

TOWN OF BRANCHVILLE
SPECIAL COMMUNITY MEETING MINUTES
FEBRUARY 17, 2014

The Branchville Town Council held a Community Meeting on Monday, February 17, 2014, at 6 p.m. in the Town Hall. Present were Mayor Glenn Miller and Council members Tom Jennings, Sam Whisenhunt, Gregory Oliver, Michael Blankenship and Amy Bryant. Council member Chris Ott was absent.

Belinda Guerrero and Frank Vass were present to answer questions. Ms. Guerrero is the founder and director of South Carolina Pathways, which is seeking to develop the former school at 460 Lockett St. Mr. Vass is working with Ms. Guerrero. They had addressed Council at the Feb. 10 meeting.

Councilman Oliver asked if the basketball court would still be available for local youths. Ms. Guerrero replied, "Definitely. It would be a shame to discourage them in any way." She also said she wants the playground equipment to be "restored where it's safe" and "painted bright colors," not "hidden away in weeds and falling apart."

Ms. Guerrero said South Carolina Pathways was formed in October of 2013 as a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization.

She said she has been a hospital intensive-care nurse, one of the first woman paramedics in the state, a volunteer firefighter and a police reserve officer. She said she has a license to carry a concealed weapon and is a certified FEMA crisis interventionist and emergency manager. She apologized for not helping other people more during the ice storm. She said one aspect of her organization involves providing for people's needs in emergencies.

Councilman Blankenship said he's looking at the proposal from "a parent's standpoint" and wants more information on the organization's targeted audience for services. He said he has had "really bad luck with the criminal element in this town." He asked, "Are we talking about a souped-up halfway house?"

Ms. Guerrero said, "I work in prison ministry. I teach in pre-release programs." She interacts with thousands of men and women in the three to six months before they are released back into society. "You cannot rehabilitate a prisoner and send him into the community if that community puts him right back into" the family and social circumstances that led him to offend, such as "drugs, alcohol and broken relationships." She continued, "We (intend to) alter the situations that caused him to go to prison."

She said she has worked with a "network of mentors, employers, churches and schools" across the state for several years but this will be the organization's first physical brick-and-mortar facility.

An audience member asked where the people are going to live while they participate in the Pathways programs. "I don't want criminals in this town," she said.

Ms. Guerrero said, "You have them here anyway. They are out there every day and you would not be able to pick them out." The difference is whether they are voluntarily participating in a program that will teach them life skills and job skills or just aimlessly wandering the streets.

Audience member Marianne Street said, "There aren't any jobs in Branchville."

Ms. Guerrero replied that her initiative would create jobs in providing participants with food, transportation and other basic needs.

Councilman Whisenhunt asked Ms. Guerrero where she puts herself on the organizational chart. She said she would be "the executive director, under the total control of a board of directors that's seven members strong."

Councilman Whisenhunt noted that the directors were not identified by name. Ms. Guerrero replied, "I was told it was inappropriate at this stage of the game" to include the names but "I'd be glad to tell you who they are." She said they reside "throughout the state."

Councilman Whisenhunt asked about the "level of offender" that the program would admit. Ms. Guerrero said the participants would be "very carefully screened" and those who have committed sexual, violent or drug offenses would not be allowed to have any contact with the elderly, children or the mentally incapacitated.

Ms. Street asked Ms. Guerrero what made her choose Branchville instead of a larger place with more resources. Ms. Guerrero said the lack of resources is why she chose Branchville. She said she took a state map and plotted every social resource listed online under "2-1-1" and realized there were "big holes" in four places of the state. One was Branchville. She visited all four places, looking for a school she had seen in several dreams. When she came to Branchville, the first person she talked to was "a girl I'd seen in a dream." Then she found the old high school but it was not the school she had seen in her dreams. Then "I made a bad turn leaving town" and came across the former Lockett Elementary, which she recognized as the school she had seen in her dreams.

Ms. Guerrero said she hopes to gain Veterans Administration contracts to bring men to the facility for training, education and a taste of "the simple things that make a community a community, the things these men are missing" in their lives, like homemade chocolate cake.

A member of the audience said she could not follow Ms. Guerrero's connection of criminals, veterans and chocolate cake.

Ms. Guerrero said, "We're talking about men and women that have never had a day of hope in their life." They feel a sense of security in prison. The other inmates are their friends and family. They have a roof over their heads, a place to sleep and food, such as it is. "In prison the inmates eat food that comes in boxes marked, 'Not for human consumption.'" ... This is all they know. They don't understand how to survive in public society, so you teach the skills they don't know. You've got to start with life skills, such as, "What is a toothbrush?" Then come more philosophical questions like, "Who are you?" Upon going to prison, they are told they are "deficient, retarded, warped, useless," so they begin to believe it.

"When they come back from war, you're dealing with the same basic mental processes – PTSD. So you do the same basic repair – you restore them to a level of normalcy. ... I am trying to give everybody a chance at a reasonable life."

A Vietnam War veteran in the audience said, "When I came back, I was lost and hurt. ... I've still got a bullet in my spine. ... When you come home, you get treated just like a criminal. They were saying how we were killing kids."

Ms. Street asked about the "nuts and bolts" of starting the ministry. "How are you going to do it?"

Ms. Guerrero replied, "With shovels and brooms." By volunteers: Scout camp-outs, church groups and community groups. She said the group has to get insurance before volunteers begin working in the building. She said money will be sought from the Small Business Administration. "Wells Fargo is talking with us about a startup loan. Grant applications are in the works." Two professional grant-writers are helping. Business sponsorships will be sought. Several contractors are willing to help.

Ms. Guerrero said, "Gov. Nikki Haley has promised us money. All we need is a facility." Councilman Whisenhunt asked, "Do you have the promise in writing?" Ms. Guerrero said she did not, but "the governor has never lied to me."

The possibility of offering as many as 100 on-site beds for participants – not right away but sometime in the future – was discussed. Ms. Guerrero said it is possible the beds would be reserved for Veterans Administration clients only.

Councilman Jennings asked if the group has adopted by-laws yet. Ms. Guerrero said they started to draft them two weeks ago and two members have been temporarily sidelined by personal situations.

Mayor Miller said, "I think it would be something good for the town, yes, for the people." He asked the council members if they felt the proposal was negotiable or out of the question.

Councilman Jennings told Ms. Guerrero, "You need to provide us with more. ... Let our attorney read the by-laws." He also asked for more details about liability insurance and a building code inspection by Orangeburg County."

Ms. Guerrero asked, "Can I take that to mean we've got the go-ahead?" Councilman Jennings said no, he wants to see the by-laws first, but "that's just my opinion."

Councilman Whisenhunt said he would like to see the building "cleaned up and utilized" in one way or another.

Councilman Bryant said her initial reaction was positive but "we've got to be cautious." She said she needs to know the opinions of the residents in the neighborhood near the school.

Councilman Blankenship said, "I'm skeptical."

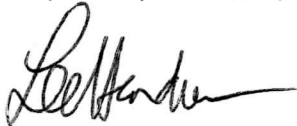
Ms. Guerrero said, "Skepticism and uncertainty we can deal with. I believe God is telling me this is where He wants me to be. I trust the Lord entirely. I've got to follow His guidance." She said she has packed her belongings and is looking for a house to rent in the Branchville area immediately.

Ms. Guerrero said she could get the by-laws finished and delivered to the Council in two weeks.

Concern was expressed that one week had not been enough time to adequately publicize this meeting, particularly with the ice storm that cut electricity and damaged trees.

Council agreed to schedule another community meeting in two weeks – at 7 p.m. Monday, March 3, 2014, at Town Hall.

Respectfully submitted,



Lee Hendren

Clerk of Court