

Mount Jackson  
Town Council Special Meeting  
January 19, 2023

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A special meeting of the Mount Jackson Town Council was held January 19, 2023 at 6:00 PM in the council chambers at 5901 Main Street. Roll call was taken with Mayor Pifer and Councilmembers Rod Shepherd, Judy Fultz, Bonnie Good, Evelyn Burner, Todd Holtzman, and Brandi Freed in attendance. Also in attendance was Neil Showalter, Town Manager; Erick Moore, Planning & Development Director; Barbara Rigglesman, Town Clerk; and Keith Cowart, Police Chief. Kate Wofford with Alliance for the Shenandoah Valley, Pamela Sperry, Gene Mobley, and Bill Ryan were visitors.

New Business:

1. Re-affirm our commitment to supporting a bike trail on the old Manassas Gap rail line.

Mr. Shepherd stated that the Regular Meeting on January 10, 2023 left a lot of uncertainties in the resolution, the way it was discussed and what Council actually voted on. He stated that he and some other councilmembers wanted to call for this special meeting to clear the air, prevent any misunderstandings, and more importantly to prevent any misconceptions of what was done. Mr. Shepherd stated that there are three items on the agenda for this meeting, and he suggested each item be taken in order. Mr. Shepherd stated that there was a resolution made in January 2021 that is pretty clear as to Council's intention and there were parts of the resolution read at the January 10, 2023 meeting that indicated a revoking of this support. Mr. Shepherd stated he wanted to indicate that this is not the case; that Council remains committed to the resolution from January 2021.

Councilmember Shepherd MOVED, seconded by Councilmember Good, that the Council of the Town of Mount Jackson RE-AFFIRM their commitment to supporting a bike trail on the old Manassas Gap rail line.

Mr. Holtzman questioned if the three items of new business needed to be considered together and not separately. He stated that he provided additional information to show that rails and trails is a viable option and not just a concept, in 399 cases throughout the country with 1,000 miles of track. Mr. Holtzman stated that he feels that the decision Council makes is a generational decision; if the railroad comes up, it will not come back. He stated that he is hopeful, for example in Item #3, that he could vote in favor of all 3 items if Council can state not only their willingness, but their desire to review an economic analysis of the possibility. Mr. Holtzman stated that Council needs to make the final decision with all of the facts, at this point a feasibility study, meaning what would be the cost to do rails and trails. Long term, if the possibility is to have a fantastic trail, but to also have freight or maybe even passenger traffic, instead of this going around Shenandoah County, he feels Council needs to be very careful before deciding not to push for consideration of a feasibility study. Mr. Holtzman stated that with that being said, if Council could aggregate these items and maybe vote in favor, that is good, but he stated his concern, for his vote, committing to support the trail without knowing the feasibility of both.

Ms. Burner stated that she has had a lot of people contact her since the January 10, 2023 meeting with opposition to going away from Rails-to-Trails and she stated that Council is not going away from this path, but did vote to do a feasibility study. She stated her desire to make it clear to town members that Council is not giving up on Rails-to-Trails and before a final, big decision is made, Council needs to have more information on the rails and trails. Right now, Ms. Burner stated she didn't want people to think Council is giving up on Rails-to-Trails and shoving this aside.

Mr. Holtzman requested the Town Clerk read the motion made at the January 10, 2023 meeting. Ms. Rigglesman read that the motion from this meeting was that the Town of Mount Jackson is interested in

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supporting the pursuit of a feasibility study to determine the viability of both rails and trails. Mr. Holtzman stated that this doesn't sound like Council is giving up on anything. Ms. Burner stated that this was the way a lot of people in the community took it and she doesn't know how the word got out so fast. She stated that what she wanted to do was reaffirm that Council is not giving up on that, and Council does not know enough about rails with trails; she stated the possible safety concerns with children riding bikes beside a train track with no barriers and that is what parents were contacting her about. Parents were concerned about not having a safety barrier in between the rail and trail, but mainly they were concerned that Council was giving up on Rails-to-Trails. She reiterated that she doesn't want people to think Council is giving up on this project, but more information is needed for the other possibility. She stated there is a lot of miscommunication in the community.

Mr. Holtzman inquired if it would be possible to consider all three new business items and vote. Mr. Shepherd stated that his motion was for Item #1 by itself. Ms. Burner stated that Council could vote on other items together but Item #1 needed to be separated. She stated that she wants people to know that Council is not shutting the door on Rails-to-Trails. Ms. Good added that Council is not going away from this project.

Ms. Freed inquired, on the economic analysis side of the rails and trails, if the feasibility study would cover if the railroad is used again, that it is overgrown with several trees and there are loose ties that would probably need to be replaced, so would this study show the cost for the railroad to be revitalized; would costs be separated out in regards to which businesses are interested in using the railroad, and would they pay for that, since it would be businesses for profit, or is that expected to come from the funding allocated for the Rails-to-Trails. She questioned whether this would be covered in the feasibility study. Mr. Holtzman stated that a feasibility study would cover the cost of conversion. There was a feasibility study for the cost of conversion from rail to trail, this would be the feasibility of can rails and trails be done, engineering-wise, and if you have enough money and it can be done, what it would cost. Mr. Holtzman stated that if it is proven that rails and trails is an option, then you would need an operator for the rail line. He stated that there is potentially a short line - there is one called Omnitrack that operates the Winchester and Western, that has expressed some interest in being a partner in this project and operating the rail line. Mr. Holtzman stated that he does not think Norfolk Southern and CSX are interested, so there are lots of unknowns. The feasibility study will only cover if it can be done and what it would cost. Mr. Holtzman stated that Ms. Freed made some good points; the railroad would have to be fixed and a trail would have to be added, and that's what the intention of a feasibility study is - can it be done and what would it cost. Ms. Burner stated that bridges and overpasses would need to be rebuilt to add a trail beside the track. Mr. Holtzman stated that this indeed would be a significant cost, not just to restore the tracks for rail traffic, but to hang a trail off the side; you would have to engineer something off to the side, or trail/bike traffic would need to detour thru the valley around these bridges and then reconnect after the overpass. Ms. Burner stated that if this would be the case, you would be right back where you are now with children riding on Main Street, riding thru downtown, and that's why you would have to have something side by side; build new railroad crossings, or bike trail crossings if you did both, because the last thing you want to do is have bike traffic having to detour thru town. She stated you would want bike traffic safely out of regular traffic. Mr. Holtzman stated his hope that the feasibility study would answer these questions.

Gene Mobley asked if he could ask a question. Mayor Pifer responded that Council should vote first.

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ROLL CALL VOTE:

AYE	NAY	ABSTAIN	ABSENT
Council member Burner			
Councilmember Freed			
Councilmember Fultz			
Councilmember Good			
	Councilmember Holtzman		
Councilmember Shepherd			

5 AYES, 1 NAY, motion carried

Mayor Pifer questioned whether Council should discuss the next items before allowing public input. Mr. Shepherd stated that Council should move to Item #2 as this is a Special Meeting and reminded Council that special meetings are very strict in what can be done as far as agenda changes or additions, and in this particular special meeting, there is no public comment. He added that there have been some new regulations and laws put into place and he does not want Council to violate these special meeting regulations. Mayor Pifer inquired as to whether public input would still be allowed. Mr. Mobley stated that he just had one thing to say; February 7, 2023 there was a meeting scheduled for the Rails-to-Trails, and now there are two meetings that came into effect that no one knows about, then this meeting for February 7 was canceled, so he questioned when the public would have a chance to speak. Mayor Pifer questioned that the meeting on February 7 was canceled. Mr. Shepherd stated that it has been postponed. Mr. Mobley stated that he is upset about that part and not being able to put his word in. At this point, Mr. Mobley left the meeting. Mr. Holtzman questioned that public comments were not allowed. Ms. Good stated that she believed this was correct. Mr. Shepherd stated that this was a special meeting, and there is no public comment at a special meeting. Regular council meetings are always open to public comment, but in this particular meeting, it was a special called meeting and when a meeting is called, only what is on the agenda is allowed. Mr. Shepherd stated he was sorry Mr. Mobley left disappointed, but stated he is happy to listen to anyone at any time.

2. Re-affirm our membership in the Shenandoah Valley Rail Trail Exploratory Partnership.

Mr. Shepherd stated that this group was organized in 2020 and has been building a lot of momentum and communication to get the rail trail project underway. Mr. Shepherd stated that if Council were to remove their membership from this, it would limit communications with them, Council would not receive information from them, and he feels this is a wrong path in which to go. Mr. Shepherd stated that the Exploratory Partnership has brought in a lot of useful information to all three counties and all nine towns along the route of the proposed rail line.

Councilmember Shepherd MOVED, seconded by Councilmember Good, that the Council of the Town of Mount Jackson RE-AFFIRM their membership in the Shenandoah Valley Rail Trail Exploratory Partnership.

ROLL CALL VOTE:

AYE	NAY	ABSTAIN	ABSENT
Council member Burner			
Councilmember Freed			
Councilmember Fultz			
Councilmember Good			
	Councilmember Holtzman		
Councilmember Shepherd			

5 AYES, 1 NAY, motion carried

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3. Confirm our willingness to review an economic analysis of the possibility of a rail and trail combined project.

Mayor Pifer stated that Mr. Holtzman wanted to add the words “and desire” to this motion. Mr. Shepherd stated that he would like to stay with his original motion.

Councilmember Shepherd MOVED, seconded by Councilmember Burner, that the Council of the Town of Mount Jackson CONFIRM their willingness to review an economic analysis of the possibility of a rail and trail combined project.

Mr. Holtzman stated that he would like to call attention to the fact that in order for him to support that motion, he would need the words “willingness and desire” to be added; “willingness” indicates Council could sit by and let it happen, “desire” sends the message that Council is interested to see if both rails and trails is a possibility. Mr. Holtzman reiterated that in the long term, for economic viability, Council should have the desire to know and make a fully informed decision. Mr. Shepherd inquired as to whether this was an amendment to his motion. Mr. Holtzman inquired as to whether he could make an amendment. Mr. Shepherd answered affirmatively.

Councilmember Holtzman MOVED, seconded by Councilmember Freed, to AMEND Mr. Shepherd’s motion, to state that the Council of the Town of Mount Jackson confirms their willingness and desire to review an economic analysis of the possibility of a rail and trail combined project.

Mr. Holtzman stated that the gentleman in the audience, Mr. Mobley, mentioned that the meeting on February 7 was canceled, and inquired as to why it was canceled. Mr. Shepherd stated that they had contacted him late today and there is some new information, some new studies being done, and they want to be able to present all the information that they have. Mr. Shepherd stated that they are very embarrassed that they weren’t ready to present on February 7. Ms. Good inquired as to who “they” are. Mr. Shepherd answered that “they” is the Shenandoah Valley Rail Trail team. Mr. Holtzman inquired as to whether this postponement had anything to do with this effort for combined rails and trails. Mr. Shepherd answered negatively, that it was not. Ms. Good inquired if Council had to cancel their meeting due to the Rail Trail team not being ready. Mr. Shepherd stated that the meeting on February 7 was not a council meeting; it was for the Rail Trail team, who had just asked to use Town Hall for a public meeting. He stated that their information was not complete, not ready for presentation, and so they had requested to cancel that meeting. Ms. Burner inquired as to whether the Rail Trail team would reschedule. Mr. Shepherd answered affirmatively, that they would when they have the new information ready for their presentation. Ms. Good inquired as to whether the word “desire” would be added to uphold or reaffirm. Mr. Holtzman stated that to him, “willingness” means that if it falls into Council’s lap, Council will look at it, but “desire” might mean that the Town Staff, for example, would participate in how the study can be done. Mr. Holtzman stated that at this point, he doesn’t know how to get a feasibility study done. Ms. Good stated that Mr. Holtzman was speaking of this as though the Town Staff would be responsible to do this study. Mr. Holtzman answered negatively. Ms. Burner asked for clarification on this discussion. Ms. Good stated that to her, it sounded like Mr. Holtzman was saying that he wants the Town Staff to be working on the study, to which her response was that she didn’t feel it should be up to the Town Staff to do the feasibility study, and that Mr. Holtzman had answered that he wasn’t meaning that. Ms. Burner inquired as to who would pay for the feasibility study. Mr. Holtzman stated that he wasn’t sure who paid for the last study, but he believed the State of Virginia paid for it, and it is his belief that the State of Virginia would pay for it again, but somehow momentum is needed to actually get them to do this, so Council has a study and can have all the facts. Ms. Burner inquired as to

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whether Council needed to amend Mr. Shepherd's previous motion. Mr. Shepherd stated that was what the motion was; the motion was for Councilmember Holtzman to add wording into Mr. Shepherd's motion for Item #3, and Mr. Shepherd stated that he liked #3 exactly as it was worded, so he did not support changing it.

Mayor Pifer reiterated that this vote is to accept Mr. Holtzman's amendment.

ROLL CALL VOTE:

AYE	NAY	ABSTAIN	ABSENT
Councilmember Freed	Council member Burner		
Councilmember Fultz			
Councilmember Holtzman	Councilmember Good		
Mayor Pifer	Councilmember Shepherd		

4 AYES, 3 NAYS, motion carried

Ms. Fultz inquired as to whether Council should put the motion made at the January 10, 2023 Regular Meeting into this Special Meeting also. Mr. Shepherd stated this was a clean slate. Ms. Fultz stated that she just wanted to make sure it wasn't needed.

Mayor Pifer stated that Council would need to vote to accept the amended motion. Ms. Good stated that she that was just done. Ms. Fultz stated that the previous vote was to accept the amendment. Mayor Pifer clarified that Council voted to accept an amendment. Mr. Shepherd stated that the key words that Mr. Holtzman added to this was to "confirm our willingness AND DESIRE", which changes the whole meaning of the motion. Mr. Holtzman stated that Council wants to know if a rail and trail is viable. Mr. Shepherd stated that this is what Council's "willingness to review" was; he did not want the term "desire" to indicate that Council was pulled into supporting rails and trails. Mr. Shepherd stated that he is willing to review an economic analysis and that is where he is at the moment. Mayor Pifer stated that he believes that is what Council is doing, confirming they are willing and desire to see an economic analysis; that is the way he sees it.

ROLL CALL VOTE:

AYE	NAY	ABSTAIN	ABSENT
Councilmember Freed	Council member Burner		
Councilmember Fultz			
Councilmember Holtzman	Councilmember Good		
Mayor Pifer	Councilmember Shepherd		

4 AYES, 3 NAYS, motion carried

Motion made by Councilmember Shepherd, seconded by Councilmember Good, to adjourn the meeting at 6:20 PM.