



## Town of Waynesville, NC

### Town Council Special Called Meeting-Budget Workshop Cont

Municipal Building, 16 South Main Street, Waynesville, NC 28786

Date: April 25th, 2024 Time: 5:00 p.m.

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(828) 452-2491 [cpoolton@waynesvillenc.gov](mailto:cpoolton@waynesvillenc.gov)

#### **A. CALL TO ORDER**

Mayor Gary Caldwell called the meeting to order at 5:01 pm with the following members present:

Mayor Gary Caldwell  
Mayor Pro Tempore Chuck Dickson  
Councilmember Jon Feichter  
Councilmember Anthony Sutton  
Councilmember Julia Freeman

The following staff members were present:

Rob Hites, Town Manager  
Jesse Fowler, Assistant Town Manager  
Candace Poolton, Town Clerk  
Town Attorney Martha Bradley  
Elizabeth Teague, Director of Development  
Taylor Garland, Assistant Finance Director  
Police Chief David Adams  
Assistant Police Chief, Brandon Gilmore  
Jeff Stines, Public Services Director  
Page McCurry, Human Resources Director  
Luke Kinsland, Recreation Director

Members of the Media:

Paul Nielson, The Mountaineer

#### **B. PRESENTATION OF 2024-2025 BUDGET ALTERNATIVES**

Mayor Caldwell asked each department head about their most important needs:

Fire Chief Joey Webb said they need four more firefighters.

Recreation Director Luke Kinsland said they need cardio equipment, but can replace some now and some later. He said that he applied for a grant to cover the cost, but he won't know if they will be awarded the grant until after the budget will be approved.

Public Services Director Jeff Stines said a lawn mower with a 48 inch deck is needed for the cemetery, as well as a leaf vacuum truck.

Police Chief David Adams said the COPS grant could pay for new officers, but they will need two gas powered vehicles. He said ballistic vests are an absolute must. Chief Adams said Waynesville officers' starting salary is \$6,000 less than the sheriff's department starting salary. Councilmember Sutton asked Chief Adams about the Administrative Sergeant position. He said that staff person would help organize trainings, manage social media and the police department app, keep track of new regulations and data entry, and supervise school resource officers.

Assistant Finance Director Taylor Garland said they need new meter reader equipment.

Development Director Elizabeth Teague requested a replacement vehicle that Land Use Administrator Byron Hickox used to drive because it's out of commission. She said they are open to having an EV, as long as it's 4-wheel drive and has plenty of room inside. She said they could bring down the cost of the vehicle for less than what they originally requested. She said a Toyota Rav4 is anywhere between \$40,000 and \$50,000. Ms. Teague said several staff in her department share a vehicle to help cut costs.

### **C. DISCUSSION AND DIRECTION BY COUNCILMEMBERS**

Mayor Caldwell said each department's needs total to \$675,000 which equals a four cent increase on the tax rate. Mr. Hites added that it includes a 2.5% career track increase and 2% COLA. Councilmember Sutton read the following statement:

"It's my duty to address the crucial issue of investing in our town's capital items. It's not just about allocating funds; it's about ensuring the well-being of both our employees and our community members.

Let's reflect on past instances where the lack of investment has led to tangible consequences. Remember when we couldn't provide timely utility bills, causing confusion and inconvenience for our residents? Or when we faced challenges in picking up leaves because we lacked the necessary trucks? These are not mere inconveniences; they're symptoms of a larger problem.

By deferring the replacement of the sewer treatment plant, we are not only incurring fines but also increased costs for the replacement. This shortsighted approach is a disservice to everyone in Waynesville.

Investing in capital items isn't just about addressing immediate needs; it's about safeguarding our town's future. It's about ensuring efficient services, maintaining infrastructure, and fostering a thriving community.

Let's learn from past mistakes and commit to investing in our town's future today.

I understand that raising taxes is never an easy decision, but it's a necessary one if we want to invest in the future of our town. By prioritizing our employees and ensuring they have what they need to succeed, we're investing in the well-being of our entire community."

Councilmember Sutton recommended an increase seven cents on the tax rate to include capital needs, an increase in COLA, and the requested staff positions. He added that the more Council defers a tax rate increase, the more it causes issues in the future. Mayor Caldwell reminded Council that there's property evaluation next year.

Councilmember Feichter said rates have been raised several times over the last few years to pay for updates to the wastewater treatment plant. Mr. Hites said that was the debt service on \$29 million. Councilmember Feichter said he'd love to do everything, but seven cents on the tax rate is hard to do. He said he understands that budgeting and allocating tax revenue comes down to wants and needs and he sees a lot of needs in this budget request and very few wants. He commended department heads for working together and identifying their needs. He said there's no good time to increase the tax rate and he recognizes Council can no longer "kick the can down the road", so he'd like to find a middle ground, knowing Council can't do everything they want to this year. Mayor Caldwell said taking care of the staff is the most important thing. Councilmember Sutton said if they don't have the tools to do their jobs, that can also lead to a high turnover rate. Councilmember Feichter asked about the Town Square topographic survey. Assistant Town Manager Jesse Fowler said it is a survey of the space in front of Town Hall and that the Downtown Waynesville Commission would like to turn that space into a Town Square/event space. Councilmember Feichter asked if that project can wait for now. Mr. Fowler said they can't move forward with the project, including planning stages, without the survey. Councilmember Feichter asked Mr. Kinsland if some of the cardio equipment could be replaced now, and some the following year. He said yes, that is possible, and they could be receiving a grant in June which would help fund replacing all the cardio equipment. He added that the tennis courts were quoted at \$450,000 to be resurfaced and the wooden playground needs repairs. Councilmember Feichter said he's done six budgets and right now, the tax rate is about the same as it was in 2016. He said he researched ways to alleviate the tax burden on the elderly and low-income households. He found three programs that the state of North Carolina offers-Homestead Exemption, Circuit Breaker and Tax Deferment, and Property Tax Homestead Exclusion. Mr. Hites said residents could apply through the county tax assessor during specific times of the year, like open enrollment. Councilmember Feichter said when speaking with Tribridge, they agreed to provide some workforce housing in exchange for some property tax relief. He asked if the town could set up a program to grant a rebate for property taxes paid to certain income levels or certain aged people. Mr. Hites said probably not, but he and Ms. Bradley can look into it.

Mr. Hites said the stormwater fee is, by statute, a utility fee, but the stormwater program is unfunded and mandated and costing the town money. He said the fee would allow the town to not take money from the general fund to pay for the stormwater program. Councilmember Feichter confirmed with Mr. Hites that this would set up a stormwater enterprise fund.

Mayor Caldwell said for staff needs to be met, he calculated a four-cent tax rate increase. Councilmember Freeman said she is not in favor of any tax increases because of how much everything else has gone up, she doesn't want taxpayers to have to pay even more. She said the staff and department heads are incredible, and all the requests are much needed. She said they've put tax increases off for years, which led to trouble with the sewer plant. Councilmember Freeman said she can't agree to do a seven-cent tax rate increase, but she can be persuaded to do some increase. Councilmember Dickson said he cannot be in favor of a tax increase. He said the electric rate is going up and the stormwater fee will be added and that fees have gone up over the last seven years and taxes were raised three years ago. He said he is in favor of keeping the career track and a 2% COLA. Councilmember Dickson said next year could be better with the increase in value from the new developments. He added that the benefits package Waynesville offers is one of the best around. He said employee benefits cost the Town \$5.5 million. Councilmember Dickson suggested letting taxpayers vote on bond referendum.

Councilmember Feichter said a one cent tax rate increase on a property valued at \$249,000 would be about \$24 a year and four cents on the tax rate would be \$99.60 a year. Councilmember Freeman said she would not raise the tax rate by four cents and that two cents is reasonable. Councilmember Feichter said he could agree

to do four cents increase if those funds could be used for capital needs. Mr. Hites said that would also help fund four firefighters, a 2% COLA and 2.5% career track.

Councilmember Feichter requested that a budget be drafted that shows what can be provided with a two cent and a four cent tax rate increase.

Chief Adams said he would be willing to go without two patrol cars to increase the COLA to 3% instead of 2%.

**D. SCHEDULE OF FURTHER BUDGET SESSIONS/BUDGET PUBLIC HEARING**

***A motion was made by Councilmember Dickson, seconded by Councilmember Sutton, to continue this meeting to next Wednesday, May 1<sup>st</sup> at 5pm in the Municipal Conference Room, located at 16 S. Main Street. The motion passed unanimously.***

ATTEST:

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Gary Caldwell, Mayor

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Robert W. Hites, Jr. Town Manager

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Candace Poolton, Town Clerk