

# City of Blue Ridge

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

Town Hall Meeting

March 30, 2021

5:00 pm

480 West First Street

## Minutes

### Present:

Council members – Rhonda Haight, Nathan Fitts, Mike Panter  
Robbie Cornelius, and Harold Herndon  
Mayor – Donna Whitener (came in late)  
Zoning, Land Development, and Project Manager – Jeff Stewart  
City Clerk – Kelly Crowder

#### 1) Call Meeting to Order

Rhonda Haight – Mayor Pro Tem, called the meeting to order. (Mayor came in late)

#### 2) Prayer and Pledge of Allegiance

Mayor Pro Tem, Rhonda Haight led the Prayer and the Pledge.

#### 3) Zoning Changes

Council member Rhonda Haight opened about how the meeting will go. We will speak about topics important to the public.

The main concern was the heights of the buildings. Mrs. Haight discussed the CBD and showed pictures of a few businesses and their heights. The tallest building is the hotel, and it is 60ft. She went on to show a few businesses and their heights for reference. The City's recommendation was 45 ft, the planning committee came back with a recommendation of 35 ft. Zoning, Land Development, and Project Manager, Jeff Stewart then came up and discussed where the Central Business District (CBD) was located, and the different color-coded areas marked for residential and commercial. He also described the other proposed changes to the Zoning Ordinance. Council member Rhonda Haight then invited any of the public that wanted to speak to come up to the podium.

1. Sherri Somma - She wanted to voice her opinion of building height maximum of 35ft.
2. Kathy Thompson – She spoke about how she suggested years ago to cap the height at 3 stories. She is worried about the historical preservation. Council member Rhonda Haight and Nathan Fitts let Ms. Thompson know that there is a committee through the DDA that is working on the historical aspects.
3. Margaret Tilley Middleton – She is for the 35ft maximum height. She is in favor of preserving the historical buildings. Council member Nathan Fitts commented that also through the DDA they are working on having the Architectural design plan.

Council member Rhonda Haight had to ask Shelli WoJohn and Cesar Martinez in the

audience to please be quiet they were distracting everyone in the audience.

4. Sandra Daugherty – She is a county resident and says this affects her as well and she is in favor of the 35ft maximum building height.
5. Debi Holcomb – Spoke about how beautiful Blue Ridge used to be. She does not want it to change.

Council member Mike Panter wanted to mention the building maximum heights in our neighboring cities that the clerk put together. Ellijay is 35 ft, Dahlonega is 35 ft, Jasper's CBD is 40 ft. Council member Rhonda Haight spoke about being ashamed that there was not a maximum set before now. Council member Mike Panter mentioned that if you go back and look at the recommendation from Roy Parson, who ended up resigning after that, he recommended to go from 4 stories to 3 stories. Council member Rhonda Haight started to say that the council had voted, but Council member Mike Panter who said he had the minutes from that meeting and there was no vote, no one did anything. Council member Rhonda Haight said that in looking at the minutes from February of 2016 that Mayor Whitener suggested that the Ordinance allow up to 4 stories, she mentioned that the planning commission had recommended 3 stories, but the Council voted to leave it at 4 stories. Council member Mike Panter said he had a copy of the February 2016 minutes and the Mayor suggesting that was not in what he read, and he had a copy for anyone that wanted to see it.

6. Cesar Martinez – Discussed that it seems like every time he turns around something else is being built. He mentioned that what is originally proposed should be what stays. He said that the design committee will approve the designs. He wants to make sure everyone knows the DDA is working on that.

Council member Rhonda Haight wanted to also mention because people have been asking questions is the infrastructure. She mentioned that we do have upgrades taking place. Council members Rhonda Haight and Nathan Fitts are going to have a Workshop on April 12 that will be open to the public. They want to investigate the areas of our strengths and weaknesses. Mrs. Haight said there is a lot of misinformation about the infrastructure. They are constantly working on replacing old water lines. Mayor Donna Whitener wanted to make sure everyone was aware that the water and sewer plants were at about 40% capacity. Council member Mike Panter also wanted to remind everyone that we had just refinanced our bonds and save the city 2.5 million dollars over the next 30 years. This gives us extra money to work on the infrastructure as well.

#### 4) Short Term Rentals

Mayor Donna Whitener asked if anyone wanted to speak on Short Term Rental. Council member Rhonda Haight said basically the Council had agreed not to remove the Special Use permit,

but put in penalties for those that are not applying for that. Council member Mike Panter wanted to be clear on who the fine would go to. Council members Rhonda Haight and Nathan Fitts

said it would be a fine to the property owner. Council decided they should follow up with the Attorney the question, could the renters be forced to get out of the rental even in the middle of the night.

#### 5) Parking

Mayor Donna Whitener wanted to open this and discuss the issue of employee parking at the businesses. She wanted to make sure the Business owners know there are free places that their

employees can park. Council member Rhonda Haight wanted to talk about the strip of land that belongs to the City next to the Pack property that Tony Byrd is going to start getting cleaned up and get with Tri-State EMC to get some lighting. It will open up around 140 spaces to help with parking. Council member Rhonda Haight spoke about a letter that was written to the Chamber about how much the train customers take up all the parking. Mrs. Haight also mentioned that East and West main street were going to have to be paid parking, and this would help bring in additional money for infrastructure. Council member Mike Panter brought up that in 2019 the City signed a contract with Executive Parking to help with the parking. He mentioned the City is not in the Parking business. Council member Nathan Fitts stated that we needed to do what was best for the city and not pad the pockets of our friends and developers and parking developers, we need to look out for the City. Council member Mike Panter asked how are we padding pockets when they are doing their job? Council member Rhonda Haight wanted to let Tony Byrd speak. Council member Panter wanted to know what Tony's criteria was that made him someone that could speak about parking. Council member Rhonda Haight said that he is the one that has been doing the work, doing the inspections and if there is trash he sends his crews. Mrs. Haight said she could ask the same question, what is a Parking Management Company doing that the city could not do? Mr. Panter asked who is going to manage that? The City would have to have an extended liability policy he stated. Mrs. Haight wanted to first know what he thought it would take to manage it? Mr. Panter said he did not know; it is not his expertise. He asked did she know and is Council member Rhonda Haight now and expert on parking management? Mrs. Haight said she is not an expert, but she has been doing a lot of research and she is a concerned Council member that wants to make sure every cent that the city deserves we get, and right now that is \$4000/month going to a parking management company for having a kiosk downtown. Mrs. Haight said that she has priced some kiosks and for a decent one the cost would be around \$5000 a month. Mrs. Haight mentioned that Alicia Stewart the finance director has spoken with the company that handles the City's credit card payments and asked them if they do that for the kiosk, and they do not, however they recommended a company that does. So basically, they would still be working with Alicia, she would receive the funds into a special account that comes just from parking. Right now, we receive the money from the parking management company. Mrs. Haight asked again for Tony Byrd to come up and explain how that worked. Council member Nathan Fitts mentioned that first of all when getting a parking management company, you are supposed to put it out by bid, but the Mayor did not advise them that they had to do that. Council member Mike Panter asked Mr. Fitts if he voted on it, he replied he did. Mr. Panter asked if the Mayor voted on it, Mr. Fitts said not on that particular issue, but she did vote on another issue that was a conflict of interest. The Mayor said it is a service and that Mr. Fitts did not read the law correctly. Mr. Fitts started saying the Attorney said that. Mayor Whitener said the Attorney did not say that and told Mr. Fitts he was out of order. Mr. Fitts stated he had it in writing that the Attorney did say that, and Mayor Whitener told him then he needed to produce it. Council member Rhonda Haight asked Tony Byrd if he would tell everyone a little about what he found out as far as the parking management? Mr. Byrd said the kiosk was around \$5000 total, then it would just be on the City to set up the payment system. Council member Haight wanted to mention that the monthly fee was usually passed onto the customer, so the City is not out any fees associated with the credit card processing. Mrs. Haight also mentioned that we should have the appropriate signage and the current company does not even have that like they should, to cover us for liability. When Mrs. Haight spoke with the insurance company, they told her that the City would have liability regardless because we own the property. She said that unless you start having claims, that is when they would go up on the policy. Council member Haight said basically we have the ability for the City right now to make \$60,000 per year. She mentioned right now the City makes about \$200,000/year on parking, if we increase this the

City to start making potentially up to \$500,000/year on parking that could go towards our infrastructure and why would we give that to a parking management company. Right now, there is no staff on site, and no one monitoring it. Council member Mike Panter said that this past Saturday Zack WoJohn, the owner of the management company, was on site. Mrs. Haight asked what he was doing. Mr. Panter said showing him a hole in the road across from the gym. Mayor Donna Whitener wanted to mention that Mrs. Haight said the parking company made \$60,000 last year but the city of Blue Ridge made \$65,000 last year and the parking management company made \$16,000. Mrs. Haight said no according to Alicia Stewart told her we were making about \$20,000/month, she said that in a meeting in here, does Alicia not know what she is talking about? Council member Panter said that Alisha had confirmed the numbers he had on paper yesterday, that the City made \$65,000 last year. Mrs. Haight said what she had was what Alisha gave her 2 months ago and she is concerned if Alicia cannot get her numbers right, she said Alisha told her the City is making about \$20,000/month and that would mean the parking company is making about \$4000/month. Council wants to put this to rest. Council member Nathan Fitts wanted to put on record that his Attorney said that the Mayor does not have the right to call point of order just because she does not like what he has to say, or because he is stating the facts. Mr. Fitts said that was a violation of his rights again. Mayor Whitener said she told him he was out of order and she can tell him he is out of order. Mr. Fitts said not for stating the truth you can't. Mayor Whitener stated he was just arguing and not stating anything. Council member Rhonda Haight said that they will have Alicia Stewart at next months meeting to verify the numbers. Mrs. Haight stated that is a decision the Council will have to make is whether to have a management company or not and if so, it will need to be put out to bid, should be simple. Mayor Donna Whitener directed her question at Tony Byrd who was still at the podium. Ms. Whitener wanted to know how often he inspected the parking lot. Mr. Byrd said it just depended, could be weekly and sometime bi-weekly.

Mrs. Margaret Tilley Middleton came back to the podium to ask a question. She stated that they live in the City, but they never come to eat or shop because of parking. Council member Rhonda Haight mentioned one thing that they had discussed before was golf carts and making a golf cart community. The other thing that was mentioned by Rhonda was to make parking free for residents by putting a code into the kiosk. Council discussed different things such as a parking contractor to help with large crowds during festivals.

Angie Arp came up to speak. She said she did not understand why anyone would have a problem with the city making money vs someone else. She mentioned that 8 years ago when she was on council that the Mayor and some others gave push back on things they tried to do, including making East and West main street 2-3-hour parking. The Pack property could have been leased 4 years ago for \$1500/month. Council Mike Panter asked Mrs. Arp if she thinks the City could manage and run parking at 0 expense and 0 liability? Council member Nathan Fitts said something was not right for Mr. Panter to be fighting so hard for this. Council member Haight said she was concerned. Council member Nathan Fitts said he has heard rumors that some people were getting financial benefits off of the management company, because he said nobody pushes this hard for the City not to make money and there is something that does not make sense. Mrs. Arp stated that the citizens probably did not know all of that and they are more concerned about the paying part and she had not heard that you could turn your tag in to get free parking. Council member Rhonda Haight said this was the first time she had heard that.

Shelli WoJohn came to the podium to speak. She announced that she was the lawyer for Executive Parking, the City's management company. She stated she was also a resident and her children go to school here. She said they originally approached the parking management as a way to help address the parking for festivals. She said they see this as a partnership with the City. She mentions that they do get 20% but they manage the property and the kiosk. They

come inspect the property every time they come into town and they only live 5 minutes away. She stated that Mr. WoJohn has cleaned up the lot himself. Council member Nathan Fitts asked Mrs. WoJohn if she was so concerned about the City why have they not already done some of these things she was talking about doing? Mr. Fitts mentioned that they have purchased other real estate that the City was trying to buy. Mrs. WoJohn responded because no one seems to agree.

Cesar Martinez came up to the podium to make some statements. He mentioned that one year ago there were 2 Town Hall meetings specifically for parking. At that time Zack WoJohn said they had the technology to allow residents to be able to park for free, and we said that was something we would allow to do. He mentioned that the discussion was also about not monetizing East and West main street until there was a plan for employees to park for free. He stated it had nothing to do with the parking management company, it had to do with us identifying places we could use for the residents to park.

Council member Rhonda Haight wanted to speak and say that what Council member Mike Panter has brought up is about parking management, not parking. The city has the ability to do it

themselves. We do not have to have extra personnel, only a kiosk. Parking is only getting more profitable. Mrs. Haight wanted to know from Mrs. WoJohn, if she is so concerned about doing

this for the community, would you be willing to do this for free. Cesar Martinez said that it was an unfair question.

Cesar Martinez discussed that all it should come down to is getting the contract with the places that said could be used for parking get

it for the residents and then get East and West

Main streets monetized. Council discussed some additional cost with the kiosk. Council member Nathan Fitts said for the record the Charter states that as an Elected Official you are not supposed to discuss anything if you have a financial interest, which the Mayor did. Mayor Whitener told Mr. Fitts she thinks he is reading the Charter wrong. Cesar Martinez said we just need to get everything we have been discussing for a year in motion. Council member Rhonda Haight mentioned that one of the biggest problems she has is that the current property management company has also purchased additional property that competes with the City for parking. Mr. Fitts wanted that to not be belittled, that it was major. Mr. Martinez said he did not see it as major as Mr. Fitts did.

Mayor Whitener asked Cesar Martinez if the DDA had figured out a way to identify employee's cars. He responded that it would be the same way as the residents with the picture of the tag. More discussion about the employees, and eventually getting a shuttle that will take employees to their cars after dark and things like that. Council member Rhonda Haight discussed phase 1 parking. She mentioned Executive Parking buying the Pack Property. Mr. Fitts mentioned that the City had been trying to buy the Pack property for a very long time. Mr. Fitts asked Mr. Panter if he was in the Executive session in the last meeting when they asked the Attorney to move forward with a contract for the Pack property. Mr. Panter said yes.

Council member Mike Panter wanted to clarify with Cesar Martinez and said that the money for parking goes to the DDA, Mr. Martinez said to be clear it is controlled by the DDA, but it is still City money, we are not a different country, we are an arm of the City Council. Shelli WoJohn was at the podium when Cesar Martinez came up, she resumed her speaking. She wanted to state again that the first property that they had purchased was to accommodate the train parking. Mrs. WoJohn stated as far as the Pack Property, Council member Mrs. Haight told her to go buy it. Mrs. WoJohn stated that she stood right at the doors of City Hall

and told her to purchase it. Mrs. Haight said that she told her if the City did not get it that she should buy it. Mrs. WoJohn said No that Mrs. Haight said she should buy it! Council member Nathan Fitts said Mrs. WoJohn was off topic, Mrs. WoJohn said not since they were trying to paint them as selfishly motivated. Mr. Fitts told Mrs. WoJohn she was not stating all the facts and that if the City that he had a contract with was trying to buy a piece of property that he would not go behind the Cities back and buy it when they had a management contract with them and it was unethical. Mayor Donna Whitener said they did not go behind the Cities back and Mrs. WoJohn said no she did not that she spoke with Council individually and that she and council member Fitts had lunch and discussed it. Mrs. WoJohn stated that currently under due diligence they may have saved the City a lot of money considering there is some sort of environmental issue that is going on with it that is having to be investigated, and it depends on if it overflowed onto that property and if it has it will have to be mitigated. She went on to say again that they are just trying to help the City.

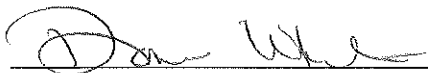
Council member Rhonda Haight wanted to say before moving on that the difference in money she was talking about previously was due to the cash, it was not figured in when looking back at Alicia's email. There was some more discussion about the difference in Council member Mike Panter's figures and what Council member Rhonda Haight's figures were. Mrs. Haight went on to say that the parking business is very profitable. Audience member Angie Arp came up and had a question. She wanted to know why Executive Parking was the only one with the opportunity to make money. She said she did not recall this being brought up. Mrs. Arp stated she would spend \$20,000 today to make \$5000/month. Council member Rhonda Haight said that if the City does not do it themselves that they would put it out to bid. Mayor Donna Whitener said the Council could have voted on it if they did not want to. Mrs. Haight said that when she first met with Zack WoJohn, he was not charging anything for managing the parking, then he had been doing that for about a year and then he said, I have been doing this I really need to get some money, they said ok that's fine. Then he brought the contract and Mrs. Haight said we really should have consulted our Attorney at the time, this needs to be put out for bid. She stated the only option the Council has is A) We do it ourselves or B) We put it out to open bid and let other companies look at it as well. She stated it was not fair to only open it up to one company.

6) Adjournment

Council member Nathan Fitts made a motion to adjourn

Council member Mike Panter seconded the motion.

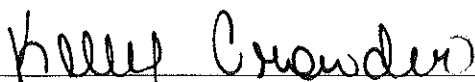
Motion passed



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Mayor, Donna Whitener

May 11, 2021

Approved



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City Clerk, Kelly Crowder