

Minutes of the Public Hearing of the Saltville Town Council held on June 17, 2021 at 7:00 p.m. in the Town Hall

Council: Monica Johnson, Jeff Comer, Eugene Call, Bryan Morris, Gary Call
Steve Surber was absent

Mayor: C. Todd Young

Staff: Brian Martin, Town Manager
Erik Puckett, Police Chief
Steve Johnson, Clerk/Treasurer

The Mayor stated that the purpose of the Public Hearing was to receive input and feedback from the audience regarding the proposed 2021-22 budget. He asked that the Council members listen to everyone and not reply.

Joe Fry's talking points:

- 1) There needs to be more transparency from the Council in general such as the town wanting to hire two more officers. There should not have to be a School Resource Officer (SRO) on the town's payroll when the county should already be supplying one, and he said he'd like to see the data that shows the town needs extra officers. Regarding the ECO transports that occur occasionally when the police have to transfer someone who may have mental issues, the town could work with other jurisdictions to basically transfer this person on up the road instead of having one or two of the town's officers do it, thereby, saving time and money. He also asked if the town was so bad that the number of arrests relative to the number of current officers warranted a need for even more officers.
- 2) With respect to raises and salaries in general, why pay overtime to workers to water the flowers on the poles on Saturdays. It seems if there's any menial labor done, it's done by a contractor these days instead of the town's workers. Some of the town's employees think they're too good to even mow grass.
- 3) The Council needs to work more with each other. Based on what he's seen the last couple of years, the Council acts more like a bunch of kindergartners instead of working as a team. You were all voted into your positions, so you need to let go of your egos. Leave your own individual agendas out of the Town Hall since this is not the place for it.
- 4) Regarding the COVID funds, the town currently has a wildlife viewing area that has a fence around it. The rumor is that fence was put there to hide the golfers drinking on the golf course. The amphitheater in the well fields was also torn down. Some of this money could be used to

take down that fence and re-build the amphitheater, but if that happened, it would be contracted out since it would be too hard for the town's workers.

5) The Council could use some of the COVID funds to give bonuses to employees, but it needs to be used to benefit the people too. There has been talk that the library wants to move in the space beside the Wellness Center, but a day care center could be placed there instead since it would provide jobs in the community and is greatly needed.

6) The town should explore, with the help of its attorneys, getting a road tax for the trucks that go to United Salt.

7) He reiterated he would like to see the data that shows the town needs more officers. The town only had three officers decades ago and more people actually lived here then. Maybe Saltville has a higher crime rate now that warrants having that many officers, but the people need to be shown the data that proves this.

8) He ended his time by repeating that the Council needed to work as a team instead of having one stalemate after another. They all need to grow up and get rid of their personal agendas to be able to get along with everybody else who was elected by the people.

Tom Holley's talking points:

1) He wanted to know who came up with the idea of paying the Council members. Councilman Morris said this budget did not contain salaries for the Council, regardless of the rumors.

2) This town is full of people who are elderly and on a fixed income who are needing relief. The Council needs to be more considerate. Raising the taxes will take the food off of people's tables and prevent them from buying their medicine.

3) The town currently has six officers, but eight are budgeted. A town of 2200 people does not need eight officers. The Council needs to be more considerate of its neighbors.

Butch Kestner's talking points:

1) He lives on Ridgeview Road and has to call every year to get the weeds cut and have rocks removed from the road. There will be a bad accident eventually where Ridgeview intersects with Highway 107 where people can't see.

2) Other towns have a better handle on getting rid of junk cars, trailers, and having people take care of their junk properties. There are many places in town with unmown yards and junky properties. The town used to be cleaner than it currently is.

Gerald Arnold, Sr.'s talking point:

1) He said he knew a budget had been worked out with the employees getting a 3% raise, and there still being a surplus of over \$30,000 with the town raising the water and sewer rates. He knows that's necessary to get government funding. Having worked for the town at one time, he also knows how bad the infrastructure actually is. However, raising taxes to give the employees a raise would be a bad vote, and shame on any Council member who would vote for that.

Pat Arnold's talking points:

1) He thanked the Council members for serving since he had been on the Council for eight years and knows it's a thankless, but necessary, job. Additionally, decisions have to be made that are not going to be popular.

2) The Council did a good job in hiring Brian Martin as the Town Manager. He's known him for several years and is confident in his abilities to do a good job.

3) He knows the Emergency Medical Services department is needed, but the proposed budgeted amount for that department is \$673,000. He's curious to know if other towns near Saltville pay that much as well.

4) The SIDA has an agreement with Virginia Gas where the town received an annual payment that is related to the consumer price index. The SIDA also received a fee per each cubic foot of gas that is stored there. He noticed that they were given the town \$175,000 this year per the budget and asked about the rest of the money the SIDA receives. SIDA member Johnny Norris was in the audience and stated that each year the SIDA gives the town between \$250,000 and \$350,000 each year. The rest of their funds goes to items such as a new town shop. The town was going to get over \$200,000 for this new town shop, but asked for help regarding other expenses leaving only about \$82,000 for the new town shop now. Mr. Arnold then asked what else the SIDA was spending its money on. He said he would FOIA the town for a list of all of the expenditures of the SIDA for the last five years. He knows there could be a charge for this information under FOIA guidelines, and Mr. Martin said that unless the work involved is extensive, there wouldn't be a charge and won't be this time.

5) He's a fiscal conservative who thinks the town should work best with what it has. Decisions have to be made that balance what the town needs with what the public can actually take. The public gets upset when this dynamic doesn't work. He again thanked the Council for their service.

Robin Bordwine's talking points:

- 1) She thanked the Council and Mr. Martin for helping her with a water situation several months ago and for generally spending the town's money wisely.
- 2) Like others, she has heard that the Council will be compensated \$100 per month as part of the proposed budget being presented. She believes this payment is not warranted since the Council knew what they were getting into when they ran for this volunteer position.
- 3) The minimum wage is going up, so the taxes will have to be raised eventually, but with water and sewer going up as well, it's just too much. Think of the new restaurants in town and the burden this will place on them while trying to get their business started. The tax increase should not go into effect this year.
- 4) Regarding the police officers, she's pro law enforcement and works in that field herself, and her son is an officer. People in town pay county taxes, so the county should pay for the SRO.

Gary Clear's talking points:

- 1) He opposes the tax increase.
- 2) The town has a hard time hiring police officers, so maybe they should just cut the amount of officers and pay those fewer officers more money.
- 3) The Council needs to figure out how to best spend the upcoming COVID money. The water and sewer infrastructure does need repairs, and this money could also be used to make the town prettier as well. This money could go towards making a difference in the town.
- 4) The Council is a voluntary position, and its members should not be paid especially when they knew this going into the process.
- 5) He agrees with Joe Fry that a daycare center is needed in Saltville.

Joe Fry spoke again about the following:

- 1) Regarding the wages for the pool workers, they receive no benefits being part-time seasonal workers, so \$13.00 per hour would be a good wage for them. The Council needs to stop bickering over two extra dollars per hour.
- 2) Mr. Martin said the ad for the workers did not list a rate of pay. We live in a social media world, and those numbers were bantered about on the social media. Within a couple of days of those amounts appearing on social media, the town had almost twenty applicants. The rate of

pay for part-time positions as voted on by the Council a while back was \$10 per hour. Now, the pool managers will make \$11 per hour.

Johnny Norris' talking points:

1) He's been on the Council and if he recalls, the reason the water and sewer rates will go up is because the federal government requires a certain rate that will produce a profit for the water and sewer system to be eligible for grants, loans, etc. The rates going up is an inevitable event. However, he disagrees with the taxes going up the 1%.

2) He'd like to see a list of what the Council is doing to eliminate waste so that the taxes don't have to be raised.

3) He thought it was a done deal that Smyth County was going to fund the SRO for the elementary school. The Mayor replied that the SRO is now being funded by Smyth County and not by the town. Mr. Norris then stated that the position in the police department budget should be eliminated since the county is now funding that position. This goes back to eliminating waste.

4) He understood it to be that eventually a day care center would open in the space once occupied by Clarks Pharmacy.

Wade Kestner's talking points:

1) Regarding the proposed tax increases, it would be a burden to elderly people on fixed incomes. Many people that live near him fall into this category. The expenses of their medicine and health care in general are already hard enough for them to handle. A lot just can't afford any more increases.

2) The Council needs to re-evaluate some of their decisions. Everything is going up, so please take that into consideration. A lot of the younger people in this town are moving away.

3) He would like to see the amphitheater and the sheds restored back in the well fields.

4) He was appointed by the Council to serve in Loretta Norris' spot when she passed away.

Melissa Turner's talking points:

1) She thanked the Council and the town's staff for all that they do.

2) She's heard that some of the people on the Rescue Squad make about \$900 a month, even those with smaller kids, so she asked that people be a little open-minded on their wages. Before the town took this over, her sister had called an ambulance for her because she thought she was having a heart attack, and it took twenty-five minutes to get there, so having the town run it now is a good thing.

3) She agrees that the county should pay for the SRO at the elementary school, but said it was a shame that an officer is even needed there in the first place, but times have changed.

4) It is true the Council needs to work better together to do the jobs they were elected to do, but the citizens can come together as well. There are a lot of talented and smart people around here who have a lot to offer. It takes everyone coming together as a community to make Saltville an even better place to live.

Pat Arnold spoke again about the following:

1) There used to be pumps in the well fields that were used to pull up the salt. Mathieson came here in the late 1800s, and there are still some holes in the ground out there even though Olin left over fifty years ago. The Council should probably have the Department of Mines, Minerals, and Energy could do an assessment of that area to see how stable it is and, therefore, how safe it is.

The vote on the budget was set for June 29th at 7:00 p.m. The Mayor then closed the Public Hearing.

