

Tracking County Responses to Welfare Reform

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## Policy Context

### Brief History of Wilkes County

Wilkes County was created by the first General Assembly of North Carolina in 1777 and constituted a large part of contemporary western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee. It was named after John Wilkes, an English nobleman who became an antagonist of George III, served time in both the Parliament and the Tower of London, and seemingly engendered little respect among his colonial peers. Benjamin Franklin is reported to have observed that Lord Wilkes was, “an outlaw and exile of bad personal character, not worth a farthing.” (Anderson, 1978, 5)

Moravian pilgrims were among the very first Wilkes settlers in the 1750s; Christopher Gist the first permanent settler of record who fled from Maryland in the 1740s to avoid debtors prison; and the legendary Daniel Boone who hunted in the Wilkes wilderness in the 1760s. Wilkesboro, the County seat, was laid out in 1801 in the geographic center of the County. Like much of the foothill and mountain areas of western North Carolina, the County was originally settled by Protestant Germans, Scotch, and English inhabitants (many of them Revolutionary War veterans) throughout the late eighteenth century.

In those early days, traveling to and from Wilkes County was considered both difficult and arduous (Anderson 1978, 5). Inter-county communication was equally difficult, and the early settlers of the area generally looked inward in creating the county’s original economic network. Thus the Wilkes economy was essentially self-contained, relying on subsistence agriculture, a healthy fur trade (that was both internal and external to the Wilkes economy), and the abilities of

local specialists (such as blacksmiths) to meet public demands for basic goods and services.

By 1820, Wilkes County had grown to over 19,000 persons. But significant social and economic change did not begin until rail lines entered the county in 1888 (Anderson 1978, 53). Thus began a boom and bust cycle of economic development. By the turn of the century, a large tannery was established that required a countywide network of raw material collection. By the 1920s, the tannery was on its last leg. Two floods in the first half of the century effectively closed the tannery forever (Anderson 1978, 111).

Road paving projects of the 1920s facilitated the establishment of new industries in Wilkes County that would develop slowly. A long-standing moonshining economy (that required moonshiners to outrun the police when transporting the product) would give rise to the stock car racing business in 1947 (Anderson 1978, 112). By the 1970s, Wilkes County boasted a thriving poultry industry (begun with the advent of railroads), a cattle industry, a hosiery mill, a series of damming projects, and a community college. In time, however, the majority of these businesses would lose their vitality.

#### Demographic and Economic Contexts

In 1997, the Wilkes County population numbered 63,663 ranking it 36<sup>th</sup> among North Carolina counties. It is a racially homogenous population with almost 95% of it classified as white (United States Census 1998). Roughly half of the citizens were part of the civilian labor force. The manufacturing, retail trade, and service industries dominate the county's economy today. Manufacturing accounted for 41.3% of 21,925 jobs held in 1997 (United States Census 1998). Furniture manufacture and textile mill work account for the bulk of this employment sector. The

retail trade and service industries employed 28.3% and 16.7% of persons from the same labor pool, respectively (United States Census 1998). Within the County, two companies dominate the employment sector. Tyson Foods, a poultry processing operation employs approximately 2800 workers, and Lowes Corporation employs approximately 2500 workers.

Median household income had improved over \$4,000 from 1989 to reach \$26,292 in 1993, but the percentage of persons in poverty also increased slightly from 13.3% to 13.9% over the same span (United States Census 1998). In terms of education, only 54.1% of the population over 25 years old had finished high school; only 8.8% of those over 25 possessed college degrees.

While the 1997 per capita income of \$19,895 is very close to the State average of \$20,217, Wilkes' median family income is only \$34,200 compared to the State's \$42,200 average (NC Department of Commerce). This disparity is explained by two factors. First, the Wilkes economy is dominated by many low wage jobs. Fifty-one percent of the jobs in the economy pay less than \$25,000 a year compared to the State average of 39.1% (Wilkes Chamber of Commerce, 2000). Second, Wilkes is the headquarters of a major national corporation (Lowes Incorporated) with nationally competitive executive salaries. Essentially, the wage structure for the County displays enormous variation with the average wages significantly below median wages resulting in a skewed distribution.

Even though the Wilkes economy has the employment characteristics of a more urban county with its high concentration of manufacturing jobs, its population and land characteristics remain largely rural. Its population density is approximately half the State average with 78.8 persons per square mile versus 155 for the average county. On three indicators of poverty Wilkes appears more prosperous than the average county. Its 1998 unemployment rate is 2.7% compared to 3.5% for the State. Its percentage of persons on Food Stamps is 6.3% compared to

7.0%, and its reduction in welfare caseload from 1997 - 99 is 49.8% compared to 38.8% for the State. On the other hand, its poverty rate is almost one percent above the State's, being 13.3% compared to 12.5% statewide (NC Department of Commerce).

The Lowes Corporation is the proverbial "five hundred pound gorilla" in the Wilkes political economy. Started in North Wilkesboro by a local boy, Carl Buchan, right after World War II, it has since grown into one of the largest retailers in the United States (15<sup>th</sup>) with 589 hardware stores in 39 states. Its annual sales exceed \$15 billion, and it employs more than 100,000 workers across the country and, as reported earlier, 2500 workers in the local economy. It is a Fortune 200 company. Given the scope of its corporate dealings, Lowes recruits top level executive talent from across the country and reputedly pays very competitive executive salaries. A major issue in its executive recruitment is the quality of life it can offer its new employees in Wilkes County. According to County Manager, Gary Page, "Lowes recruits people from Minneapolis and Seattle and they expect the amenities in Wilkes that they had where they came from." This means that there is pressure on County officials from Lowes Corporate headquarters in North Wilkesboro for cultural, educational, and recreational services one would not expect from a county with a population below the state average in income. The pressure this creates on the local political establishment is profound and fundamentally affects how decisions are made by elected officials.

#### The Political Context

To say that Wilkes County is a Republican stronghold would come near to understating the case. Only one Democrat has garnered a majority in any national, state, or local race during the decade of the 1990s. In the 1992 US Senate and Governor's races, both Lauch Faircloth and

Jim Gardner won overwhelmingly across the County. In 1994 both Robert Dole and Jesse Helms outpolled Clinton and Gantt two-to-one while Robin Hayes received 55% of the vote against Jim Hunt in 1996. Throughout the 1990s both Wilkes State Senators were Republicans and both State House members were Republicans (NC State Board of Elections). In the House, Wilkes has been represented by John Brown and George Holmes for over two decades. Democrats did not even file for election in the county commissioner's races of 1990 and 1992. Republicans have held all seats on the county commission, except for one spot being held by a Democrat, from 1996 through the 2002 term. The event marked the first time a Democrat had been elected in two decades. The commission is also something of a men's club. Only one woman has held a commissioner's seat during the 1990s, and she is the second woman to ever do so.

As frequently happens when one party dominates so overwhelmingly for so long, it tends to factionalize. An indicator of a factionalized party is the number of individuals filing in the party's primary. In the Republican primary of 1992, ten candidates filed for three seats; in 1994, twelve hopefuls filed; in 1996, nine filed; and in 1998, the number had dropped to six. However, this downward trend reversed in the 2000 primaries when, again, ten Republican candidates filed for the three open seats. One informed source commented, "There at least two and probably three Republican parties in Wilkes County. You've got the fiscal conservatives, the social conservatives, and the Country Club group." The political battleground is, therefore, not between liberals and conservatives; but rather, among different factions of conservatives.

Given the aforementioned position of the Lowes Corporation in the local political economy, and its desire that public services rise to the level of more urban settings to retain its executive workforce, the County has been on a building spree for much of the 1990s. In just the past five years, the County built a new courthouse, a new library, a major addition to its

community college for cultural events, and established a new landfill.

The political issues debated by commission candidates over the decade have been largely predictable. Some issues—county landfill needs, watershed laws, building a new county courthouse, and various types of land use planning—have been prominent at various times during the 1990s, but only one issue has consistently captured the attention of the commissioners and the voting public - taxation. (*Wilkes Journal-Patriot* Nov. 5 1992, A1). Property taxes have been on the rise every year of the 1990s. Thus the ‘need to reduce taxes’ has been the most prominent political slogan throughout this period. Indeed, a grassroots organization called Fairness in Taxation (F.I.T.) was formed and has endorsed and funded commission candidates since 1994, though their candidates have not been uniformly successful (Williams May 2, 1994, A1-A2). However, most candidates running during the 1990s made some mention of the need to address county taxation issues.

## Time Frame Highlights

As will be shown below, Wilkes’ decision to become an “elect” county did not evolve smoothly. While Democrats and Republicans battled over the shape of the welfare reform program in Raleigh, politicians and social services administrators struggled over the decision in Wilkes.

August 14,1997 - DSS Board votes 3-0 to recommend that County remain standard. Two members are absent from the meeting, one a member of the County Commission - Becky Mullins.

August 18,1997 - Commission votes 3-1 to go elect. Motion made by Mullins, Dr. Bowman

opposes, Chairman Handy abstains

August 26, 1997 - Commission reverses position on a 3-0 vote on a motion by Bowman. Handy abstains again, Mullins is absent.

September 17, 1997 - Major front page article on the success of the Work First program from 1995 to 1997 featuring DSS Director - Donnie Bumgarner.

October 9, 1997 - DSS Board votes again to recommend that County remain standard on a 3-0 vote. Mullins absent again.

October 21, 1997 - Commissioners agree to invite NC House Speaker Harlod Brubaker and Representative Sherie Berry to a special meeting of the Commission to hear about the advantages of going elect.

October 23, 1997 - After hearing from Brubaker, Berry, and their own legislator, John Brown, Commission votes 3-2 to remain standard. Voting for standard are Handy, Woodie, and Bowman. Voting for elect status are Mullins and Absher.

October 31, 1997 - In another special meeting the Commission reverses itself again and notifies Raleigh that it wishes to be considered for electing status. Bowman and Handy change sides saying that they have received more information about this decision.

November 12, 1997 - Welfare Reform Advisory Committee meets for first time.

December 18, 1997 - Advisory Committee recommends that Wilkes pursue electing status.

January 5, 1998 - Electing plan presented to Commission

April 1, 1998 - Final electing plan presented to NCDSS.

## Decision Dynamics 1997-98

The decision dynamics driving the process in Wilkes County during the late summer and through the fall of 1997 was a rich mixture of state and local partisan politics, fear of the unknown, and cautionary advice from policy experts. In the end partisan politics prevailed as the Republican dominated Wilkes Commission became

embroiled in the ideological battle between Democratic and Republican politicians in Raleigh over the best way to implement welfare reform. It is not an exaggeration to say that partisan ardor trumped rational analysis as the ultimate decision was rendered. A political accommodation was engineered that allowed all parties acceptable coverage as minds changed and rationalizations were offered. One cannot escape the irony that the decision to go elect was made at literally the 11<sup>th</sup> hour on October 31, 1997 (Halloween night), and the final Electing Plan was submitted on April 1, 1998 (April Fools Day).

In mid-August the commission was clearly caught off guard when their new but experienced County Manager, Gary Page, informed them that they had 48 hours to decide whether or not to fundamentally alter the way they had approached serving the poor of the County. The urgency was being stoked from Raleigh. “Our legislative delegation is telling me there are 30 to 40 counties interested in being an autonomous pilot county and set the reform up for the next year. The key is we have to get our name in the hat if we want to be considered, probably by this time tomorrow.” (Hubbard, August 20, 1997, A4) When asked pointedly what his recommendation was, Page deferred. “So when you say Gary make a recommendation, this isn’t based on experience. I don’t think anyone really knows what welfare reform is going to do. There’s no track record. Its brand new.” (Hubbard, August 20, 1997, A4) Despite this cautionary note, Commissioner Becky Mullins offered a motion to inform Raleigh of their desire to be a pilot county which passed on a 3-1 vote. Her rationale was that welfare reform had been needed for a long time and now was the time to take advantage of the opportunity. Voting against the motion was Dr. Bowman and abstaining was Mr. Handy.

Immediately following the meeting the Chairman of the DSS Board, James

Richardson, contacted Page to ask that the Board and DSS staff be allowed to appear before the Commission to discuss its decision to volunteer to be a pilot county. At a special meeting called on the 26<sup>th</sup> of August, Richardson pointed out that the DSS Board had previously voted not to experiment with welfare reform. The Board's rationale was that it was already being successful in reducing the welfare caseload following State guidelines with the current Work First program. Another member of the DSS Board pointed out, "the old adage, 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' applies to this situation." (Hubbard, August 22, 1997, A20) The staff member responsible for the Work First program, Dean Edmiston, spoke to the issue of additional costs if Wilkes were to become a pilot county. While not specific, he mentioned additional staff and computer needs to implement an autonomous program. The County Manager joined voices with the DSS staff and urged caution. After noting how effective the current Work First program had been at reducing the welfare caseload, he advised, "If there was ever a time to look at welfare reform this probably isn't it because the economy is so strong. ... Now when the economy does a down turn, you will probably see the welfare rolls go up." (Hubbard, August 22, 1997, A20) Following the discussion, Bowman (who had voted against volunteering to be a pilot county at the previous meeting) moved to remain a standard county. Commissioners Absher and Woodie (the lone Democrat on the Commission) voted with him while Handy abstained (for the second time on the issue claiming he did not know enough to have an opinion) and Mullins was absent for the meeting.

In mid-September a front page article appeared in the local paper touting the success of the existing Work First program. DSS Director Bumgarner reported that the welfare caseload had dropped from 820 to 612 since the program's inception in January

1996. Other members of the DSS staff reported on the success of the community's involvement in moving welfare recipients into jobs (Jenkins, September 17, 1997, A1). While the timing of this glowing news article may have been coincidental, it could not have come at a more propitious time for those opposed to local autonomy. Two weeks later the DSS Board reaffirmed its desire not to be a pilot county on a 3-0 vote, again with Commissioner Mullins absent (Hubbard, October 24, 1997, A14)..

In one of the most unusual Commission meetings in Wilkes County history, three members of the State Legislature appeared before the Commission to urge that Wilkes be a pilot county. While it was unprecedented for state legislators to appear at a Commission meeting, even more extraordinary was that, in addition to Wilkes Representative John Brown, there appeared the Republican Speaker of the House, Harold Brubaker, and the leader of the welfare reform effort in the House, Representative Cherie Berry from Catawba County. In their presentations, Brubaker observed that the biggest opponents of welfare reform at the county level were "bureaucrats in Raleigh who want you to rubber stamp whatever comes out of Raleigh." (Hubbard, October 24, 1997, A14) Berry offered that there was a financial incentive for counties to volunteer to be elect in that they could divert 20% of their state welfare funds to other programs if they met their targets whereas standard would have to return their funds to Raleigh. She also advised that elect counties could return to standard status at the end of a year but standard counties would not be permitted to volunteer to be electing after October 31.

Juxtaposed to Brubaker, Berry, and Brown was the DSS Board and its director Donnie Bumgarner who presented an analysis of the estimated costs of deciding to go

elect. His analysis indicated that it would take 11 new positions with a total additional cost of \$217,152. The rationale underlying the projections was that going elect would cut the County off from the State's computer system for processing checks and tracking clients, resulting in the County having to perform these functions itself. Additionally, more expenses were anticipated in legal services to handle appeals from clients when services were terminated. Representative Berry refuted these calculations asserting that only one additional position would be needed in electing counties and that funding for this position would come from the State (Bowman, October 24, 1997, A14).

Clearly the Commission was in a quandary. After an hour and a half of debate between the Republican legislators and the County DSS Board and staff, Chairman Handy asked that the Commission go into executive session in order to sort out the conflicting information and to come to a consensus. He was quickly informed by the County Attorney that this would violate the state's Open Meeting Law. Becky Mullins then moved that Wilkes be an electing county. The motion failed on a 3-2 vote with Absher joining Mullins while Handy, Bowman, and Woodie voting against going elect.

The following week yet another emergency meeting was called on Halloween night to reconsider its decision of October 23<sup>rd</sup> on participating as an elect county. According to the County Manager, "I think some of the commissioners have been talking among themselves about becoming an electing county and naming a committee to look into it." (Hubbard, October 31, 1997, A1) Commission Chairman Handy, who had voted previously against going elect after two previous abstentions on the issue, was quoted as saying he was changing his position because, "We got more information (from Raleigh) but I am not at liberty to discuss it until tonight's meeting." (Bowman, October 31, 1997,

A14)

On October 31, 1997 the Commission reversed itself a second time and voted 5-0 to establish a study committee to explore becoming an elect county. Explaining their reversal, Chairman Handy said, "They (meaning Brubaker and Berry) did not do a good job presenting it last time." Now, according to information faxed to all of the Commissioners the previous day, they felt more comfortable exploring the option of going elect rather than their previous belief that they were committing themselves to the experiment. Through the mechanism of the study committee, the commissioners allowed themselves to be considered as an electing county in Raleigh without committing themselves to the potentially expensive option at home.

The Wilkes County Welfare Reform Advisory Committee met for the first time on November 12, 1997. Present were representatives from the Department of Health, the Social Services Board, Mental Health, United Way, the Board of Education, the business community, and two at-large citizens. The County Manager, Gary Page, was appointed its Chair, and it received staff support from DSS. According to Page, there was a very steep learning curve for the members of the committee since few had any background on what the Social Services Department actually did (Page, interview, May 30, 2000). As he described it, DSS was an autonomous entity in county government, much like the school system and mental health department. Therefore, few outside the DSS policy system had any knowledge of what the agency actually did. For example, few members knew that traditional welfare payments were only 4 % of the agency's budget and, by far, the largest program was Medicaid. Page did point out that the DSS staff was very helpful and cooperative as the committee met over the next several weeks

to work out a recommendation. The most influential voice during the committee's deliberations was Dean Edmiston who directed the current Work First program and had been a DSS employee for almost three decades at that time. The DSS director, Donnie Bumgarner, did not take an active role on the committee nor did other DSS Board members. Over the next month the committee met with little fanfare, and on December 18, 1997 the committee recommended that Wilkes pursue electing status. With no debate among the Commissioners, DSS was directed to begin developing the electing plan for submission to Raleigh by February 1.

According to DSS Director Donnie Bumgarner, DSS director of programs Bill Sabastian, and Work First Coordinator Kevin Brown, the plan development process was largely driven by assistance provided by state DSS (interview, June 23, 1997). They described a meeting in a Statesville motel room where a private consultant (a faculty member from UNC-CH School of Social Work) met with electing county representatives to coach them on putting together their plans. The first Wilkes Work First Electing Plan submission was a thick, detailed document that was returned because it was too detailed. The resulting final plan consisted of a one page addendum to the State Standard County Plan consisting of three alterations to the standard county plan. First, Supplemental Social Security Income would be considered income for eligibility purposes. Second, sanctions would be stiffer than the standard plan. Third, all applicants must report to the Child Support Enforcement Unit within ten days of applying for benefits. This addendum was accepted by state DSS officials and went into effect in May 1998.

## Goals, Objectives, or Program Priorities

In discussion with the principals involved in Wilkes' decision to seek electing status, four different goals were articulated. One goal was to assist the forces in the Republican controlled House by volunteering to be an elect county. Given the state level Republican position to devolve welfare reform to the county level and given the Republican domination of Wilkes politics, it would have been a sign of disloyalty not to participate. Another goal articulated by Commissioner Mullins, who led the way on the Commission to go elect, was to reduce the welfare caseload even more dramatically than already achieved by the Work First program initiated in 1996. Parallel with reducing caseload was to reduce local expenditures on welfare. As one DSS official observed regarding the County's decision, "Saving money was the bottom line." (Sabastian, August 7, 2000) The final goal was to reduce uncertainty. It was the fear of uncertainty that made the decision to go elect so painful for the majority of the commissioners. So painful, in fact, that they initially balked at direct, public, personal appeals by the leader of their party, their own state representative, and the leader of the welfare reform effort statewide. Fear of the unknown was also driving the response of the DSS professionals. Of major concern was the potential legal liability the County might be exposed to if it cut itself off from State DSS guidance (Bumgarner, Interview, June 23, 2000). So much was unknown that prudence dictated from the local DSS perspective not to risk experimentation especially when the current program was already proving successful.

## Program Implementation

By all accounts the Work First program in Wilkes County has been successfully implemented. Since the plan went into effect, the caseload on public assistance had dropped by almost half (49.8%) and no major public controversy has made it to the media. From the perspective of the County Manager, the success can attributed almost exclusively to the robust economy. With an unemployment rate under 3% and many low-wage jobs in the poultry processing industry, there is no reason for an able bodied person not to work according to Page. One of the problems with this economic picture is that there is little incentive for youth to finish high school since they can step into a job paying above the minimum wage at age 16, and begin a life not much different from their parents'. Almost half of Wilkes youth do not finish high school. As long as the economy stays strong, the Wilkes Work First program can be successful. When the economy sours, a different story could well be told about the citizens sitting on the margins of poverty with little educational equipment to escape their fate.

From the perspective of the County DSS, the program has also successfully met its goals. Caseloads have dropped, no person has sued the County over the program's implementation, and the County's Report Card as graded by State DSS is passable. These are the standards by which the agency measures success. The DSS Director credits the staff with the smooth transition from the old Work First program to the new "electing" plan. "They kept their clients informed about the changes that were coming. They treat their clients with respect and they try to be helpful." (Bumgarner, interview, June 23, 2000) The agency has reorganized itself in response to the Work First program, but not necessarily because it decided to go elect. Based upon urging from State DSS, two eligibility specialists have joined the two Work First social workers to form a Work

First Unit within the agency. This meant physically relocating the two eligibility specialists in a different part of the DSS building and promoting an existing DSS employee, Kevin Brown, as a program director.

One organizational change that did emerge in response to Wilkes deciding to go elect is the retention of the Welfare Reform Advisory Committee as a standing policy committee for that one program. In essence, the DSS Board has turned over one part of its responsibility (albeit a very small part) to an interagency advisory committee with the County Manager as its chairman. This has brought the business of DSS to a more prominent position in the Manager's realm of responsibilities.

Another organizational impact has been in the flow of funds among different programs offered by the agency. Because of the "maintenance of effort" requirements of the federal TANF program, Wilkes and the State must spend the same level of funding on Work First now as they did in 1996. In 1996, Wilkes had over 800 persons receiving public assistance. As of May 2000, only 224 individuals were receiving TANF payments. The resulting surplus in TANF dollars has been used, at the urging and advice of NCDSS personnel, to support and expand child protective services and other job-related services for eligible recipients (Sabastian and Brown, interview, August 10, 2000). The resulting increased emphasis on children's services has addressed a major concern of the DSS officials prior to implementing the new program. They had feared that the reduction in public assistance to adults could have a negative impact on incidences of child abuse and other domestic problems. Because of additional dollars for child protective services these fears have not been borne out.

## Overall Assessment

The story of welfare reform in Wilkes County is really the story of the chess match being played in Raleigh between the Republicans and Democrats during the spring of 1997. How radically could a state decentralize its welfare delivery system? Would the peoples' worst instincts be unleashed on the poor and powerless or would local officials be creative, compassionate, and innovative in addressing the real needs of the poor. Wilkes was an unwilling pawn in that game, but a pawn nonetheless.

The evidence makes it very clear that the local political establishment did not want to venture into experimentation with unknown consequences. While the conservative position in Raleigh was in favor of decentralization, at the local level such potentially large changes in the status quo seemed radical, not conservative. Only one commissioner, Becky Mullins, was clearly and forcefully in favor of going elect in that she was the only one to vote consistently in favor of the idea. All the other commissioners changed their votes at least once, even the lone Democrat on the commission who eventually voted with the majority to go elect on Halloween night.

The County Manager, seemed to play an "honest broker" role during the deliberations. He was transmitting messages from Raleigh to keep the commission informed as deadlines drew near. When he sensed that the commission was leaning in favor of going elect he encouraged that perspective. When he sensed that his administrative professionals were hesitant to journey in uncharted waters, he supported that position. When finally the commission decided to go elect, he put together the group necessary to make a recommendation and drew in professional assistance to formulate

the final plan. While the Manager was squarely in the middle of the decision process, he did not play a policy role. Using the vernacular of the “neo-managerialism” school of public administration, he “steered” the process while others did the “rowing”.

The DSS establishment did its best to persuade the commission not to go elect and nearly succeeded. Using its expertise and knowledge advantages over the citizen commission, it created a scenario wherein the County would be forced to spend additional resources on helping the poor, not less, if it decided to be autonomous. This clearly had an impact. How else can one explain that in the face of personal, public pleading by the State’s Republican party leadership, the conservative Republican commission initially refused to acquiesce. Only after a face saving compromise was offered (a study committee that by-passed the Social Services Board) did the commission finally agree to be considered an experimental county. Once the study committee began work DSS staff played a significant role in educating the members about welfare reform and the options available to electing counties. The leadership of DSS, however, appeared to keep its distance from the committee’s work..

The electing plan finally devised by Wilkes County reflected its conservative attitudes about poor people. By using SSI payments in the calculation for income eligibility, approximately 30 families were dropped from the roles. When two other DSS Directors in neighboring counties were asked about this decision, both were rather surprised that a county would want to make it harder for people to participate in the program. The second alteration from the standard plan of increasing the penalties for non-compliance is another indicator of the attitudes in Wilkes toward the poor. Assuming that people can be motivated to find work by either using a carrot of incentives or a stick

of penalties, Wilkes chose the stick approach. This says something fundamental about how the poor are viewed in the County.

What does come across consistently in discussion with DSS personnel is how reliant they were and are on guidance from Raleigh. Their major objection to going elect was the fear of severing this relationship; the plan they finally devised was done under the guidance of state DSS consultants and officials; and their interaction with state DSS officials continues on a daily basis. While the local political establishment might have believed that they were separating themselves from, as Speaker Brubaker put it, “those bureaucrats in Raleigh,” when they voted to go elect, the local DSS establishment had no desire to cut those strings. In fact every move they have made over the past two years was orchestrated with state DSS officials. As one Wilkes DSS official put it, “We’re very conservative about spending public dollars.” (Sabastian, interview, August 10, 2000)

Fundamentally, the fact that Wilkes is an electing county has had little affect on either the agency or the poor of the county. This status was foisted upon the county over the agency’s objections; and, since the day-to-day work of implementation has been passed down to the agency, standard operating procedures have asserted themselves over program operations. As long as the local economy keeps supplying low skill, low wage jobs the working poor of Wilkes will survive as they always have. If things should change in the local employment picture as they inevitably will, I would not want to be their shoes.

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