



**LUCAMA BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
MONDAY, OCTOBER 2, 2023
LUCAMA TOWN HALL
BOARD ROOM**

MINUTES

1. Call to Order

Mayor, Jeff Johnson, (hereinafter “Mayor Johnson”) called to order the regular meeting of the Town of Lucama Board of Commissioners (hereinafter “Board”) at 6 pm on October 2, 2023.

2. Roll Call

Mayor Johnson conducted roll call – by use of sign-in. The following were present:

Commissioner, Michael Best (hereinafter “Comm. Best”)
Commissioner, David Johnson (hereinafter “Comm. Johnson”)
Commissioner, Peggy Lamm (hereinafter “Comm. Lamm”)
Commissioner, Judy Mason (hereinafter “Comm. Mason”)
Commissioner, Keely Pate (hereinafter “Comm. Pate”)
Town Administrator, Darlene Newsome (hereinafter “Admin. Newsome”)
Town Clerk, Dena Owens (hereinafter “Clerk Owens”)
Billing Clerk, Ashleigh Hooks (hereinafter “Clerk Hooks”)
Town Attorney, Gabe DuSablou (hereinafter “Attorney Dusablou”)

3. Approval of Minutes of Last Meeting

Mayor Johnson gave the Board an opportunity to review the proposed minutes from the September 5, 2023, meeting and monthly financial report.

MOTION: Comm. Mason made motion to approve the September 5, 2023, meeting minutes and financial report; seconded by Comm. Best. Motion passed by unanimous vote.

4. Welcoming of Guests and Public Comments

Mayor Johnson welcomed guests and opened the floor for public comments, reminding them that those who signed up for public comment would be given three minutes to speak.

Cheryl Raper of 308 West Blalock Road addressed the Board. She mentioned that her light bill continues to go up. She expressed that she has a problem with that. Her water and sewer are great. She further stated that she sits at home in

the dark every night. She mentioned that she only dries her clothes for 20 minutes and then hangs them on a wooden rack to finish drying because of the light bill. She mentioned again that her water was good. She wanted to let the Board know and she could prove it: it keeps going up and up. She has changed nothing. She has changed nothing for her household. She thanked the Board before leaving the table.

Dave Howell of 100 Pine Street addressed the Board. He wanted to share with the Board what his bills had been and then would like to get their comment on why they are the way they are. He mentioned that the rate increase that he saw on their bill from September, the October bill, the increase alone was 88 percent. The rate he calculated from the usage and the dollars for the electric, the rate on the October bill came out to 27.3 cents per kilowatt hour. He stated while looking at the packet that was handed out at the meeting, the most expensive rates showing for the next year would be the .15 cent range. He continued that he had graphed out what it has been and offered to hand it to the Board for back up documentation. He wants to understand why and wondered if it is something that everyone is experiencing. He thanked the Board before leaving the table.

Brittany Clemens of 100 Terry Street addressed the Board. She mentioned that with everybody else her light bill had also gone up. She stated that they average between 1500 and 2000 kilowatts a month, and that last month she was read at 4,494 kilowatts, making her bill \$898. She was told that the rates went up last month and she understands that. Her rates did go up last month and so did her bill. She mentioned that this month there was no way that she had used 3,000 more kilowatts than she did the month before. She stated that she has video proof of the men coming to read her meter, and not read her meter – numbers are being written down and they are expected to pay for it. The rates everywhere else are Freemont - .12; Pikeville - .13; Smithfield - .09; Pinetops - .13. We are at .15. She questioned why it went up when the town is not through the year. She stated that the rates had just gone up in December. In Jan. of 2022 it went from .11 to .135. She said that we are eight months in, and it has already gone up within a year. Two times, within a year. She mentioned that her new meter was installed on 9/28 and as of today her meter is reading 186 and if averaged out it would be about 1400 a month. She stated again that there was no way she used 4,495, that the numbers were not correct. She said that in June her water was read incorrectly. Same thing. It was fixed, but she didn't have a way of proving what was on her meter because it could not be seen. She said that they came out to replace it and did not give them an opportunity to look at it. She said it was not right and stated that the Board knew it wasn't.

Matt Creech of 107 East Blalock Road addressed the Board. He said he wanted to address, obviously the Board knew why the citizens were there. He mentioned that the Board claims that Lucama is the least expensive Town, the cheapest. He said that the Town isn't, but the most expensive. "Why, is I don't know," he said.

He mentioned that Black Creek is at .13. The cheapest is in the city, of all places, and is at .09. He mentioned that the reason he knows the information is because Brittany Clemens and himself called each and every one of the Towns and looked on their websites to verify what they were reading was correct, and it is. He stated that each time they are told "the meter is wrong, the meter's wrong, the meter's wrong, the meter's wrong." He said they've had people come to the town, of which he has verifiable proof, showing that people go and are told, yes, they agree that the meter was wrong, and they changed it. He questioned why? He said, "Either two things has happened, one is that the Town's staff is inept, which I don't think it is and they don't know what they are doing, which I really don't think that looking at this board here right now and as well as the town staff. Or two, something else is going on. And we are tired of it. To pay ... my bill right now is \$550, yet I average 12 to 1800 kilowatts per month. And on cold months, I break no more than 2100. Suddenly, I break 2500 in the last two months. Why, I have no idea." He continued that to hit on Mrs. Clemens' statement, "we have a fiscal year that began in May or in June, specifically in May or June and now we change it again, eight months later here in October and September. Why, I have no idea. Why without the town's approval, without letting anyone know. And we are not going to stand for it. Thank you."

Becky Medlin of 5019 Saint Mary's Church Road was at the meeting to speak with the Board. She mentioned that she was here like everyone else. She had gone back for the last six months to see what her bills had run. She stated there were only two in the home, she, and her husband, both retired. She said that it could be very difficult when getting a light bill of four to five hundred dollars. She mentioned that in April her bill was \$121.10, it wasn't hot then. The next month the bill was \$161.16. In June her light bill was \$108.39. She said July was a hot month and her bill was \$145.37. She mentioned asking why her bills had gone up and it was stated because the weather was hot. She felt like if that was the case, her July bill should have been more because July was hot. For August, her bill was \$176.72. She mentioned that she felt like that was still good and could be paid with their budget. The next bill that she got for one month was \$442.43. She does not understand how a light bill can go from \$176 to \$442. She said she was told that the rates had gone up, that they had used more electricity, but they had not done anything differently. She mentioned that she is just a concerned citizen just like everyone else. She again stated that they were retired and there was no way that they could pay a \$500 light bill every month with the rest of their bills and continue to survive off retirement. She mentioned having to get back out and get a job, just to pay the light bill. She thanked the Board before leaving the table.

Admin. Newsome mentioned that back in December, according to Kevin O'Donnell, our energy consultant, he recommended that the town increase the utility bills because one of the power suppliers went down. While reading information from the handout that was available to the public, she read that the environmentalist killed the Atlantic Coast Line. The towns went with the Mountain

Valley Pipeline and they were doing their best to kill it. The Town was losing money and based on what the Town was losing, the engineer stated that there needed to be an increase. When he first recommended the increase, the town did not increase it, but tried to hold off as much as possible. The Town ended up with a deficit of \$670,000 plus in utilities. She said the Town had no choice but to increase. An increase was made in January and then one in July, that did not begin until September. She shared the rate schedule that had been available. She mentioned that everyone was suffering, but that they were trying to keep the town going. She again stated that the increase was based on the engineer/consultant.

Comm. Johnson mentioned that everyone knew that the town was changing all meters, some which were 20 to 25 years old. He said the older meters were slowing down and that the town was losing money. He mentioned that there are now true readings.

Admin. Newsome mentioned that some of the meters were reading slower because of age. She requested that the Public Works Director, Thom Goff, come up and explain what the town is going through. Thom mentioned that some of the old meters were not even reading. Some commercial customers were not being charged correctly because of it. He mentioned that some of the old meters worked from magnets. Over time, after going around and around, they have slowed down. With digital meters, there is an accuracy rating of .0001. Admin. Newsome mentioned that she had received information from the company from where the meters were purchased and said that they are calibrated before they leave the manufacturer. Director Goff mentioned that the new meters are "smart" and are accurate. During the change of meters, the town's linemen found several insufficiencies that could have caused house fires. The old meter bases were burned and began burning the back of the meter. He mentioned that one customer had wired his service backwards and the meter was reading backwards. He said the new metering system is like AI and is the future, it is where we are.

Regarding high bills, Dir. Goff mentioned that he complains as well. He stated that he lives in Fremont and could also show them a light bill that is \$548. It is only he and his wife living at the home. He mentioned that the weather men can attest that it has been the hottest time on record of any time, which is going to make the bills go higher. During the heat the air conditioners will run 24 hours, especially with it being 80 to 90 degrees at nighttime.

Many questions were asked by citizens in the meeting towards Dir. Goff. Mayor Johnson, at the recommendation of Attorney DuSablou, mentioned that the public comment portion of the meeting was concluded and suggested if anyone else had any questions or concerns or wanted to speak with Dir. Goff to call the town office.

5. Request for Board Approval

Mayor Johnson presented to the Board Ordinance No. 23-04 requesting road closure for the Down on Main Street Harvest Fest taking place on Saturday, October 28 from 7:30 to 4:30.

MOTION: Comm. Mason made motion to approve Ordinance No 23-04 closing Main Street from Grove Street to the Rouse and Campbell intersection; seconded by Comm. Johnson. Motion passed by unanimous vote.

Mayor Johnson presented the Planning and Adjustment Board decision regarding the rezoning of properties at 6405 US Highway 301 and 114 S. Main Street. Clerk Owens mentioned that although the Planning and Adjustment Board had made their decision that the two properties would have to be heard during a public hearing and mentioned that it would be forthcoming.

6. Departmental Reports

Comm. Mason reported that the Fire Department had a total of 40 calls – three being in Town and 37 in the County. For the year, there have been 293 calls. She reported that the Department was always busy and doing things for the Town.

Comm. Mason did not report anything for the electric department but mentioned they had been working very hard.

For the water and sewer report, Comm. Johnson mentioned that there was one pump that the Town was waiting for at the Cabin Branch Lift Station. All the other stations he said were up to par.

Comm. Best mentioned that the sidewalks had not currently been completed. He mentioned that the park looks good. He stated that there were two events planned in the month of October: The Down on Main Street – Harvest Festival – the Town’s first – will take place on October the 28th from 10 am to 4 pm. He mentioned that vendors and food trucks, bouncy houses and music were already planned. There are currently 30 vendors on Main Street and nine food trucks. He requested that all come out and support the event. The next event will take place on the 31st of October – the Trunk or Treat from 6 – 8 pm at the Community Building partnering with Little Rock Church as has been done in the past. He mentioned that last year’s event went great and was very successful. He stated that there would be a food truck at the Trunk or Treat event for parents and families that wanted to eat before Trick or Treating.

Comm. Pate reported for the Sheriff’s Department that there were 202 calls total. There were 170 self-initiated calls and 32 calls for service. He also mentioned that

the Little Rock Church Road event of the five-month-old child's death was under investigation.

Regarding beautification, Comm. Pate mentioned that he had nothing further to report more than last month.

Comm. Lamm reported that the door count for the Library in September was 208, reference questions 123, computer usage was 16, there were 384 materials checked out and 8 library cards issued. During the month of September, the Library kicked off "Sock It To Me in Socktober", a community event to provide items to the Veteran's Residential Services of Wilson County. It did extremely well, and a report will follow the October 19th distribution. There were 12 attendees present in the Secrets of the Sea Turtle program. Participants created a uniquely designed necklace and answered questions about the sea turtle's life cycle. The upcoming programs for November 16th are "Let's Talk Turkey" and "Pajama Storytime". The library will be closed in observance of Thanksgiving – November 23rd and 24th. Normal hours of operation will resume Monday, November 27th.

Comm. Lamm mentioned that things are going well at the Community Building. She has had no complaints, and the folks are happy.

Comm. Pate mentioned notices that the Town had sent out regarding junked and untagged cars. He stated that some of the residents who received letters had spoken with him and said that they did not have cars that were not insured, licensed and drivable. He suggested that they attend the meeting and voice their concerns. Mayor Johnson mentioned to Comm. Pate that the residents could also call the office to get further information regarding the letter that was sent.

Comm. Johnson asked about whether there had been a lot of rereads of meters during the last month. Clerk Hooks answered that she did not have many meters that needed to be re-read. She stated there were a few that were hard to read, and she had put work orders in through the billing system for those. She mentioned that those were not rereads, but merely a reading need. There have been no rereads. She stated that when changing out the meters in the billing system that she found one in 500 that had been misread and needed to be fixed, giving the customer an adjustment. Comm. Johnson stated that as the new meters are put in, with them being verified, it seems to show how much money the Town had lost in the past with meters not reading correctly. Admin. Newsome mentioned that the engineers said that when going with the new meters that the Town would be surprised as to how much money that Town had lost in old meters. Comm. Pate questioned what the current rate is per kilowatt hour. Admin. Newsome answered that there was a flat rate of \$13.20, then it is .15 per kilowatt hour. Clerk Hooks mentioned that customers are taking the kilowatt hours and dividing them into the total for the electric. That is an incorrect way to do math. The base rate of \$13.20 must be taken from the total of the electric charge. Once that has been

done the kilowatts should be divided into the remaining total. When doing so, the amount per kilowatt hour is .15.

Clerk Owens mentioned that Clerk Hooks is doing an audit of all meters when making the change out in the system, and she is ensuring that the previous readings have not been overread. Clerk Owens also mentioned that some bills include readings from two separate meters due to the change out. It is important that customers add the usage from both meters before dividing it into the cost of the electricity on bills. If the full usage is not divided into the cost, then it will appear that the customer has been overcharged.

Attorney DuSablón asked Clerk Hooks when doing the audit of the meters if there was a mechanism that alerts her of usage that is higher than what would normally be. Clerk Hooks mentioned that usage is high across the customer base. She stated that when she had done the work on putting the new meters in the software that she only found the one overread. She is keeping all paperwork of the changeouts for verification. She mentioned that the high usage seems to have been found on the older meters. However, with the new meters she said that readings could be taken in “real-time” and she could pull readings at any time and show customers what their current usage is. She is afraid that because of issues in the past with the billing, customers just are not trusting of the process.

Comm. Pate asked if anyone is currently reading any electric meters. Clerk Hooks stated that all readings are pulled from the new meters through the system. When all the new meters are completely installed there will be no read errors, etc. Once all meters are in the only meters that will need to be read are the water meters.

Attorney DuSablón asked if the customers complaining that their bills had such a high rise in cost had called or been into the office for explanation. Clerk Hooks mentioned that some had been in, she had spoken with them before the meeting that seemed to be fine. However, she stated that if the customers are still not satisfied that she could look further if needed. Attorney DuSablón mentioned that issues with meter reads, or the like is only part of the issue. The other issue is excessive consumption, which is not something that the Town can control. Certainly, if there is an issue with the meter, then the Town can control and investigate it. If the meter is working correctly, then the issue is excessive consumption by the customer – not a meter problem.

Comm. Johnson asked where the new meters are sent for calibration. He mentioned that the City of Wilson in the past had calibrated the old meters for the Town. He suggested doing a spot check to see, to make sure they are reading correctly. Admin. Newsome mentioned that the new meters had been calibrated before shipment. Comm. Johnson asked if there was a seal on the meters stating the calibration. Admin. Newsome mentioned that there was a seal. There was

one meter than looked as if the seal had been tampered with, which will be checked out to insure there are not problems.

Mayor Johnson thanked Rich Moore with McDavid Associates for being present at the meeting. Mr. Moore was present to meet with residents who had complaints about the water service at their home. He stepped out of the meeting to speak with Gladys Martinez and Matt Creech regarding their water concerns.

7. Adjournment

Mayor Johnson adjourned the meeting at approximately 6:45 pm, October 5, 2023, upon motion of Board.

MOTION: Motion was made to adjourn by Comm. Best; seconded by Comm. Johnson. Motion carried by unanimous vote.

Respectfully Submitted: Dena Owens, Town Clerk