

**City-County Special Joint Session
November 30, 2020**

The City Council of the City of Elizabeth City and the Pasquotank County Board of Commissioners met in special joint session on Monday, November 30, 2020 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 Councilman Kem Spence
Mayor Pro Tem Johnnie Walton
Councilman Billy Caudle
Councilman Darius Horton
Councilman Chris Ruffieux
Councilwoman Jeannie Young

MEMBERS ABSENT: Councilman Michael Brooks
CITY Councilman Gabriel Adkins

MEMBERS PRESENT: Chairman Jeff Dixon
COUNTY Vice-Chairman Lloyd Griffin, III
Commissioner Cecil Perry
Commissioner Frankie Meads
Commissioner Charles Jordan
Commissioner Barry Overman
Commissioner Sean Lavin

MEMBERS ABSENT: NONE
COUNTY

OTHERS PRESENT: Interim City Manager Eddie Buffaloe, Jr.
Parks and Recreation Director Sean Clark
Assistant City Manager Angela Cole
County Attorney Mike Cox
County Manager Sparty Hammett
County Clerk Lynn Scott
City Clerk April Onley
Deputy City Clerk Doris Walton
ECDI Director Debbie Malenfant

The special joint City-County Council regular session was called to order by Commissioner Jeff Dixon 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. Afterwards, Commissioner Dixon and Mayor Parker invited participants to join them in the Pledge of Allegiance.

1. Statement from Pasquotank County Board of Commissioners Chairman Jeff Dixon:

Chairman Dixon thanked the City and City Council for hosting the joint meeting. He said he believed the meetings were important for the communication between the two bodies.

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

Mayor Parker greeted everyone and said it was her pleasure to take part in the joint meeting. She said as community leaders, it was important that the two bodies met periodically to collaborate and coordinate for the betterment of the citizens. She commended Chairman Dixon for his many years of service to Pasquotank County and said “a good man will be lost” when he retired at the end of December.

3. Presentation / Discussion – Wayfinding Signs:

Mrs. Malenfant said wayfinding was an information system that helped to guide people. It was a carefully planned sequence that gave information to people on their way to a destination. It was a combination of designs and symbols. This project began in June of 2019, and was a joint project of former City Manager Rich Olson, Visit Elizabeth City, ECDI, and consultant Buzz Bizzell, along with others. Mrs. Malenfant said wayfinding was needed in the community for both visitors and residents. Mr. Bizzell gave a brief overview on the science of wayfinding. He said that it’s a comprehensive system of signs that link to tell a story about the city and the area

as a whole. It's directed toward visitors, but residents also get a tremendous amount of benefit as well. He identified the five main objectives of the wayfinding signs and the process. He said telling visitors where to stop (park) was even more important than telling them where to go because that helped drive business into the downtown area, which in turn promoted small business. With this process, there would be 44 signs branded with the reflective Elizabeth City / Pasquotank County message, which resulted in far cheaper "branding" than other forms of signage such as billboards. He noted that wayfinding had been a successful part of NCDOT for the last several years, so much so that NCDOT changed their manual to include it within.

Mr. Bizzell showed illustrations of the various types of signs that would be included in the wayfinding sign technical package, which would be distributed to NCDOT for approval. They must all be wind-load graded according to North Carolina specifications. He noted that the entire design process was finished and had been vetted by the entire group. The cost, based on a preliminary budget is \$249,000, including 18 downtown sides with double faced parks signs, and 27 boulevard signs. He said that figure was fairly close to what was estimated at the beginning of the process.

Ms. Malenfant said the next steps were support of the plan and financial commitment by the City of Elizabeth City and Pasquotank County, and then to submit the plan to NCDOT for review and approval, as most were on DOT right-of-ways. Also an RFP would need to be distributed to get firm pricing for production of the signs. During that period, the team would work on locating finding additional funding sourcing and grant dollars. Once approval from NCDOT, the process would take six months from start to finish. She said now was a great time to move forward with a program like this coming out of a pandemic when people begin traveling again. She said that although this was a team effort, Visit Elizabeth City had assumed most of the financial risk by paying solely for the consulting services.

Councilwoman Young asked how much was being asked for at this time. Ms. Malenfant said she would like to initially ask for up to \$75,000 from each board at this time.

Chairman Dixon said there was enough money in the County's Tourism Fund to pay for it without dipping into the General Fund. Commissioner Frankie Meads asked where it was possible to shop in Elizabeth City. Ms. Malenfant said downtown had over 30 shopping opportunities. Commissioner Meads said he did not believe the public knew that because he didn't and he'd been here for over 70 years. He added that Elizabeth City's downtown taxes were 22% higher than Virginia Beach's, so that's why he felt no shops wanted to establish in this area. Mrs. Ruffieux noted that a kiosk was in the works to be established to specifically indicate and identify local businesses so they survived and thrived.

Councilwoman Young said she was very excited about this prospect and believed it had the potential to greatly grow the City's downtown area. Councilman Caudle asked how far away the signage would be. Mrs. Ruffieux said it would be as far as out near Walmart on the bypass directing people into the town. There would not just be downtown signs, but also signs directing to ECSU, the Coast Guard Base, the hospital, and other important areas in Elizabeth City.

Mayor Parker asked if NCDOT would let us use their right-of-ways for the wayfinding signs. Mr. Bizzell replied that they would do it via an encroachment agreement however, there were sometimes places they wouldn't

Chairman Dixon asked his board to make a motion on the matter.

Motion was made by Commissioner Overman, seconded by Commissioner Jordan to move forward with the wayfinding signs by committing funding not to exceed \$75,000 in County Tourism funds. Motion carried unanimously.

Mayor Parker asked for the Council's pleasure. Mayor Pro Tem Walton said he wasn't comfortable moving forward at this time because two members were not present and he didn't believe a few weeks would make any kind of difference anyway.

Motion was made by Mayor Pro Tem Walton to add this topic to the next City Council agenda. Councilman Horton seconded the motion. Those voting in favor of the motion were: Spence, Walton, Caudle, Ruffieux, Young, and Horton. Against: None. Motion carried.

4. Presentation – ECCPS – Dr. Catherine Edmonds

Dr. Edmonds greeted the boards and gave an overview on the return-to-campus efforts of ECPPS. She said some students whose parents wanted face-to-face were able to return.

Middle schools returned November 2nd and high schools returned November 9th, albeit to very different conditions. Pre-K to 5th go to school four days a week with very limited capacity. Middle schoolers have cohort A and B, A goes Monday/Tuesday, B goes Thursday/Friday. High school goes in different blocks for one day each. She said all students and staff have been very compliant with safety protocols for COVID-19. She said 72-passenger buses can now only hold 12-14 students, although most parents are now bringing their children if they are attending face-to-face. Wednesdays are remote days across the district for all ages.

Dr. Edmonds said the region had met numerous times with the ABC Science Collaborative and various other health leaders in the area to make decisions. She noted that although there have been cases in the schools, there has not yet been secondary spread, which would be a deciding factor in shutting schools down again. The Lighting Our Way Forward and Strong Schools NC were the protocols being followed and implemented. Each school site had an individual Return to Campus Guide Book on how to enter the buildings, walk down hallways, visit the restrooms, et cetera. She gave an overview of the newest COVID dashboard, which was created in the interest of being transparent about COVID cases in particular schools. When a positive case is identified, a letter is sent to families in the school and a pop-up is put on the website for three days. The dashboard will tell you which schools have had positive cases and how many, whether or not there is secondary spread, if quarantining is necessary, and if the school may face a shut down.

Dr. Edmonds said at this time on average, about 50% of elementary school students were back on campus, although there were some outliers. Middle schools were around 30%. High schools have had between 15-22% return to campuses. She pointed out that extra effort was still being given to students who were participating remotely full-time as well, especially if they appeared to be struggling. Only one student has refused to wear a mask and had to be removed from face-to-face and returned to remote status. Meals are still being given to students participating remotely. 252,963 meals have been served from August – October. She ran through various technology that had been purchased and supplied to students in the area to make sure they had what they needed to succeed.

Commissioner Griffin asked if there were enough teachers when full-time face-to-face learning began again. Dr. Edmonds replied that they were seeing some issues, but they had been successful in contracting with some retired teachers. Some teachers with medical issues had to stay remote however, so they were working with what they had as best they could.

Mayor Parker said she was constantly asked why custodians did not receive hazard pay when maintenance workers received it. Dr. Edmonds said no hazard pay was paid to any of the school employees, aside from some of the child nutrition workers.

Mayor Pro Tem Walton commended Dr. Edmonds for all her hard work and told her to “hang in there.”

5. Presentation – Sentara – Dr. Phil Jackson

Dr. Jackson gave an update on COVID-19. He said that over 364,512 cases of COVID has been reported in North Carolina, and we had a daily positive percentage of 9.5%. Locally, SAMC had done over 181,000 tests this year, about 7% of which were positive. Approximately 70% of the people tested at the hospital are tested and released to quarantine on their own. About 30% end up in the hospital, although not too many have ended up on a ventilator. Dr. Jackson said the numbers he saw today for the virus at the hospital were the highest ever, so it was still dramatically on the rise. He said we need more resources and to expect more climbing. He assured everyone that the hospital is able to take care of the COVID patients when they are presented with them; we have no issues with PPE or lack of staffing or capacity. A plan is in place if things continue to worsen. We normally operate at 110 beds and can expand to 182 if necessary. Plans have been made to expand into COA if necessary. He said Sentara is working with the Department of Health to figure out how to get the vaccine, although there is not much information he can share at this time. He noted there is no definitive date for getting a vaccine; although the news has reported several dates, they are not correct.

Dr. Jackson briefly discussed the future SAMC hospital campus and its potential and expected offerings for the City. He explained that several years ago, the hospital bought quite a few acres of property on Halstead Boulevard Extended, which was where the new hospital would be located. He noted that importantly, this would include EMS.

Mayor Parker asked if the vaccines from Pfizer had to be kept exceptionally cold, as she had heard. Dr. Jackson said that was the case, and the hospital would be purchasing a special

refrigerator for the vaccine. Councilwoman Young asked how it would be determined who got the vaccine first. Dr. Jackson responded that healthcare workers would most likely receive it first, then those with very high risks or danger of contraction. He admitted he was not sure how it would be dispersed after that point.

6. Discussion – Transform Parks and Recreation Advisory Committee to a Parks and Recreation Board

County Manager Sparty Hammett gave the background on the Parks and Recreation Interlocal Agreement between the City and County from its inception in April of 2010. There had been four amendments to the Interlocal Agreement since that time. Mr. Hammett said his recommendation was that a fifth amendment to the Interlocal Agreement be entered into, which would change the makeup of the Parks and Recreation Board, as follows: Two County Commissioners, Two City Councilors, One County Citizen, One City Citizen and One Joint Member appointed by both City and County upon recommendation of the Parks and Rec Board. He said the function and authority of the Parks and Recreation Board should parallel the Pasquotank-Camden EMS Board. He added that he believed changing the composition would benefit both the City and County to provide for better unification and collaboration between the two bodies.

Mayor Pro Tem Walton said he supported unification and understood the County Manager's rationale. He said he felt having two members was important in the event that one was absent. Also it would move from an Advisory Board to a board with more authority.

Councilwoman Young asked Mr. Hammett what was needed of the City. He replied that this was discussed during the County's retreat and would require motions for approval or denial. Councilman Caudle said he thought some guidelines might need to change. He asked if the City and County Manager were ex-officios on the board previously. Mr. Hammett responded that they were not.

Mr. Hammett noted that not everything would move through the Parks and Recreation Board, but major projects and organizational changes would go to the board. He pointed out that the City and County were still under the fourth amendment for the next year, so there was no rush at this time. Mayor Pro Tem Walton said he wanted to move forward and get the board consistent and balanced because we had a lot of boards that were very unbalanced, such as the TDA board.

Motion was made by Mayor Pro Tem Walton, seconded by Councilwoman Jeannie Young to adopt the fifth amendment as presented. Those voting in favor of the motion were: Walton, Spence, Caudle, Young, Ruffieux, and Horton. Against: None. Motion carried.

7. Tourism Update

Mrs. Ruffieux began her update with the numbers we just received from 2019, which were record-breaking and included the most spending by visitors in our local businesses in Pasquotank County (nearly \$70 million). City and County collected over \$1.6 in taxes from visitors; every city and county household saves \$380 in taxes annually due to this. She noted that 2020 numbers, which would not be released until next fall would not look nearly this good due to the pandemic. She pointed out that although there were small spikes in travel over July 4th and the end of summer, it was still drastically reduced to the prior years. Losses of \$446 million a week were commonly recorded in travel dollars in North Carolina. She added that Pasquotank County has climbed out slightly better than some areas in that rely heavily on convention business, such as Raleigh and Charlotte, but it's still an extremely bleak situation.

Mrs. Ruffieux noted that tourism was fortunate to partner the City and County to receive over \$90,000 in Cares Act grant funding, which put them in partnership with a public relationship firm whose job it was to get Elizabeth City in places it has never been before (Fox News, Travel & Leisure, New York Post, MSNBC, Forbes). Additionally, an "Our E-City Shop and Dine Pass" had been created. Consumers can sign up, go into a shop, get a coupon, discount, and check-in. With 10 check-ins, the consumer receives a free t-shirt.

8. Upcoming Joint Meeting Dates

Potential upcoming joint meeting dates were discussed as being March 29th and November 29th 2021.

9. Adjournment:

There being no further business to be discussed, Mayor Parker and Chairman Dixon adjourned the meeting at 7:18 p.m.

Bettie J. Parker
Mayor

April D. Onley, NCCMC
City Clerk

