

**MINUTES – SPECIAL MEETING
BOONE TOWN COUNCIL
February 23, 2022**

CALL TO ORDER

A Special meeting of the Boone Town Council was called to order virtually at 6:00 p.m. on Wednesday, February 23, 2022. Mayor Tim Futrelle presided. Council members present included Mayor Pro-Tem Edie Tugman, Becca Nenow, Dalton George, Todd Carter and Virginia Roseman. Staff present included Town Manager John Ward, Town Clerk Nicole Harmon, Deputy Public Works Director Todd Moody, Finance Director Amy Davis, Police Chief Andy Le Beau, Sustainability and Special Projects Manager George Santucci, Planning Director Jane Shook, Deputy Public Works Director Josh Eller, Fire Chief Jimmy Isaacs, Communications Specialist Laney Pilkington, Cultural Resources Director Mark Freed, Public Works Director Mark Freed, Deputy Planning Director Stacey Miller, Human Resources Director Dale Presnell, and Long Range Planner Jessica Mitchell. Town Attorney Allison Meade was also in attendance.

The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the Town of Boone State of Emergency and Covid-19 requirements regarding Town of Boone employees.

MOMENT OF SILENCE

PUBLIC COMMENT

A representative of the Common Good in Downtown Boone asked members to end the mask mandate. She felt that Council members had disregarded CDC recommendations for the last five months regarding masks, and hoped that members would not disregard the Governor's recommendations to end the mask mandate.

Dr. Dan Hatcher stated that he recently retired after practicing internal medicine for 35 years and indicated that he recently completed a literature review of studies that looked at the efficacy of masking and reducing mortality related to Covid. He stated that most of the studies endorsing the use of face masks in the community setting were based on indirect evidence, and suggested that Council forego the mask mandate since in his opinion, it was not helping the spread of Covid-19.

David Jackson of the Boone Chamber of Commerce indicated that they had heard from more than 20 businesses over the last 72 hours regarding the mask mandate, with responses being mixed. He asked that whatever Council decided to do, that it be done with strong communication and enforcement, and urged members to listen to local health professionals and take their guidance.

Carey Gregory of Boone spoke in favor of removing the mask mandate.

Jennifer Greene of the Watauga County Health Department noted that numbers would be skewed since more people were testing at home and were not always reporting the results. She believed that the vaccines were helping with the recent decrease in case, and believed that masks worked. Ms. Greene felt that people who were not up to date with their vaccines should be encouraged to wear masks, and that masks should be continued to be worn in healthcare settings, on public transportation and congregate settings.

Rob Hudspeth, Senior Vice President of the Appalachian Regional Healthcare System stated that the hospital currently had 7 patients in Covid isolation, and 16 patients that came in for another reason ended up getting a secondary Covid-19 diagnosis, most of which were asymptomatic. He indicated that while Covid was still active, it was trending down. Mr. Hudspeth pointed out the staffing crunch the hospital was experiencing, but was confident that staff could handle what was currently going on.

COUNCIL MATTERS

DISCUSSION REGARDING TOWN OF BOONE STATE OF EMERGENCY

Police Chief Andy Le Beau indicated that since the beginning of the pandemic, the department had close to 200 complaints about executive order violations. He stated that the department had responded to only five calls for service since November 1, 2021, which indicated a decline in reported violations. Chief Le Beau added that staff would remove patrons from stores for not wearing masks whether or not a mask mandate was in place. He stated that it was his experience that big-box stores were more problematic in terms of mask wearing as opposed

to local businesses. Mr. George felt that the Town would support each business no matter what they decided to do in terms of masking, but felt if the Town continued with the mask mandate, it would become impractical and unenforceable. Ms. Roseman suggested holding off on voting on the matter until the March 9 regular meeting, and if cases were still declining, discussing making masks optional at that time. Mr. Carter indicated that he was not in favor of the night's meeting to begin with, and felt that the matter should have waited until the March 9 regular meeting since the State's recommendations did not take effect until March 7. Due to the low vaccination rate, he too preferred to wait until the March 9 regular meeting to make a decision. Ms. Nenow felt that businesses who were going to require masks were already doing so, and that those who were going to wear a mask were doing so already. She believed that Town Council was trying to force people's hands and did not believe it was practical to have a mandate in place. Mayor Pro-Tem Tugman felt that the vaccination rate in Watauga County needed to improve, and that the area was not close enough to what science indicated to be a threshold to lift the mask mandate right now. She stated that she heard frustrations from everywhere, but did not believe that those were reasons to end the mask mandate. Mayor Pro-Tem Tugman supported Ms. Roseman and Mr. Carter's suggestion to revisit the topic at the next regular Council meeting. Mr. George felt that Council was risking its sense of credibility by being the only town in the area with a mask mandate, but was willing to compromise by discussing the matter on March 7. Ms. Nenow agreed, and stated that the representatives from the local medical centers were competent and should be listened to. She did not believe that with 7 in isolation and only 2 on a ventilator, that things would get better. Ms. Roseman made a motion that the Town of Boone would follow the North Carolina mandate and cease the requirement of masks in indoor settings as of March 7 and that the matter would be reconsidered at the March 9 regular meeting. Mr. George seconded the motion.

VOTE: Aye: Roseman, George Nenow
 Nay: Tugman, Carter

Ms. Roseman requested that an item be placed on each future agenda for potential action regarding the current Covid-19 status.

DISCUSSION REGARDING COVID-19 REQUIREMENTS REGARDING TOB EMPLOYEES

Mr. Ward indicated that if this decision were left to him, he would not require testing for unvaccinated staff, but asked Council for further direction. He noted that the Town had lost some key personnel due to this requirement. After brief discussion, it was the consensus of Council to keep employee testing requirements as-is and to revisit in two weeks.

ADJOURNMENT

Upon a motion by Mayor Pro-Tem Tugman, seconded by Mr. Carter, Council voted unanimously to adjourn the meeting at 8:51 p.m.

Nicole Harmon, Town Clerk

Tim Futrelle, Mayor