

Mount Jackson
Town Council Work Session
October 24, 2023

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Work Session

Mayor Pifer called the Work Session of the Mount Jackson Town Council to order at 6:00 PM in the Council Chambers at 5901 Main Street. Roll call was taken with Councilmembers Evelyn Burner, Brandi Freed, Todd Holtzman, and Rod Shepherd in attendance. Councilmembers Judy Fultz and Bonnie Good were absent. Also in attendance were Olivia Hilton, Assistant Town Manager; and Barbara Riggelman, Town Clerk. There were no visitors.

Agenda Additions/Deletions/Changes: None

New Business (For Discussion Only – Not Eligible For Action):

1. Committee Needs + Expectations

Ms. Hilton stated that this work session would be for her to get direction on some items and talk out some items with Council. She stated if there were any staff support or other needs of the committees, just let her know. Ms. Burner stated that some things just take time to get action done in the correct manner. Ms. Freed inquired if committee chairpersons could be reassigned to other committees. Mayor Pifer stated that after an election, when a new councilperson is elected, he usually makes these appointments at the first of the year. He stated he isn't in favor of changing committee chairs each year just for the sake of change as some mayors have done previously. Ms. Freed stated her concerns for her committee, Public Properties & Facilities, and some projects they have in the works as she won't be running for reelection this year. Mr. Holtzman inquired if a councilperson could chair two committees. Mayor Pifer stated he wasn't sure. Ms. Riggelman stated that Town Code states no councilman shall chair more than one standing committee. Mr. Shepherd referred to Ms. Freed's question and stated that it is the mayor's prerogative to appoint whomever he wants to each committee and as chair. Ms. Hilton stated that she feels that if a councilman enjoys their position, they should stay in that position.

2. Orchard Drive + Jackson Street Parcel

Ms. Hilton showed sketch plats and maps of the two properties. Old Hickory was a development that was approved in 2005 and there are 24 unfinished duplexes in Truxton Court. The property located above it, Orchard Drive, is on the Barbatsuly property. D.R. Horton has worked with the property owner to bring 120 single family homes to that piece and complete the 24 duplexes that were originally planned for Truxton Court. Ms. Hilton stated that Staff has not received a final proposal development plat from them, just the preliminary plat. The developers are requesting consideration of the sale of a .28 acre Jackson Street parcel that the Town owns that would connect the two parcels over the railroad tracks and become the primary entrance into the development. Ms. Hilton showed a map with the planned entrance and exit marked. Ms. Hilton stated that she and Randy Lonas have had several meetings with the developers and gone back and forth with VDOT. The developers have not put in an offer for the parcel, just seeing if Council is open to it. Mr. Lonas is for the sale of the parcel as it would connect water and sewer.

Mr. Holtzman inquired as to why the Town owns the parcel. Mr. Shepherd answered that there used to be an old, broken down trailer there in the early 2000s with the landowner hundreds of miles away. The Town purchased the property to clean it up. Mr. Holtzman stated that he would argue that the Town could give the .28 acre parcel to the developers in exchange for their economic development opportunities, with the water and sewer sales, and more people coming to Mount Jackson. Ms. Hilton stated that this is definitely a need for the town. Mr. Holtzman inquired if a price point for the houses has been given. Ms. Hilton answered \$300-

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400,000 each. Mr. Holtzman stated that this is now the price for a starter home. Discussion ensued on the history of the property and why development had stopped. Mr. Holtzman stated that D.R. Horton is the biggest builder in the county. Ms. Hilton added that their engineers are out of Staunton, the Timmons Group.

Mayor Pifer inquired to Council if everyone was on board with potentially selling of the .28 acre parcel off Jackson Street. Ms. Hilton stated she could enter into talks with the developer and circle back with Council if the direction is to use the parcel as a bargaining chip. Mr. Holtzman stated that he would be in favor of using the parcel as a tool, even if this meant giving the developers the parcel, in exchange for something of benefit to the Town, like infrastructure needs, and inquired if sidewalks have been planned. Ms. Hilton said some things have been discussed, but she would like to get an answer to this on the final plat. Mr. Holtzman stated that these things should be asked for because you have a need for sidewalks. Ms. Hilton stated that it would be a mistake, at this point, to approve of any subdivision without that infrastructure. Ms. Burner stated that one of the best things about this development is that the people who would purchase these homes would have solid families, and the town needs this growth. Mr. Holtzman cautioned that the Town should expect to have some pushback as we are a small town and this is the biggest builder in the country. Fortunately, the Town has the pieces in place to demand some standards. Normally, a development of this size has some type of feature and this should be negotiated. Mr. Shepherd agreed that the density is way overboard – a lot of people packed into a tiny space with absolutely no amenities. Discussion ensued regarding aspects on the planned project and Ms. Hilton referred back to maps and plats to answer questions.

3. Motel 6 Finances

Ms. Hilton give a quick history of the ownership of the motel. Currently, Harsit Patel owns the property with two other partners; intent was to add another partner, but now the plan is to sell the motel to this individual. There had been a water leak on the property for several years, which was fixed in July at a cost of about \$30,000. The water leak issue had been an ongoing issue between the owners and Staff. At one point, Mr. Patel owned about \$140,000 in water and sewer since he hadn't paid for a length of time. He has been paying gradually and currently that total is \$21,000 in water and sewer. Mr. Patel requested Staff to wave some portion of this amount, via sewer, as he stated it was a water leak and he did not use the sewer. Ms. Hilton stated that she explained to Mr. Patel that what goes thru the water meter he is expected to pay regardless of sewer usage. Staff did offer Mr. Patel a \$5,000 credit equaling about a 2 month span of sewer fees, provided he pay the remainder, which Mr. Patel has declined and asked to petition Council to see if Council would wave a larger amount.

Mr. Holtzman asked for clarification if the property has been sold. Ms. Hilton answered that the 3 owners are selling it to another individual, and technically it is the property and those connected to it that will owe the money. She stated that she believed the person interested in buying it knows the background of this issue. The water and sewer is still in Mr. Patel's name but everything else is now in the name of the potential new owner. They are still navigating this process, but it is his LLC that will owe the money. Jay Neal has stated that if it is not paid, a lien could be put on the property and it could not be sold until the lien is paid. Mr. Holtzman inquired if this was handled well or poorly. Ms. Hilton stated that she believes Staff handled it well. Mr. Shepherd stated that Staff has bent over backwards for Mr. Patel.

Ms. Hilton stated that Neil Showalter previously gave Mr. Patel a \$50,000 credit. Mr. Holtzman inquired that if \$50,000 was credited, why he was still asking for more credits. Ms. Hilton stated that this has surpassed the Staff level. Mr. Shepherd stated he was fine with attaching a lien before closing as these arguments have gone on long enough; Staff has invested a lot of time and money in meters and reconciliations. Ms. Hilton stated

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that Randy Lonas installed a 2" check valve in the meter vault; bill for labor and excavation costs were just under \$1,000, which was also never paid. Ms. Freed stated that it sounds like Staff has went over and above to help this individual already. Ms. Burner stated that everyone else is expected to pay their water and sewer bills, he should have to pay his bills also. Mr. Holtzman asked for justification for the \$50,000 credit. Ms. Hilton stated that without talking to Mr. Showalter, she couldn't identify why. The only thing that happened on a Staff level was that for several months, six months in 2020, the meter was read incorrectly with the decimal, so it showed a big usage. Mr. Patel did not pay for six months, but this was all credited. Mr. Holtzman inquired if this was the \$50,000 credit. Ms. Hilton answered that it was not; this ended up being \$200,000 taken off the account. The \$50,000 credit was just straight credit off what she could only assume was sewer. Mr. Holtzman stated that he would agree with Mr. Shepherd's suggestion, but he wasn't sure if a decision could be made without Mr. Showalter's input, especially regarding the \$50,000 and why this did not require Council approval. Mr. Shepherd stated that Mario Rosso had spent huge unknown Staff hours on this issue. Some fault was the Town's regarding the water meter, and this may amount to some of the \$50,000 credit if the meter was not working properly. Ms. Hilton stated that there is a large log of meetings between Staff and Mr. Patel.

The water usage for Motel 6 was discussed, along with what Staff had proposed. Mr. Shepherd requested Mr. Rosso compile a one-page fact sheet of this issue, a memo of what all has been involved. Mr. Holtzman stated that he agreed with Mr. Shepherd, it would be good to have all the facts, and a call to Mr. Showalter to determine why the \$50,000 credit was authorized. Council was in agreement to honor Ms. Hilton's original offer to write off \$5,000 if Mr. Patel will pay the \$16,000 remainder, conditional that it is paid by the end of October 2023. If the remainder is not paid, the offer will be withdrawn and a settlement will be attached.

4. Mount Jackson Five (Small Business Support)

Ms. Hilton stated that this would be an effort for community business launch. A strategic effort to offer a competitive and aggressive recruitment and retention package for new business in downtown Mount Jackson. This will be Staff-driven but also bringing some regional partners like the County Economic Development. This will be a 6-week class training program in Fall 2024 limited to 5 new businesses or businesses less than 6 months old. Ms. Hilton stated that there are a few businesses she is talking to now that may open in the spring but would still want to take part in the program. Ms. Hilton described the training process and topics, including incentives for business. Some of these could include grant funding, chamber memberships, radio/podcast times, tap fees, and signage. Her goal would be to have this be an annual program. Locations for the five businesses was discussed and potential new business that are interested in coming to downtown. Mr. Holtzman stated his appreciation for Staff actively creating a platform for and supporting new businesses because starting a new business is not easy. There is not much in the downtown area, so to bring business back to this area is a great thing.

5. Site Ready Inventory

Ms. Hilton stated that her goal was to learn what spaces in town are open for new businesses, square footage, perks, rent range, photos, and to have a place on the Town's website for people interested in starting a new business to discover what sites are available. Mr. Holtzman suggested talking to landowners about what incentives they may be willing to offer to help get their empty spaces filled. If your building is sitting vacant, not generating any rent, potentially writing off a couple months of rent will cost you nothing but encourage businesses to rent your building. Ms. Burner stated that she is glad to see an incentive to get new businesses back. Ms. Freed stated that with the new growth in the housing development previously discussed, these new businesses will have more potential business as more families will be coming to the area.

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6. Branding Brainstorm

Ms. Hilton stated that the Town has a seal, but doesn't really have a brand. A successful branding campaign can turn any town into an attractive destination. It attracts people to visit, live, and work, and help with our identity. A community is hard to define; creating an identity involves understanding all of our attributes and being able to communicate them. Since the early 2000s, many cities have recognized the importance of developing a brand image, increasing the potential to attract residents, bolster business, and boost tourism. Reasons to brand would include differentiating Mount Jackson from other places – complimenting the other area logos is nice, but doesn't need to be boring. Mr. Holtzman asked if the Town could still retain the seal that we currently have. Ms. Hilton stated that she would recommend using it for permitting and documents, more of the professional side, and then have a fun logo. Aspects of the current logo and potential changes, including identifying landmarks for the Town, were discussed. Mr. Holtzman stated that some guidance from a marketing firm may be beneficial. Most of the towns in the area have modern logos, but they all look the same. Having something traditional, but still modern and eye catching to set us apart is a good idea. At some point, if you want exposure, you have to do something more than just change the logo. Mr. Holtzman stated that he would be in favor of exploring what a marketing firm could do and maybe spending \$2,500 to see where that could take the Town and how we could advertise. Councilmembers present were in agreement with Mr. Holtzman's suggestion to explore a marketing firm. Advertising suggestions after branding were discussed.

7. Intentional Art

Ms. Hilton stated that this item came from the Shoemaker mural proposal. Public art provides access to beauty and imagination, having access to art locally and not having to travel. Some examples of art, besides murals, are planters/flower baskets, sculptures, mosaics, banners, and signage, including a LOVE sign. Ms. Hilton reported that Triplett Tech is having a local competition for some students to create a design. The principal is spearheading it and then hopefully the students will build our first LOVE sign. Mr. Holtzman inquired into where the LOVE sign would be placed. Ms. Hilton stated that this is still up for debate. Mr. Shepherd inquired into what the LOVE sign would look like, if Council would get sketches to look at. Ms. Hilton stated that technically, Triplett could build the sign and put it on their own property if they want. The dream would be to have one at Triplett and one downtown. Mr. Shepherd stated that it will be interesting to see what the students come up with. Ms. Freed stated that she was in favor of the sculpture idea, like the "rock man" in Woodstock. It would be nice to have something like that to tie to Mount Jackson.

Ms. Hilton stated that having some goals would be helpful going forward. Some questions to consider would be: What types of art do you want to see downtown? What do you not want to see? Is there a limit to how much or where? Mr. Holtzman asked Councilmembers present if it would be safe to say that a more traditional type of display would be preferred. Ms. Burner stated that it may be determinate on the request. What is defined as traditional was discussed. Councilmembers present agreed that having something traditional – conservative, not contemporary or super modern – would be the direction going forward.

Ms. Hilton inquired into how Council would want to handle funding. Mr. Shepherd stated that if someone were to request assistance, this request could be done thru the EDA or tourism money, with Council's input on the design. Mayor Pifer suggested that matching funds would be preferable. Mr. Holtzman inquired what the next steps would be for the Shoemaker mural request. Ms. Hilton answered that it is on the Public Properties Committee agenda for November 1, and Ms. Hilton believes that Ms. Shoemaker will attend. At this point, Ms. Hilton stated that it is up to Council to approve or disapprove of the design. Direction going forward, if funding assistance is requested, the proposal will move to the EDA with a 50% match.

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Mr. Shepherd stated that the veteran banners on the light poles needs to be discussed. Displaying the banners for a defined period of time, in recognition of their service, but limiting exposure and deterioration needs to be determined. There are several colorful, cool banners that could be displayed; banners featuring the covered bridge, bicycles, the Knob, grapes. Ms. Hilton stated that feedback on these banners has not been favorable. Ms. Hilton showed a picture of Wardensville, WV's banners. Discussion ensued on banners and installation timelines, including the Hometown Partnership's veteran banners. Ms. Hilton stated that she was in discussion with the Hometown Partnership and Staff regarding the veteran banners and a display timeline.

Mr. Holtzman inquired if planters should be placed back on the wish list. Who plants the flowers, waters and maintains them, and the planters in town was discussed. Ms. Hilton suggested having sponsored planters, with a plaque that states who sponsored the planter. Having better plants was discussed. Mayor Pifer stated that in answer to one of the questions, he would not like to see art on every corner. Sometimes you can get an art overload.

8. LPDA

Ms. Hilton stated that this was basically an update. Jessica Mauzy wanted to confirm the draft park program. Mr. Shepherd stated that he thought this had already been approved. Ms. Hilton stated that this was sent after the in-person meeting with LPDA. Mr. Holtzman stated that an additional \$15,000 is being requested. Ms. Hilton stated that this is not part of the park project totals. This was an added request for a park and pedestrian master connectivity plan, which is walkways and pathways to connect the river access, the Mayors Park, community center, and the town park. Mr. Holtzman stated that the total started at \$17,000, which was approved for the park design; then \$9,000 was added which was supposed to be for the pool, bringing the total to \$26,000; and now an additional \$15,000 for what was just mentioned is being requested. Ms. Hilton stated that LPDA is still working on the park, they just wanted to confirm that this program draft incorporates everything that Council wanted to see. The park proposal has already been approved and is forging ahead; this is for the additions. Ms. Hilton referred back to the list on the program draft page, to see if anything has been missed. The aquatics center is a bit of an aside; LPDA is working on a basic concept for a \$4-6 million aquatic facility that incorporates a 6-lane Olympic pool, therapeutic senior pool, locker rooms, with/without concessions options. The engineer is still working on this. Mr. Shepherd inquired if an aquatics facility would fit in the existing park. Ms. Hilton answered that it would not; LPDA's hope is to give the Town a footprint of the facility and then discussion can ensue on the best logical fit. Mr. Shepherd clarified that LPDA is wanting to add \$15,000 to the original plan.

Ms. Hilton stated that the Town Park Program Draft is just a list of elements that has been discussed and reiterated that she was asking if this list was acceptable. Mr. Holtzman stated that the list was correct, that is the basic park expansion and the aquatics facility. LPDA has stated that they would be willing to look behind the old Triplett School for a possible site, and inquired if that was part of the requested additional funds. Ms. Hilton stated that the additional funds just connects the other sites to the community center. Discussion ensued on the aquatics center and the old Triplett School location. Ms. Hilton reported that the only acceptable location at the town park for the aquatics facility would be the location of the Little League baseball field. Discussion ensued with the agreement that LPDA should look into not only the town park, but the 4 acres behind the old Triplett School. Ms. Hilton stated that to just conceptualize the school acreage would be \$10,000 and another \$5,000 to map it out. Mr. Holtzman stated that the original plan included \$9,000 for mapping the aquatics facility at the town park. If it can't be done at the park, then there should be a \$9,000 credit. Ms. Hilton stated that they are making a blueprint of the aquatics facility. Mr. Holtzman stated that this can't be done without knowing what property it will go on, and asked Ms. Hilton for a draft of what Council has

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already signed off on and exactly what it says to be sent to Council, as this was supposed to be included. Ms. Hilton agreed to this request. Councilmembers present were in agreement not to spend more funds without knowing the facts.

Discussion ensued on what the bike and pedestrian connectivity plan would include. Ms. Hilton showed a 12-mile loop that Woodstock adopted for reference. Mr. Holtzman stated that the Town already has \$26,000 committed; the additional connectivity planning should be tabled for a later date. Councilmembers present were in a agreement with this and that the aquatics facility should be located at the community center and not at the town park.

9. River Access

Ms. Hilton stated that two locations had been proposed. She stated that she felt that the focus should be on the site located at the water treatment plant and not at the new bridge location. An idea for further down the road could be an MOU between the Town and the Day Brothers, in writing, regarding the use of the bridge and parking. Mr. Shepherd stated that the new bridge location should not be considered any longer. Ms. Hilton stated that she would like to see an entrance at the water treatment plant or on Mr. Holtzman's property with some amenities, and then encourage the County to do an exit at Red Banks. Discussion ensued on the proposed water treatment plant site. Mr. Holtzman stated that he would be willing to partner with someone for a potential RV park on his property as well.

10. Avondale Acres

Ms. Hilton stated the Town has gotten permission from the property owner to plant trees. Suggested plan was to reach out to an arborist, the Garden Club, and the Master Gardeners. The Master Gardeners do not give advice or recommendations, but will offer assistance. The suggested plan was to plant giant evergreens in a staggered formation, 12-15' increments, 5-6' plant size for faster growth. Between plant cost and installation, cost is estimated around \$20,000. Ms. Hilton stated she has been talking with Cain Harbison at the Department of Forestry regarding DOF's Virginia Tree for Clean Water Grant Program, which is a 50/50 match grant program, with potentially more coverage available. Applications are accepted until 12/1/23; DOF must review the project prior to submission. Ms. Hilton has a meeting scheduled with Mr. Harbison on 11/6/23, however you can not apply within 30 days of when you are planting. Mr. Harbison said the best time to plant is early Spring 2024. Ms. Hilton stated that most likely the installation will need to be outsourced depending on staff capacity and plants will need 3-4 months of focused watering support.

Mr. Holtzman requested clarification as he had heard that the DOF would give the Town trees. Ms. Hilton answered that the trees are through their grant program with a 50/50 match, but it is not uncommon for the DOF to pay for almost all of the project. Projects must include community outreach and engagement components, and projects may not include tree removal. Mr. Holtzman inquired as to how many trees would be requested. Ms. Hilton answered probably 50 trees as the project site is 400'; trees would be planted 20-24 per row in 2 rows. Mr. Holtzman inquired how tall the trees would be. Ms. Hilton answered that the arborist recommended 5-6' for best height as smaller trees would take longer to grow and be of benefit; these trees would be \$200-300 each. Discussion ensued on the grant process, how many trees would be needed, the site lot being for sale, and by right/SUP.

Mr. Holtzman suggested just buying 24 trees at \$300 each for a cost of \$7,200, that way trees could be planted this year and not next year, as Fall is the desired planting time for trees. Ms. Hilton suggested getting quotes from nurseries and outsourcing the installation as Public Works has other projects going on right now.

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Mr. Shepherd suggested starting with just 10 trees. Mr. Holtzman stated that 10 trees would cost \$3,000; installation would probably cost \$50-100/tree and then this project would be completed. Mr. Holtzman referred to the list of suggested plant species and stated that the giant arborvitae would be the best for planting and disease resistance. Mr. Shepherd suggested a mix of some hardwoods with the arborvitae to diversify the plants. Councilmembers present were in agreement with planting 10 trees. Ms. Hilton stated that as Asst. Town Manager, she could spend up to \$5,000 without a project needing Council approval, and this project should be under that threshold. Mr. Shepherd suggested keeping this item on the Council agenda in case approval should be required, and also to give an update for the concerned citizens in the area. Ms. Hilton stated that if other citizens would like trees, there are grants available for this and it could be looked into.

The Work Session was adjourned at 8:30 PM.

Barbara Riggelman, Clerk

Donald "Donnie" I. Pifer, Mayor