



OCCOQUAN TOWN COUNCIL
Work Session Minutes
Town Hall - 314 Mill Street, Occoquan, VA 22125
Tuesday, June 16, 2015
7:00 p.m.

Present: Mayor Elizabeth Quist; Vice Mayor Pat Sivigny; Councilmember Tyler Brown; Councilmember J. Matthew Dawson; Councilmember Jim Drakes
Councilmember Joe McGuire.

Staff: Kirstyn Barr Jovanovich, Town Manager; Sheldon Levi, Chief of Police and Town Sergeant; Greg Holcomb, Town Clerk

Absent: None

1. Call to Order

Mayor Quist called the work session to order at 7:00 p.m.

2. Visitor Center Operation

Mayor Quist stated that the purpose of this discussion item was to notify the public that due to funding issues, Discover Prince William and Manassas would be closing the visitor center in town. She noted that the original closing date was June 30, 2015, but Discover Prince William and Manassas has provided funding to keep the center open until August 2, 2015. She asked that while public comment was not permitted during work sessions, if Council would have no objection, she would invite Ms. Laverne Carson, President of the Business Guild of Occoquan, to speak later in the discussion as a representative of the business community.

Ms. Quist then discussed the needs of keeping the center open. She stated that \$45,000 would be needed to keep the center open and maintain its status as a sanctioned visitors' center with the Commonwealth. She noted that the Town does own the building and if the center were to close, the building could be leased to a retail vendor or could be rented to a private entity as a new operator for the center. She noted that she spoke to Mr. Earnie Porta, owner of the Occoquan Transportation Company, about taking over center operations; he is thinking about it.

Ms. Laverne Carson then spoke on behalf of the Business Guild of Occoquan. She believed that the loss of the center would be devastating to the town. She noted that if you are travelling south on I-95, we are the first center located outside of Washington D.C. and the next center is in Fredericksburg. She noted that the center is more than a rest stop, that the volunteers and employees provide a lot of information and a personal interaction.

Mayor Quist stated that approximately 23,000 visitors come through the center, which is tracked by the center's volunteers.

Ms. Carson ended her comments by stating that it is difficult to get visitor centers sanctioned by the Commonwealth and if we lose our center, it may be very difficult to get it back.

Mayor Quist then introduced Ms. Ann Marie Maher, President and CEO of Discover Prince William and Manassas. She began explaining that she has been with the organization for five years. She stated that the organization had a \$370,000 budget shortfall this year. Their budget is \$1.1 million, which comes from the transient occupancy tax the county collects on hotel visits which is down from the previous year. She noted that the county cut funds and their board had to take a hard look at the finances and make tough decisions to close the gap. She did note that the county reallocated an additional \$96,000 back into their budget, which they used to reinstate a full time employee. She stated that through April, there had been 16,000 visitors to the center and the usage trends have been decreasing every year. She noted that many visitor centers have closed and people are utilizing more online and mobile technology to find their information. She further stated that the return on investment of keeping the center open is just not there, stating that it costs \$3 per visitor. She also noted that Discover Prince William and Manassas provides a lot of exposure and advertising for the town through the website, social media, and trade shows.

Councilmember Drakes asked if Discover Prince William and Manassas was shifting emphasis to the center of the County. Ms. Maher replied that they were not and they are not funding the other centers in the County. He further asked if the county was aware of this decision. She stated that all the supervisors were aware that the organization was being cut and services were going to be impacted. She stated that they are refocusing their efforts to web, mobile, and other technologies to reach visitors.

Councilmember Brown asked why they chose to close the visitor center. Ms. Mayer stated that it was a difficult decision based on the return on investment numbers. She explained the other aspects of the organization and how it benefits the town.

Mayor Quist stated that the Council needed to decide if the town should get involved in trying to keep the center open by becoming a partner or deciding some other path for the center.

Mr. Paul Wetmore, 312 Overlook Dr., stated that he moved to Occoquan last year and opened a business in a leased space. He just expanded his business and signed a longer lease and is concerned with the closure of the center. He stated he was a recruiter for 25 years and that he would assist in finding volunteers to keep the center open.

Ms. Lenore Banks, 12521 Cassandra Ct., Lake Ridge, stated that she has driven through town for years. She is a customer and a friend of many of the businesses here. She said she brings people to the town a lot and they all love this place. They utilize the visitor center often. She further stated that she discovers something new every time she goes to the center. She said the personal touch given by the employees and volunteers at the center is what makes this town unique and special.

Ms. Diane Boli, 404 Mill Street, Hawthorne House owner, stated that she has been in business for 31 years this June. She has been here before the visitor center was here. She noted that the center has been amazing for the town. She stated that the center reaches travelers coming off the highway that we would never see otherwise. She said that 23,000 people is a lot of people. She noted the many things her business has had to go through over the years from the bridge construction to water line construction. She said if you put an impediment in front of a customer they will go somewhere else. She urged the council to keep the center open.

Mr. Stephen Power, 201 Union St., Blue Arbor Café owner, stated that a majority of the people that come to the center come from I-95. They stop because of traffic backups and they come and visit. They stop because they saw the sign. He stated that at least two tables are filled every day because of the visitor center. He wished there was more data on where visitors are coming from and said that last week he has tourists from Japan and Germany come to his restaurant because of the visitor center.

Ms. Cathy Campbell, 206 Mill St., owner of Details of Occoquan, stated that several customers come several times a year to come to her store. She noted her efforts to bring visitors to town from various shows and events she attends. She urged Council to keep the center open for those visitors.

The Council held a discussion on how to go about keeping the center open. They reached agreement on having the Town Manager create a committee to look into funding and volunteer options to keep the center open. They also agreed that the town needs to reach out to Supervisor May and the County for assistance. They also urged the committee to find partnering organizations, businesses and communities nearby town to get them involved as well. It was agreed that the committee would bring a proposal update to the July 7, 2015 Council Meeting.

3. River Mill Park Operating Procedures/Policy

Ms. Jovanovich began the discussion by stating that Fairfax Water Authority was preparing to turn River Mill Park over to the town and that this discussion was to prepare policies for the park. It was noted that if the park is opened this summer and pets are allowed then the town will need to invest in waste stations,

trash cans, park benches and possibly tables which would be about a \$5,000-\$7,000. She stated at a minimum trash cans would be needed. It was further discussed that there would not be any lights in the park yet and that it was proposed that the park be open from dawn to dusk. Finally, the entrance to the park while construction was occurring was discussed. It was noted that there would need to be a small investment to make the park accessible, but not Americans with Disabilities Act compliant. The council liked the proposed rules and asked Ms. Jovanovich to propose them to the Fairfax Water Authority for their June 18, 2015 meeting. They also asked her to obtain clarification on some of the lease restrictions.

4. Snow Removal Procedures

Ms. Jovanovich opened the discussion explaining that there were concerns last winter regarding the clearing of parking spots during snow events. She noted that VDOT does not clear parking spots, however, their contractor in Town has been very cooperative and has assisted in clearing spaces. She further stated that we cannot rely on this service and to clear the parking correctly we will need to remove the snow, not just plow the spots. She noted that last winter we had circumstances where residents were parked in the streets and it made it difficult to clear the snow from parking areas, especially on Union Street.

Councilmember Drakes asked about emergency snow enforcement. Chief Levi stated that in the past the town did have an emergency snow ordinance, however, it was repealed. Mayor Quist asked what VDOT's requirements were for having a snow emergency and enforcing the ordinance on VDOT streets. Chief Levi stated he was not aware of any problems with enforcement of an emergency snow route ordinance on VDOT streets but would check. He further stated that an emergency snow route ordinance would give him authority to ticket and tow if it came to that. He stated that last winter efforts were made to have move vehicles from the streets, but Union Street was still an issue.

The Council directed Ms. Jovanovich to research the language for an emergency snow route ordinance, policies, and procedures of enforcement. Mayor Quist also requested a breakdown of potential costs associated with the additional snow removal.

5. Adjournment

The Council adjourned at 8:40 p.m.

Greg Holcomb, Town Clerk