



OCCOQUAN TOWN COUNCIL
Work Session and Public Hearing Minutes
Town Hall – 314 Mill Street, Occoquan, VA 22125
Tuesday, March 17, 2020
7:00 p.m.

Present: Mayor Earnie Porta; Vice Mayor Pat Sivigny; Councilmembers Cindy Fithian, Laurie Holloway and Eliot Perkins

Absent: Councilmember Matthew Dawson

Staff: Kathleen Leidich, Town Manager; Kathleen Dellinger, Town Treasurer; Adam Linn, Chief of Police; Jason Forman, Town Sergeant; Julie Little, Events Director; Katy Nicholson, Town Clerk

1. CALL TO ORDER

Mayor Porta called the meeting to order at 7:01 p.m.

2. PUBLIC HEARING

a. Budget Amendment #2020-001: Kayak Ramp Project

No comments. Public comment period closed at 7:02 p.m.

Mayor Porta gave staff a chance to discuss the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by comments from Council. He noted that in response to a communication from Councilmember Holloway, he had contacted the Prince William County School Board for clarification about its handling of meetings. He added that the School board was limiting its agendas to essential business and broadcasting on Facebook Live in lieu of its regular TV coverage, eliminating the need for A/V staff at meetings. He also noted that the School Board and the Town had the authority to limit the number of people attending their meetings. Councilmember Holloway said she had hoped to obtain the Town Attorney's opinion on the matter for future reference.

Ms. Leidich reported that she had distributed to Council the most recent information and resources regarding the pandemic. She noted that Ms. Little had notified her of a Facebook group that had been organized to offer support within the community. She explained that the Town's Peep Show would be going completely virtual, Discover Occoquan would be postponed, and planning for RiverFest was still underway. She added that Ms. Little had reached out to the shuttle and port-a-john contractors and that May 15 was the deadline for canceling those services without losing money.

Ms. Leidich reported that Town Hall and River Mill Park (including the restrooms) remained open, and the Visitors' Center and Mill House Museum were closed until further notice. She added that she had participated in conference calls with representatives from nearby jurisdictions and that their responses included:

- Closing facilities to the public and requiring business by phone, online, or drop box
- Canceling board/commission meetings
- Providing work-from-home guidelines for staff
- Canceling events
- Closing facilities for meeting rentals by outside groups
- Implementing enhanced cleaning procedures

Ms. Leidich explained that the Town's plan included:

- Enhanced cleaning procedures
- A review of work-from-home guidelines
- Providing carry-out parking signage to Town restaurants
- Development of a COVID-19 plan for the Police Department

Ms. Leidich noted that staff requested Council's consideration regarding the following proposals:

- Closing Town facilities to the public and requiring business by phone, online, or drop box
- Closing Town facilities for meeting rentals by outside groups
- Canceling or postponing events
- Canceling Planning Commission and/or Architectural Review Board meetings
- Maintaining Town Council meeting dates to allow for budget discussion

Councilmember Holloway noted that two Facebook accounts had been established to assist area residents – one specific to the Town of Occoquan and the other based in Lake Ridge. Mayor Porta asked how the Town should promote the groups. Councilmember Holloway suggested notifying the public of the groups rather than promoting them, as they were not Town-sponsored.

Councilmember Holloway asked whether the River Mill Park restrooms were on an accelerated cleaning schedule. Ms. Leidich responded that the Town Maintenance Supervisor was wiping down the restrooms daily in addition to their regularly scheduled weekly professional cleanings.

Councilmember Perkins noted that several restaurants were offering a carry-out option, and that the Town should advocate for them and help to promote them consistently.

Councilmember Perkins asked whether a new date had been set for Discover Occoquan. Ms. Leidich responded that the date had not been determined.

Mayor Porta noted that he wanted to make it clear that staff members were not obligated to report to work during the pandemic. He added that compared to larger jurisdictions, the Town's small size afforded it some flexibility. He commended staff for their work keeping the Town facilities safe.

Mayor Porta also noted that a recent press release from the Governor had established more stringent distancing guidelines, and that he planned to update Town business owners on this. He added that he would defer to Chief Linn's discretion in regard to enforcement. Councilmember Holloway noted that restaurant owners risked losing their Health Department licenses and/or being charged with a misdemeanor if they did not follow the new regulations, so it was crucial that they remain informed.

Councilmember Perkins asked about the status of the Town's restaurants. Mayor Porta responded that Ballywhack Shack, Bottle Stop and Cock and Bowl were closed, but others were likely to close as the situation progressed. He added that the state had waived the waiting period for unemployment benefits for employees who were laid off or whose hours had been reduced.

Mayor Porta, Councilmember Holloway and Councilmember Perkins agreed that Town Hall should not be available for use by outside groups during the pandemic. Mayor Porta asked Ms. Leidich to contact the one group that was already on the calendar for March to find out the size of their meeting.

Mayor Porta noted that he would like to keep Town Hall open to the public. Councilmember Perkins said he agreed as long as staff members were comfortable with the situation. Ms. Leidich said she would meet with staff to discuss Council's sentiments. Mayor Porta said he had heard from several residents who appreciated the fact that Town Hall was open with appropriate precautions. He confirmed with Ms. Leidich that staff had been provided with sanitizing products. Councilmember Holloway said she agreed, and that the situation should be re-evaluated daily. She noted that staff should be cautious as people could be contagious prior to showing symptoms, particularly considering the Town's significant senior population.

Councilmember Holloway suggested that Council and staff develop a notification plan in the event of a COVID-19 case in Town. Mayor Porta asked Ms. Leidich to discuss this subject with the Town Attorney.

Councilmember Fithian suggested that the Town establish a system to check on vulnerable residents. Mayor Porta noted that Ms. Little's community messaging included a request for residents to check on their neighbors. Councilmember Fithian responded that the Town may need to take further action if residents were concerned about their neighbors and could not get in touch with them. Mayor Porta asked whether there was a system in place for residents to request a welfare check by police. Chief Linn responded that anytime a resident was concerned about a neighbor, they could call the Prince William County Police non-emergency line and request a welfare check. He also noted that Occoquan police had conducted welfare checks for residents in the past. He added that he would work with Ms. Little to facilitate the welfare check process between residents and Town police. Mayor Porta said he would like a communication to go out later in the week addressing the subject. Councilmember Perkins noted that consistent messaging was important for this and other pandemic-related information.

Mayor Porta said the chairs of the Planning Commission and Architectural Review Board could decide whether their groups would continue to meet as scheduled. Councilmember Perkins said the Planning Commission likely would not need to meet in March and could notify the public of its next meeting date. Councilmember Holloway said she would check in with the Architectural Review Board chair. Mayor Porta said he would like to continue to hold Council meetings as scheduled, and that Council could cancel any unnecessary meetings as needed.

Mayor Porta also reported that he had spoken with Vivian Le of the 99 Percent Invisible podcast. He explained that the March 10 episode discussed the negative effects of Pokémon Go on Occoquan businesses, and that he did not think the episode told the full story. He added that Ms. Le had agreed to produce an update on the subject.

Ms. Leidich noted that she and Ms. Little had met with a local artist who proposed a design for the Town's "Love" sign. The concept consisted of a painted plywood façade that would be displayed in front of the sign. Councilmember Perkins said he liked the idea of adding some color to the design. Ms. Leidich explained that the design was black-and-white, and that she would speak with the artist about the possibility of a full-color design.

Ms. Leidich also reported that she had spoken with the landscaping contractor regarding the project at the entrance to Town at Route 123 and Commerce Street. She noted that the contractor had submitted an alternate plan incorporating native plants in accordance with Council's request, and that she welcomed any additional comments on the plan.

In regard to a potential real estate acquisition, Mayor Porta noted that the Town would not make an offer in April due to the pandemic. He added that the Town likely would decide in April whether to fund its own appraisal. Council agreed with this assessment of the situation.

Council agreed to vote on the budget amendment for the kayak ramp project at it April 7 meeting.

3. REGULAR ITEMS

a. FY 2021 Budget Work Session - No materials.

Ms. Leidich noted that Council had requested several follow-up items:

- A breakdown of costs for “Personnel Services” between FY 2020 and FY 2021:
Ms. Leidich provided a written breakdown of these costs.
- Projected real estate tax average increase per housing unit:
The average per-unit Town real estate tax bill in 2019 was \$402.11. For the estimated 2020 assessments, the average bill would be \$411.85, an average per-unit increase of \$9.74.
- A breakdown of individual operational costs:
Ms. Leidich provided a written breakdown of these costs.
- Eliminating the Net Asset transfer:
The revised budget included the conversion of part-time police officer positions to a full-time position, the conversion of a part-time treasurer position to a full-time position, supplemental funding for the social media contract, an increase in professional services and the transfer from the Operating Budget expenditures to the Capital Improvement Plan. The initial proposed Net Asset transfer was \$71,267.00. Ms. Leidich noted that real estate tax revenues were projected to increase by approximately \$5,000.00 for FY 2021. She explained that she reduced the following expenditures to reduce the Net Asset transfer to \$16,900, which was a placeholder payment for a police vehicle that would be paid for by public safety fine revenue:
 - \$13,434.00 for Personnel Services to fund a proposed part-time parking enforcement position. This also would decrease the Capital Improvement Plan budget by \$5,000 (parking enforcement equipment).
 - \$3,588.00 for Travel and Training
 - \$26,509.00 for Facilities and Maintenance
 - \$2,036.00 for Information Technology
 - \$2,800.00 for Vehicles and Equipment
 - \$1,000 for Seasonal

Ms. Leidich also noted that she had provided Council with a proposal for the Town to join the Virginia Retirement System.

Mayor Porta expressed concern that the Budget Calendar included a date of March 20 to advertise the proposed budget. He explained that Council was not yet ready to vote on a proposed budget for advertisement. Ms. Leidich responded that Council could adjust the budget calendar as needed. Mayor Porta said he would discuss the calendar adjustments with Ms. Leidich after the meeting, and that Ms. Leidich would need to prepare the proposed advertisements for Council’s review.

Regarding the breakdown of Personnel Services costs, Mayor Porta asked Ms. Leidich to include health insurance information for each employee.

Mayor Porta asked Ms. Leidich to include the \$5,000.00 projected real estate increase in the original proposed budget as well as the new version.

Councilmember Holloway noted that Council may want to discuss the potential financial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Mayor Porta responded that Council would need to watch meals tax revenues closely during the remainder of the budget development process, and that the budget may require further adjustments. Councilmember Holloway asked staff and Council to keep this in mind during the next few months.

Mayor Porta asked whether the Police Department had noticed a decrease in traffic fines. Chief Linn responded that Town Police continued to conduct traffic enforcement as usual, but Prince William County and the Town of Haymarket had suspended regular traffic enforcement due to the closure of the county courts. Councilmember Perkins said he thought the Town Police should continue to conduct enforcement. Chief Linn added that although the courts were closed to the public, it was his understanding that the County was still processing summonses.

Mayor Porta noted that the Town Attorney was looking into the option of extending the payment deadline for Business, Professional and Occupational License taxes. Council agreed that this would be a good option to show support for the Town's business community.

Ms. Leidich introduced the new Town Treasurer, Kathleen Dellinger. Council welcomed Ms. Dellinger to the Town.

Mayor Porta asked Ms. Little about RiverFest and the Fall Craft Show. Ms. Little said she had noticed a decrease in vendor applications, but this was expected due to the new vendor restrictions. Councilmember Perkins asked how this compared to Ms. Little's expectations for applications. Ms. Little said she had received about half the expected number of applications for juried vendors. She added that due to the uncertainty caused by the pandemic, she was concerned that she may not receive many more applications. She reminded Council that they would need to make a decision about RiverFest by May 15 at the latest to avoid losing money for the shuttles and port-a-johns. Councilmember Fithian noted that Council might want to make this decision earlier, depending on how the situation progressed. Council agreed that they would monitor the situation. Councilmember Holloway asked if vendors would receive a refund for their fees if the event needed to be canceled. Ms. Little said she did not think the contract addressed this. Mayor Porta said he would expect the Town to refund those fees. Ms. Little asked whether she should continue with her RiverFest advertisement plan. Mayor Porta responded that she should proceed with her advertising plan for the time being.

Mayor Porta asked Council to review the Capital Improvement Plan items before the next meeting. Ms. Leidich explained that the Capital Improvement Plan included funding for a parking management system. Mayor Porta noted that Councilmember Perkins had investigated paid parking options relating to a potential property acquisition, and Council could discuss it at a future meeting.

Ms. Leidich provided Council with the results of an actuarial study from the Virginia Retirement System (VRS). She suggested that Council use this time for a preliminary discussion of the matter, following up with a vote at the April 7 meeting. She added that

by joining the Virginia Retirement System, the Town would strengthen its ability to attract and retain quality staff.

Ms. Leidich explained that for FY 2021, the cost of VRS to the Town would be \$27,230.00. If Council took action at its April meeting, the cost for the remainder of FY 2020 would be \$4,544.00. She recommended that the Town reallocate the funding for its full-time employees' Simple IRA plans to help cover the cost of the VRS. With this reallocation, the net cost increase for VRS would be \$16,828.00 in FY 2021.

Mayor Porta asked Ms. Leidich to provide Council with historical information on variation in VRS rates, as the Town's rate would be subject to change every two years.

Mayor Porta asked whether any of the Town's current staff had previously been enrolled in VRS and could purchase prior service. Ms. Leidich responded that the majority of the Town's employees had been enrolled in VRS and that they would have the option to purchase prior service.

Mayor Porta asked why the Town would join VRS prior to the beginning of FY 2021. Ms. Leidich responded that Council could choose to join immediately or at the beginning of the next fiscal year.

Councilmember Holloway asked why VRS was the best retirement option. Ms. Leidich responded that VRS was a defined benefit plan and several staff members already were vested in the system. Councilmember Holloway said she would need more information to justify the cost increase. Mayor Porta explained that VRS was considered by some to be a recruitment and retention tool for staff because it provided a guaranteed retirement income unlike a defined contribution plan. Councilmember Holloway noted that many private sector employees were not enrolled in defined benefit plans.

Vice Mayor Sivigny asked whether other regional jurisdictions participated in VRS. Ms. Leidich responded that most towns in Prince William and Loudoun counties were VRS members.

Mayor Porta asked if any staff members would like to speak about VRS. Chief Linn, Ms. Dellinger and Ms. Leidich said they were enrolled previously and they would like to be enrolled again. Mayor Porta asked if these employees could purchase all of their prior service with the Town. Ms. Leidich responded that they would be able to do so with their own funds within a year of joining VRS.

8. ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 8:48 p.m.



Katy Nicholson
Town Clerk