

Minutes of a Special Meeting of the Council of the Town of Blackstone, Virginia, held in the Council Chambers, located at 100 W. Elm Street, Blackstone, Virginia on Wednesday, June 7, 2023 at 7:00 p.m.

There Were Present:

Mayor: L. Benjamin Green

Council Members: Wesley Gormus, Christopher Page, Nathaniel Miller, Eric Nash, Jake Allman

Town Staff: Philip Vannoorbeeck, Town Manager; Jennifer Daniel, Town Clerk; Jackie Brown, Bookkeeper; Nicholas Kuzmiak, Police Chief; Chastiddy Bryant, Community Development Specialist

Town Attorney:

Those Absent: Lloyette Wynn, Carolyn Williams

*Special Called Meeting of the Council of the Town of Blackstone, Virginia for 7:00 p.m., Wednesday, June 7, 2023.*

*Pursuant to the authority vested in me as Mayor of the Town of Blackstone, I call a Special Meeting of the Council of the Town of Blackstone, Virginia, to be held in the Town Council Chambers, located at 100 W. Elm Street, Blackstone, Virginia at 7:00 p.m., Wednesday, June 7, 2023, for the purpose of considering the following:*

- 1. Award Bid – Concrete Pads/Headwall*
- 2. Blackstone Chamber – July 1<sup>st</sup> Event Donation*
- 3. John Neal Proclamation*
- 4. Budget Work Session*

Mayor Green said there were four items on the Agenda tonight, but he was going to make an exception. He said this will be the last meeting that we will have visitors speak at a meeting, other than the third or fourth Monday at our regularly scheduled meetings.

Councilman Page asked to add this issue to the next Agenda. He believed there was a Code that counteracts that position. Councilman Nash clarified, there may be something in the Town Code that says no public comment.

Mayor Green said he will allow public comment now, and limit it to three minutes. He asked there be no name calling, and be respectful to Council, and speak to Council not the audience.

**Mr. Nicholas Johnson – 211 Maben Avenue**

He said he was here about the video, and was upset about it. He said the Mayor asked for no name calling and be polite, he said that's what we want. He said we want this Town to be civil, what was in the video was not civil, the King needs to go. He said bullying, he won't tolerate with his kids, and won't tolerate it with an adult. He said something needs to be done, he was asked to start a petition, and in a week, they were at almost 90 signatures. He said the Town was speaking, we need to be heard.

**Ms. Christina Collazo – Sullivan Street**

Ms. Collazo asked Mayor Green why he allows Manager Vannoorbeeck to break employee policy. Mayor Green said policy was violated, and we are in the midst of going over policies. He added the policy on carrying a firearm is being reviewed now.

Ms. Collazo said as of today, and the day of the incident, the policy stands the way it is. She asked if Manager Vannoorbeeck was given disciplinary action for breaking company policy. Mayor Green said this is a personnel matter and Council has met on it twice.

Ms. Collazo said she was asking because as Mayor, he has shown zero to no communication to the Town, and the Town wants answers. She said consequences need to be given and the Town needs to know. Mayor Green said his number and email are out there, but he will not banter on Facebook. Ms. Collazo said the Mayor does banter on Facebook, she has seen the screenshots.

Ms. Collazo said Manager Vannoorbeeck broke company policy, and was not the first time he acted disgusting, so something needs to be done before people lose respect for the Mayor, because they already lost respect for Manager Vannoorbeeck.

**Ms. Rene Brockenbrough – Courthouse Road**

Ms. Brockenbrough said if the policy is being rewritten, what is it going to be rewritten to. Mayor Green said the policy had not been written yet, but was in the process. She asked what the outcome would be, would firearms be allowed in the meetings, in Town Hall, on city property, if so, then why. She asked Mayor Green what his position was. Mayor Green replied, Council sets the policies and he sees they are enforced.

Ms. Brockenbrough asked why weapons were needed on city property from anyone, except licensed officers of the law. She said if there is that much danger in these buildings that firearms need to be carried, then security should be hired, instead of letting civilians carry firearms. She said there was just a shooting in Richmond yesterday, you are bringing it to our doorstep. She said obviously certain people cannot control their emotions, and she did not want someone with such rash decision making to carry a firearm in a public area. Mayor Green thanked Ms. Brockenbrough for her comments and said Council was working on the policy.

**Ms. Mae Tucker**

Ms. Tucker said she would not say King, his name is Philip Vannoorbeeck. She said he was a good manager as far as she had followed. She said Manager Vannoorbeeck is a hothead, but that does not affect his ability to be a manager. She said Council are not his parents, but you need to tell him so he will stop being so hotheaded. She said she saw the video and was appalled that Manager Vannoorbeeck would take a grown man and treat him like a six year old. She commented about the gun on his hip, and the comments he made. She said there is a chain of command, and if we learn to follow that, we wouldn't have all these problems. She said in the end it was found out Manager Vannoorbeeck had the wrong person, and then jokingly apologized, she said that is not enough. She said the person being accused was a human being, and should have been treated as such. She said the slap on the wrists don't work anymore, something needs to be done. She said in his position, she thought he was pretty good at it.

**Ms. Sharon Streat – 26 Pickett Court**

Ms. Streat said she was on the Juneteenth Committee, but any of her comments on social media are her personal opinion and not related to Juneteenth. She said if Council wished to address her about her comments, please don't hesitate to contact her.

Ms. Streat said in reference to public comments, she suggested the comments be professional. She said she had just started to comment at meetings, and wished she had started a long time ago. She said we go by what you all said during campaigning, but when you get in these chairs, you show another side. She said please listen to your citizens, and know we want a better change for Blackstone.

Ms. Streat said the Town was fixated on FASTC, but who in here can afford \$1,400.00 in rent. She said Council was not taking care of the citizens that pay your salaries. She said she was still concerned about the gentleman at the laundromat, she called APS because of Mr. Lewis' health issues.

**Ms. Sara Allen – Wards Lane**

Ms. Allen said she was here to address Councilman Miller. She read a transcription on what he said at a previous meeting about Taylor Bottom, and playgrounds.

Ms. Allen said as officials, if you are scared of public comments, you are in the wrong business.

Ms. Allen said she was going to address Manager Vannoorbeeck as peaceful as possible, she believed they were two peas in a pod, because she has a temper also. She said Manager Vannoorbeeck addressed a human being, and to do that with a gun on his hip, in a private room and yell at him, was dehumanizing. She said the only authority Manager Vannoorbeeck had to do that was the gun on his hip. She asked that Manager Vannoorbeeck have some empathy in the future, she said imagine if that was being done to your child. She said be kind to all people.

Ms. Mae Tucker said she rode down the streets in Taylor Bottom, and saw 17 kids.

A lady from the audience said she has 9 kids at her house.

**Mr. William Clarke**

Mr. Clarke said it had been hard for him to keep the peace in Taylor Bottom. He said he was concerned about freedom of speech, this is 2023, not 1950. He said Council needs to take better care of us, housing is crazy. He said Council needs to walk the streets to see what is going on, there are serious issues here, with drugs and people sleeping in the street. He said we need to do a better job taking care of each other.

**Award Bid – Concrete Pads/Headwall**

Manager Vannoorbeeck said these bids were opened prior to this meeting, and he has since had an opportunity to meet with Seay Creek to discuss his low price, and was told the bid stood.

Councilman Nash asked to be sure this company was licensed and insured.

***Councilman Nash made a motion to award the bid to Seay Creek, LLC in the amount of \$21,570.00, with \$13,820.00 for the bus shelters, and \$7,750.00 for the Cemetery Headwall, with no change orders outside the scope of work. The motion was seconded by Councilman Allman.***

Manager Vannoorbeeck said the company is not entitled to any change orders based on the scope of work, without Council approval.

Mayor Green asked for a Roll Call Vote:

VOTE:

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

**Ms. Deborah Rose – Blackstone Chamber of Commerce – July 1<sup>st</sup> Event Donation**

Ms. Rose said the Chamber was doing the fireworks again this year. She said according to their fireworks provider, they are 20% more expensive this year. She said last year the Chamber took a loss, so this year they were requesting the Town pay for the insurance.

Ms. Rose said this year they would be doing a beer garden, but were not asking the Town to help with that insurance cost. She was hoping the beer garden would help cover some of the costs for the event.

Ms. Rose said her request is for \$10,000.00. She said after speaking with Councilman Page, he suggested \$9,999.00. Councilman Page did not think there were enough members tonight for a quorum, because he has to abstain.

Councilman Nash said if we dole it up to \$10,000.00, that will set a precedent for anything. He said this doubled amount is pretty harsh. Councilman Miller agreed.

Councilman Nash asked if the Town provided workers for this event, as we do for Juneteenth. Manager Vannoorbeeck said they are available if needed.

Ms. Beverly Ambs said last year, from Chamber funds, they paid to have a Town employee pick up the garbage. She said they paid the TULIP and fireworks insurance from Chamber monies. She said they received a grant that covered a majority of the insurance for the fireworks. She said the fireworks for last year was \$2,875.00. Councilman Page believed the Chamber lost around \$4,000.00 last year.

Ms. Rose hoped the event would be more widely attended this year, because the 100 Mile Yard Sale was the same day and coming through Blackstone.

Councilman Allman asked for public comment. Mayor Green asked if there was \$5,000.00 currently in the budget for fireworks.

Councilman Nash asked what the cost of fireworks are. Ms. Rose replied, last year they were \$5,000.00 just for the fireworks, and \$6,000.00 this year.

Councilman Allman said in the spirit of our Town, and we are a military Town, he always enjoyed the fireworks show growing up.

***Councilman Allman made a motion that Council grant \$9,000.00 total to the Chamber for this year only, and provide receipts for the money used. The motion was seconded by Councilman Gormus.***

Councilman Miller said we give \$5,000.00 to Juneteenth, what will happen next year when they ask for \$10,000.00. Councilman Allman said in a meeting recently with DBi, there was someone there from Main Street Programs, and talked about how to be successful as a town and community, which was themes and the audience. He said it is evident that our main audience is the Department of State and the Army National Guard. He said when he thinks about a theme for Blackstone, he thinks about armed services. He said he would like to figure out how to grow our patriotism in Town, and use that as our theme.

Councilman Miller said he was not knocking the request, but asked if we were opening a can of worms.

Councilman Page asked if the Town wanted to do the fireworks show, most towns do, especially with a military base.

Councilman Gormus said we talk about drawing people to Town with events, but it is not going to be cost free. He said we need to invest in order to have these events.

Councilman Nash said it was not so much about the money, but the process, it needed to be included in the budget.

Councilman Miller said he was not concerned about the \$10,000.00, he just wants to know what is going to happen if somebody else asks for the same amount. He asked if we were going to set a limit or not.

Councilman Nash said in the beginning it was said these requests were seed money. Councilman Miler said seed money is only supposed to be for one year.

Councilman Gormus asked if the fireworks would make money, because talking about seed money, that is an event that is going to profit. Ms. Rose replied, it does not make money.

Councilman Nash said we need to look into this. Councilman Allman believed the Town should partner with this, but it will cost us more to do than the Chamber with its volunteers.

Ms. Rose said the person lighting the fireworks, that Ms. Ambs found, does not charge for lighting them, he just charges for the cost of the fireworks. She said if her fund request doesn't get approved, they can ask businesses to help sponsor the fireworks.

Council clarified the request tonight is for the current budget.

Mayor Green asked for a Roll Call Vote:

VOTE:

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

Councilman Page said he had to abstain because he was being paid to do the event.

**John Neal Proclamation**

Mayor Green said being presented tonight was a Proclamation for Councilman John Neal.

Manager Vannoorbeeck said the family was asking this Proclamation be adopted, as prepared by them. Clerk Daniel said the bench was delivered to the Town Shop, and the family wants it presented at Juneteenth. She said the bench would be placed here in front of the Council Chambers.

***Councilman Nash made a motion to adopt the Proclamation as presented for Mr. John Neal, as a previous Council Member. The motion was seconded by Councilman Miller.***

Mayor Green asked all in favor or opposed:

VOTE:

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

**Budget Work Session**

Manager Vannoorbeeck said in January, the VMEA group announced a 14.4% increase in electric rates. He said the expectation was the fuel adjustment cost was going down enough to offset the rate increase.

Manager Vannoorbeeck said the 2022 True-Up was \$7.3 Million for the VMEA membership, which consists of the Town of Culpeper, City of Franklin, Harrisonburg Electric Cooperative, Town of Elkton, Town of Wakefield, City of Manassas, and the Town of Blackstone. He said the True Up portion for Blackstone is about \$239,000.00, including interest, payable in three installments of \$79,891.00. He said this would be in the month of June for the bill in July. He said the Town would use 12 months to collect this.

Mayor Green asked what the interest rate would be. Manager Vannoorbeeck said he would have to find out.

Manager Vannoorbeeck said the key reason for the large True-Up was due to Dominion having \$329 Million of Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative allowance expenses in 2022. He said this was not accounted for in Dominion's estimated rates billed to VMEA. He said the Greenhouse Gas Initiative is raising people's rates dramatically. He believed Governor Younkin is attempting to get Virginia out of the initiative. Councilman Gormus said you have to pay more to burn gas.

Manager Vannoorbeeck said VMEA is preparing to dispute \$180 Million of the initiative. He said do not anticipate resolving any items with Dominion prior to September 2023, at which time the Town will have already paid the True Up.

Manager Vannoorbeeck said the demand/energy rate is 8.6% higher than estimated in January 2023, with energy rates at 7.5% lower than January 2023. He said the fuel adjustment charge that went into effect April 1, 2023, is 18.52.

Manager Vannoorbeeck said not including fuel adjustment, the electric rates in Blackstone will go up 21.8%. He said the net effect will be an offset because the fuel adjustment did come down, and should be around an 8% increase. He said this is just a straight up pass through, and only effects the electric portion of the utility bill.

Manager Vannoorbeeck said the advertised rate needs to be with a 21.8% increase.

Manager Vannoorbeeck said the budget amount does not include the electric number received today. He said the budget is \$22,255,755.00, and includes the new fuel adjustment, and a \$31,000.00 increase in the Payment in Lieu of Taxes to pay for certain salary adjustments, specifically for those making under \$35,000.00, including benefits.

Manager Vannoorbeeck said a ladder truck would be coming in the amount of \$1.84 Million, with \$1,050,000.00 in grant funds, \$200,000.00 will be from the County, \$70,000.00 is from Fire Department apparatus funds, and \$520,000.00 will be in a loan with USDA.

Manager Vannoorbeeck said we will be using General Fund Balance of \$2,534,000.00, with \$2.2 Million for the Armory, \$270,000.00 being used for the Ladder Truck, and \$64,000.00 for the demolition of the old school buildings, if the Town gets the buildings.

Manager Vannoorbeeck said the budget includes Miscellaneous Funds of \$1,581,000.00, of which \$1 Million is an IRF Grant, and \$581,000.00 is Tobacco Grant Funds for the Armory.

Manager Vannoorbeeck said the Personal Property Rate will stay at \$.72, with 60% relief. He said Meals Tax was still at 6.5%, and Real Estate stays at \$.22. He said there was going to be a 4% increase in water and sewer rates to pay for the East End project. He said the Budget includes \$96,000.00 for two ditches.

Councilman Miller made a motion to not do anymore ditches until further notice, and abide by current policy.

Councilman Gormus said on March 20<sup>th</sup>, we voted to have 5 of the 7 Council Members vote on private property ditches being done. He said if we change everything we create within a few months, then we will never have anything. Councilman Miller said we have had a moratorium on ditches for two years.



Councilman Allman believed Councilman Miller was saying there would not be a \$96,000.00 line item in the next budget. Councilman Gormus added, unless 5 out of 7 agree. Mayor Green said you need five members to spend over \$10,000.00.

Councilman Miller withdrew his motion.

Councilman Miller said it appeared to him; we do not get answers from our Town Attorney when needed. Mayor Green said this is not on the Agenda, but would be on June 26<sup>th</sup>, and may include a Closed Session for performance.

Councilman Page asked if there was any land acquisition money included in the Budget for playgrounds. Manager Vannoorbeeck replied no.

Councilman Nash asked if the \$11,000.00 for the Chamber was included in this Budget. Manager Vannoorbeeck said there is \$15,000.00 in Council Discretionary. Mayor Green said the \$11,000.00 for the Chamber and \$5,000.00 for Juneteenth exceeds the \$15,000.00, so it needs to be fixed now.

Councilman Allman asked if there were any other requests submitted for Council consideration. Manager Vannoorbeeck said Succor Solutions submitted something.

Councilman Miller asked staff to send to Council, the funds expended so far from Council Discretionary.

Councilman Page said he would like to move \$25,000.00 from cash on hand from selling property in the Industrial Park, and put it towards land acquisition for a playground location to be determined. He said this gives us skin in the game, and shows the citizens we are committed to moving forward with playgrounds.

Councilman Miller said he did not have a problem with setting money aside, his problem was the way it is being handled. He believed the Recreation Department should be involved, as well as Councilwoman Wynn. He added we need a scope before dumping money into this.

Councilman Nash said if this money is earmarked, it will probably not be spent in this budget season. He believed Ms. Chastiddy Bryant could find some grants and hopefully we would not have to expend any money.

Councilman Allman said he preferred to find grants first. Councilman Page said we tried that with the Dillard Crawley building, but got denied because we did not own the land. He added the \$25,000.00 is for negotiations for land, or ask the County for a match.

Councilman Gormus suggested reaching out to Emporia as a peer to peer check, and get some ideas from them, since they installed a new playground. He said find out what they did from beginning to end, learn from their mistakes and don't make the same ones.

Councilman Nash suggested allocating \$25,000.00 to Parks and Recreation, which is not saying it is going to a playground, just in the fund.

Mayor Green referred playgrounds to the Parks and Recreation Committee.

***Councilman Page made a motion to take \$25,000.00 from the sale of Industrial Park property to Mr. Jason Walker, and move it to the Parks and Recreation Fund. The motion was seconded by Councilman Nash.***

Mayor Green asked for a Roll Call Vote:

VOTE:

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

Mayor Green said he was going to take this under advisement, using his five days.

Councilman Nash said we have to advertise this Budget. Mayor Green said he could line item veto the Budget; he was not stopping advertising the Budget. He changed his mind and said he would not veto this because we will be having a Public Hearing, and the two missing members tonight will be here then.

Manager Vannoorbeeck said this would include an additional \$25,000.00 being added to the Budget. He said for the advertisement he would add \$25,000.00 to the Budget, and clean up the electric rates received today.

Manager Vannoorbeeck said the first three months of this upcoming fiscal year, there will be no money put aside for capital projects, because the True Up funds have to be paid.

***Councilman Nash made a motion to advertise the FY24 Budget as presented in the amount of \$22,225,755.13, plus moving \$25,000.00 to Parks and Recreation, and adjust the VMEA rates. The motion was seconded by Councilman Page.***

Mayor Green asked for a Roll Call Vote:

VOTE:

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


Mayor Green said Chairman Steve Bowen resigned, and the Board was meeting tonight. He said he was going to write a letter to Mr. Bowen, who has done an outstanding job.

Council agreed Mayor Green would write the letter on behalf of Council.

Councilman Nash said his resignation concerned him because of the previous talks they had about the school property. Mayor Green said he still felt good about it.

Mayor Green asked Council to think about Mr. Vaughan's years of service because he was going to be retiring. He suggested a Resolution or Plaque for Mr. Bowen, Mr. Vaughan and Mrs. Shekleton.

There being no further business to bring before Council, Mayor Green declared this Special Called Meeting adjourned at 8:50 p.m.

  
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MAYOR  
OF THE TOWN OF BLACKSTONE, VIRGINIA

September 18, 2023 APPROVED AND ADOPTED

  
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TOWN CLERK  
OF THE TOWN OF BLACKSTONE, VIRGINIA