

**City-County Special Joint Session
March 29, 2021**

The City Council of the City of Elizabeth City and the Pasquotank County Board of Commissioners met in special joint session on Monday, March 29, 2021 in the BLET Room at the College of the Albemarle, located at 1208 North Road Street, Elizabeth City, NC.

MEMBERS PRESENT: Mayor Bettie Parker
CITY Mayor Pro Tem Johnnie Walton
Councilman Billy Caudle
Councilman Darius Horton
Councilman Chris Ruffieux

MEMBERS ABSENT: Councilman Michael Brooks
CITY Councilman Gabriel Adkins
Councilwoman Jeannie Young
Councilman Kem Spence

MEMBERS PRESENT: Chairman Lloyd Griffin, III
COUNTY Vice-Chairman Charles Jordan
Commissioner William Sterritt
Commissioner Cecil Perry
Commissioner Barry Overman
Commissioner Sean Lavin

MEMBERS ABSENT: NONE
COUNTY

OTHERS PRESENT: City Manager Montre' Freeman
Assistant City Manager Angela Cole
County Attorney Mike Cox
County Manager Sparty Hammett
County Clerk Lynn Scott
City Clerk April Onley

The special joint City-County Council regular session was called to order by County Chairman Lloyd Griffin and Mayor Bettie Parker at 5:30 p.m. They welcomed everyone to the meeting and asked that all attendees give pause for a moment of silent reflection. Commissioner Barry Overman led everyone in the Pledge of Allegiance.

1. Statement from Pasquotank County Board of Commissioners Chairman Lloyd Griffin III:

Chairman Griffin thanked everyone for attending the meeting. He said he believed joint meetings were important for communication between the two governing bodies. He said he was happy that the County could host this evening, and that the economy in the region was finally starting to improve.

2. Statement from City of Elizabeth City Mayor Bettie J. Parker:

Mayor Parker said she was glad the County and City could join together to discuss things and be of one accord. She thanked the County for hosting the meeting and said she was excited to hear the presentations planned for the evening.

3. Recognition of Women's History Month – Mayor Bettie Parker:

Mr. Freeman asked that Mayor Pro Tem Johnnie Walton delivered a proclamation to Mayor Bettie Parker on behalf of Women's History Month. Mayor Pro Tem Walton explained that one of the City's goals this year is to give recognition where it's due. He said he thought it would help the whole community if we participated in more acts of recognition. He read the prepared proclamation into the record and delivered it to Mayor Parker on behalf of her and all women for whom the month is dedicated.

PROCLAMATION
In Recognition of Women's History Month

March 2021

WHEREAS, Women’s History Month was first recognized in 1987 by Congress and enacted by the President after years of lobbying by the National Women’s History Project; and

WHEREAS, throughout our nation’s history, women have been pioneers in all areas of society, from the arts and sciences, to medicine and public service; and

WHEREAS, women have significantly influenced public policy and contributed to the building of viable institutions and organizations that continue to support our communities today; and

WHEREAS, the knowledge, skills, and abilities of women contribute to a more robust workforce and a more prosperous economy; and

WHEREAS, from championing basic human rights to ensuring access and equal opportunity for all Americans, women have led the way in establishing a strong and more democratic country; and

WHEREAS, we remember the great American women who fought for suffrage and advanced our democracy and the extension of the centennial through 2021 groups, individuals, and institutions to continue the celebrations that were cut short due to the COVID-19 pandemic; and

WHEREAS, 2021 was ushered in with Kamala Harris taking office as the first female Vice President of the United States; and

WHEREAS, American women have been leaders, not only in securing their own rights of suffrage and equal opportunity, but also in the abolitionist movement, emancipation movement, industrial labor movement, civil rights movement, peace movement, and more that aim to create a fair and just society for all; and

WHEREAS, in that very spirit of leadership, the City of Elizabeth City is proud to recognize Mayor Bettie J. Parker as the first female mayor of our City, and we take great pleasure in the knowledge that she serves as a beacon and trailblazer for many women to come; and

WHEREAS, Mayor Parker’s virtuous spirit and dedication have emblazoned her as a shining example of what it is to be not just a woman, but an extraordinary woman.

NOW THEREFORE, I, Mayor Pro Tem Johnnie Walton, do hereby proclaim the month of March 2021 as Women’s History Month in Elizabeth City, and we ask everyone to take special notice and consideration of the remarkable women surrounding us, and issue a particularly gracious “thank you” to Mayor Bettie Parker for her tireless efforts in leading us to greatness.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand and have caused the Seal of the City of Elizabeth City to be affixed this 29th of March 2021.

Johnnie B. Walton
Mayor Pro Tem

April D. Onley, NCCMC
City Clerk

4. Introduction of Emergency Management Director – Brian Parnell:

Brian Parnell was introduced to those present by County Manager Sparty Hammett. Mr. Hammett explained that Brian Parnell replaced Christy Saunders, who retired after more than 20 years in the role. As the only emergency management coordinator responsible for two counties. Mr. Parnell has been immediately able to step into the role and meet the needs of the position. Mr. Parnell greeted the boards and said he was looking forward to working with everyone as we continue to build our relationship.

5. Presentation – College of the Albemarle – Dr. Jack Bagwell :

Dr. Bagwell welcomed everyone to COA's campus. He said when COA was established, they were set as a regional college, serving seven counties, which was by far the largest service area. COA is the first comprehensive community college in North Carolina. He noted that unfortunately, many of their celebrations had been derailed by COVID, but their importance was still recognized. COA continues to serve and offer connections long past when someone is on campus – they're a family. He said they have recently been recognized as the number one nursing program in the area. Additionally, there's a new CDL program that started during COVID on the Chowan campus. Dr. Bagwell said COA is about the students, but also about impacting the quality of life for all involved. They value integrity, honesty, trust, people, diversity, equity, inclusion, community, relation and service to others, and partnerships. There will be a strategic plan coming that will develop from some of those guiding thoughts. In addition, they are looking at organizing spaces in order to offer more trade programs. COA is seeking more focus on adult learners, retraining, and more night and evening programs. They understand that we need short-term initiatives to help people get back to work. There will also be a program for dental assisting and continuing education. Dr. Bagwell noted that they've done pretty well during COVID, all told. About halfway to their \$2-plus million goal of raising money for new facilities. They do expect to have a new building ready for Fall 2021 in Currituck, ranging at about 18,000 feet, and one of about 36,000 square feet in Dare in Spring 2022.

6. COVID-19 Update – Albemarle Regional Health Services – Battle Betts

Director Betts said it had been over a year since the first COVID discussions. He thanked all partners and volunteers who made the pandemic survivable particularly Emergency Management, law enforcement, hospital partners, and the National Guard. The first two sites administering the vaccine in our area had National Guard help with organization, He said that ECSU offered the use of an ultra-cool storage freezer, which was required to store the vaccine. Many civic organizations offered assistance where they could, including Albemarle Commission and Meals on Wheels, who use GIS-mapped routes to take vaccines to those who are home-bound. On March 15th, ARHS stood down internal processes to be at a better readiness state for the public. The vaccine is serving everyone 18 and over in eight counties. Our region has stayed well ahead of the Governor's planned phases, which were designed to make sure the healthcare systems didn't get overrun. Pasquotank was consistently in the top 5 for vaccine percentage, and in the top 20 in Northeastern NC. As of last Friday, 40% of our population has received one dose, and 1/3 have been completed vaccinated. He stated that COA nursing students have been an immense help in giving vaccinations and getting hands-on experience. The implied immunity is about 18-20%; we want to be about 60-70% for herd immunity. As of today, our COVID cases in Pasquotank are going in the right direction, but this could still change. On April 1st, we will go to by-appointment only for first doses. Second doses will still be administered in mass settings, but will hopefully appointment-based by the end of April. We should have some opportunity to get some of the Johnson and Johnson vaccine in the weeks to come, as we have submitted requests. We hope to have doses of it within the next two weeks, but maybe in one week if we're lucky – it only requires one dose. Director Betts stated that this would be used to target our homeless population, jail population and migrant workers. Lots of outreach has been done, and transportation has been provided for those without it. We are really trying to reduce barriers if possible.

Mayor Parker said it's important that people remember that they must still be vigilant even if they have been vaccinated. She asked Director Betts if he knew if there was a time for "normalcy." He said "normal" will be a new normal. History repeats itself. We have seen historically low flu numbers because we're being careful with social distancing and masking. Hopefully we keep those up with increased emphasis. People should still stay home when they're sick. Even when we get to 60%, good infection control is always a good idea because you're just an eyelash away from the next variant and we need raised awareness.

Commissioner Lavin thanked Director Betts for his efforts and said he'd heard nothing but positive things about how well the vaccines were getting out to people. He said he agreed that

it was important to be prepared for the “next” thing and we need to be repositioned for the things we’ve pushed off to the back.

Director Betts said there have been unintentional side effects that will have to be dealt with nationwide, which will be one of the next public health challenges. Longitudinally, we’ll still be looking at this 10 years down the road.

County Manager Hammett praised the vaccine clinics, and Battle Betts and his teams for all they had done.

7. Presentation – Northeastern Workforce Development Board (Albemarle Commission (Director David Whitmer):

Director Whitmer explained what workforce development boards are, what they do, and their impact on communities. He said workforce development boards are groups of community leaders who are authorized through WIOA federal legislation and the oversight of the one-stop system (NCWORKS career centers). The core purpose is to resolve issues and challenges to meet workforce needs. There are 23 boards in NC. The local board in Elizabeth City is the largest, which serves a 10-county region. Largest presence in EC with largest center – Jordan Plaza. He spoke about the 2019 in partnership with COA, in which they opened a career development center on COA’s campus. NCworks staff has been working with COA staff providing employment and training service to COA students and the public in general. They’ve also been working with ECSU and will soon have a presence on their campus as well. Director Whitmer explained that there are two customers in NCworks – job seekers and employers. Some people who come in do not know what they want to do for a career, so staff can help identify their skills and match them to a career. Professional advisors can help with resumes and interview skills. Some people already have everything they need and just need help with job search assistance, which staff can help with too. NCworks can help pay for tuition, books and even supplies to help earn in-demand degrees, certificates, diplomas, and also help pay for childcare and transportation expenses. They also provide customized recruitment and job fairs, as well as two grant programs, including on-the-job training. They can help pay the salary for up to six months for an employee. He briefly mentioned another grant program that helps to bring a trainer for employees or send employees for training. They can also provide paid work experience for youth, and encourage them to go back to school for their diploma or GED. He spoke about the importance of financial literacy education and the annual “real world” event. He said that 2020 was challenging, but they were still able to provide services. They worked with 7,000 job seekers, and provided \$170,000 in scholarships. They provided \$200,000 to participants to help with childcare, transportation, supplies; \$40,000 in emergency grants for finish line in partnership with COA (college students); \$42,000 in wages to youth while learning in work experience program; and \$129,000 in employee training grants.

Mayor Pro Tem Walton said this seemed like a very important program. He asked about the success rate per individual. Director Whitmer said each program was measured on various terms, and all were different, but in general the success rate was about 75%. Three out of four participants obtain and retain employment. Mayor Pro Tem Walton asked about Pasquotank County in particular. Director Whitmer said Pasquotank is where they do the majority of their work.

Commissioner Lavin said they all did a great job and had touched so many lives with their work and helping break down barriers.

Mayor Pro Tem Walton asked what kind of advertisements they had for their programming. Director Whitmer said NcWorks didn’t have statewide marketing, but it was being encouraged by the boards. ECSU’s radio station advertised them each month. They were also announced during community events, but there haven’t been many of those right now. He noted that staff do go to high schools and bring materials for the students there. He pointed out that there are many restrictions on what can and cannot be done with federal funds. For example, they can’t do marketing of any kind.

Chairman Griffin noted that they were located where the old employment security commission was, and that they’d been revamped and broadened in many ways. The state recognized there needed to be more done for the cause, so they switched over four or five years ago. He said he was on the board for about 16 years.

8. Tourism Annual Report – Visit Elizabeth City Executive Director – Corrina Ruffieux

Director Ruffieux greeted the boards and explained that she would be presenting the 2020 annual report. She said that Visit EC is a destination marketing organization (DMO). Their job is to tell story of Elizabeth City and the County as far and wide as possible. When they do a good job, more people want to come visit. The economic impact of visitors is calculated for all 50 states and every county within each state. She noted that the 2020 numbers would not be in until September or so. In 2019, our community saw about \$70 million from tourism. She said amongst our 2020 accolades, Forbes said we are one of five idyllic American small towns to visit this year and BuzzFeed said we're a "cool town." We did not get to all of the 2020 marketing priorities because of COVID. There was no advertising from mid-March through the end of August due to pandemic. As this is funded by occupancy tax, the budget significantly dropped. However, grants and opportunities still came to pass that allowed for unique programs even when the budget was declining. They managed to produce a detailed visitor's guide for the first time ever (20,000 copies) OBX, Tidewater, NC.

She explained that website analytics tell us how people go to the website and where they're from so we know who to talk to in the future. The top five pages visited, not including homepage, were the event calendar- people want things to do; shop and dine pass; Harbor Cam; Christmas campaign; and travel advisory page, which was all about COVID. Web traffic declined hugely because of the lack of ads. She noted that the shop and dine pass was a digital pass that was created with grant money; it encouraged people to shop and dine locally at Christmas. It launched November 23rd, and is clearly a program that needs to be brought back due to popularity. She mentioned that there's a new social media team in place this year. Referrals are up 90%. She pointed out that public relations are not paid ads – if we had to place ads where we got our stories, it would have cost us over \$8 million. Community engagement and partner education is huge, and 2019 was a record breaking year. Occupancy tax of 6% goes to them. Overall, our total occupancy declined 21%, but compared to bigger cities, we did okay, although not as good as OBX, but they are almost 100% vacation rentals. Our AirBNB and Bed and Breakfasts stays increased almost 24%, so we need to try to grow that avenue. She stated that we are looking for a permanent public relations agency to get more stories out there. For the time being, we want to continue to leverage outdoor and socially distanced activities.

Director Ruffieux mentioned that wayfinding had appeared in The Daily Advance. They had received 10 different proposals for the project, and unanimously picked Signs Etc. out of Charlotte to install and manufacture the signs. So far, they were about \$25,000 under the planned budget. She said the company came highly recommended and the signs were coming with a 10-year warranty they should be installed at the end of August.

Lastly; she said there were two days left to register for virtual Coast Guard half marathon and 5K, which had proven extremely successful. Next year's run will be in-person.

9. Walk EC Update – Walks and Biking Trails Discussion

City Manager Freeman introduced Shom Tiwari, the City's LEAD fellow. Shom gave the background on Walk EC, which will be a guiding document that will identify critical needs to improve walkability in our community. A masterplan will help us identify funding opportunities to build out sidewalks, walkways, etc. Similar ones have been created by municipalities across our state. This project is being led by the Kimley Horn engineering firm. There has been a great deal of community input thanks to a steering committee, who have given recommendations for things to build in the area and helped with public engagement. He explained that the steering committee has 17 members with a variety of members and backgrounds. They meet regularly to drive vision and goals of the pedestrian plan. The existing conditions report is where engineers began. They looked at how people commute in our community and how that might need to change. They also conducted an equity analysis, including where people without cars live and how they have to go about getting where they need to go. They looked at physical conditions such as higher speeds of vehicles and areas prone to flooding where a path might not be able to be build. Where are successful corridors already built and how can they be expanded? They also reviewed previously plans, including the County's plan from 2016. Engineers developed proposed plans spread out across the city, which might connect colleges to downtown, to the Coast Guard base, to grocery stores, etc. Then prioritization will need to take place. Public engagement is a key aspect of the process. So far, they have partnered with more than 40 organizations to get the word out and encourage feedback. Nearly 600 people have provided feedback across two surveys. This process started in the Fall of 2019, and will be coming to a close soon. Prioritizing what to build first comes next, followed by NCDOT

review, and then submission to the City Council for feedback. Lastly, they will need to seek funding from City's budget and/or solicit grants.

Chairman Griffin said Shom should speak with Angela Welsh with RPO if he had not, as there was definitely funding available there.

City Manager Freeman said he really wanted to get the biking and walking trails up and running because he would love to see more races here. He said he would like an Iron Man competition in the future. Chairman Griffin said he believed the Coast Guard already has an Iron Man competition that they are holding here.

Chairman Griffin mentioned that he'd received a letter about moving I-87 forward and encouraging agencies to write letters of support. He said he'd be giving the letter to the Mayor, and that he would put it on the Count's agenda for discussion.

Mayor Parker said she felt it was a good meeting and we were attentive for a long period of time. Mayor Pro Tem Walton said wanted the topic of "recognition" to be added to the next joint agenda.

10. Adjournment:

There being no further business to be discussed, both Chairman Griffin and Mayor Parker adjourned the joint meeting at 6:59 p.m.

Bettie J. Parker
Mayor

April D. Onley, NCCMC
City Clerk

