

MINUTES  
SPECIAL TOWN HALL MEETING  
CITY COUNCIL

held in the lower level of the Collett Street Recreation Center

October 13, 2020

Ronnie Thompson, Mayor

Sally W. Sandy, City Manager

Louis E. Vinay, Jr., City Attorney

Wendy Cato            )  
Christopher Hawkins ) Council  
Chris Jernigan        )  
Butch McSwain        )

Others in attendance included interested citizens, City staff, and media.

The meeting was called to order in the lower level of Collett Street Recreation Center at 5:30 p.m. by Mayor Thompson.

The Mayor explained that the purpose of this meeting was to receive public input into how we, as a community working together, can make Morganton a better place to live, work, and play. All in attendance were invited to state their name and address, and speak to City Council on any topic they wished.

Sheila Keller stated she lives on Bethel Road and was speaking on the topic of recycling in Morganton. She expressed dismay about the closing of the Shuey Field recycling center and would like to continue recycling without driving 10 miles out of town to a recycling center. She stated that she would like to see a manned recycling center somewhere in the City.

Councilman McSwain stated that he doesn't think anyone would disagree with the need for a recycling center in the City, but during the last budget year the City spent \$60,000 operating the recycling center due to people mixing in trash with the recyclables; if the recycling is tainted it goes into the landfill. He stated the City has reached out to the County to talk about getting a center in town. He urged conversation with the County officials. He stated there are several places in town to locate a recycling center. Councilman McSwain stated that Simply Green is also an option for the City residents.

Malachi Pearson asked about the neighborhood and modernization surrounding the Downtown hotel. He asked if taxes would be raised in that area and wondered if there is

a plan for growth in that community. He expressed concern over long-time residents in the area losing their homes.

The Mayor stated that the Burke County Tax Office is in charge of the tax valuations. He stated there are plans for the Catawba Street side of the property and that all are aware that Bouchelle Street needs to be repaved and paving should take place in the next couple of weeks. Councilman McSwain stated the hope is the area would grow but not at the sake of pushing out current property owners.

Councilwoman Cato stated that the old St. Stephen's Church building is being developed into a coffee shop and there is a possibility of a bakery in the area. She stated that it would be up to the people who own the properties in the area of whether they choose to sell or stay in the area. She stated the area is looked upon as an area for improvement. She stated that on Patterson Street someone has taken a big brick home and is turning the building into apartments.

Marcia Benson stated that her sister, Shelia Keller, had already spoken about recycling but she wanted to reiterate the need for a manned recycling site.

Malachi Pearson stated he wanted to bring up a sensitive subject about the monument on the Old Courthouse Square. He stated there is an organization with a petition and wondered if City Council had received it. The Mayor stated the property the monument is on belongs to the County and the County has indicated they have no plans for removal. Councilman McSwain stated he feels Council is of the same mind and would like to see the statue removed. Pearson stated there are almost 8,000 signatures on the petition to remove. He stated that in the Black community they would like to see statues of people with their skin color in the area, such as the Etta Baker statue. He stated it would be good to have other statues of people of color uptown in a more prominent position.

The Mayor stated there is a misconception that the City owns the Old Courthouse Square property. He said the City owns a portion on Meeting Street, but the County owns the majority of the square.

Councilman Jernigan stated he appreciated the fact that people were getting signatures in a positive way and supports their effort.

Hannah Clark stated that she knows people have brought this concern to the County Commissioners and felt the City should have some pull. Councilwoman Cato stated that Council and staff has met with the Commissioners and the Commissioners' stand is they cannot remove the statue because of state mandate.

Councilman McSwain said we have local representation in Raleigh and they are well aware of the problem; he stated that he is frustrated by this issue too and that we never ever want to see another event like that which happened at the end of June.

Aaron Lipsey stated the June 27 event showed the statue has been a problem for the past few years. He expressed his concern for the Black community and about the infiltration of police with white supremacy groups. He stated his number one issue is with systemic white supremacy and white supremacists. He expressed concern about safety while voting in the upcoming election.

The Mayor stated he had three conversations with the Board of Elections about issues in early voting and he felt assured that the Board of Elections was working to make sure it is safe to vote during election season.

Beverly Carlton stated she resides at 211 River Hills Lane. She stated her property is on the backside of a subdivision that is not developed. She stated that her street does not get road maintenance on a regular basis and during the winter months the street does not get snow removal.

Carlton stated that the Olive Hill Economic Development Corporation is working to partner with a housing development group focusing on infill and rehabilitation. She then said that any assistance they could get would be appreciated.

Councilwoman Cato suggested that Carlton contact BDI, saying that a year ago BDI identified numerous houses that no one is living in and that might be a good place to start.

John Flood stated he was glad to see the Confederate flags come down from along the interstate; he likes the inclusion billboard on 181, and he stated his concern about the statue saying it should be moved to a place of honor. He expressed his worry at seeing armed people on our courthouse square and concern that none were arrested. He questioned why Public Safety did not find out who some of those people were and make arrests.

Aaron Lipsey stated his group were able to find some of the people from video taken that day. Malachi Pearson stated that during that time there was a 17-year-old girl who was assaulted. He stated she turned to Public Safety and asked if Public Safety was not hearing what people were saying to her.

The Mayor stated the activities of that day on Courthouse were out of control; however Public Safety did a good job of making sure that everyone was safe, no one went to the hospital, and everyone went home at the end of the day. The Mayor asked Chief Lowdermilk to address the subject.

Chief Lowdermilk stated it was unfortunate because they could not charge just one side or the other, so the decision was made not to charge anyone and instead make everyone leave the area. He stated the decision was made for the safety of everyone present. He stated that moving forward, Public Safety would not tolerate guns at a public demonstration.

Aaron Lipsey asked if there was any information to share with citizens or any way to get together to talk about white supremacy groups. Chief Lowdermilk stated Public Safety would be happy to talk with him and to look at ways to solve problems as best they can.

Councilman McSwain stated that in the aftermath of that incident there were a lot of meetings to talk about how to handle such a situation should it arise again. He stated the meeting this evening was to talk about working together to make Morganton a better place. He assured citizens that Council and staff are always open to talk.

Lipsey stated there was no form of justice which he feels gives people the courage to be bolder. He also wants to make sure local law enforcement is aware of possible issues around voting areas.

Maryann Flood stated she lives in the County and previously lived in the City. She thanked the Council for hosting a Town Hall meeting saying it is a great idea, and she thanked Council for what they are doing for Morganton. She mentioned the streatory, parklets, and the movie theater, saying she is happy to be in Morganton as it is friendlier than Asheville. She acknowledged the hard work and effort it takes to make things happen. Flood stated she also wanted to mention recycling saying she thinks this would make a good project for Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, and others for weekend clean-up projects.

Van Clontz spoke about the homeless and asked about the number of homeless people in Burke County. Captain Jason Whisnant, who works with the homeless population, stated the number varies because the homeless tend to be a transient population; he estimated the population being as high as 40-60 in the summer months and in the colder months about 20. Captain Whisnant stated that when he was a young officer he could count the number of homeless on one hand and he knew their names, but that is no longer the case.

Clontz stated that the Burke Pharmacy property must be a hub for homeless people because he picks-up trash regularly. Clontz stated that he thought the numbers were higher and expressed his frustration at having to clean up after people.

The Mayor stated that Morganton is blessed with State facilities such as Broughton. When someone is released they may not have a way home, so by default they stay in Morganton. Captain Whisnant said there is a huge issue with mental health, medication, and treatment; when the State Hospital releases patients they have a choice of where to go and some choose to stay here.

Clontz also commented on the Confederate statue on the Old Courthouse Square. He said he has family names on the statute, saying those people fought for what they believed in, but that's not what we believe in, it doesn't represent what Morganton is now. He stated that God says love all. This is a Country worth saving he stated and if we have the love of God in our hearts we will change.

Beverly Carlton's business Olive Hill Economic Development Corporation is situated on the Burke Pharmacy Property. Carlton stated that she had a comment for BUCM Director Alice Horton who was present at the meeting. She stated that much of the trash is coming from the meals and the takeout boxes that BUCM is supplying. She stated she sometimes pays the homeless to pick up after themselves. She stated that BUCM really needs to find a way to deal with that since it's coming from the food, as well as their belongings. Carlton stated she has had to clean up the parking lot of broken bottles and suggested maybe patrolling more. She stated the homeless keep getting pushed from place to place, saying it is a sad picture to see. She encouraged training programs but said there are currently none being provided by OHEDC due to lack of funds.

BUCM Director Alice Horton stated that, to be clear, BUCM can only do what they can. Horton stated they put containers out for the trash and they do move people along from their parking lot because no one wants them loitering while trying to provide other services. She stated she honestly feels that housing is an issue, but that is not going to solve the problem because it is a multi-faceted issue. Just like the statue, there is not only one solution.

Councilwoman Cato thanked Horton and Carlton for their comments. She stated that it is helpful to post no trespassing signs and call public safety when people are trespassing. Councilwoman Cato said there is a group that meets regularly to discuss the homeless issue. She said that according to United Way a large percentage of the homeless have addiction or mental health issues. She said that if a client is high or drunk they are not allowed into BUCM nor local shelters. She stated our community is blessed with a mission and that is why we have so many people coming to our area. She agreed it is a multi-faceted issue and the City is involved in supporting local non-profit agencies to tackle homelessness.

Councilman McSwain stated that there are communities in North Carolina that have taken a hard line to get homeless to move on. He stated that years and years ago at the inception of BUCM it was great because we were helping so many in our local community, but now it has made Morganton attractive to people from outside our area.

Councilman Hawkins stated there is not a "one-size-fits-all" solution. There are so many issues and it will take a lot of groups working together to make a difference. He stated he has heard it said that if we didn't have "a BUCM" we wouldn't have these problems, however he grew up hearing it is the Christian thing, the humane thing, to help others. Even though there is not one solution for every person, wanting to help is a good place to start.

George Logan stated his appreciation for holding this meeting. He wondered what citizens could expect from City Council and what does the Council expect from citizens. He questioned whether this is a conversation with expectations behind it or is it just a conversation. Logan also questioned why the outdoor basketball courts at Mountain View Recreation were not lighted when the adjoining tennis courts are lighted.

Councilman McSwain stated that most tennis courts were built in the 1970-80s and lighting was installed at that time. He commented on the popularity of tennis and night-time play in years past. He explained that the City has spent over \$2 million in and around the Mt. View Recreation Center and not adding lighting was not intended in any way to be a slight to the community. There were unexpected grading and drainage issues that arose that needed to be fixed so some monies that might have been used for extras were used in construction. He stated that Council could take into consideration lighting and feels it will not take much to add lights to the basketball courts. Councilman McSwain stated that lights and noise could be an issue to local neighborhoods.

The Mayor, in response to Logan's first question regarding expectations, stated this meeting was something that stemmed from the June 27 event. He stated that it was a way to get citizens together who may not feel comfortable coming to a regular City Council meeting.

Councilman Jernigan stated he was happy to have the opportunity to come together. When he was elected he planned on having "Coffee with a Councilman" but then COVID-19 shut things down. He stated that it is a good question, "is this just a conversation", but said the Council needs to hear from people living in the City of Morganton. He stated that being a City Councilman has been difficult because the decisions are so big and affect so many people. He said that Council and citizens need to continue to come together to talk about issues. He stated his hope that we can get past COVID so we have more opportunities to get together. He stated that he is finding out that there are some things Council cannot do, however, Council can listen and when they hear a large group saying *this* needs to happen, it then becomes Council's responsibility to see if there is a way to make *this* happen.

Carol Ervin resides on Bost Road and works at hospital. She said a big part of the homeless problem is – Beverly (Carlton) can train them, but then they have no place to go; Alice (Horton) can feed them, but then they have no place to go. Ervin advocates for day programs where the homeless can go. She said that most of homeless don't want to be homeless, but there has to be something sustainable in their day. She encouraged people to get behind providing something on a sustained basis.

Carol Ervin also stated the streets of Morganton are looking pretty shabby and asked when streets are going to be paved. She said streets look really ratty in some places. She mentioned Quaker Meadows Golf Course on 181 saying she knows it's property for sale but it looks terrible.

Councilman McSwain said he doesn't want it to sound like he's punting all the time, but, the City doesn't have a department of social services or a health department. All Morganton citizens pay County taxes to cover those issues. These are the types of issues where we need more cooperation between County and City. He stated that we don't have the programs, but we do have the problem.

Malachi Pearson stated when he was a vote canvasser he was heavily involved in the homeless population. He encountered a lot of the “drifters” (40-below) and he would ask them, “what do you want with your lives”. He said they would reply they want to rebuild but don’t know how. Pearson stated that if there were programs they would go.

Lennetta Williams said she would like to lighten up the conversation saying she wondered about the movie theater. She stated that she goes to Asheville to the movie theater rather than staying in Morganton. She said the Morganton theater was not a pleasant experience it smelled and the cleanliness was lacking. She said that growing up in Morganton the movie theater was one thing they liked to do.

Sharon Jablonski stated that before COVID-19 hit, the theater was slated for a renovation. Jablonski stated she would call the owners and have a conversation with them.

Ruth Roseboro stated she too appreciates the conversation. She stated she has a different take on the Confederate monument. She said she did not a problem with the monument, but the statue on top of the monument is the issue because of what it represents. She heard that as long as the statue stays up, the flags along the interstate stay down. If the statue is removed, the flags will begin flying again.

Roseboro also stated she is a fan of the Jonesboro Community and feels there should be a plaque or something that denotes it as a historical area.

Roseboro also said the mental health system revamp is partly what began the problem of homelessness. She advocates for wrap-around services. She would like to see more inclusivity when planning community programs such as TGIF instead of one group planning for the whole community.

Roseboro’s last comment had to do with infrastructure saying that something needs to be done about her water pipes. She stated she has cloudy water and is unable to drink it.

Beverly Carlton stated the City needs to have an office of minority affairs.

Kathryn Ervin stated she would like to see a program for diversity and inclusion for officials, staff, and City boards and commissions.

Sharley Mendoza asked about communication with citizens. She stated that during COVID all of the City’s social media posts were in English but not in Spanish, and encouraged including Spanish in posts. She then asked if the City of Morganton offers grants to small businesses and if so is it only in the Downtown area. Sharon Jablonski stated there are not grants, however the City does have a loan program. Housing and Urban Development loans do not have to be in downtown but do have to be in the City limits. Jablonski stated that VEDIC loans money throughout the region.

Mendoza asked who was paying for the renovations on the Old Courthouse Square.

The City Manager was asked to speak on this topic. The City Manager explained the ownership of various parcels of land on the square, the lease agreement with the County, and finally that City taxpayers are paying for the renovations. She then touched on the monument topic, stating that for several months the City had tried to initiate conversations and opportunities to bring both sides together for conversation and possibly compromise. She stated a suggestion was for the base to stay and the soldier statue be relocated, however, that compromise was not received well. The City continues to push, but more people have more power, and she encouraged citizens to make their opinions known to the County.

The City Manager stated that on the issue of recycling there was an opportunity for a grant for joint recycling. The City needed the County's participation in order to make that happen and could not get them to cooperate at this time. The City Manager stated it takes the Commissioners coming to the table.

The City Manager said, regarding lights at basketball court at Mountain View, the City doesn't have lights at Freedom and didn't even think about it for Mountain View when planning, instead putting that money into the air conditioning at the Mountain View gym. She stated that sometimes it's about trade-offs and not a big conspiracy to do more in any one area versus another.

She stated that Bouchelle Street is planned to be repaved because of cuts made in the street during the hotel and school construction. She stated the City uses every penny of paving money every year and that if we repaved all the streets in Morganton with the money allotted, currently it would take 50 years to repave all the streets. This year we are spending just under \$400,000 to repave two streets.

The City Manager stated she wanted to address an earlier question regarding tax rates. She stated that all properties are taxed the same rate; the valuation of each property comes from the County. She said the only difference is in the downtown tax district which has an additional tax to help fund extra services in the Downtown district. The City Manager then shared information on how local sales tax is split between the County and municipalities.

Kim Logan stated her concern is area youth. She would like to see more things to do for young people. Councilman McSwain stated the Recreation Advisory Commission is a conduit for ideas.

The City Manager said there are not a lot of things for younger kids to do and one of the City's goals, which we have been working for several years, is courting developers for something like a Bo's. She said those are things the City cannot do by itself. The City is open to ideas and help in identifying partners. Staff and Council are very approachable she said.

Sheila Keller shared a comment regarding paving asking if College Street could be re-lined. She stated the lines are so faded it is dangerous.

John Flood asked if the City had considered buying the Quaker Meadows Golf Course.

The Mayor stated that a portion of the golf course property is in the flood plain.

The City Manager stated it was her understanding the building will be removed. She said the front part of the property is a workable piece of property, however the rest is flood plain and floodway. She explained that floodway cannot build be on. She suggested that at least a portion of the property needs to be donated for greenspace, greenway, etc. She said years ago the City was approached to purchase the property when it was an active golf course. The City did some financial study and asked the LGC at the State if the City could borrow money for the course and were told absolutely no.

Beverly Carlton said hire more minorities at City Hall.

Ruth Roseboro encouraged everyone to vote.

There was no action taken at this meeting.

Adjournment – The meeting ended at 7:17 p.m.

Preparation of Minutes. These minutes were prepared by Mikela D. Russell, Assistant City Clerk. Copies of all resolutions, ordinances and orders referenced in these minutes are intended to be incorporated into these minutes as if fully set forth herein. Prior to including them into the official minute book, the minutes have been read and approved by the City Manager and the City Attorney, then distributed to each member of the City Council for further review and final approval, at a subsequent Council Meeting.

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Mayor

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Assistant City Clerk