

**MINUTES – SPECIAL MEETING
BOONE TOWN COUNCIL
MARCH 20, 2026**

CALL TO ORDER

A special meeting of the Boone Town Council was called to order at 9:05 a.m. on Friday, March 20, 2026, in the Boone Town Council Chambers located at 1500 Blowing Rock Road in Boone. Mayor Dalton George presided (entered the meeting at 9:28 a.m.). Council members present included Mayor Pro-Tem Todd Carter, Virginia Roseman (entered the meeting at 9:10 a.m.), Eric Plaag, and Anne Pruitt. Staff present included Interim Town Manager/Human Resources Director Dale Presnell, Town Clerk Nicole Harmon, Grants Coordinator/Communications Laney Wise, Public Works Director Todd Moody, Deputy Public Works Director Justin Stines, Planning Director Jane Shook, Deputy Planning Director Brandon Wise, Cultural Resources Director Mark Freed, Police Chief Daniel Duckworth, Fire Chief Jimmy Isaacs, and Sustainability and Special Projects Manager George Santucci. The purpose of the meeting was to gather input and take potential action regarding the Town-owned property known as Daniel Boone Park and its entities.

MOMENT OF SILENCE

A brief moment of silence was observed.

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE PROPERTIES/RESOURCES AT DANIEL BOONE PARK

Councilmember Plaag provided an overview of the property known as Daniel Boone Park, including the resources located on the site. An overview of existing lease and license agreements associated with the property was also presented.

WATAUGA COUNTY FARMERS MARKET

Michelle Dineen provided an overview of Market activities and encouraged Council to prioritize increased safety and accessibility at Daniel Boone Park, including the provision of year-round, fully functional restroom facilities. She inquired whether the Town had initiated an official planning process for the park. Council members indicated that the current discussion represented the first step in that process. Councilmember Plaag noted that previous Councils had been frustrated by the absence of a comprehensive plan for the park, which had resulted in outside entities independently shaping the use of the Town-owned property. He stated that the intent of the current effort was for the Town to take a more active role in planning and to collaborate with partner organizations rather than defer to separate, entity-driven plans. Councilmember Roseman recalled that during her time with SAHA, the Town had not been significantly involved in planning efforts. Councilmember Pruitt expressed a desire to move beyond past plans, while Councilmember Plaag noted that previous plans still held value.

Ms. Dineen asked how the Market could best collaborate with the Town and its partners moving forward. Councilmember Plaag emphasized the importance of clear communication and encouraged the Market to articulate its vision for future growth. Mayor Pro-Tem Carter asked about opportunities for improved signage and connectivity. Ms. Dineen indicated that there was potential for more cohesive signage and better-connected pathways throughout the park. Councilmember Plaag observed that there had been inequities in the use of space and acknowledged past tensions among park entities, including between the Gardens, the Market, and SAHA, particularly related to restroom access and pathway use. He emphasized the need for mutual understanding and cooperation moving forward, noting that the property is Town-owned. Ms. Dineen acknowledged past misunderstandings and expressed the Market's commitment to a collaborative approach, recognizing all entities as shared community assets. Councilmember Pruitt asked whether a master calendar existed for park activities. Ms. Dineen indicated that she was not aware of one. Councilmember Plaag stated that, as a Town resource, the park would benefit from a Town-managed master calendar, and Ms. Dineen agreed. Ms. Dineen also asked whether the Town supported shared branding and marketing efforts for the park, such as a coordinated flag campaign. Council members expressed general agreement with this initiative. Ms. Dineen further inquired about expanding AppalCART service to the park. Mayor Pro-Tem Carter noted that discussions had occurred with AppalCART but that feasibility data would be needed to justify adding a new route, though the idea warranted further exploration. It was noted that ADA services are currently available upon request. Finally, Ms. Dineen asked whether the Town anticipated the Market continuing at its current location. Council members generally indicated support for its continued presence at Daniel Boone Park. Councilmember Plaag noted that there had been no formal discussions regarding relocation, though there had been informal conversations about potentially hosting a separate farmers market event at the Armory.

DANIEL BOONE NATIVE GARDENS

Daniel Boone Native Gardens Director Amy Seely provided a presentation on ongoing operations and needs. Mayor Pro-Tem Carter asked whether funding had been considered for the installation of a fence. Councilmember Plaag noted a perceived inequity in utility costs and that these need to be equitable across all user groups. He raised concerns that SAHA would be responsible for utility costs in the new restrooms when they are open for other uses, and also referenced a cabin on the property, suggesting it could present an opportunity for shared use and collaboration among partner organizations. He further noted that the fern garden and bridges were damaged during Hurricane Helene, and that while the Town had completed some stabilization work, the area may be eligible for disaster recovery funding. Councilmember Roseman stated that assistance with grant writing would need to be considered equitably among all entities. Mayor George asked whether the concert series was envisioned as a long-term revenue source. Rebecca Hutchins, Board Chair, responded that it had generated some revenue in recent years but that sponsorships and donations had been difficult to secure, noting potential for future

growth. Mayor George suggested coordinating with Cultural Resources on pricing strategies. Councilmember Plaag also suggested exploring partnerships with the Appalachian Theatre and Valle Crucis Community Park to assist with promotion of non-ticketed events.

SOUTHERN APPALACHIAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

Southern Appalachian Historical Association Director Marrena Greer provided an overview of upcoming events and requested support from the Mayor, including storytelling and an opening-season letter. She noted ongoing construction at the site, including an ADA-accessible pathway funded by the State, and expressed enthusiasm for the addition of year-round restroom facilities. She also reported that grant work was underway, along with electrical, paving, and tree-related improvements, and stated that a 36-night regular season was planned. Ms. Greer thanked the Gardens for their cooperation in addressing sound concerns and noted an increase in visitation to the museum from school groups. Councilmember Plaag acknowledged the history of deferred maintenance at the property and stated that the Town holds responsibility for maintaining the facility and pursuing grant funding, rather than relying solely on SAHA to communicate needs. He also noted that, while SAHA operates under a license agreement, there should be flexibility to allow other groups to use the property at appropriate times. Councilmember Pruitt suggested that such coordination be addressed within the license agreement and further noted that the agreement should clarify that the licensee is responsible for the conduct of its guests in order to alleviate issues experienced during previous events. Ms. Greer expressed a desire to be included in discussions regarding additional events. Mayor George agreed and emphasized the importance of consistency across agreements. Councilmember Plaag asked whether SAHA maintains insurance on the Hickory Ridge buildings that SAHA owns. He indicated that SAHA should be responsible for maintaining insurance on these and not the Town, but that the grounds at Hickory Ridge and the grounds and other buildings elsewhere on the property are clearly Town property and should be insured as such. Ms. Greer indicated she would need to confirm. Councilmember Roseman stated that, if additional events are scheduled, SAHA would be interested in partnering to manage ticketing and concessions as a potential revenue source. Mayor George noted that such arrangements could be explored but should be approached cautiously to ensure fairness among all users. Ms. Greer also raised concerns regarding utility costs, stating that with the addition of new restroom facilities, it would not be equitable for SAHA to bear the full cost of water usage.

Mayor George declared a break at 10:59 a.m. Council reconvened at 11:13 a.m.

INPUT FROM TOWN DEPARTMENTS

PUBLIC WORKS DEPARTMENT

Public Works Director Todd Moody provided a historical overview of maintenance and improvements at Daniel Boone Park. He noted that between 1996 and 2004, the Town performed minimal maintenance beyond leaf collection. In 2005, restroom renovations and winterization efforts were completed to extend the facility's usability, followed by general building maintenance in 2006 and significant work on outdoor lighting. He reported that the Powderhorn Theatre was demolished in 2014, major electrical upgrades were completed in 2008 and approved by an inspector, and a building for use as a sound booth was purchased in 2009. Additional improvements included roof replacement and cabin repairs at the Gardens in 2009, removal of numerous trees between 2012 and 2014, installation of an ADA-accessible sidewalk in 2014, and construction of a stage in 2025. He also noted that the Town had provided mowing services at the Daniel Boone Native Gardens for approximately 15 to 20 years. Mr. Moody stated that approximately \$300,000 in Town funds had been invested over the past 20 years, with approximately \$1,574 remaining in that budget line, not including staff time. He requested direction from Council and noted that future considerations should include both maintenance funding and staffing needs. Councilmember Plaag asked, excluding staff time, what level of funding would be necessary to ensure safety, proper use, and adequate infrastructure, such as parking. Mr. Moody stated that he could not provide a precise estimate without further review, but indicated that the need would likely total in the millions. Councilmember Plaag expressed appreciation for staff efforts but stated that the limited historical investment reflected a lack of prioritization by past Councils and emphasized the need for increased investment moving forward. Councilmember Pruitt suggested that park-related expenditures may be more appropriately managed under a Parks and Recreation function rather than Public Works. Councilmember Plaag also raised questions regarding utility cost allocation, particularly with the addition of shared restroom facilities, and whether a different cost structure should be considered. Mr. Moody indicated that it would not be appropriate for SAHA to bear the full cost of water usage and noted that additional information on existing utility payments would need to be confirmed. Cultural Resources Director Mark Freed explained that a credit system is currently used, whereby the Town pays to maintain certain utility lines, such as parking lot lighting, and those costs are factored into overall usage. Councilmember Plaag asked whether the Gardens contribute to restroom-related utility costs, and Ms. Hutchins responded that their electric costs have been minimal and that she was unsure what all was covered. Councilmember Plaag acknowledged staff efforts to maintain equitable arrangements but stated that the addition of new restroom facilities would likely require restructuring of existing agreements. He further noted that past Councils had determined it was beneficial to allow licensees to occupy the property without charging rent.

CULTURAL RESOURCES

Cultural Resources Director Mark Freed recognized the park's partner organizations as valuable contributors to the community and noted their strong commitment and collaboration. It was stated that the use and condition of the property have varied over time based on direction from Council and Town management. Mr. Freed requested

guidance on several operational matters, including whether to actively encourage increased use of the park and how to manage a centralized calendar of events. It was noted that annual coordination meetings with each partner organization had occurred in the past but were not held in the previous year due to the anticipation of the summit; however, staff indicated that a calendar could be managed internally with clear direction from Council. Mr. Freed also requested clarification on funding responsibilities, specifically distinguishing between program-related needs, which should be funded by individual organizations, and broader park-related needs, which should be funded by the Town. It was noted that exceptions have occurred, such as the stage turntable, which was funded by SAHA, and staff requested direction on how such situations should be handled moving forward. Additional guidance was requested regarding the pursuit and coordination of grant funding. Mr. Freed referenced prior planning efforts, including the marquee haul back plan, which was Town-funded and included stakeholder and community input. He indicated that feedback from that process emphasized the desire for the park to function as “Boone’s Central Park,” valuing traditions such as Horn in the West while also supporting expanded use of the amphitheater for additional events. Identified needs included fencing, improved condition of cabins and stage facilities, electrical and lighting upgrades, trail development, a permanent farmers market structure with community space, and upgrades to concessions and amphitheater seating. Mr. Freed noted a preference for avoiding reliance solely on arts-related fundraising to support these improvements. Mayor George acknowledged that both successful and challenging events have occurred at the park. Mr. Freed noted that events such as vintage markets, haunted trails, and Daniel Boone Days have been successful. Mayor George suggested that these examples could serve as a model or framework for future event organizers. A discussion was held regarding the licensing of events and the need to review current processes. Mr. Freed noted that scheduling constraints are present, as Saturdays are in high demand as the Farmers Market holds a license for the upper lot from April through November until 2:00 p.m. each Saturday, and SAHA holds a license from May through August. Mr. Freed requested clarification on how the Town could schedule events within the Gardens area under current agreements. Ms. Hutchins indicated that such use would require coordination and agreement, similar to any other external party. Mayor Pro-Tem Carter cited examples from other communities, noting that partnerships between municipalities and universities have been used to draw attention to public spaces and increase residents' familiarity with and use of them.

POLICE DEPARTMENT

Chief Duckworth provided an overview from a law enforcement perspective regarding operations at Daniel Boone Park. It was noted that officers conduct preventative measures, including routine property checks, though full walkthroughs of the entire property are limited. For events, staff evaluate factors such as crowd size, demographics, presence of alcohol, and overall threat level in order to determine appropriate staffing levels. Typical incidents include graffiti and parking lot accidents, though a few arrests were reported at a prior “Thaw Out” event. Councilmember Plaag asked whether security

personnel hired for outside events are off-duty officers or separate from Town staffing. Chief Duckworth responded that most are off-duty officers coordinated through Major Robbins. Councilmember Plaag asked whether it would be preferable for the Town to provide security services directly and bill event organizers, rather than coordinating separately. Chief Duckworth indicated that additional analysis would be needed to evaluate costs and options and noted that the Town Attorney has reviewed off-duty contract arrangements. Councilmember Pruitt cautioned that such an approach may involve additional considerations, including overtime, fees, and insurance costs, and emphasized the importance of accounting for those factors. Chief Duckworth noted that some jurisdictions charge up to \$100 per hour for such services compared to Boone's \$60. In response to a question regarding frequency, he stated that off-duty assignments vary among officers, with some working none and others working several per month, and that scheduling is monitored to ensure officers remain adequately rested for their regular duties.

LUNCH

Mayor George declared a break at 12:09 p.m. Council reconvened at 12:57 p.m.

DISCUSSION OF CREATION OF POSSIBLE PARKS AND RECREATION DEPARTMENT

Councilmember Plaag noted that the Town manages a variety of properties, some functioning as parks and others that are less obvious, such as Mayor Brantz Park at the Jones House and Jimmy Smith Park. He noted the lease agreement with the American Legion for Junaluska Park and encouraged exploring acquisition or lease-to-own opportunities with the American Legion. Mayor George concurred. Mayor George further observed that park-related responsibilities are currently dispersed across multiple departments, including Cultural Resources and Public Works, and that there is no clear advocate within the budget process. He suggested that, rather than creating a full department, the Town could consider dedicating one or two staff positions to manage park assets and expand programming. Councilmember Plaag suggested establishing a parks division within the Cultural Resources Department. Mayor George acknowledged current budget constraints, particularly with the upcoming Public Works facility, but emphasized the importance of setting a long-term goal. Mayor Pro-Tem Carter referenced the Elizabeth Young Garden as an example of a space evolving toward park status and noted the need for a clear vision, potentially modeled after communities that incorporate parks within a Cultural Resources framework. Mayor George suggested that the term "Parks and Recreation" could be confusing, given the County's role, and proposed "Parks and Open Spaces" as a more appropriate designation. Councilmember Roseman noted that the Rivers House, previously considered by the TDA, could serve as a potential location for staff dedicated to park management and programming, and suggested this as a long-term goal. Councilmember Pruitt emphasized the importance of establishing a timeline for implementation. It was stated that staff would work together with the Town Manager to develop a proposed structure, timeline, and approach for Council consideration at a future

work session. Mayor Pro-Tem Carter suggested using a strategic planning model for this effort. Councilmember Plaag also encouraged the development of a comprehensive inventory of Town-owned properties.

OPEN DISCUSSION AMONG TOWN COUNCIL, PLANNING COMMISSION, HPC, AND CRAB REGARDING LONG-RANGE PRIORITIES FOR DANIEL BOONE PARK

Vardell Smyth, Chair of the Historic Preservation Commission, noted that SAHA manages its own operations and expressed support for the ongoing planning process. Vardell emphasized the importance of establishing a single point of contact to coordinate efforts among the various entities involved.

Frida Paz Miranda of the Planning Commission discussed opportunities to address immediate, achievable improvements at the park. Frida agreed that management of a centralized calendar by the Cultural Resources Department would be appropriate, that it should be made accessible on the Town's website, and that the need to improve signage throughout the park should be addressed. It was noted that future planning for the park should be led by Town staff, with consideration given to preserving the community's history and character. Frida also discussed the potential benefits of expanding AppalCART service or implementing a shuttle option to improve access, while acknowledging the challenges of coordinating private hotel shuttle services due to their operational constraints.

Frank Veno, Chair of the Planning Commission, agreed that expanded shuttle service would be beneficial, noting that traffic and parking constraints continue to be challenges at the site. He also observed that a significant portion of Farmers Market patrons are tourists.

Loretta Clawson, Cultural Resources Advisory Board member, expressed appreciation for the opportunity to provide input. Councilmember Plaag asked for reflections on how the park could have been managed differently in the past. Mrs. Clawson responded that responsibilities were often deferred over time due to limited funding and emphasized the need for greater investment in park resources moving forward. She noted that funding challenges will likely persist but acknowledged that current efforts are moving in a positive direction, including the allocation of parking-related funds to SAHA. Councilmember Plaag observed that parking revenue generated at Daniel Boone Park could serve as a potential funding source and suggested that Council consider dedicating or sequestering those funds specifically for reinvestment in the park.

Bettie Bond, Historic Preservation Commission Vice Chair, was supportive of the summit and believed an inventory of Town-owned property was in order.

Jill Juris, Cultural Resources Advisory Board member, expressed enthusiasm about the progress of the discussion and noted appreciation for the anticipated creation of a position to advocate for park spaces.

Mayor George noted that a recurring theme among presenters was the importance of trail connectivity and highlighted opportunities to link key areas, including Strawberry Hill and Jaycee Park. He suggested that painted crosswalks, potentially designed by local artists, could help guide pedestrian movement and could be achieved through volunteer efforts. Ms. Bond emphasized the importance of historic markers and signage, while Mayor George stated that establishing connectivity should be prioritized before expanding signage. Ms. Bond also suggested coordinating with the Tourism Development Authority to develop a map of the area. Councilmember Pruitt recommended engaging Eagle Scout projects to assist with implementation efforts. Mayor George expressed support for increased marketing, development of a master calendar, and encouraging broader use of the park as construction projects are completed. A brief discussion was also held regarding the potential for metered parking at Jaycee Park. Councilmember Plaag noted prior discussions with Mayor George about the possibility of forming a community organization to serve as a steward for Strawberry Hill.

Mayor Pro-Tem Carter noted that the Tourism Development Authority has recently invested in a Bloomberg Philanthropies application through the Arts Council to support interactive art walks and trails. He explained that the platform would allow the Town to incorporate markers, trail information, videos, and narration to guide users through the experience. Mayor George asked whether the TDA could also support funding for physical signage, and Councilmember Carter indicated that such support may be possible.

Mr. Veno inquired about insurance coverage for the park facilities. Mr. Presnell explained that the Town maintains a policy covering Town-owned properties, while partner entities maintain their own separate insurance coverage. Mr. Veno also asked about utility billing arrangements. Mr. Freed stated that the Town pays each water bill, while Daniel Boone Native Gardens maintains its own power account. SAHA, the Farmers Market, and the Strawberry Hill restrooms each have separate power accounts, with the Town covering the base charge. It was noted that when outside groups use the space, they are asked to provide a small donation to offset daily electric costs.

Next, Mr. Veno asked about the lease structure, specifically why the Gardens' lease is set at \$1 per year. Councilmember Roseman explained that the Gardens entered into a long-term lease with the Town, which included a nominal annual payment, though the original rationale was unclear. Mr. Presnell noted that leases require an exchange of value, and Mayor George added that the Town has chosen to subsidize use of the property at minimal cost. Councilmember Roseman further noted that long-term leases can be advantageous when applying for grant funding.

Mr. Veno raised concerns regarding the newer playground equipment at Junaluska Park and whether that investment could be at risk if the lease were to expire. Mayor George responded that staff have been working with stakeholders at Jaycee Park on revitalization efforts and grant opportunities. Mayor Pro-Tem Carter asked whether the Town intends to

move toward lease or license agreements for all entities. Councilmember Plaag noted that leases may convey too much control over Town property and referenced concerns raised by the Town Attorney regarding multiple leases within the amphitheater area, particularly as they may limit the Town's ability to accommodate other users. Mayor George suggested further discussion with the Town Attorney before making decisions. Councilmember Plaag emphasized the importance of planning for the long-term future of park spaces and encouraged formalizing SAHA's current use in some manner. It was noted that staff would compile a comprehensive inventory of Town-owned properties, with the goal of presenting that information by the second meeting in April or early May. Mayor George indicated that Council anticipates discussing these matters further in May and encouraged partner entities to meet and communicate more regularly moving forward.

Hearing no objections, Mayor George adjourned the meeting at 2:23 p.m.

Nicole Harmon, Clerk

Dalton George, Mayor