

"From the Halls of..." Marines Land at WHS

Written by Gary Childers
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One could tell before Watauga County's Board of Education got very far into their meeting Monday evening that the JROTC topic listed for "acceptance" later on the agenda was going to be a challenging one. During the public comment segment which occurred early in the meeting former Board of Education chairperson, Debra Miller, addressed the current Board, "This has been in the works for some time--well over ten years by my memory." She went on to say, "Board members, please allow our students to participate in this JROTC program." When it came time to present the Marine JROTC program to the Board for acceptance WHS principal, Marshal Gasperson, shared all that had been done to have the program ready to begin for the coming school year. This seemed to catch several Board members off guard and a number of questions were raised about whether approval had been granted to implement the program and, if so, when. There were also questions about how much the program would cost and where the money was coming from to cover the two to three year approximately \$150,000 financial commitment. When Board member Ron Henries asked various administrators where the money was coming from there seemed to be some uncertainty as to whether it would be covered from the Board's fund balance or if there would be additional money requested from the County Commissioners. Chairman, Dr. Lee Warren, felt the Board had approved an ROTC program years ago. Board member Brenda Reece wanted to know if it had been funded in the past without knowing how much it would cost. She also expressed concern that funding this program would cause other teaching positions to be cut. Others wondered if former Boards could financially obligate the current Board. At this point principal Gasperson defended his actions and made the following appeal, "The Marine Corps has operated as this is approved." He went on, "If the board is going to stop this, the board needs to stop this tonight." Following this, upon the advice of Board attorney Paul Miller, it was decided the Board needed to take action on the current request instead of assuming permission had been granted for a JROTC program in the past. After a long pause, waiting for a motion and second, the Marine JROTC program was approved for implementation by a split vote. Warren, Hodges, and Henries voted in favor, Kinsey voted against, and Reece abstained.