

Minutes of a Continued Meeting of the Council of the Town of Blackstone, Virginia, held in the Council Chambers, located at 100 W. Elm Street, Blackstone, Virginia on Thursday, May 29, 2025 at 6:00 p.m.

There Were Present:

Mayor:

Council Members: Wesley Gormus (attended through Zoom), Lloyette Wynn, Christopher Page, Carolyn Williams, Nathaniel Miller, Eric Nash, Jake Allman

Town Staff: Philip Vannoorbeeck, Town Manager; Jennifer Daniel, Town Clerk; Tony Mayton, Police Lieutenant; Jackie Mitchell, Bookkeeper

Town Attorney:

Those Absent:

President Nash called this Continued Meeting from May 19, 2025, to order, and said because Councilwoman Williams was running a few minutes late, Council would be moving the Agenda around.

Town Square Requests

Councilman Nash said Hope Point Church is requesting to use the Town Square, and waive the Noise Ordinance on June 7, 2025 from 12:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. He said this would also include a cookout, cornhole and live Christian Music.

Councilman Page asked that a device be nearby for the cookout, due to a recent incident. Councilman Allman said he would make sure a fire extinguisher was available.

Councilman Page made a motion to approve the Town Square request from Hope Point Church as presented. The motion was seconded by Councilman Allman.

President Nash asked all in favor or opposed:

VOTE:

Councilman Allman	-	Aye
Councilman Gormus	-	Aye
Councilwoman Wynn	-	Aye
Councilman Page	-	Aye
Councilwoman Williams	-	Absent
Councilman Miller	-	Aye
Councilman Nash	-	Aye

Councilman Allman said this is a reboot for Hometown Jams in the Town Square on June 6, 2025, from 6:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. He said the request was to waive the Noise Ordinance and close two blocks in front of the Town Square and two blocks behind the Town Square. Clerk Daniel said she was informed yesterday they did not want to close the streets. Councilman Allman said they will be serving alcohol, and provide a TULIP Policy.

Councilman Allman made a motion to approve the requests from DBi for the Hometown Jams in the Town Square, to include waiving the Noise Ordinance, and allowing alcohol with a TULIP Policy. The motion was seconded by Councilman Page.

Councilman Nash said the request says reoccurring, is this every month or how often. Councilman Allman believed they would see how the first one goes, but the plan was for reoccurring throughout the year.

President Nash asked all in favor or opposed:

VOTE:

Councilman Allman	-	Aye
Councilman Gormus	-	Aye
Councilwoman Wynn	-	Aye
Councilman Page	-	Aye
Councilwoman Williams	-	Absent
Councilman Miller	-	Aye
Councilman Nash	-	Aye

Councilman Page suggested a recess until Councilwoman Williams arrived.

Councilman Page made a motion to enter into a recess. The motion was seconded by Councilwoman Wynn.

President Nash asked all in favor or opposed:

VOTE:

Councilman Allman	-	Aye
Councilman Gormus	-	Aye
Councilwoman Wynn	-	Aye
Councilman Page	-	Aye
Councilwoman Williams	-	Absent
Councilman Miller	-	Aye
Councilman Nash	-	Aye

President Nash called the Continued Meeting back to order.

Appoint Mayor:

Councilman Nash said we had some great applicants, and was glad people stepped up to serve Blackstone.

Councilman Page made a motion to appoint Mr. Lafayette Dickens as the interim Mayor for the Town of Blackstone. The motion was seconded by Councilwoman Williams.

Councilman Nash said Mr. Dickens will need to go to the Nottoway Courthouse and get sworn in tomorrow, if there is an affirmative vote.

President Nash asked all in favor or opposed:

VOTE:

Councilman Allman	-	Aye
Councilman Gormus	-	Aye
Councilwoman Wynn	-	Aye
Councilman Page	-	Aye
Councilwoman Williams	-	Aye
Councilman Miller	-	Aye
Councilman Nash	-	Aye

Mr. Lafayette Dickens said he was honored, and looked forward to working with Council, as well as all the citizens. He said he would serve honorably.

Human Resources Presentation – One Digital

Ms. Amira Epstein and Ms. Missy Richstien-Jones (by phone)

Councilman Nash asked what One Digital could do to help the Town of Blackstone get through some issues we have had. He said Council needs help to mitigate through complaints and grievance procedures.

Ms. Epstein said after speaking with Town staff, there seems to be issues with the grievance procedure, and Clerk Daniel sent her the Policy today. She said the Policy looked good, but she believed it would be helpful to have an impartial third party, and that is who One Digital would be.

Ms. Epstein said she and Manager Vannoorbeeck talked about having a consultant come on site and provide supervisor training. She said they can also look at policies and procedures, as well as making sure the employee is heard. She said Clerk Daniel advised her that Council may also want One Digital to be a resource for employees as well.

Ms. Epstein said One Digital is flexible and can do whatever needs to be done. She said they offer 10 hours of month, and could prioritize what is needed, or they can provide a bucket of hours for a year, that roll over.

Councilman Allman asked what the rate would be if the Town used all the bucket hours. Ms. Epstein said it would be the hourly rate, which is \$180.00.

Councilman Miller asked what the steps would be for employees filing a grievance. Ms. Epstein said we would work with Blackstone on the process. She believed the Town's current policy is reporting to the supervisor, the department head and then the town manager. She believed some grievances do go to Council. Councilwoman Williams said as a last step, if the employee is not happy with a response.

Councilwoman Williams believed it was a good idea for One Digital to tweak the Policy, and asked that Council is aware of any changes. She said she preferred employees come to One Digital first for grievances, so they may feel more comfortable. Ms. Jones (by phone), said grievance procedures typically follow a chain of command. She said because there is not an established HR department, they would not be in the process typically. She said we can write it any way the Town wants. Ms. Jones believed the process was pretty good that was already in place, with maybe a few tweaks.

Councilman Gormus believed the leaders needed to be trained on how to deal with situations, to prevent getting to a grievance. Ms. Epstein said that is part of the process she discussed, One Digital can provide this.

Councilman Nash said two days in June all Town staff would be attending a Discrimination and Sexual Harassment class. Manager Vannoorbeeck said it was available to Council as well. Councilman Nash said these classes are through the Town's insurance carrier, VAcorp.

Councilman Page asked about issues that may involve complaints against council or an elected official. He asked if this could be included in the new policy updates. Ms. Jones (by phone) said we can take any history that the Town has had, and shore it up in the policy to make sure it does not happen again.

Councilman Allman said as council members we cannot be fired, but if there is a complaint against an elected official, an employee needs an avenue to submit a complaint. Councilman Page said if a town manager handles complaints, and there is a complaint against an elected official, that puts the manager in a difficult position. He said we need a process and procedure to take complaints, and go through the grievance process. Ms. Jones (by phone) asked if the Town had a town attorney. Councilman Nash replied yes, and he handled the most recent situation.

Councilman Page asked how many hours were included in the bucket of hours, and what is the cost. Councilman Allman said it includes 100 hours at \$180.00 per hour.

Councilman Miller asked how employees are protected from retaliation if a grievance is filed. Ms. Epstein believed that was a part of the policy that was missing, and they would add information for that.

Councilwoman Williams asked if there would be one dedicated person for the Town. Ms. Epstein said the Town would have two dedicated persons, along with the account manager.

Councilman Page asked how many hours it would take to review and update a retaliatory policy. Ms. Jones (by phone) replied, they would do this at the same time they scrub the entire policy, which may be 4-5 hours.

Councilman Gormus said aren't there already laws in place in the State of Virginia against retaliatory action. Ms. Jones (by phone) replied, there are not any specific anti-retaliatory laws, but it could fall under harassment or discrimination.

Councilwoman Wynn asked if this would cover positions, because some things that have happened were not handled correctly. Ms. Epstein said yes, we will offer training, and job descriptions can be discussed.

Ms. Epstein said they will never go over the allotted hours without Council approval. Councilman Allman asked if they would provide an estimate for an issue if we may go over the allotted hours. Ms. Epstein said once we have been through 100 hours, we should be familiar with the Town, so we will have an idea of costs.

Councilman Gormus suggested for each task, that a work order number is created to track where the most time was spent. Ms. Jones (by phone) said each consultant enters their time into the system that is billable to a client with an explanation. She said they typically don't send to the client unless required.

Councilman Miller asked how they will handle letting the employees know about new changes. Ms. Jones (by phone) said there needs to be communication, and let them know it is for the better. Councilman Allman suggested having One Digital draw up a memo to provide to each employee for their signature recognizing the changes.

Councilman Miller asked they we sit down with the employees and explain to them what is going on, then he would not have a problem with employees signing a form. He wants to make sure the employees understand.

Councilman Nash believed the Town needed to use their insurance policies more, and it should be annual training. He said our insurance company offers a lot of training that the Town pays for, so we need to use it.

Councilman Page suggested new employees be offered information about human resources.

Councilman Nash said this is included in the budget. Manager Vannoorbeeck said we have professional services in the budget.

Councilman Miller made a motion to hire One Digital as the Town of Blackstone HR Consultant effective immediately for their bucket of hours, 100 hours annually at \$1,500.00 per month for twelve months. The motion was seconded by Councilwoman Williams.

Councilman Allman asked as a first item for One Digital that they comb through the Town's Personnel Policy and anything that needs direction, please have something for the next Council Meeting.

Ms. Epstein said the year starts with the agreement date signing, then a year from that date.

President Nash asked for a Roll Call Vote:

VOTE:

Councilman Allman	-	Aye
Councilman Gormus	-	Aye
Councilwoman Wynn	-	Aye
Councilman Page	-	Aye
Councilwoman Williams	-	Aye
Councilman Miller	-	Aye
Councilman Nash	-	Aye

Budget Discussion

General Fund

Councilman Nash said the highlights of the budget include: new chairs for council, curb & gutter on High Street, server updates, S. Main Street paving, fire station roof, new rubbish truck, pickleball court, and painting Schwartz Tavern. He said this also includes reconductoring, voltage regulators, transformer replacement, tank aerators, raw waterline, and water and sewer on Hodges Street and Fort Avenue.

Manager Vannoorbeeck said the total budget is \$20,558,180.23. He said there had been discussion about using Bright or going with another company, which would take another \$60,000.00, with the \$69,000.00 currently budgeted.

Manager Vannoorbeeck said S. Main Street paving is a grant project of \$600,000.00, and the Town's portion is \$60,000.00. He said the amount for the fire department roof is too low, the architect estimated \$70,000.00, and only \$24,000.00 is in the budget, but money had already been set aside.

Manager Vannoorbeeck said included in the budget is the full price of a new cherry picker truck based on state bid at \$260,000.00. He said a pickleball court is included at \$40,000.00. Councilwoman Williams asked where that recommendation came from. Manager Vannoorbeeck said three or four people have asked him about a court. Councilman Miller asked where the court would be. Manager Vannoorbeeck replied at Wigglesworth.

Councilman Miller said before we do a pickleball court, let's get the Gator field ready. Manager Vannoorbeeck said the Gator field was done. He said the Town has spent \$300,000.00.

Manager Vannoorbeeck said \$20,000.00 was set aside for painting Schwartz Tavern, and the Carriage Museum.

Councilwoman Williams asked if money was set aside for a pickleball court, or just a recommendation. Manager Vannoorbeeck said it was a recommendation. Councilwoman Williams said she would like to see something built for the youth. Manager Vannoorbeeck said we have the Armory. Councilman Page said a splash park would be very popular. Manager Vannoorbeeck said with \$300,000.00 he would build a heck of a splash park.

Councilman Page suggested leasing a cherry picker truck. Manager Vannoorbeeck said if it is a better deal, then sure we can look into that. Councilman Page believed the Town would not have to pay for maintenance with a lease. Manager Vannoorbeeck suggested leasing computer equipment at \$129,000.00, because after five years it is usually obsolete.

Councilwoman Wynn said school will be out in a few weeks, and the Armory was not open yet. Manager Vannoorbeeck questioned why the school system doesn't open the gyms in the summer. He said there needs to be a parks and rec department, which is traditionally a county function.

Councilman Gormus asked about a stop light at Maple and Main. Manager Vannoorbeeck said that did not make the cut for his recommended budget, but Council can make any changes necessary. Councilman Gormus said Manager Vannoorbeeck advised that stoplight would be about \$100,000.00. He said he was asking because maybe some of the general funds being carried over could be used for the stoplight. He said it is the only intersection between Tavern and Church Street that does not have a light, and probably has more crisscross than any other street.

Electric Fund

Manager Vannoorbeeck said there is a reconductoring project, with a portion being used as match towards the Taylor Bottom project. He said \$400,000.00 of the \$1 Million would be match. He said the reconductoring project would be rebuilding the wiring in two areas of Town. He said the Town was replacing poles and cross-arms in preparation for the reconductoring project. He said the Town does not string the wire. He said this project would provide upgraded service to Taylor Bottom, Eppington Forest, and at Highway 46.

Manager Vannoorbeeck said the Town had purchased two sets of voltage regulators, and there are three circuits. He said there is still one set needed at \$120,000.00. He said also included in the budget is \$30,000.00 for transformer replacements.

Water/Sewer Fund

Manager Vannoorbeeck said he had \$120,000.00 budgeted for a tank aerator. He said we used this year's aerator money to upgrade the SCADA system.

Manager Vannoorbeeck said he has \$1,350,000.00, and is almost the same amount we received in grant funds, which was \$1,351,000.00, to do the planning and design work for the raw water line.

Manager Vannoorbeeck said he had \$155,000.00 budgeted for Hodges Street and the Fort Avenue sewer he budgeted \$300,000.00. He believed Hodges Street was the only street in Town that did not have a Town water line. He said he received a preliminary estimate for Hodges Street of \$582,000.00.

Manager Vannoorbeeck said he met with Davenport & Company, and is proposing adding Fort Avenue in with the large financing for the raw water line.

Salaries

Manager Vannoorbeeck said several departments were previously granted increases in salaries and included the Police Department, the Electric Department and the Water/Wastewater Treatment operators. He said his recommendation was to give a base cost of living to all employees at 3%, and those not included in the three departments, getting 8%. He said this was an effort to help level those that did not get increases, and the 8% did not include the town manager.

Councilman Allman said the Account & Finance Committee met with department heads at a previous meeting, and the committee discussed moving towards a merit based system. He said this would include performance and consideration for step ups or catch ups. He said we took information from the department heads and developed categories they believed were fair. He said the information had been compiled into one form, and he wanted to give it back to the department heads to verify, then bring to Council.

Councilman Gormus said as total transparency, 8% was not included for anybody, he said that is like a promotion raise.

Councilman Miller asked how can you start a merit raise one month before the time to get paid. Councilman Gormus said the merit is being based on performance. Councilman Miller said this should have been done earlier so the employees would know what was happening. Councilman Gormus said do you think people would have worked harder if they knew they would get more money. Councilman Miller said they would have had something to work for.

Councilman Allman believed once Councilman Miller saw the report, it shows 90% of the employees will be right at the Virginia cost of living portion, with some standouts, and some that did not perform. Councilman Miller asked if everyone was being treated equal with the merit increase. Councilman Allman said if you performed well, you will be rewarded, if you did not perform well, you will not be rewarded.

Councilman Miller said if a supervisor doesn't like someone, they will not get a good performance rate. Councilman Allman replied, we either need to trust our supervisors, or get rid of them.

Councilman Page said when he heard 8%, he thought that was a lot, but after seeing what some departments make, that is not a lot, and would put them in line with what they should be making.

Councilman Miller said people have families and have to buy food, they have the same responsibilities we all have. Councilman Allman said we can feel as good as want about giving raises, but at the end of the day, it is not our money, it is the citizens money and we owe it to them to be responsible. He said giving an 8% raise because it feels good, is not being responsible.

Councilwoman Williams said 8% was not a lot when you do the numbers. She said some of the departments are not making a good salary in her opinion, because a dozen of eggs cost \$6.00. She said bringing somebody in at \$12.00 an hour, that is hard for anyone to make it. She said she would like to see the merit proposal, and do it next year. She said the town employees are citizens too, and it is their tax money as well.

Councilman Allman said what the committee was proposing is higher than the State's cost of living, which is 2.5%. He said he disagreed as a consumer, but most governments are giving 3%.

Councilman Page said we have a few employees that are only \$.09 over minimum wage, he said in January it would go up \$.40, which is not covered in this budget. He said he was for merit raises, but if you are not working as hard, you get less of one. Councilman Allman said that is what is included. Councilman Page added this should have started sooner.

Councilman Allman said 8% is not a cost of living raise, it is a raise, and mislabeled. He said in their list there are four categories, "I came to work and did my job", "I needed a catch up or went slightly above and beyond", "I was an extraordinary employee" and "I did not perform". He said any education or step raises are still included.

Councilman Page said we are advertising the budget now, and we have no idea what the merit raises are going to be. Councilman Allman said it will be between the figures you are seeing now and \$100,000.00 less.

Councilman Nash said every employee has already had an evaluation done. Bookkeeper Mitchell said a copy is in each person's personnel folder.

Councilwoman Williams suggested this be tabled until the full Council can see the information.

Councilman Nash said everything included in the budget, except pickleball, are vital core functions. Councilman Page said you are asking to advertise a budget without the actual raises.

Councilman Nash said an employee making \$15.00 an hour, the Town contributes to that person's retirement \$1,500.00 a year, and the Town pays \$10,260.00 a year for their insurance. He said that is paying almost \$50,000.00. He said maybe if employees want to get paid more, the Town could reduce the insurance.

Councilman Allman made a motion to advertise the FY25/26 Budget in the amount of \$20,558,180.23. The motion was seconded by Councilwoman Williams.

President Nash asked all in favor or opposed:

VOTE:

Councilman Allman	-	Aye
Councilman Gormus	-	Aye
Councilwoman Wynn	-	Aye
Councilman Page	-	Aye
Councilwoman Williams	-	Aye
Councilman Miller	-	Aye
Councilman Nash	-	Aye

Manager Vannoorbeeck provided a copy of the Town's debt at Council's desk. He said as of March 1, 2025, the principal amount of water and sewer debt is \$9,027,188.00. He said if we make the payments through the life of the loans, the interest paid will be \$2,201,665.00.

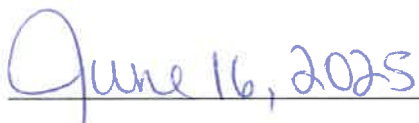
Manager Vannoorbeeck said for two fire trucks, three police cars, a garbage truck, and two dump trucks that are financed, the principal balance is \$857,260.00 as of March 1, 2025. He said these are all through USDA.

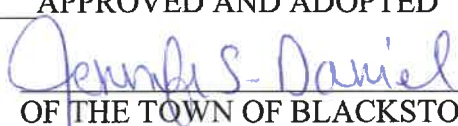
The Employment and Police Committee said they would each pick six applicants for the Treasurer position tomorrow. Councilman Allman said maybe we will have four that will overlap. He said he would rank his when sending.

There being no further business to bring before Council, President Nash declared this Continued Meeting adjourned at 7:34 p.m.



PRESIDENT OF
COUNCIL OF THE TOWN OF BLACKSTONE,
VIRGINIA



APPROVED AND ADOPTED


TOWN CLERK
OF THE TOWN OF BLACKSTONE, VIRGINIA