



OCCOQUAN TOWN COUNCIL
Work Session Minutes
Town Hall – 314 Mill Street, Occoquan, VA 22125
Tuesday, July 21, 2020
7:00 p.m.

Present: Mayor Earnie Porta; Vice Mayor Jenn Loges; Councilmembers Krys Bienia, Cindy Fithian, Laurie Holloway and Eliot Perkins

Absent: None

Staff: 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 7:00 p.m.

2. REGULAR BUSINESS

a. Summer Events Discussion – Craft Show Update

Ms. Little noted that she had provided Council with a list of ideas to help generate revenue for the remainder of 2020. She explained that Council would need to determine the focus of the Town's events for the near future, as well as for 2021. She also asked for Council's opinion on the virtual Craft Show concept.

Councilmember Fithian said she thought Ms. Little had suggested some fun and creative ideas. She noted that it was unlikely that the Town would be able to hold the Craft Show, and that the Town would likely be able to implement some of Ms. Little's ideas for other events to help bring in some funding. She asked about the "Ghost Tour Pub Crawl" concept. Ms. Little responded that it would be an in-person ghost tour.

Councilmember Perkins asked which of the concepts Ms. Little preferred. Ms. Little responded that she particularly liked the Taste of Occoquan, Trivia Night, petting zoo and holiday event ideas. She noted that the Rent Our Park campaign would be an opportunity to promote the Town's parks as venues for previously canceled private events.

Councilmember Perkins said he had recently attended a DC United event with successful physical distancing measures. He noted that River Mill Park was similar in size to the field where the event had been held. He added that the Town would need to consider revenue when selecting its events. Councilmember Fithian asked about the physical distancing measures at the DC United event. Councilmember Perkins responded that there were separate entrances, exits and restrooms for people sitting in different sections; food orders were placed using a QR code; each group was assigned to a specific square area; and masks were required outside of those squares.

Councilmember Bienia asked Ms. Little if she had considered which of her proposed events would generate the most revenue. Ms. Little responded that she had considered this, and that Taste of Occoquan likely would generate more revenue than Trivia Night, for example. She added that if the situation continued to improve, the Town could host multiple events. Councilmember Bienia noted that some of the proposed event concepts were more focused on awareness of the Town than on revenue, and that there might be a way to combine those

two focuses. She added that she found the results of Ms. Little's poll interesting, particularly the question of how much vendors would be willing to pay for booths.

Councilmember Perkins said he thought people would be willing to pay an entrance fee to attend some of the events. Vice Mayor Loges said she liked the variety of event ideas Ms. Little had provided, and she thought the Town would need to consider return-on-investment more than ever due to the recent loss in revenue. She also noted that the Town could provide training opportunities to help businesses increase their online sales.

Mayor Porta asked if Council was comfortable making a decision regarding the Craft Show/RiverFest. He noted that things would need to change dramatically for the Town to be able to move forward with the event. Councilmember Perkins said he agreed, and that canceling the Craft Show/RiverFest would allow Ms. Little to focus on other opportunities for the Town. Mayor Porta asked if Councilmember Perkins would make a motion to cancel the event. Councilmember Perkins asked Ms. Little if she thought it would be possible to hold the event. Ms. Little responded that she did not see how the Town could do so. Councilmember Perkin noted that even if the situation improved, it would seem inappropriate to bring such a large group of people into Town for an event. Ms. Little agreed. Mayor Porta noted that the Craft Show/RiverFest events were the only Town events intended exclusively to raise revenue for the Town, so the Town would be losing out the most from the cancelation. He added that he thought canceling the event was the responsible thing to do.

Motion to cancel the 2020 RiverFest event.

Moved by Councilmember Perkins; seconded by Councilmember Fithian.

Ayes: Councilmember Fithian, Councilmember Bienia, Vice Mayor Loges, Councilmember Perkins and Councilmember Holloway, by roll call vote.

Nays: None.

Mayor Porta noted that one challenge moving forward would be that the Town typically hosted two types of events: those intended to improve the quality of life for residents, which comprised the majority of the Town's events, and revenue-generating events. He explained that the Craft Show/RiverFest events were the Town's primary sources of funding for capital projects, and that both events were being canceled for 2020. He added that Council would need to balance the desire for quality-of-life events with its need to replace the lost revenue.

Councilmember Fithian said she would be willing to volunteer a few hours per week to help with the events. Ms. Little responded that she would let Councilmember Fithian know what she could do to help.

Mayor Porta asked about the plan for Discover Occoquan. Ms. Little responded that a number of businesses had signed up to offer virtual or in-person activities over the course of a week in August. She added that the beer garden and concert for Discover Occoquan had been canceled. She asked how Council felt about welcoming people to Town.

Mayor Porta noted that Discover Occoquan was an example of an event that was not revenue-generating. He explained that the event had been designed for residents and to bring people to Town who might not normally visit. He added that Council would need to decide whether they were comfortable with bringing additional people to Town.

Councilmember Bienia said she had mixed feelings because the purpose of the event was to bring people to Town and limiting that would detract from the concept. She also expressed concern about what would happen if too many people showed up.

Vice Mayor Loges said she appreciated the concept of breaking up the event over the course of a week with both online and in-person events. She asked whether there was a way to control the number of attendees, such as requiring registration for the in-person events. She added that the Town needed to continue to market itself and that Discover Occoquan could be a good opportunity to do so, with the proper precautions. Ms. Little noted that the businesses that were planning in-person activities had agreed to encourage physical distancing.

Councilmember Holloway asked why a series of events with limited participation would be preferable to the type of marketing the Town had undertaken since the pandemic began. Ms. Little responded that merchants and their patrons were ready to get back to business as much as possible. She noted that she could make the entire event virtual but she was hoping that spreading out the events during the week would help to manage participation.

Councilmember Holloway asked if there had been unanimous support for the event from the business community. Ms. Little responded that the support had been strong but it had not been unanimous. Councilmember Holloway asked if Ms. Little anticipated any problems with mask enforcement, as some businesses had encountered trouble with this. Ms. Little responded that she was not aware of any problems and that most people were becoming accustomed to idea of “no mask, no service.”

Councilmember Fithian asked if the Town could require masks for employees of all Town businesses as well as their customers. Mayor Porta responded that this was a state requirement but the Town could not require it. Councilmember Fithian said she had observed some employees and business owners without masks and she wondered whether the Town could require all businesses participating in Discover Occoquan to obey the mask mandate. Mayor Porta responded that it was a state requirement regardless of the Town’s policies, and that police were not authorized under state law to enforce the mandate. He noted that he had received several complaints about the same business and that he and Chief Linn had reminded the owners about the mask mandate. Beyond that, concerned residents could report the business to the Health Department or stop patronizing the business, he explained. He added that the Town may be able to remove any non-compliant businesses from its Discover Occoquan marketing materials.

Councilmember Fithian said she had been stopped by residents on the street who asked what the Town was doing about individuals who were not complying with the mask mandate. She added that she thought Council should have a standard response to such questions. Mayor Porta responded that the Police Department was reminding people to wear masks indoors or when not social distancing. Councilmember Fithian suggested that the Town sell masks with the Town logo.

Councilmember Perkins said he thought the Town should proceed with Discover Occoquan if it could implement safety and social distancing guidelines. Mayor Porta asked if Ms. Little had a strong preference regarding the event. Ms. Little responded that she would like to hold Discover Occoquan. Mayor Porta noted that it already was a scheduled event, so no further action would be necessary unless someone wanted to make a motion to cancel it.

Motion to cancel the in-person components of Discover Occoquan.

Moved by Councilmember Holloway.

Councilmember Fithian asked if the Town would need to abide by the state's guideline of 250 people or fewer per gathering. Mayor Porta responded that this would not apply to Discover Occoquan because it was not a single gathering. Councilmember Perkins said he thought the Town and participating businesses could take reasonable steps to make the event safe.

Councilmember Bienia said she wanted to approach the issue conservatively and safely, but she did not have enough details about the logistics to make a decision. Mayor Porta asked Ms. Little for examples of the in-person aspects of the event. Ms. Little responded that most of the activities were virtual, and the in-person activities proposed so far were a scuba diving presentation and a card-making workshop. Mayor Porta noted that these businesses had established that they would take appropriate precautions, so the primary concern was whether the Town was comfortable inviting additional people to participate in in-person events.

Councilmember Fithian asked if the in-person events were outdoors. Ms. Little responded that they were both indoors and outdoors. She asked if Council would like the events to be outdoors-only. Councilmember Holloway responded yes, because there was evidence that indoor events posed a bigger safety issue. Mayor Porta asked if Ms. Holloway would withdraw her motion if the in-person events were all outdoors and registration-only. Councilmember Holloway responded yes.

Councilmember Holloway withdrew the motion to cancel the in-person components of Discover Occoquan.

Ms. Little asked whether Council would like her to plan a virtual Craft Show.

Councilmember Perkins said he would like to maintain a relationship with the vendors, but he did not want Ms. Little to invest too much time in the event. Ms. Little responded that the event would be time-consuming but the Town needed to shift to online events due to the pandemic. Councilmember Perkins asked Ms. Little if she had time to plan a virtual Craft Show along with the other events Council had discussed. Ms. Little responded that she would need to focus on the Craft Show through the end of September, after which she could work on the additional events.

Councilmember Loges noted that the Craft Show historically had been a revenue-generating event and that it would not make sense to invest a significant amount of effort into the virtual event if it would not generate revenue.

Councilmember Bienia asked whether other towns were bringing their craft shows online. Ms. Little responded yes, adding that she had participated in a call with 75 event directors and half of them were considering going virtual. Councilmember Bienia said she would be open to learning from their experiences, though she thought the in-person aspect of the Craft Show was what made it so enjoyable.

Councilmember Fithian said she thought Town residents would be willing to pay to attend events, such as movies under the Route 123 bridge. She added that people were anxious to

get out and do something, and that they would recognize that the Town was missing out on revenue from the Craft Show.

Councilmember Holloway noted that it would take significant work to execute a successful virtual Craft Show and she was concerned that the outcome could appear low-quality. She added that she did not think the virtual Craft Show would be a good use of Ms. Little's time.

Mayor Porta said there appeared to be unanimous consensus that the virtual Craft Show would not be worth Ms. Little's time and that there were other initiatives for her to work on. Ms. Little responded that she would work on the smaller events, which she thought the Town could host safely.

b. Update on Kayak Ramp Project

Mayor Porta said Council would discuss this item in closed session, as it involved a personnel issue.

3. Closed Session

Motion to convene in closed session to discuss, as permitted by the Virginia Code Section 2.2-3711(A)(1), a personnel matter involving the assignment, appointment, promotion, performance, demotion, salaries, disciplining, or resignation of specific public officers, appointees, or employees of the Town, specifically dealing with all Town employees.

Moved by Councilmember Fithian; seconded by Vice Mayor Loges.

Motion **passed** unanimously by voice vote.

Closed session began at 7:49 p.m.

Closed session ended at 8:53 p.m.

Motion to certify that, in the closed session just concluded, nothing was discussed except the matter or matters (1) specifically identified in the motion to convene in closed session and (2) lawfully permitted to be discussed under the provisions of the Virginia Freedom of Information Act cited in that motion.

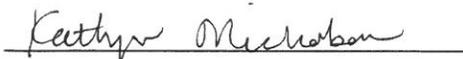
Moved by Councilmember Fithian; seconded by Vice Mayor Loges.

Ayes: Vice Mayor Loges, Councilmember Bienia, Councilmember Fithian, Councilmember Holloway and Councilmember Perkins, by roll call vote.

Nays: None.

4. ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 8:56 p.m.



Katy Nicholson
Town Clerk