

Commissioners in Watauga, Wilkes Take On Smoky

Written by Steve Frank

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County Commissioners in at least two of the counties served by Smoky Mountain Center are disturbed—and vocal about changes in the make-up of the board that governs the agency. Smoky Mountain Center, acting as agent for distribution of Medicaid funds for mental health providers in now 26 counties in the western part of the state, will take a vote next week to restructure their Board of Directors, with the current proposal to eliminate representatives from most of the counties they serve, according to Watauga's current representative to the board, Billy Kennedy at the Watauga commission meeting this week, "Without public oversight of this public money of this public mental health system—I'm worried." And he pointed out the discrepancies for rural counties, "The way the law was written really is not helpful to rural counties, and it takes away representation by elected officials who have to respond to the people. There going to put a board on there that won't have to be accountable to anyone but themselves." On this point, Board Chair Nathan Miller and Kennedy agree, only Miller even more strongly, "Well my opinion is that, I want you go down there hooting and hollering and vote to dissolve the entirety of their administration there at Smoky Mountain. But that's my personal opinion. I'd fire the CEO and move on down the line." Miller said at the meeting that Wilkes County was pondering reimbursing mental health provider Daymark directly and not pay Smoky Mountain. Talking with Wilkes County Manager John Yates, that has been proposed by their board, with the matter taken up by the county attorney and the Institute of Government in Chapel Hill, but Yates said this morning there is 'murkiness' in the state statutes on reimbursement matters, and they are investigating further. Wilkes, according to Yates, pays the largest amount to Smoky Mountain for services to their citizens of any of the 26 counties in their current service area and would also lose its representative. Those close to the issue say Smoky has made it clear they want to expand their influence as the state trims what was 11 such agencies to three or fewer. Governor McCary placed the matter as a top issue soon after taking the Governor's Office earlier this year. The Watauga Commissioners voted to have Nathan Miller send a letter of protest over the issue to the board before next Thursday's meeting. The bottom line, according to Kennedy, "People who need this stuff the most and can't afford it, and if people don't this mental health help, then police end up picking this up."