

TOWN OF BRANCHVILLE  
COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES  
December 8, 2014

The Branchville Town Council held its regular monthly meeting on Monday, December 8, 2014, 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.

Mayor Glenn Miller called the meeting to order. The Mayor, Council and all present stood for the Pledge of Allegiance, followed by prayer.

All Council members were present except Councilman Christopher Ott.

Mayor Miller welcomed the guests.

**Timber:** Mayor Miller introduced Beth Richardson, area forester with the Clemson Extension Service. She said she is a registered forester and a landowner. She has taught forestry classes for 30 years. She said the County of Orangeburg retains her to sell their surplus timber as needed.

Among her comments:

- (1) Sellers always make more money by selling by unit price/weight/scale rather than a lump-sum bid.
- (2) Find the logging company that does the best job merchandising the timber.
- (3) Orangeburg County never seeks bids for its timber; rather, she arranges the sales on their behalf.
- (4) After the land is cut, reforest it. One option is Loblolly. It costs less to establish and can be harvested in as little as 24 years. Another option is Longleaf. The initial investment is higher – around \$350 to \$400 an acre – and the trees can take 45-55 years to mature, but the return is higher, and the pine straw can be sold after 8 or 9 years. But she warned that the straw is highly susceptible to theft.

The Council previously agreed to sell approximately 10.9 acres of timber on the Town-owned property behind the convenience site, specifically Orangeburg County Tax Map Number 0191-15-18-001.000.

Councilman Michael Blankenship made a motion to advertise for bids. Each bid is to specify that the bidder is to clear-cut the property. Each bid is to specify the bidder's unit price per ton for each product and the end market for each product – chip and saw, saw timber, pulp, poles, etc. Beth Richardson will review the bids with the Town to give her advice on which bid is the best bid overall, with price being one consideration but not the only consideration. The motion was seconded. Motion carried.

**Minutes:** Councilman Sam Whisenhunt made a motion to approve the minutes of the November 10, 2014, regular council meeting and the December 1, 2014, budget work session. Councilwoman Amy Bryant seconded the motion. Motion carried.

**Financial Report:** Mayor Miller noted that the Council did not approve the October 2014 financial report at the November 10, 2014, meeting because some members had questions about two expenditures. Mayor Miller, who was not present for the November 10 meeting, said the Town's wastewater operator, Cal Hartzog, requested \$1,200 to refurbish the effluent flow meter at the wastewater treatment facility and the Mayor approved the expenditure. The Mayor said the Town saved about \$3,700 by refurbishing the pump (and borrowing a pump while the work was being done) instead of buying a new one.

Mayor Miller said he will do whatever it takes to keep the wastewater system working properly and safely and within state regulations. For instance, he said he spent \$29,000 in capital projects "penny" sales tax money earlier this year to install equipment at the wastewater treatment plant, and he did so without a vote of the Council because it was essential and needed to be done as quickly as possible.

Councilman Sam Whisenhunt said he questioned that expense the previous month because he simply did not know what it involved and that he should have been informed because he has been designated by the Council to oversee water and wastewater operations.

Mayor Miller said the other expenditure was to obtain and install cameras in each of the three police cars. The cameras retail for about \$16,000 plus installation costs, but we acted quickly when we learned of an opportunity to purchase refurbished cameras for \$6,000, installation included.

Councilman Michael Blankenship said, "That's the kind of issue that needs to be brought before Council. ... I would have voted yes, but I would have liked the opportunity to have voted." He said it is "our job to make these kinds of decisions." He said he would have liked to have Police Chief Randy Clark explain the request to Council before the cameras were purchased and installed.

Councilman Whisenhunt said, "I would like to see Chief Clark at every meeting to tell us what he would recommend for his department and why."

Councilman Whisenhunt added that replacement is a different matter than buying something new. He said, "I don't see an issue with direct replacement."

Mayor Miller said it's not always possible to get Council's approval on short notice. He noted that he had called a special meeting for October 29 but it could not be held because of the lack of a quorum present.

Councilman Gregory Oliver said the financial report appears to show that the Town is "paying more out than we're taking in" for garbage collection. The Town charges \$10.75 a month per cart and is supposed to net \$1.09 per cart under its contract with Republic Services.

Mayor Pro Tem Tom Jennings said he would like to see three months history of garbage collection revenues and expenses.

Councilman Whisenhunt made a motion to accept the financial report for November. Councilwoman Amy Bryant seconded the motion. Motion carried.

**Backhoe bids:** Four sealed bids were opened for the JCB backhoe, VIN SLP215TCVE0464301. Nathan Hughes of Hughes Farms bid \$10,200. David Summers bid \$11,525. Alvin Pair bid \$11,500. Donald Dukes bid \$10,252. Councilman Oliver made a motion to accept the bid of David Summers for \$11,525, and if he does not bring the money and take the backhoe by Friday at 5 p.m., Alvin Pair will be given until the following Friday at 5 p.m. to bring the money and take it. Councilman Blankenship seconded the motion. Motion carried. (Note: Mr. Summers did bring the money and take ownership of the backhoe.)

**Insurance:** Councilman Blankenship said, "Our deductibles are too low." He said he would like to see a quote for premiums if the deductibles for vehicles – and in particular the rarely used dump truck – were raised from \$250 to \$500, \$750 and \$1,000.

Councilman Whisenhunt said the deductibles for buildings could be increased too.

Mayor Miller proposed inviting the insurance agent to talk with the Council, even if it requires a special called meeting. He said the policies are up for renewal in early January.

**Water and wastewater report:** Councilman Whisenhunt said he and Cal Hartzog met with wastewater regulators at the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control headquarters in Columbia the previous Thursday. He said he felt the meeting went well.

Councilman Whisenhunt said a smoke test is likely in the near future. He said utility customers should not be alarmed at the sight of smoke rising from unusual places while the testing is being conducted.

**Movie Night:** Councilman Blankenship said, "It was a very special night for the Town." The other council members agreed and thanked Councilwoman Amy Bryant for a job well done in coordinating the event.

**Truck repairs:** Mayor Miller reported that the F-250 truck is in the shop to get a replacement bumper and he is getting three or four bids for repairing the tailgate of the F-150 truck.

**Holiday pay:** Mayor Miller said, "I need to know how long a person has to be working before he qualifies for vacation and holiday pay." He said the newest employee earned just two days' pay (15 hours) before getting 16 hours in paid holiday time for Thanksgiving and the day after. "I have a problem with that."

Councilman Whisenhunt asked, "What does the handbook say?"

Mayor Pro Tem Jennings read from the handbook, which says "all full-time employees" qualify for paid holidays. He said it does not make an exception for employees who are still in their probationary period. The handbook does say probationary employees are not eligible for annual leave (paid vacation) days.

Councilman Whisenhunt made a motion to amend or add to the policy to stipulate that employees do not qualify for paid holidays until they have successfully completed their probationary period. He said this applies to employees "now, and anybody hired in the future." Mayor Pro Tem Jennings seconded the motion. Motion carried.

Mayor Miller said, "If I am correct, this money paid last week will come out of next week's pay, correct?" Councilman Whisenhunt replied, "Correct."

**Cut-offs:** Mayor Miller said at least one utility department employee should be scheduled to work until 5 p.m. on each day when water is shut off for non-payment. Councilman Whisenhunt agreed.

**Police:** Capt. Eric Bonnett spoke in favor of a mutual aid agreement between the Branchville Police Department and the City of Orangeburg Department of Public Safety. Under the agreement, Branchville could borrow specialized equipment from DPS and DPS could benefit from the expertise of Branchville officers. Capt. Bonnett said, "I'm a certified hostage negotiator." Capt. Ira James is a certified instructor. Capt. Bonnett also elaborated on the police department's request for Tasers and body cameras. He said using Tasers avoids legal issues stemming from the use of batons and provides a non-lethal "alternative to using our firearms." He said the desired model has a list price of \$1,100 but he has negotiated a price of \$861.05 from Taser International. Capt. Bonnett also said a car camera "can only record what's in front of the car" while a body camera is much more versatile. He said Axon body cameras can be purchased for about \$399.00 each.

Councilman Blankenship said he arrived at a total of \$3,700.83 for the requests. He asked, "When we approve something like this, where does that money come from" because it is not in the budget.

Councilman Whisenhunt said purchases such as this need to be budgeted.

Mayor Miller said the Town is paying 2.5 percent interest on a loan backed by a Certificate of Deposit that is earning 0.5 percent interest. He said, "My thing is, cash the CD in, pay off all the bills" and buy a new CD when the new revenues come in next year. "Let's talk about it."

Councilman Blankenship expressed the hope that the money made from selling the timber and the dump truck would allow the Town to balance the budget without cashing in the Certificate of Deposit.

Council agreed to put off the purchase of Tasers and body cameras until 2015.

Councilman Oliver made a motion to adopt the mutual aid agreement with the City of Orangeburg Department of Public Safety. Councilman Blankenship seconded the motion. Motion carried with Mayor Pro Tem Jennings voting no.

**Meeting schedule:** Mayor Pro Tem Jennings made a motion to adopt the 2015 meeting schedule. The council will continue holding regular monthly meetings at 6 p.m. on the second Monday in each month in Council chambers at the Town Hall. Councilman Blankenship seconded the motion. Motion carried.

**Christmas party:** Mayor Miller asked the Council to reconsider their choice of Main Street Bar-B-Que for the annual Christmas party for Town officials and employees. "Since it's for Town employees I thought they should have some say.... Several people said they would prefer to go to Ryan's" in Orangeburg.

Councilwoman Bryant asked who had initiated these conversations: the employees or the Mayor? She also asked whether the employees knew that the Council had already voted to keep the affair in town. Mayor Miller said, "I did what I was supposed to do."

**Mumbling:** Councilwoman Bryant expressed her irritation that she can hear certain audience members "mumbling" among themselves when she has the floor during a Council meeting. Mayor Miller asked the audience members to refrain from such behavior.

**Personnel:** Councilman Whisenhunt said it was time to "address this employee issue. You all got a letter. You know what my stand is. I make a motion we carry it out." Motion died for lack of a second.

Councilman Blankenship said personnel matters are supposed to be discussed in executive session.

Councilman Whisenhunt made a motion to go into executive session for a personnel matter. Mayor Pro Tem Jennings seconded the motion. Motion carried with Councilman Oliver voting no, saying the agenda did not include an executive session.

Council went into executive session at 7:49 p.m. and returned to public session at 8:03 p.m. Mayor Miller said no vote was required as a result of the executive session.

**Public comment:**

Resident Luvenia Williams asked what decisions the Mayor can make without Council's approval and if the Mayor does not have any authority, "what is the purpose of a Mayor?"

Mayor Miller said the Town of Branchville has a "weak Mayor, strong Council" form of government that allows the Council to "relet a lot of their power to the Mayor," which is what the Council did in 1997, but "now they're taking it back."

Why are they taking it back? Ms. Williams asked.

Councilman Whisenhunt said he could not speak to a decision made in 1997 because he had not been on the council that long.

Mayor Pro Tem Jennings said the form of government cannot be changed except through a referendum.

Mayor Miller said, "If I had the authority of the former Mayor, they would have (the Tasers and body cameras) in two weeks." He recalled a time when he was a Councilman and questioned then-Mayor Tim Cooner's decision to re-roof the Community Center. "I was told, 'Remember, we voted to give the mayor the privilege to spend X amount of money without going before Council.' But now that's gone, but it doesn't really bother me. What bothers me is when we're wasting good time on little personal, frivolous things instead of trying to do something for the people."

Councilman Blankenship predicted that the police department will have the Tasers and body cameras within two months. "We just have to figure out a way to pay for them." He said the Town should not have to borrow money every year to get through the year. He said, "The problem with the previous administration was excessive spending. Nobody knew where the money was going and we're trying to change that and that's all this is about.... There's a reason there's a budget."

Councilman Whisenhunt said Mayor Cooner used to prepare the budget by himself, but now the entire Council participates in the budget-writing process. He said, "We all need to know what's going on so we can make educated decisions."

Resident Beverly Berry agreed with Councilwoman Bryant that there is a lot of "mumbling" in the audience. She said it interferes with her ability to hear the proceedings. She said, "We're here to listen. We need to be quiet so we can hear."

Resident Naomi Mingo thanked the police department, and Capt. Bonnett in particular, for their diligence in patrolling the Town, including her neighborhood.

Resident Harriet Hughes said the Fun Day and Movie Night provided “the best holiday season in a long time” in Branchville. She said, “Everything I’ve heard has been positive.”

**Items for information:**

**Water cut-off date:** Councilman Whisenhunt made a motion to change the date of cutting off water service for non-payment from the 27th of the month to the 4th of the following month. He said it would help customers who are living on fixed incomes. He said there will be no water cut-offs on a Friday and if the 4th is a Friday, Saturday or Sunday, the cut-off date would be the next Monday. Councilman Blankenship seconded the motion. Motion carried.

**Maintenance:** Councilman Whisenhunt said several exhaust fans in Pump Station #6 need to be replaced. Too, several lights on various vehicles need to be replaced. Also, he requested the purchase of “Class 3” highly reflective vests and Tyvex suits for utility workers.

Mayor Miller said the utility workers also need rain suits and boots.

Capt. Bonnett said some patrol car lights need to be replaced too.

**Budget:** Clerk of Court Lee Hendren provided the Mayor and Council members with copies of a page from the Municipal Association of South Carolina’s Handbook for Municipal Officials listing the information that must be included in the legal advertisement announcing the public hearing on the Town’s 2015 budget.

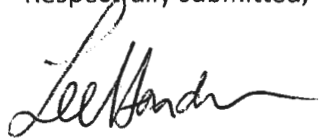
Mayor Miller asked Mr. Hendren if he could place such an advertisement in The Times and Democrat. Mr. Hendren replied that he could, on the condition that he is given the information that must be included in the legal notice.

**Street light:** Councilman Oliver said the owner of Steedly’s Variety Store would like to have a street light outside his establishment. Councilman Oliver said the Town could afford to put up more street lights if it replaced some of the existing lights for a more economical type of light bulbs.

Mayor Miller said the Town has to be careful not to provide lights for some areas and not for others.

**Adjournment:** Mayor Pro Tem Jennings made a motion to adjourn. Councilman Whisenhunt seconded the motion. Motion carried. Adjourned at 8:37 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,



Lee Hendren  
Clerk of Court