

**MINUTES – WORKSHOP/RETREAT
BOONE TOWN COUNCIL
May 30, 2024**

CALL TO ORDER

A special meeting of the Boone Town Council was called to order at 9:10 a.m. on Thursday, May 30, 2024 at the Town Council Chambers located at 1500 Blowing Rock Road in Boone. Mayor Tim Futrelle presided. Council members present included Mayor Pro-Tem Dalton George, Virginia Roseman, Todd Carter, Eric Plaag, and Edie Tugman. Town Staff present included Town Manager Amy Davis, Town Clerk Nicole Harmon-Church, Finance Director Guy Miller, Planning Director Jane Shook Deputy Planning Director Brandon Wise, Police Chief Andy Le Beau, Major Shane Robbins, Public Works Director Todd Moody, Cultural Resources Director Mark Freed, Sustainability and Special Projects Manager George Santucci, and Fire Chief Jimmy Isaacs.

MOMENT OF SILENCE

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Mayor Futrelle thanked staff for their work during last night's Public Hearing. Chief Isaacs announced changes to occupancy limits at Council Chambers from 99 to 80 occupants to address safety issues seen during two recent meetings with occupants standing in aisles and blocking doorways. He noted that these changes would count everyone in the room except for the person enforcing the code.

PUBLIC COMMENT

There were no persons signed up to speak during the public comment session.

DISCUSSION REGARDING BUDGET EXPENDITURES FOR FY 24/25

Manager Davis started the conversation by announcing a recommended .01 cent tax increase dedicated to public safety, specifically for one police officer and one firefighter and the associated expenses. She noted that staff would not receive information regarding sales tax revenue until September, but as of now, she estimated the Town was approximately 2% ahead of last year's collections. Manager Davis noted that the County had recently announced a property revaluation in 2027, which would affect future numbers. She then went through the budget message and highlighted items of significance, including an increase in solid waste fees from \$8 to \$10.50 to offset increasing sanitation and recycling costs. Public Works Director Todd Moody added that Council could expect to see a contract amendment in June, which would result in another \$2 increase next year. Manager Davis continued, highlighting gas and electricity costs, but there was no increase in medical insurance rates, though dental insurance rose slightly. She stated that general, workers' compensation and auto insurance rose by approximately 9.5%. Manager Davis stated that water and sewer rates would increase according to the previous Raftelis recommendations from the rate study a few years prior. She indicated that water rates would increase by 8.5% and sewer rates would increase by 5%. Manager Davis noted that it would take a .20 cent tax increase to cover what the Town had lost in tax revenue in one year due to the change in tax allocation by the County. She stated that the Town had lost approximately \$30 million to date due to the tax situation. Discussion continued with Manager Davis outlining the recent pay study results published by the County. For the Town, Manager Davis recommended a compression adjustment and noted that the steps Council had taken toward employee retention had been successful. A lengthy discussion ensued regarding potentially setting aside funding for future projects and a potential tax increase for future large projects. Manager Davis cautioned Council at this notion and reminded members that Town taxpayers were also County taxpayers and did not want them to feel punished by having to fill the gap because of the sales tax distribution method.

Manager Davis asked Council for permission to have the Bolick Property appraised, with Mayor Pro-Tem George indicating, and Council member Carter agreeing, that he was against selling any Town-owned property. Council member Plaag suggested the placement of a solar field on the property, with Sustainability and Special Projects Manager George Santucci noting that the topography of the property was steep, though he felt it was worthwhile to investigate. It was the consensus of Council to allow staff to move forward with the appraisal of the Bolick property at their discretion.

The topic briefly turned to electric vehicles briefly before Council member Roseman indicated that she had recently met with SAHA representatives to discuss funding. She reported that SAHA representatives acknowledged that the Town owned the property but that the grounds were often neglected during the nine months that they were not utilizing the property for productions. Council member Roseman asked whether the property could be added to Public Works' responsibilities during the off-season so that it would be easier for the SAHA crew to prepare for the

season. Council member Plaag stated that his understanding was that SAHA had the right to use the amphitheater for performing but had access to the property outside of the summer production window. Cultural Resources Director Mark Freed confirmed this. Council member Carter expressed concerns regarding the lack of professionalism from SAHA staff. After a brief review of the license agreement, it was Council member Plaag's view that the Town should be responsible for the upkeep of the park. Council member Roseman also reported that SAHA staff wanted the license term to be extended to five years to assist them with obtaining grant funding. Council member Tugman suggested it would be helpful if Council could see letters of proof that SAHA had been turned away for funding due to the lease term. Council member Plaag suggested that two members of Council work with SAHA representatives and Town staff to move forward with discussions regarding maintenance of the park and license agreement terms, with the understanding that there was no debate about the Town's ownership of the property. Manager Davis suggested a half-cent tax increase to hire an additional employee in Public Works to assist with the upkeep of the SAHA property. Council member Plaag agreed and suggested that staff direct the Historic Preservation Commission to pursue a local landmark designation. Council member Tugman proposed that the Council retain Keith Martin to prepare a business plan in conjunction with staff for the utilization of Daniel Boone Park and the surrounding parks (Daniel Boone Gardens, Strawberry Hill) for entertainment prior to the expiration of the current license agreement. Council member Plaag suggested Council member Carter and Council member Roseman suggested Council member Tugman to work with Mr. Martin on the business plan. Council member Plaag indicated that he was willing to prepare the necessary reports for local landmark designation on a pro-bono basis.

Mayor Futrelle declared a break at 12:03 p.m. Council reconvened at 12:17 p.m.

Discussion continued with Mayor Pro-Tem George proposing a 50% cut to the Boone Area Chamber of Commerce membership and expressed that he was concerned with some of their narratives. He added that he felt it was wrong to give taxpayer money to the Chamber at present. Manager Davis expressed her displeasure that staff was not contacted about the recent parking survey and noted that the Chamber was aware of a survey that had already been done by the DBDA. She stated that she would have hoped for a better narrative from them for the Town, to which Mayor Futrelle agreed.

IT and wide-area networks were discussed next with Mayor Pro-Tem George suggesting that staff reach out to the streaming provider for Thomasville since they produced a good product. Council member Carter inquired about social media now that Laney Wise was in the Grants Coordinator position. He indicated that he would like to see some of the money saved from the Chamber subscription go toward a marketing plan for Boone. Many suggestions were given to this point, such as a rebranding package, with Manager Davis indicating that staff was currently working on a grant. Mayor Futrelle reminded members of the Talk of the Town radio program Council had discussed recently, and Mayor Pro-Tem George suggested staff and Council partner with marketing students at AppState to develop a plan. Council member Roseman suggested that students help curate videos similar to those made during the campaign season and include links to them on the Watauga Democrat website. Council member Carter agreed and added that TikToks could also be produced to reach a broader audience. After brief discussion, Manager Davis indicated that staff would include a marketing line item within the administration budget for \$5,000.

APPROVAL OF ITEMS ON CONSENT AGENDA

Upon a motion by Council member Tugman, seconded by Mayor Pro-Tem George, council voted unanimously to approve the request for permission to apply for COPS Hiring Program Grant as presented.

DISCUSSION AND POSSIBLE ACTION REGARDING OUTSIDE AGENCY FUNDING ALLOCATIONS

Council member Plaag began Outside Agency Funding discussion by suggesting that the total amount of funding be subject to revaluation every year for a potential increase by the national CPI. Council and staff agreed, with the total amount of funds allocated this year being increased from \$115,000 to \$121,900.

Mayor Pro-Tem George suggested the removal of the SAHA and Daniel Boone Gardens applications since they had already received funding and services from the Town. He further noted that there were not enough requests to account for the 40% arts and culture allocations as indicated in this year's updated application.

After lengthy discussion, the following allocations were made to Outside Agencies for FY24/25 (totals include the 6% CPI adjustment):

Appalachian Theatre of the High Country: \$8,480

Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture: \$13,780

Children's Playhouse: \$6,000

F.A.R.M. Cafe: \$19,080

Friends of the Watauga County Public Library: \$2,500

Hospitality House: \$23,320 (Council member Carter recused himself from this discussion due to his relationship with the organization)

Hunger and Health Coalition: \$5,300

Mountain Alliance: \$7,950

O.A.S.I.S.: \$14,840 (Mayor Pro-Tem George recused himself from this discussion due to his relationship with the organization)

Watauga Food Council: \$3,180

Watauga Human Society: \$2,250

Western Youth Network: \$10,070

Watauga County Project on Aging: \$2,650

During this discussion, Council member Plaag raised a recent issue he faced with the Watauga County Library involving the reading of an LGBTQ+-friendly book to children. He noted that, in the wake of that issue, the Library had committed to funding a diversity audit for the children's book section, and stated that, although he was frustrated by this troubling issue in library operations, he also knew the volunteers who ran the Friends of the Watauga County Public Library were not responsible for the situation. He emphasized that he did not think the situation should affect funding for the Friends."

Manager Davis gave a brief update on the new public restrooms located at Town Hall, and asked whether there was consensus to use TDA funds in the amount of \$15,000 per year to pay for the cleaning of the restrooms. Council members were in agreement, with Council member and TDA liaison Tugman noting that the subject was broached at a recent TDA meeting and that Director Wright Tilley would be checking on the legalities of utilizing TDA funds for this use.

ADJOURNMENT

Upon a motion by Council member Tugman, seconded by Mayor Pro-Tem George, Council voted unanimously to adjourn the meeting at 2:49 p.m.

Nicole Harmon, Town Clerk

Tim Futrelle, Mayor