

MINUTES
REGULAR MEETING
FEBRUARY 8, 2022

The regular meeting of the Council for the City of Covington was held on Tuesday, February 8, at 6:30 p.m. at Council Chambers in City Hall, 333 W. Locust Street, Covington, Virginia.

The meeting was called to order by Mayor Thomas H. Sibold, Jr. The invocation was given by Rev. Dan Gillette, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance.

Roll call of Council showed all members present as follows: Mayor Sibold, Vice Mayor David S. Crosier, Councilman William E. (Lance) Carson, Jr., Councilman Raymond C. Hunter, and Councilman S. Allan Tucker.

City Manager: Krystal Onaitis

City Attorney: Mark Popovich

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

Vice Mayor Crosier made a motion to approve the agenda, Mr. Tucker added a second, and members agreed by consent.

CITIZEN COMMENTS

Mayor Sibold welcomed the large audience of more than twenty people and reminded them to come to the podium to speak and to state their names and addresses. Mike Wickline of W. Phillip Street spoke concerning Council's action last week in hiring a consulting firm to address issues with Council, the City Manager, and City employees. He said his experience showed that consultants hired for charting new territories are beneficial. However, when they are hired to evaluate operations and recommend changes based on what they perceive to be the desires of the hiring group, "the consultant becomes a collaborator and a patsy for unpopular decisions the group is planning to make." He believes the "cultural change" Mayor Sibold spoke of last week has been occurring for several years, especially during the last two years of the Covid pandemic, with people living in a constant state of fear and uncertainty. He said he has heard allegations about actions within local government, and he is concerned because people cannot come to City Hall and resolve those issues face-to-face as City Hall has been locked down for almost two years for any purpose "other than taking citizens' money." Mr. Wickline stated, "Our City Hall was not built to be a sanctuary to keep citizens from public servants, but rather a place to where we can meet with them if we have business or an issue that needed to be addressed. It is 'way past time we reopen up our City Hall.'" Mr. Wickline also called for transparency in government and for officials to stop giving excuses and "pull back the veil of secrecy." He added that employees in the Treasurer's and Commissioner of Revenue's offices shouldn't be interrupted by people trying to reach employees on the second floor. The audience applauded him.

The next speaker was Susan Crowder, 1310 W. Jackson Street, who asked several questions concerning last week's meeting, and Mayor Sibold, although emphasizing that this is for Citizen Comments, not questions, but he would try to answer her questions.

1. Will taxpayers pay for the consultant to be hired? The Mayor said yes, that's how everything is paid for.
2. Will management hire the consultant? Mayor Sibold said that the five Councilmen will hire that person.
3. How much will the consultant cost? How will this be paid for? No proposals have been received yet, Mayor Sibold said, so he has no idea of the cost. Council will be responsible to look for other sources if the cost is prohibitive. Ms. Onaitis said there is an available allocation of funds in Human Resources for training and learning resources.
4. How may citizens and previous employees speak to the consultant? The Mayor said the process will go from talking to Council, filter down through the ranks, and no employee needs fear repercussion for speaking up. He referenced former Building Official Jay Crowder's interview on the *Alleghany Journal*, which led to a meeting with a Closed Session, and this plan for a consulting firm was a result of allegations made.
5. Why not have a panel of non-management employees and citizens choose the consultant? Mayor Sibold said this was an option to be considered.

Jay Crowder, 1310 W. Jackson Street, said he'd been hearing rumors lately that Council had considered giving a buy-out to the City Manager, and his opinion was that the cash amount would cost Council less than paying for a consulting firm.

Janet Kidd of 901 N. Beverly Street spoke last, stating she and Mayor Sibold met by chance yesterday and she wasn't sure about the specific guidelines he mentioned that would need to be followed to keep the "official." However, she reminded the Mayor that while he seemed unaware of how many employees had quit, she knew that quite a few had quit. She remarked that she was proud of the number in the audience, even though "a controversy" had brought them out. Later during the meeting Mrs. Kidd also reminded Council of past issues with her son at his store on Maple Avenue and a house on Fudge Street that she and her husband had owned.

Councilman Carson thanked the audience for coming, stated he needed the support and it was hard to make decisions for Covington when it seemed like nobody cared what happened.

CORRECTION AND APPROVAL OF MINUTES

On a motion by Vice Mayor Crosier, seconded by Mr. Tucker, Council consented to approve the following minutes as presented: the Work Session on January 4, 2022; the Regular Meeting on January 11, 2022; and the Called Meeting on January 20, 2022.

REPORT OF THE CITY MANAGER

Ms. Onaitis reported that "great progress" had been made in a meeting she had with Chief Andrew Baker, Safety Director Chris Smith, and Financial Director David Bryant concerning the purchase of self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA) for the Covington Fire Department. They identified an existing state contract to tag on, and with the approval of City Attorney Mark Popovich, registered with the vendor. They are determining how many SCBAs can be purchased with the \$175,000 grant and how much additional funding will be needed in the Fiscal Year 2023 budget. She emphasized this is a budget priority and said she instructed Chief Baker to program an additional ten percent above that to ensure price increases are covered. She cautioned that several other "big ticket items" will be coming also, as a recent meeting with the School Consolidation Budget Committee indicated.

A press release on the Historical Main Street Revitalization Project was released yesterday, and the Small Business Coordinator position will be advertised tomorrow. This person will assist existing businesses in growth and help nurture new businesses. A quote and more solidified commitment from the developer for Project Sparkle at 410 W. Main Street were received also.

Tree clearing began this week at the site-ready pad in the Allegheny Commerce Park. She stated that project appears to be on schedule and on track.

UNFINISHED/OLD BUSINESS

On a motion from Mr. Crosier, seconded by Mr. Tucker, Council voted unanimously to approve R-22-04, an Appropriations Resolution for a Parks and Recreation Litter Grant in the amount of \$2,159.32, with no local match. The vote showed Mayor Sibold: For; Vice Mayor Crosier: For; Mr. Carson: For; Mr. Hunter: For; and Mr. Tucker: For.

NEW BUSINESS

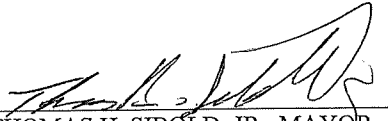
Vice Mayor Crosier again thanked people for coming, "even if you're yelling at me."

Mayor Sibold asked Ms. Onaitis for clarification about the SCBA, ascertaining that additional funding was planned when the new fiscal year begins on July 1. He also asked if the grant coordinator that will be paid by the American Recovery Plan Act (ARPA) funds, and she assented. ARPA funds will be budgeted for four years, and at the end of that time, the position will be eliminated or the Small Business Coordinator will be responsible for finding other grant funds to pay for the position. The City is not creating a new position.

Next he asked her to explain how ARPA money will also be used for childcare to help parents maintain jobs and needed housing, particularly with the Rivermont Redevelopment Project. Landmark Development employees have submitted their Request for Proposals to receive five

fixed-income senior housing vouchers, which will remain with the units, not people renting the units. If awarded, these vouchers should help ensure that Landmark will be awarded the Virginia Housing grant for \$10,000,000 for tax credits. The structures will contain 47 multi-family units with one, two, or three bedrooms, ADA accessible units, and market rates will apply. Mayor Sibold complimented Mr. Carson's efforts in securing the vouchers that will hopefully make this project work. Ms. Onaitis also complimented Police Detective Baker, who also serves on the Housing Authority, in securing the vouchers.

With no further business to come before Council, the meeting was adjourned on a motion from Vice Mayor Crosier and seconded by Mr. Tucker.


THOMAS H. SIBOLD, JR., MAYOR
PRESIDENT OF THE CITY COUNCIL AND
SUCH, EX-OFFICIO OFFICER OF THE CITY OF
COVINGTON, VIRGINIA

ATTEST:


REBECCA W. SCOTT
CITY CLERK