

City of Blue Ridge

480 West First Street • Blue Ridge, Georgia • (706) 632-2091

City of Blue Ridge
Townhall Meeting Minutes
City Hall
480 West First Street
February 5, 2020 at 9:00 a.m.

Present: Mayor Donna Whitener
Council Members Rhonda Haight and
Nathan Fitts
City Clerk Kelsey Ledford
Zoning, Land Development and Project Manager Jeff Stewart
DDA Chairman Cesar Martinez
DDA Board Members Brandon Lofton and Nichole Potzauf

1) Call Meeting to Order:

Mayor Donna Whitener opened the meeting by explaining that the City has had a parking problem for some time but is continuing to work towards finding a solution. She reassured that parking problems are good problems and that many towns only wished they had enough visitors to cause parking problems. She then introduced the attending members of the Council and Downtown Development Authority.

2) Parking:

DDA Chairman Cesar Martinez explained that parking has always been the number one complaint downtown. He stated that since serving on the DDA, he realizes that the City has not been ignoring this problem. He continued to explain that the Council and DDA are looking forward to receiving public input on the matter. He also explained that in the summer East and West Main Street parking is nearly impossible to find, as the spots are usually occupied first thing in the morning. He then pointed out that most of the parking is taken by train riders, who occupy the spaces for an entire day, resulting in little to no turnover of those valuable parking spaces. Mr. Martinez continued to point out that the second culprit of no turnover is that business owners and employees often occupy valuable parking downtown. He explained that the first goal is to find alternative parking for train riders as well as business owners and their employees. Resulting in the valuable parking being left for those investing in our City.

Mr. Martinez announced that the lot owned by Blue Ridge Hotel, recently became unavailable for parking since the hotel is now being constructed. He then proceeded to say that the lots owned by Green Rocks, LLC on Ada Street will be available for parking

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until the owner begins development. The City Council will consider approving an addendum to the agreement between Green Rocks, LLC and Executive Parking Systems at their next Council Meeting on February 11th. If approved this would allow the City to receive some of the monies collected on the lot.

The members discussed the new parking deck being constructed on the corner of Depot Street and West First Street. The developer is John Keifer, who also developed Blue Ridge Station as well as the North Georgia University campus including the surrounding property. The deck is on schedule to be completed by the end of the year. The City is hopeful that Mr. Keifer will work out an agreement with the DDA to allow employees to park in his deck at a discounted price or reserve a certain number of spaces for train riders.

Mayor Donna Whitener stated that some businesses that are closed on the weekends and churches have posted signage informing visitors that their lots are available to park in for free on weekends, while they are not operating for normal business. DDA Member Brandon Lofton explained that the DDA is working on many options for parking and each is situational.

Council Member Rhonda Haight announced that Matt and Jessica Draper are the new owners of the Blue Ridge Runners. The members discussed the runners being a key in the DDA moving everyone except for visitors off the main streets because the runners will be able to transport train riders and business owners/employees from their designated parking areas to downtown.

DDA Board Member Brandon Lofton stated that parking was the City's number one priority and he realizes that now that he is serving on a City board. He continued to urge public input on the matter. DDA Chairman Cesar Martinez mentioned that the train riders are who takes up most of the parking on the main streets and stated that the train is willing to work with the City on this issue.

The City then opened the floor for public comment.

Two representatives from Dr. Holds dentist office were present and spoke in favor of validated parking for their patients. DDA Chairman Cesar Martinez discussed parking being free to City residents and that one hour parking will only be \$1.00. After some further discussion of validated parking, one of Dr. Holds' representatives requested that the crosswalk at First Baptist Church, on East First Street be fixed as well as working with the high school tram in the summer.

The owner of Jumping Mouse Beads was present and mentioned that she hears most of the parking complaints coming from locals. She described her business as being unique since her customers normally spend all day downtown working on their crafts and eating lunch downtown during their break. She continued to caution the City about paid

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parking and being money hungry. Mayor Donna Whitener stated that there would be 15-30-minute free parking. She continued to state that there would be free parking located farther from downtown but the parking on main streets would be a higher fee for parking. DDA Chairman stated that the money collected from paid parking would fund managing the paid parking, sidewalks, public safety, crosswalks, etc. Council Member Nathan Fitts stated that the City would have to generate revenue in order to pay for the implementation. They continued to discuss beautifying pedestrian walkways, etc.

Chip Cipicic, a resident and member of the Chamber Marketing Team, stated that business is good. He continued to state that Merciers and downtown used to always compete for the number 1 attraction for visiting Blue Ridge, but downtown is now 40% higher than Merciers. He suggested that Blue Ridge double their projected parking plan and take everyone into account. He stated that people want to live, work and play in downtown and suggested adding bike paths.

Larry Minor, a resident, stated that beautification and streetscape was crucial. He mentioned that there are volunteers that would be able to paint murals downtown if the City was interested.

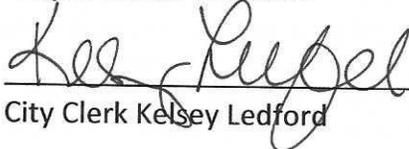
Zach Wojohn, with Executive Parking Systems, was present and stated that he loves Blue Ridge and has bought a home in which he plans to move into upon retirement. He explained how he got involved with the parking situation in Blue Ridge and just wants to help Blue Ridge. He explained that he has learned that the paid parking that is implemented will need to be user friendly and that he thought text to park would be the best solution for Blue Ridge. He continued to suggest that the City would benefit from city wide WIFI. He confirmed that his company has already conducted studies based on tags, time the vehicles have parked, etc. He also stated that there must be a way to fund the City's infrastructure and that paid parking is a good way to do that because it targets tourism and not the locals.

3) Adjournment:

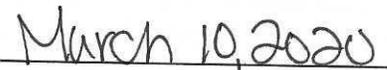
Mayor Donna Whitener adjourned the meeting.



Mayor Donna Whitener



City Clerk Kelsey Ledford



Approved