



BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
MINUTES
CONTINUED MEETING
July 29, 2024
6:30 PM

Mayor Huneycutt called the meeting to order. He asked Mrs. Leslie Murray, Town Clerk, to call the roll. Commissioner Brett Barbee, Commissioner Joey Carpenter, Commissioner Lanny Hathcock, Commissioner Bud Smith and Ms. Georgia Harvey, Town Administrator were present. Commissioner Jackson was absent until during open forum while speaker #2 was speaking.

Mayor Huneycutt asked everyone to stand for the Pledge of Allegiance.

Mayor Huneycutt then asked the board to amend the agenda to allow for a second public forum. Commissioner Barbee made a motion to amend the agenda to allow for a second public forum and Commissioner Carpenter seconded. Voted and carried unanimously.

Mayor Huneycutt then called on Ms. Harvey to provide an update. She shared that the Oakboro Police Department currently has five full-time officers and one part-time officer and the other shifts are through a contract with the Stanly County Sheriff's Office to fill the gaps. She shared that with the recent resignation of Chief TJ Smith, the board needs to consider all possible options for Oakboro Law Enforcement. She advised everyone that she has gathered state, county and local law enforcement information to share with the board and that it takes time for all members of the board to meet and hear collective information. Decisions of public safety in Oakboro should not be made in haste or without careful consideration, she stated. She also shared with everyone that there have been no unscheduled board meetings; however, she and the sheriff have met numerous times to discuss the current contract to fill staffing gaps and to gather information as one of the many options. Ms. Harvey also shared that she had communicated with other municipal chiefs of police for information on hiring a new chief and staff. She has also communicated with our municipal town administrators on their police department structures and the NC State Criminal Justice Standards Division which provided resources and contacts for assisting with processes needed in Oakboro. Finally, she has been in contact with the North Carolina League of Municipalities for resources. Ms. Harvey then wanted to inform everyone that closed session meetings are held to protect discussions on personnel issues, attorney information on legal and contractual issues – each of which may or may not involve the police department. She ended with stating that voting is done outside of closed session unless a vote would be detrimental to individuals/staff or attorney information on issues.

Open Forum

Mr. Jason Eschert, of 336 Jaida Lane, Oakboro was called upon to speak. He stated that he was sad to see Chief Smith have to leave and go to another agency. He shared his concerns of the details of his promotion to Assistant Chief saying that he was told Chief Smith wanted him to be his Assistant, but since then he has found out that wasn't true and that Chief Smith was forced to make Mr. Eschert the Assistant Chief. Assistant Chief Eschert stated that he would have never taken the position if someone was forced to give him that position. He shared that he and Chief Smith have talked and he believes him 100%. He said that the perception in the public was that he wanted Chief Smith's job. Assistant Chief Eschert said he never wanted Chief Smith's job and doesn't want it now. He shared that he wanted what

was best for the department and helping Chief Smith succeed. He felt it was wrong to force a man to promote someone. Assistant Chief Eschert stated that we have an officer that needs boots (he held up some boots that were damaged on the front sole). He felt this was embarrassing that he could not get permission to order some new boots. He shared that some of the board members were talking out in public and he was aware of those conversations. Assistant Chief Eschert told the board they represent the town and they should do what's best for the town. He commended the sheriff for having enough respect to share what was going on instead of hiding the information about the possibility of allowing the Stanly County Sheriff's Department to take over. He shared that during the time of his promotion, the board did not share any information regarding what was going on and he had his name run through the mud. He felt they should have defended what he was told and spoke up, but instead the board sat in silence. He is concerned about the police department and that someone else is doing the scheduling and that the personnel files were removed from the police department without conversation. He shared that Ms. Harvey has a key which opens the DCI terminal as well that only sworn law enforcement officers should have access to. He also pointed out that Mayor Huneycutt and Commissioner Hathcock had a key to the building. The officers do not have a key to the evidence room at this time he shared. His concern is that everyone on the board sits in silence and doesn't want to answer anyone's questions. That alone, according to Assistant Chief Eschert, tells him where he stands with the board. He thanked them for the time to speak.

Secondly, Mrs. Crystal Eschert of 336 Jaida Lane, Oakboro spoke. She stated that she is a concerned citizen of this town and also an Oakboro police officer's wife who is disgusted with everything going on right now. She asked at what point does the town administrator and the board stop and tell the truth adding that the police department shouldn't have to find out their fate from other sheriffs' deputies and a newspaper article. She shared that Oakboro has experienced officers and others waiting in the pipeline to be hired, but the town administrator wouldn't allow for hiring currently as she is acting Chief of Police. Mrs. Eschert stated that the newspaper article told the citizens that if the Stanly County Sheriff's Department took over that Oakboro would have access to all of these extra resources such as animal control and some others. She advised everyone that we currently have access to all of those resources and nothing would change. Mrs. Eschert stated that the sheriff's office can't even provide supplemental coverage for one deputy, so how are they going to cover 24 hours? She shared that the sheriff knows the scheduling gaps are there because he is scheduling OPD right now. She also brought up that the deputies are paid at time and a half. On that note, she shared there are some deputies that really do work and she sincerely appreciates that; however, there are others that sit behind a building next to the school. If they are behind the building, Mrs. Eschert questions, how are they protecting our town. She shared that meanwhile, the OPD officers are showing up for their shifts, getting their regular pay and they are doing all the work and property checks and even responding to a breaking and entering alone because the deputy was still sitting behind the school. Mrs. Eschert then asked Mayor Huneycutt was it a hard pill to swallow when he dealt with the police for his wreck report, stating it's okay when you need them. She shared she's not sure how Mayor Huneycutt expects to earn votes when he takes away jobs and safety away from the residents and the business owners. She shared that he did not have her vote. She then said that at countless board meetings that Commissioner Barbee expressed appreciation for the Oakboro Police Department and all that they do and now she is wondering why the sudden change. She shared Commissioner Carpenter has experienced interactions with the police department and police are good when one needs a favor and then asked Commissioner Carpenter is disbanding the police really the best option. She asked Commissioner Jackson if she had forgotten about the sound of gun shots. She reminded her she had experienced first-hand the need for assistance and a

quick response by Oakboro Police Department and even more why they need more than one officer at a time. Mrs. Eschert asked for everyone to imagine that situation but the responding unit was somewhere out in the county rather than an Oakboro Police Officer being within a mile down the road. She stated that Oakboro is only about 2.1 square miles. She then thanked Commissioner Smith for his transparency and for his constant support. At that time, her 3 minutes were up and she had to cut off her speech.

Linda Caputo of 298 Jaida Lane, Oakboro spoke next on what she had come to the board with in June, 2024. She was curious about Gold Street being paved and the probability of that happening. She also would like an update on the smell in the Ruby Ridge Subdivision from the sewer pump station on Gold Street.

Fourth, Mrs. Lynn Huneycutt of 126 N Haywood Street, Oakboro spoke to the board. Mrs. Huneycutt stated that she had sent the board an email and wanted to follow through with making sure it was put in the minutes. She shared that she as well as a lot of Oakboro is hoping our rumor mill is not correct. She shared that we need to continue with our own police department. She shared she has had many businesses in Oakboro for nearly 40 years, the Oakboro Police Department is very important for the safety and well-being of all businesses and to have adequate police coverage especially with all of her children at Oakboro Kids Club and Quality Child Care Center. She loves our Mayberry town and she wants to keep it even though we are growing. Her suggestions follow next. She shared we have an assistant chief of police and usually those are the ones that go in as the interim for the chief until the board hires. She stated she would like to see the board list the chief of police job because there are a lot of people who would love to be in our town and give everyone the opportunity and at that point have a hiring process. She shared that if the community was needed, she was sure there would be a lot of people at the meeting now that would sit on that committee to hire a police chief. She went on to say she would be glad to and that her son is a law enforcement officer with ALE. She said all of the police officers put their lives on the line every single day and she prays for them on a daily basis. Using the Stanly County Sheriff's Department is okay, but she suggested reaching out to other departments in our county and hire them to come help our guys until we can get enough feet on the ground. She shared that some of the sheriff's department is very young and very inexperienced. When she makes phone calls, she doesn't want anyone less than a year to come to any of her places because she has children that are with her that are in foster care and being hidden in Stanly County for a safe environment. She said the world has changed and she has a privacy fence around all of her businesses to make sure all of her children and employees are safe and that pulling a police department away from Oakboro is not the answer, it's actually the problem. She stated that ever since Covid, no one wants to work. We have LEOs that are great, some that are wonderful and some that are lazy but we need to find the ones that will work for us. She also stated that some of the businesses here in town are talking about moving because of the lack of police force and they are scared. Mrs. Huneycutt shared that we shouldn't be scared. We should be able to walk through our wonderful town and not be scared. She also said that the talk is embarrassing. She told the board if the town does not keep its own department, that she personally will be very disappointed in each and every board member. She finished by saying she doesn't like Oakboro to be in the news unless it's positive and the last two times it has been negative and she is very concerned.

Next, Mr. Shane Allen of 20456 Huneycutt Mill Road, Albemarle shared some information with the board. He started by talking about communication being key in their line of work and that was one of the first things that he and TJ Smith talked about when he was considering the job. Officer Allen stated

that up until about April of 2024, that the communication was good. He said that all that changed when they received an email of title changes for some of the department members. This email and the lack of communication afterwards started the ball rolling which eventually led to the resignation of nine officers including the most recent, Chief Smith. He informed everyone that all of the officers that are left are willing to bend over backwards to make this work until Oakboro gets fully restaffed. He said this included but was not limited to working overtime. All of those officers, he said, were willing to do that until the communication of the schedule ceased to exist. He said it seems like with every turn they were met with a roadblock of communication. He stated that the past few months, it seems like outside agencies have known what has happened with Oakboro more than the ones working in Oakboro have known. He shared that they have been locked out of their own evidence locker by someone who has no experience in law enforcement and now has access to sensitive information. Officer Allen shared that they also had to learn from the Stanly News & Press that the Sheriff's Department was going to take over Oakboro. He said it makes the meeting with Commissioner Hathcock and Town Administrator Harvey nothing but a stunt to show face. He finished with this, saying that over the past 9 months since Town Administrator Harvey had been with the town that we have lost a total of 11 officers and now it seems like we will lose our full police department. He asked if this is something that each of you sitting on the board that were elected by the people are proud of?

Following Mr. Allen, Mrs. Jennifer Allen of 20456 Huneycutt Mill Road, Albemarle spoke. She mentioned she was Officer Allen's wife and that she was not a citizen of this town; however, she felt the need to share about what she was seeing and hearing. She shared that she has quickly fallen in love with the Town of Oakboro. She loves the fact that the citizens walk up to the officers and shared she feels there is a charm about this town. She continued on by saying that her husband left the Stanly County Sheriff's Department in February, 2022. He intended never to return to law enforcement. In early December 2022, Officer Allen shared with her that former Chief TJ Smith had contacted him about coming to work for Oakboro and offered him a job. She shared that her husband's light started to dim from the rumor mill, lack of communication and guidance. She went on to say that she learned early on in her career that honesty and clear communication can often prevent conflict and unnecessary situations. She doesn't feel like the board has learned this and hasn't exercised this over these last few months. She said that the continuous silence has led to more accusations and division within the police department. The small communication that has been released from the board has been nothing but a PR comment, according to Mrs. Allen, as well as individual board members posting hostile comments on Facebook. She said it has been absolutely heartbreaking to know that these men found out from the Stanly News and Press with comments from Sheriff Crisco that the town was considering turning all law enforcement over to the Stanly County Sheriff's Department. She believes that turning everything over is a cowardly move and that the board should face the poor decisions and havoc they created along with the town administrator. She 1000% believes that if the board would ask the officers to come alongside and find a solution, that all of the officers would do that.

Mr. Harold Thompson of 234 James Road, Oakboro was the next citizen to speak. He stated he was a short-term resident of Oakboro being here only 16 months. He stated he does appreciate where the men and women sit on the board. He knew it could be a really hot seat. Mr. Thompson shared that he is really concerned if Oakboro relinquishes the police department. He shared that he had experienced the fire department in Norwood resigning. He said the biggest thing that would happen if the town turned over the police department to the sheriff's department is that the town would lose part of their identity as well as the sense of community. He commended the board for doing a tremendous job in keeping the

community feel. He stated that he was afraid if this happens, that the police department would never be able to rebuild due to the startup cost it would take to resurrect a new Oakboro Police Department. He asked what would be done with the equipment the department has now if it is turned over to the sheriff's office. He believes that Sheriff Crisco is a great sheriff and stated he campaigned for him. However, he knows that the sheriff's department is not built or operated to supply what the citizens need. He shared that he would really like to see, as a new member of Oakboro, the board begin the process of interviewing for a chief of police.

Pastor Deon Anderson of 601 Pine Street, Oakboro spoke to the board. He is pastor of Galilee Missionary Church. He shared that he is an eight-year military veteran who has also been in law enforcement with Kannapolis and Cabarrus County Sheriff's Office all together for 20 years. He stated to the board that it would be a big mistake to turn the Oakboro Police Department over to someone else. He said we have good people in the Town of Oakboro who feel safe with what we have now. He shared that it's a sad thing when you sit here and allow the people to not feel safe anymore. He said what he is hearing from the church members is the main reason he is here. He also went on to say that we need to feel safety and security in our community. He said these officers know how to community police and go to each and every house. He said the people in the homes in Oakboro feel comfortable with our police here in Oakboro. He stated that he personally thinks the Oakboro officers have done a fantastic job. He said maybe they don't write all the tickets in the world, but at least we don't have people breaking into other people's houses. He told the board he heard about TJ leaving and shared that he felt the town was letting go of one of the best men, that if he had a fault, it would be how big his heart is. He said if the board allows Chief Smith to walk off the grounds that they are making a big mistake. Pastor Anderson also said that as a man of God and a man in the community his responsibility is to make sure his people at Galilee feel safe. If he sees they do not feel safe, then he will stand up in front of the board and get towns from all around and will make sure the board provides safety and security like we already have.

Last, Mrs. Lisa Cratty of 225 Carrie Drive shared her concerns with the board. She shared that she feels like it would be a terrible thing to disband our police department. She also stated she is in the fire department and she sees a lot of crime other people don't see and there are a lot of drugs in our community. She said there is a lot of beach traffic. Mrs. Cratty said if they disband the police department that will invite crime into our community. She said this is a good place to hide. She mentioned there was a tent community on the outskirts of town and that there are people who are known drug addicts in this town. She questioned what makes them feel safe enough to come into our town. Mrs. Cratty also shared that the town has put a lot of money in the police department and there was a lot of equipment there at the police department; why would we want to get rid of that? She also questioned why would we pay the police department time and a half when we have great police officers sitting right here. She mentioned that there was someone pulled over at Parker Motor. She also mentioned that someone ran the red light in town and almost hit her, but an officer saw that and pulled the car over. She reiterated that we have a great police department here.

The public forum was considered closed at this time.

Commissioner Smith asked to say a few words. He started by saying he believes in being completely transparent. Commissioner Smith made a motion for our town to keep the Oakboro Police Department in its current state, that we appoint Assistant Chief Eschert as Interim Chief of Oakboro Police Department to allow Assistant Chief Eschert to help fill the open vacancies as soon as possible in order

to rebuild the department to full capacity, that Assistant Chief Eschert be in charge of scheduling and all aspects of running and overseeing the duties of Oakboro Police Department and finally that the vacancy of the Oakboro Police Chief be posted by the end of the week. Commissioner Carpenter seconded. The vote was 3 for and 2 against with Commissioner Jackson agreeing with Commissioners Smith and Carpenter. Commissioners Hathcock and Barbee voted against. The motion carried.

Adjourn

Commissioner Hathcock made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Commissioner Barbee seconded. Voted and carried unanimously.

Christopher N Huneycutt, Mayor

Leslie Hatley-Murray, Town Clerk/Finance Officer