

STATE OF WEST VIRGINIA, COUNTY OF UPSHUR, CITY OF BUCKHANNON, TO WIT:

A Special Meeting of the City Council of Buckhannon was held on Monday, July 8, 2021, at 9:00am in City Hall. The following were in attendance (GTM – GoToMeeting):

Mayor	Robbie Skinner	Present
City Recorder	Randy Sanders	Present
Council Member	Mary Albaugh	Present
Council Member	Pam Bucklew	Present
Council Member	Jack Reger	Present
Council Member	CJ Rylands	Present
Council Member	David Thomas	Present
Assistant Recorder & Director of Finance	Amberle Jenkins	Present
City Attorney	Tom O'Neill	Present
BFD	Chief JB Kimble	Present
BFD	Captain Joey Baxa	Present
The Record Delta Newspaper	Macie Queen	Present
MyBuckhannon.com	Katie Kuba	Present

Guests: Scott Preston, Renee Preston; Derek Long, Tanner Smith, Linn Baxa, Joey Baxa; Jasmin Adous, WDTV; Robyn Simons.

To Participate in a City Council meeting participants were invited to contact us at 304-472-1651 for the GoToMeeting link/access.

***Special Meeting of City Council of Buckhannon – 9:00a.m. in Council Chambers
Meeting Agenda for Monday, July 8, 2021***

A. Call to Order

- A.1 Moment of Silence
- A.2 Pledge to the Flag of the United States of America

B. Strategic Issues for Discussion and/or Vote

- B.1 Continued Discussion Hiring of Three (3) Fire Fighters

C. Comments and Announcements

- C.1 Mary Albaugh
- C.2 Pamela Bucklew
- C.3 C J Rylands
- C.4 David Thomas
- C.5 Jack Reger
- C.6 Randall Sanders

D. Mayor's Comments and Announcements

E. Adjournment

Posted 07/06/2021

A. Call to Order - Mayor Robbie Skinner called the meeting to order.

A.1 Moment of Silence – Mayor Skinner asked all present to join him in a Moment of Silence.

A.2 Pledge to the Flag of the United States of America - The Pledge was led by Mayor Skinner.

B. Strategic Issues for Discussion and/or Vote

B.1 Continued Discussion Hiring of Three (3) Fire Fighters – Mayor Skinner opened the meeting with a statement regarding the need to hire three additional Fire Fighters that was first brought up during the budget hearings.

Mayor Skinner's statement - *Since February, this is the 9th time this topic [of hiring three additional firefighters] has been discussed here in Council Chambers in a public setting. This does not include fire accreditation meetings, or individual/one-on-one conversations had between Council members and firefighters. Eight times, this has been officially placed on agendas, and nine times has it been discussed. All of those have been in public forums. Any notion otherwise, is inaccurate.*

Since this topic has been first introduced [in February], we, as a Council, have allocated funding for, or have discussed allocating funding for the following:

- *To complete the physical structure of the Colonial Theater*

- Hire a person to manage/operate the Theater
- Purchase the Knights of Pythias property across the street (and tearing the house down)
- Demolition/reconstruction of the Madison Street property; facilitating community input about what the community might want to see there

...all of this without once ever mentioning what our “permanent” or “dedicated” funding source would be to maintain these expenditures long-term. None of these investments will be one-time hits. Anything we invest in that is a tangible asset also requires funding for upkeep and maintenance.

Months ago, the City Council asked the fire department to provide a “needs analysis” to justify their request to add three firefighters. Chief Kimble and Captain Baxa provided, in detail, a report showing the difference in rapid response times aligned with their ongoing accreditation process and industry best practices – all for the goal to save more lives and property.

City Council then asked for a wage breakdown and, most importantly, the effect adding three firefighters would have on the department’s overall over-time calculation. Additionally, the council wanted to see if adding the three firefighters would help reduce overtime expenditures in any way. Once again, Chief Kimble and Captain Baxa returned to Council with a detailed breakdown and explanation. For the record, in response to another discussion, all of the paid staff support being placed under FLSA, with some modification to base pay, to help the City reduce overtime within the department.

City Council also asked if “SAFER” Grant funding was available to help us hire the three firefighters. Unfortunately, the grant funding could not be used for additional staffing, but instead, could only aid in bringing back laid off staff, or to support current staff – neither of which we qualify for.

During this same time period, this Council has heard from several members of the paid staff, members of the volunteer department leadership, and members of other volunteer departments over the past few months – all who see the value and the necessity for the City to hire three additional members. At current staffing levels, a tremendous amount of strain is placed on our volunteers, of which their numbers have decreased. There was a time when the Buckhannon Fire Department had 34 volunteers. Today, we have 14, but the number of calls for service have increased.

Public safety is a baseline necessity for cities to adequately staff and equip. We are fortunate to live in a safe, affordable community where little activity takes place, and THAT is a good thing. Our law enforcement and firefighter professionals do not run calls every shift, but we’re not making the investment into public safety for past events. We’re making public safety investments of what COULD happen, and although this is a small town, we are not without a chance of a major event. Unfortunately, it’s not “if” it’s “when” and I want us to be prepared. Investing in public safety is an insurance policy for the City – and our citizens deserve the best!

We have a moral responsibility as decision makers for our community to make sure when our citizens call 911, we have well-staffed, and well-equipped professionals ready to answer that call.

As for funding, our 1% sales tax application clearly states that we will invest funds earned to invest in staffing and equipment for our fire and police departments. That application was submitted and approved in-lieu of a first-due fire fee or increasing fees within the city limits. From that standpoint alone, we should agree to hiring the three additional firefighters. County residents are already helping to pay for the service by shopping, eating, and entertaining in the City of Buckhannon.

A few months ago, when we were drafting our 2021-2022 budget, we estimated that we would have a balance on hand to begin the new year at approximately \$700,000. At our July 1 Council meeting, just last week, we learned that our balance on hand was actually \$1,300,000. Learning this, it is my opinion that it is irresponsible of us NOT to invest \$200,000 of the \$1,300,000 to add fire department staffing. Years ago, when the City of Buckhannon agreed to support a paid fire department, we continued that responsibility to make sure we are adequately staffing and equipping it for our future. I also find it inappropriate to impose additional charges to our citizens – either within or outside of City limits – when we are clearly proving that we have the funds to be able to support the fire department’s request.

The Mayor then read excerpts from the city’s 1% sales tax application and ended with the following

- As with everything in life, there are wants and there are needs, and public safety is most certainly a need. I am asking the City Council to approve the request to add three additional firefighters today.

Council Member Pamela Bucklew supported the Mayor's position and pledged her support for hiring the three (3) Fire Fighters.

Council Member Jack Reger supported hiring the three (3) Fire Fighters and provided several reasons as to why we should act now in supporting the first responders keeping the financial aspects in mind. He felt we are in a strong financial position and the need for the additional Fire Fighters has been identified.

Council Member Mary Albaugh had a question concerning the number of calls we make in the county and what type of support we are getting or should be getting from the county. She feels that this should be explored more in depth.

Council Member CJ Rylands echoed the need for a study of the services provided to the county versus the financial support provided from the county. He feels that a review of a First Due Fire Fee is in order. He went on to explore various examples of staffing costs and shift scheduling to avoid excessive overtime costs with input from Fire Chief JB Kimble. He also had questions on using the FLSA pay system and he had questions regarding various wage comparisons throughout departments of the city. He then led a discussion on the city implementing a First Due Fire Fee and the effect it would have on the county and the funds that it would raise to cover the cost of the three (3) Fire Fighters. He concluded by stating he supported hiring the three (3) Fire Fighters with the implementation of the First Due Fire Fee with those residents outside the city paying 1 1/2 times that of the city residents; no change to what the city residents are paying now and allocate funds to a training center for all county fire departments to benefit from.

Council Member Albaugh asked Chief Kimble if he supported a Fire Fighter Training Center and the Chief explained that he did and provided the reasons why.

Council Member Dave Thomas stated that he would be in favor of funding the salary of the three (3) new Fire Fighters from the 1% sales tax while we work to implement a First Due Fire Fee. He also felt that the county and the county fire board has dropped the ball by not raising the fire fees over the past several years. He also suggested that we need to focus on what we intend to do with the proceeds from the 1% sales tax long term as well.

A further discussion on the First Due Fire Fee took place with input from City Attorney Tom O'Neill, Council Members Rylands, Thomas, and (Recorder) Sanders.

Recorder Sanders stated that while the First Due Fire Fee had to remain on the table, he was not going to allow it to be a reason the approval of hiring the three (3) new Fire Fighters would not be approved. He spoke on the quality of the Fire Department including the high number of certified trainers. He also expressed optimism in being able to work with the Upshur County Commission and the Upshur County Fire Board in coming up with solutions to the concerns brought up today but reminded all that we have to be proactive in doing so; and, he invited the media to track our progress. He stressed the importance of making decisions based on what's best for our citizens using what is available to us today and what strategies we can work towards in the future.

The Mayor asked if anyone else in Chambers had comments and he first recognized Captain Joey Baxa. Captain Baxa stressed that the training facility will take some time to properly plan and build. He also explained the FLSA funding process a little more effectively.

The Mayor recognized Robyn Simons who supported the City using the funds from the sales tax as residents of the county were already contributing to it by shopping in Buckhannon and she felt should the city institute a First Due Fire Fee it would be a form of double taxation.

Assistant Recorder & Director of Finance Amby Jenkins made the point that while many people keep referencing the funding that would be coming from the sales tax, that is a bit incorrect as we develop general fund budgets knowing that a part of the general fund will come from the 1% sales tax revenue. She also expressed personal concerns and hopes that all parties, including the county commission, county fire board and other county fire departments agree to work together. She knows that we can handle the funding this year and probably next year but eventually we will need

to look at implementing the First Due Fire Fee as a revenue source.

The Mayor recognized Scott Preston who provided his background as a former council member, volunteer firefighter, and now a county school bus driver. He is familiar with the many grants that are available now but will go away eventually. He is in favor of a solid source of income, such as a First Due Fire Fee, be implemented along with the hiring of the new Firefighters.

Motion to hire Three (3) Fire Fighters was made by Bucklew/Reger. Discussion on whether we were going to include a First Due Fire Fee as a part of the action caused an additional dialogue on the nature of the motion. The Mayor then called for the vote, which was followed by a roll call vote:

Thomas - No	Rylands - No
Albaugh - No	Bucklew - Yes
Sanders - Yes	Skinner - Yes
Reger - Yes	

Motion carried.

Sanders publicly invited the County Commissioners and the County Fire Board to meet with the City Council soon to discuss the First Due Fire Fee. The Mayor encouraged us to work on the First Due Fire Fee issue so that we can have it on the agenda by the first of the year.

C. Comments and Announcements - Nothing further

- C.1 Mary Albaugh
- C.2 Pamela Bucklew
- C.3 C J Rylands
- C.4 David Thomas
- C.5 Jack Reger
- C.6 Randall Sanders

D. Mayor's Comments and Announcements - Nothing further

E. Adjournment

Motion to adjourn the meeting at 10:25 a.m. was made by Sanders/Rylands. Motion carried.

Mayor Robert N. Skinner III _____

City Recorder Randall H. Sanders _____