

MINUTES OF THE STRASBURG TOWN COUNCIL WORK SESSION HELD ON MONDAY, APRIL 1, 2024 AT 7 P.M. IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBERS OF THE STRASBURG TOWN HALL.

COUNCIL MEMBERS PRESENT: Vice Mayor McCorn, and Council Members Carter, Hooser, Kimmons, Lowder, Monahan, and Stover. Absent: Mayor Boies

Call to Order – Vice Mayor Emily McCorn

Introduction and Recognition of Visitors and Guests:

Citizen Comments on non-agenda items:

Presentation/Reports:

• **Strasburg Volunteer Rescue Squad – Chief Dan Rothstein**

Chief Rothstein said he has been the chief for four years. The department has approximately twenty-five active members and four new members are being processed in. They have three ALS ambulances, one mobile chase unit (cannot transport), they house the County's swift water boat and raft, and are housing two County reserve vehicles. They have Strasburg Volunteer Fire Department's antique fire truck and Mobile 10 for the County housed in their building. They just spec'd out a new ambulance which will cost over \$400,000.

The department ran 204 calls during the month of March. The total number of medical calls for 2023 was 2,210.

Challenges:

- Recruitment and retention
- Prices – get funding through the State and EMS funding has been cut. Many of the grants have been cut because they are strictly EMS.
- Hours needed to stay up-to-date on training; struggle to get CE hours
- Supplies are expensive.
- They can bill for calls; if volunteers get the entire call, they get the full amount charged. If Shenandoah County people are on the call, they get the money except for mileage.
- Insurance
- FDA licensing for the medication they carry; might have to get their own FDA license.

One of the things the membership has asked for is some parking spaces. The town took some of the parking spaces when the parking lot changed. They used to have spaces beside the steps, but Box Office says it is for them. They have problems with people parking in the ambulance bays; they would like for this to be addressed.

Mr. Rothstein invited all to tour their building, two at a time.

Council Member Monahan asked if the County will pick-up the insurance for their employees.

Mr. Rothstein said they would not. If a career staff damages the ambulance, the department will have to pay the deductible.

Council Member Hooser asked how much support they receive from the town. **Mr. Rothstein** said they get two installments per year with the total amount being \$35,000. Currently, they are doing okay in their bank account, but they will be paying for a new ambulance.

Vice Mayor McCorn asked how many parking spaces were lost, and it is thought it was two spots. **Mr. Rothstein** thought they were told they would get two spots. **Vice Mayor McCorn** asked **Town Manager Coggsdale** to look into the spaces and the other issues that were raised.

Council Member Woodson said he has noticed the handicap space is on the wrong side, so he wanted to let them know this before they re-stripped.

Council Member Monahan asked if the police department could help with the blocking of the doors. Chief Sager said they should call and they will come.

Vice Mayor McCornyn asked if there is anything that Council can do to help with any of the challenges. **Chief Rothstein** said the County is looking into a retirement system for the volunteers. If there are events going on, they would like to have a table set up. They wonder if someone could change the oil for them even if they pay for the oil.

Asst. Town Manager Shipe said the department has been sending an ambulance to events and are acting as a first aid station.

Council Member Stover said if a person doesn't have any health insurance to bill, what happens. They have to write it off. They send a bill three times and if it isn't paid, they write it off. Their income mainly comes from the mileage from the paid staff.

Vice Mayor McCornyn extended her thanks for all the work of the First Responders with the fires.

- **Stowe Engineering and Shockey Companies – Preliminary Request for Water and Sewer Extension to the Glendale Site**

A presentation was given by **Tim Stowe**, Stowe Engineering, and **Gray Farland**, representing The Shockey Companies. The rezoning was approved by the Board of Supervisors, and they are now working on how to best utilize the property. They are in attendance to show some of the ideas they have about water.

A slide was shown of the land area and where it is in relation to the railroad. They can build up to a 1.2 million square foot building.

They have two options of how to get the water to the property and both options were explained.

Option 1:

- Bore under the interstate.
- Anticipate building a pump station for sewer.
- They anticipate putting in a larger line for sewer than what they will need and put a smaller line inside of the larger line.
- Have had preliminary discussions with VDOT on boring under I81.
- Need more water for the fire suppression system and not for what they anticipate the use.

Option 2:

- Would go under the CSX railroad.

They do not have a strong opinion with either option.

They have looked at the town's system. Only about 30% of capacity is being used for water and only 35% for sewer. They think they will only use about the same amount of water as 10 houses.

Path Forward:

- Approval by the Council for connection to the system.
- Acquisition of easements owned by the Town.
- Determine end user's water and sewer demand.
- Plan review-construction.

All easements would belong to the town.

They do not have an industry who has signed onto the property, so they don't know what size meter they will need but they know the size line they need for the fire suppression.

The goal is just to present this information and to let Council know they will come back for a formal request.

Council Member Monahan said if they have no idea what will go on the property, how can they ensure the town that it will only be for bathrooms and coffee pot. **Mr. Stowe** said they will have someone come and talk to the town and let them know what is planned. They are only asking for the line to provide the sprinkler requirements. Coming off of this would be the service laterals to the building. Council would determine how much would be allowed. A big line is needed for the sprinkler and a smaller lateral for the building use. Council will ultimately have to say yes or no to the size line to get to the building.

Council Member Monahan asked what would happen if the town says no and **Mr. Stowe** said they could drill wells for the daily use at the building and utilize gray water from the Carmeuse.

Council Member Woodson said he remembers that DEQ allows 1.5 million gallon withdrawal per day, but **Mr. Stowe** showed 2.5 million. **Council Member Woodson** asked what happens if more water is needed; it was said a new permit would be asked for.

Council Member Kimmons asked if they are being asked for an approval for option 1 or 2 and then later the applicant will come back and at that time the town can now say no for an actual connection. **Mr. Stowe** said they are hoping they could get fire suppression water from the town.

Council Member Monahan said it is being referred to as fire service and if Council would say no, could they get the water from wells. **Mr. Stowe** said they would ask Carmeuse for the use of gray water for fire service. They could not get this from the wells.

Mr. Stowe said this is an opportunity to get water to the other side of I81.

Discussion Items/Updates:

1.) Project Updates

Asst. Town Manager Shipe said both agreements have been signed for the fireworks. They are almost finished with pool work. A fall planting is being planned for the Town Run project. The trees along the proposed addition to the River Walk were cut down on Saturday. A contractor is looking at the RFP for the bathrooms before it is put out for bid. The Easter Egg Hunt held at the Visitor Center went great. Vintage in the Valley is this weekend.

2.) Water and Sewer Extension Policy

Town Manager Coggsdale said several modifications asked for by Council have been incorporated into the policy.

Vice Mayor McCornyn said she saw the updates to policy. She asked if Council was ready to add this to the agenda for a vote, and if so, regular or consent agenda.

This will be added to the regular agenda for the Council meeting.

3.) Surplus Inventory

Asst. Town Manager Shipe said the town has been working with GovDeals which is much like eBay. Since the original list of items were voted on to deem surplus, other items have been added that need to be declared surplus. A new list was given to Council and these can be added to the surplus items to be auctioned off.

Council Member Kimmons asked about climate control system, and it is from a police vehicle. It was for a canine unit. We have had two dogs in the past.

Surplus items will be added to the consent agenda.

4.) FY2025 Draft Budget

Town Manager Coggsdale showed revision #1 of the FY2025 Draft Budget and then where we are now with the revisions asked for by Council. We now have an overall deficit of \$59,622. He explained the revisions and how they affected the funds.

CIP projects total \$2,973,500. This is the amount for FY2025 but the CIP is forecast for five years and these numbers were shown. Ultimately, over the next five years, the total is \$8,058,150.

Budget deliberations need to be done by next Tuesday night because of advertising. You can go down from the advertised budget, but you cannot go up. We still need to figure out how to balance the funds.

Council Member Kimmons asked what the possibility would be of lowering the water rates and raising the sewer rates to compensate. **Town Manager Coggsdale** said you can do this, but he views it as one fund.

Council Member Monahan said she thinks of it as one, too, but people get upset when they fill their swimming pool and get charged for the sewer. **Town Manager Coggsdale** said we bill the sewer from the amount of water used. We aren't talking of any increases.

Council Member Kimmons said raising the sewer rates and lowering water rates would move us closer to securing the availability funds. **Council Member Monahan** would like to work toward this during the next budget cycle.

Council Member Hooser said he sees where **Council Member Kimmons** is coming from. When he came on Council, we were transferring money from the General Fund to shore up the Water Fund and we now have a balanced Water Fund.

Council Member Monahan said she thinks it is semantics and she thinks it is too late in the game to try to do this.

Town Manager Coggsdale said if we try to do this, you would need to use approximately \$278,000 from the availability funds.

Vice Mayor McCoryn said she is getting the feeling that Council would like to look at this next year. **The consensus was to look into this further during the next budget year.**

Council Member Hooser said we are still using one time tap fees for recurring expenses. They should pay for themselves. Ultimately, it just needs to go up.

Town Manager Coggsdale said with the latest connection, we met the budget total for this fiscal year.

Council Member Monahan asked when the new water meters will be up and running. **DP&PS Otis** said training will be on April 9. The meters are live now; the portal is what the training will be on. You might see some use changes when the portals are live. The customer will be more aware of usage.

Adding a comment about lowering of water fees, **Town Manager Coggsdale** said there are some things to look at as far as our USDA loans/grants with the lowering of water bills.

Town Manager Coggsdale said we still need to address the deficit in the General Fund. We could use the Water Fund Surplus to help balance this. A one cent tax increase would generate \$85,417. We can use General Fund Balance (Reserve) to balance the General Fund. Any of these would just be for advertising purposes. A decision doesn't have to be made tonight but he will need to know next week.

Council Member Hooser said the last time we raised the Real Estate, it went from .135 to .155. Nobody complained about this. We need to be honest with the citizens about what is needed. We can't get things unless we get control of the real estate tax.

Council Member Woodson said localities never make money from collecting trash ourselves. **Town Manager Coggsdale** said the conversation about this came up because of the ARPA funds. This can be an ongoing conversation.

Council Member Hooser said we will never get anything until we raise our tax rates. He said Luray has a .29 per \$100 of assessed value rate and we have a .155 rate.

Town Manager Coggsdale said next week staff will need to get clear direction on what to advertise. He asked that all reach out to him or **Director of Finance Fletcher** with questions.

Council Member Woodson said we will advertise this and then find out we are in better shape than we thought. **Town Manager Coggsdale** said you advertise with the worst case and then we might find out we don't need that much before the budget is adopted.

Council Member Monahan said we could do a two cent raise in taxes and then use some of the reserve fund or the water fund.

Committee of the Whole (listed Areas of Focus will be discussed):

1) Finance/Personnel – Council Member Council Member Monahan

a. Utility and Tax Write-Offs

Director of Finance Fletcher said the write-off list was provided. This is a standard process. The numbers are trending down, and new policies have been adopted to help with this.

This will be added to the consent agenda.

b. Title and Grade Level Assignments (Proposed Revisions)

Town Manager Coggsdale said the assignments were provided to Council. Each grade level has been increased by 3% at each level (Min/Mid/Max). Multiple positions are being recommended for grade assignment upgrades.

Staff seeks Town Council's input on these proposed changes and would request that any changes be decided on and made effective on July 1, 2024.

Council Member Monahan said there will be several employees who will not be able to make the COLA because of maximum. Should these people be given a bonus or how should they get this.

Vice Mayor McCornyn asked how you determine the min/mid/max assignment. **Town Manager Coggsdale** said you try to lump like/type of employees in the same grade level or pay band. You then decide on a rate of pay for each grade. There is usually a 5% difference between each level.

The thought is that if you stay in a position for your entire career, you progress from the min to max. He thinks there have been so many changes to the grades and levels because some were too low to begin with.

Vice Mayor McCorn asked how this will address her questions from last week on the starting salary of police officers. **Town Manager Coggsdale** said this plan would move a police officer from a 107 to a 109. It would increase the starting pay to \$47,000. This would take us from 17th to 6th. The note on the sheet says that the starting rate for a police officer will be \$49,000.

Town Manager Coggsdale said when you do this, there is no money involved; it is only on paper. What you have to be careful of is compression toward the next group. We will need to look at this to make sure this doesn't happen, and if it does, there might be some funding issues. Vacant positions need to be budgeted in. When people leave, you usually have the money already budgeted in. Compression issues will have to be addressed. This is more of a recruitment tool.

Council Member Stover said police officers talk all the time about other jurisdictions. Are we having retention issues because of people going to other jurisdictions close to us. **Chief Sager** said we have significant turnover, and this will help with that. He would want to support all those that have been loyal to the community. The department has made a significant investment in the officers. **Town Manager Coggsdale** said the police department has a career development program. **Chief Sager** said this allows them to reward those who are with us. People are recruiting every day. We are only down one officer, but some are down 18 officers.

Council Member Stover said we invest in them, and we want to keep them. **Town Manager Coggsdale** said this is not budget driven; this is a longer range goal and does not have to be advertised with the budget. He wants all to fully understand the challenges of all departments. This could at least bring people in when hiring.

Vice Mayor McCorn said the average is \$49,300 and this would bring us to \$49,000. **Town Manager Coggsdale** said at the minimum we would go to the minimum. **Vice Mayor McCorn** asked if the reason a police officer wasn't moved to Grade 110 because of compression. **Town Manager Coggsdale** said this gets them to the average. We could go to the next grade, but it could cause some other problems.

Council Member Kimmons said he would like to have an explanation of PO 1 and PO 2 and then PO 3. Would this not cause compression issues. **Town Manager Coggsdale** said we always factor in experience and how it fits and how it fits with the years of experience with those here. If you stretch out the levels too far out, you reach the other grade levels. **Council Member Kimmons** said there are certain grade levels that are not being utilized.

Vice Mayor McCorn said there is enough difference between the min/mid/max to keep the PO 1 and PO 2 in the same grade level.

Council Member Hooser asked how much friction there is when people think they deserve more. How easy is it to get a raise. **Chief Sager** said we don't have a merit based pay. They have career development and different variables are looked at. He explained the criteria for career development increases. The officers have the ability to work through the program. He is strict on this. It is not just given out.

Council Member Woodson said he doesn't see what the issue would be if you hire someone with the same amount of experience. He said if you hire someone with no experience and they get paid the same amount as a person who has been there for five years, that would be a problem He talked

more of merit increase. **Town Manager Coggsdale** said this is what makes us competitive and retains people on the COLA side.

Council Member Kimmons said one thing good for retention is insurance. What percentage of the insurance do we pay. **Town Manager Coggsdale** said we had a 9% increase in our rates. The town side went up and the employee side went up. Should we adjust what we pay for insurance and what we pay for dual and family plans? He thinks this is where we lose some people.

Vice Mayor McCornyn asked if this is something we can have a discussion on after budget season. **Town Manager Coggsdale** said all of these are good topics to see where we are. These are topics of retention.

Chief Sager said between the 110 grade, we could manage all the POs on this grade. He has people who have five years of experience, and they can go across the bridge and earn more than they are as an officer starting out. **Town Manager Coggsdale** said this skews the numbers.

Council Member Kimmons said he talked to people in Front Royal, and they were at the lower end of the scale and they bumped it up.

Vice Mayor McCornyn asked about the Grade 100 and the salary rate being \$12. She thought it was required to pay \$15. **Town Manager Coggsdale** said we raised our starting salary for all full time employees to \$15.

2) Public Works, Utilities & Infrastructure

a. Gateway Trail design/reseeding

DP&PS Otis said the Gateway Trail runs from Walgreens to City Bank. Last year, the trail did not look good. It was decided to wait and see how it looked in the spring. There are some areas where nothing will grow and there has been an invasive weed.

Three options have been presented:

- Perennial/Annual Wildflower – it is a mix of seeds.
- Herbaceous Perennial Grass – grows fast
- Tall Fescue Turf Blend – mow regularly

We need to get direction from Council this week as to what they would like to see on the trail as we need to plant.

Council Member Monahan asked what they will do with the invasive species, and Public Works has already been spraying.

Council Member Lowder said he wants it to look neat and be maintained.

Council Member Hooser said he sprinkled some wildflower seeds and they do very well. It was noted that we installed the wildflowers to help with bees and butterflies.

Consensus was to go with Option 1.

Council Member Comments:

Closed Meeting (if needed):

Adjournment

Being no other business, the work session adjourned at 9:09 p.m.