

Town of Branchville
Regular Council Meeting Minutes
September 14, 2015

The regular Council meeting for the Town of Branchville was held on September 14, 2015, at 6 p.m. at the Town Hall. A notice was placed on the door of the Town Hall with the time, date, and place of the meeting at least 24 hours before the meeting. The Times and Democrat newspaper was notified.

The meeting was called to order by Mayor Pro Tem Tom Jennings. The Mayor, Council, and all others present stood for the Pledge of Allegiance, followed by prayer.

All Council members were present.

Mayor Pro Tem Jennings welcomed the guests.

Minutes: Councilwoman Amy Bryant made the motion to approve the August 10, 2015, minutes. Councilman Michael Blankenship seconded the motion. The motion carried.

Financial Reports: Mayor Glenn Miller said he did not receive the water and sewer report in his packet. Councilman Sam Whisenhunt made the motion to postpone approval until the next meeting. Councilwoman Bryant seconded the motion. The motion carried.

Cox Wood ordinance: Councilman Whisenhunt made the motion to give third and final reading to the ordinance. Mayor Miller seconded the motion. The motion carried.

Rayrode Daze Festival trash removal: Clerk/Treasurer Jenny Elliott sent the Mayor and each Council member an email with Republic Services' quote for placement, rental and removal of two 40-yard bins. They will cost \$400 each. They will arrive on Thursday, September 24, and will be removed on Tuesday, September 29. This will give Town employees one day to remove some items from the old school into the bins. Mayor Pro Tem Jennings said Mrs. Elliott was supposed to check prices with some other companies but now there is not enough time to get other prices. Mayor Miller said he never received the email and let the record show that in the future the Town Clerk should make sure that all recipients receive their emails. Councilman Whisenhunt said the clerk should have printed copies of the proposals and included them in the Council agenda packets. Councilman Whisenhunt made a motion to accept the quote from Republic Services. Councilman Chris Ott seconded the motion. The motion carried.

Farmers Market signs: Councilman Oliver said the signs are being done at the high school and will be finished on Friday. He said the total cost to the Town is \$43.00.

Community Center: Councilman Oliver said Johnny Chavis looked at the building but has not yet provided an estimate. Separately, Councilman Oliver said he asked Donald Valentine to give a price for replacing the handrails next to the steps to the front and back doors. The quote was \$759.00. Mayor Miller said that seems too expensive and we should put a message on the electronic sign inviting other quotes. Councilman Oliver also said he wants to get another quote on the ceiling work.

Hospitality tax: Councilman Oliver said the Council asked last month what hospitality tax revenues could be used for. Those uses include promoting tourism; maintaining tourism-related facilities, restrooms, parking lots, and access roads; financially assisting arts and cultural events; and paying other costs directly attributable to tourism, such as law enforcement, utilities and solid waste. No action was taken.

Christmas boxes: Councilman Oliver said he has bought the paint but the boxes are not yet painted because the Town employees have not had time. He said he might paint the boxes himself.

Projector purchase: Councilwoman Bryant said there was nothing new to report since the last meeting.

Update on Sewer Line at 118 George St.: Councilman Whisenhunt said he hopes to have an update by the next meeting.

Council Pay: At present the Mayor receives \$7,920 per year in wages. With Social Security and Medicare added, the amount is \$8,525.88. Each of the six Council members receives \$780 per year in wages. With Social Security and Medicare added, the amount is \$839.67 each.

For fiscal years 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019, Councilman Whisenhunt presented a proposal to split the current yearly total (\$13,563.90) by seven members and divide it by 12 months and add \$25. Under his proposal, the Mayor and each of the six Council members would receive \$2,100 per year. With Social Security and Medicare added, the amount would be \$2,260.65 each, for a total of \$15,824.55.

Councilman Whisenhunt emphasized that the increases do not affect the current Mayor and Council as they would not go into effect until January 2016, following the election in November 2015, in accordance with State law.

Mayor Miller said the Mayor has to be available 24/7/365 while some Council members work for one hour a month. He said most Council members do not deserve to be paid as much as the Mayor. He said the Mayor gets calls when everyone else is sleeping. He asked what Council members bring to the table.

Several Council members challenged that characterization, saying constituents call them at all hours too, and their contributions are important even when they are less publicly visible as the work of others.

Councilman Oliver said he does not know about the unseen work, but he does know what the seen work looks like. He said there is room for improvement.

Councilman Whisenhunt said the ordinance will have to be changed to reflect the new salaries. He made the motion to adopt the new salary schedule for the Mayor and Council members. Councilwoman Bryant seconded the motion. The motion carried by a vote of 5-2, with Mayor Miller and Councilman Oliver opposed and all of the others in favor.

Temporary Help: Councilman Whisenhunt said a water department employee is on extended sick leave but the grass still grows and the water still flows and maintenance never stops. He said two people have applied for temporary work. Councilman Whisenhunt made a motion to hire at least one person to work 40 hours per week "for the next several weeks" until the permanent employee is able to return to work. Councilman Blankenship seconded the motion. The motion carried.

Councilman Whisenhunt made a motion to increase Joe Breaker's work hours if needed during the same time frame. It was noted that when Mr. Breaker had been hired, he was to work 20 hours a week, or more if needed. Councilman Blankenship seconded the motion. The motion carried.

Confederate Flag Vendor: Mayor Miller asked if a certain vendor would be invited to sell his wares "on public property" during the Raylrode Daze Festival again this year. Mayor Pro Tem Tom Jennings replied that the vendor has come to the festival each year for at least a decade and paid many months ago to reserve a spot at this year's event. Mayor Miller asked if this was the consensus of the Council members.

Councilman Whisenhunt said it's legal to sell Confederate-themed items and there is no legal basis for excluding the vendor. Council members Ott and Blankenship agreed. Councilman Oliver said the imagery "offends many people" but it's a moot point since the festival has already accepted the vendor's money.

Sanitary survey: Mayor Miller said he wants to know who is authorized to open letters that are addressed to him at the Town Hall. He passed around a letter from the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control that listed its findings from a drinking water sanitary survey.

Councilman Whisenhunt said he received the letter via e-mail so there was no envelope to open. Mayor Pro Tem Jennings pointed out that the letter in question was dated July 24, 2014.

Lawsuit update: Mayor Miller said he and various Council members have met occasionally with Town Attorney Russell Blanchard to discuss a lawsuit Orangeburg Consolidated School District 4 filed against the Town after the 2012 audit of the Town suggested that the Town owed a total of \$202,868.95 to Orangeburg Consolidated School District 4, USDA Rural Development, and the Victims' Assistance Fund. While there is nothing new to report, Mayor Miller said he does not want anyone to forget about it.

Grocery store: Councilman Oliver said he went to a meeting in Columbia to learn more about a low-interest community improvement loan fund. He said if the Town pursues a loan, the Town would have to put up 20% of the project cost, but it does not have to be in cash; it could be in the form of property.

He said he has met twice with the vice president of Save A Lot, who said he is interested in studying the feasibility of establishing a supermarket in Branchville if they felt the community would welcome it.

Councilman Whisenhunt made the motion to allow Save A Lot to do a feasibility study and ask the company to give the Town a copy of the study when it's done. Councilman Blankenship seconded the motion, which carried by a vote of 5-2, with Councilman Ott and Councilwoman Bryant opposed.

Mayor Miller said an employee of the Orangeburg County Development Commission visited him in Branchville to tour the Town's property assets and offer ideas on how they could be promoted for commercial and retail development.

Old elementary school: Councilman Oliver said a team at Claflin University in Orangeburg is willing to seek grant money to clean up the property and conduct a feasibility study of the building. He said he has been told the cost of clean-up could exceed \$1 million. Councilman Whisenhunt made the motion to allow Claflin to proceed as outlined. Councilman Blankenship seconded the motion. The motion carried.

Industrial park sign: Councilman Oliver said he took down the sign, repaired it, and reinstalled it today. He recommended buying 3 solar-powered lights to illuminate the sign at night. Councilman Whisenhunt made the motion to spend up to \$120 for the lights. Councilman Ott seconded the motion. The motion carried.

Mailbox: Clerk of Court Lee Hendren said he and Town Clerk/Treasurer Jenny Elliott have heard from vendors whose mail was returned to them because it did not have our post office box on it. He said the new postmistress told him the post office will continue to return such mail to the sender until we install a free-standing mailbox at Town Hall. The Town can't stop using the street address because it is needed by delivery companies and persons who wish to conduct business in person at Town Hall or attend court. Councilman Whisenhunt said we must be able to receive our mail. He said he will buy a mailbox tomorrow and have it installed.

Budget work session: Council members agreed to hold their first budget work session of the year on Monday, Oct. 26, 2015, at 6 p.m. in council chambers at Town Hall.

Clerk of Court: Police Chief Randy Clark and Capt. Ira James said SLED had told them that everyone who sees, hears or handles "criminal justice information" must undergo SLED's certification process, which includes taking a short online Security Awareness quiz and signing a Non-Disclosure Agreement. They said Clerk of Court Hendren had declined to undergo the process. Clerk of Court Hendren said he discussed the request with three attorneys and researched rulings, orders and opinions of the S.C. Supreme Court, the S.C. Attorney General and the Municipal Association of South Carolina, all of which warn court employees not to be under the supervision, monitoring, or discipline of law enforcement because it endangers the impartiality and neutrality that all Court employees are expected to maintain. Capt. James said he and Chief Clark had taken all of the case files out of the Clerk of Court's office and limited the clerk's access to LawTrak computer databases. Chief Clark said the Orangeburg County Clerk of Court's Office has stopped accepting custody of the Town's case files. Councilman Whisenhunt said, "As long as it is morally sound and not illegal, I think anybody ought to be able to perform any job in this Town Hall. We're not a big Town Hall. We can't afford to hire a bunch of people in here and it's my opinion that we contact our lawyer and seek his advice on whether Mr. Hendren has to take this test, and Jenny, for that matter." Councilman Whisenhunt made that a motion. Councilman Blankenship seconded the motion. The motion carried.

Items for Information: Councilman Oliver said residents can contact the fire department to purchase reflective street address signs for a minimal price. Councilman Whisenhunt said everyone needs to have their street address prominently displayed on their house and/or mailbox because it helps firefighters, police officers, postal carriers, delivery truck drivers and even the water department employees.

Public comments:

Charles Bamberg said he'd never seen a Town pay its council members the same amount as the mayor.

Betty Skolasky announced that she will be the election clerk again this year.

Mrs. Skolasky asked if the Council could reactivate the beautification committee. Mayor Pro Tem Tom Jennings made a motion to do so, and to designate Mrs. Skolasky as the chairperson. Councilman Whisenhunt seconded the motion. The motion carried.

Mrs. Skolasky asked about progress in getting a branch library re-established in Branchville. Councilman Oliver said the Town has offered several buildings for use as a library but Orangeburg County Council has not agreed to re-establish the branch library and provide funding for the librarians, furnishings, and contents. If and when they do, the Town would be required to provide a building and pay the utility costs.

A Town resident said she believed her water bill was too high. Councilman Whisenhunt said Town employees visited her residence five times recently and determined that the meter was measuring the water flow correctly. He said, "It is going through the meter. Where it's going after that, I don't know."

Executive Session: Councilman Blankenship made a motion for Council to enter into executive session to briefly discuss an unspecified personnel matter. Mayor Pro Tem Jennings said it was not on the agenda.

Adjournment: Mayor Miller made the motion to adjourn. Councilwoman Bryant seconded the motion. The meeting was adjourned at 7:36 p.m.