

**TOWN OF BIG STONE GAP, VIRGINIA
REGULAR COUNCIL MEETING**

**COUNCIL CHAMBERS
505 E 5TH STREET S
BIG STONE GAP, VA**

June 09, 2026

6:30 PM

AGENDA ITEM 1

Call to Order and Roll Call

Mayor Johnson called the meeting to order.

Council Present: Hon. Gary Johnson, Mayor
 Hon. Kent Gilley, Vice-Mayor
 Hon. Robert Bloomer, Councilman
 Hon. Adam Harris, Councilman
 Hon. W. Turk Hollinger, Councilman
 Hon. Crystal Lyke, Councilwoman

Council Absent: Hon. Tyler Hughes, Councilman

Staff Present: Mr. Stephen Lawson, Town Manager
 Ms. Amanda L. Hawkins, Town Clerk/Treasurer
 Mr. Matt Russell, Chief of Police
 Mr. Charles Bledsoe, Town Attorney

Planning Commission Present: Ms. Amy Hubbard –Chairwoman
 Mrs. Freda Bishop – Member
 Mr. Shawn Eldridge - Member
 Mr. Kent Gilley – Council Rep.
 Mr. Brian Jones, Member
 Mr. Tyler McFarland - Member
 Mr. Matthew Bright, Administrator

Planning Commission Absent: Mr. Greg Kress – Vice-Chair
 Mr. John Morrissey – Member
 Mr. Lorenzo Rodriquez – Member

AGENDA ITEM 2 - INVOCATION by Reverend Rick Whitten, New Hope Assembly of God.

AGENDA ITEM 3 - PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

AGENDA ITEM 4 - ADOPT OR AMEND THE AGENDA

Motion by Harris, seconded by Bloomer, that the agenda for the Regular Council Meeting of June 09, 2026 be amended to add agenda items 9f Proclamation – The Wicked Willow Hair Co and 10 Fair Housing Practices. Motion resulted as follows:

Ayes: Bloomer, Gilley, Harris, Hollinger, Johnson, Lyke

Nays: None Abstain: None Absent: Hughes

Mayor Johnson recessed the Regular Council Meeting and opened the Joint Public Hearing.

AGENDA ITEM 5 – JOINT PUBLIC HEARING - Preliminary Site Plan Review for the former Walmart Property

Mayor Johnson made the statement that before the floor was opened to public comment Council wanted to inform the public that the property being discussed for development is not owned by the Town but is privately owned. He said this hearing is a legal requirement the Town must complete prior to the project moving forward and to receive comments from the public related to the topic of this development.

Mayor Johnson asked for Comments from Citizens.

Mike Clisso said that Chris White, the property owner, is seeking a commercial-use designation for the property. According to the presentation, several commercial developers, including grocery stores, home improvement retailers, and other businesses, have expressed interest in the site, but no commitments have been secured to date. The proposed development would consist of modular single-family homes on approximately 36 lots, with home prices estimated to range from \$225,000 to \$275,000. Exterior lot layouts may change as the project progresses. The development would be separated from the existing trailer park on Neely Road by fencing. The plan is the rental center would move in beside of the Dollar Tree and Little Mexico would move into where Verizon was located so the whole left-hand side will be commercial and we will still have some room on the upper end to add an additional business. Development of the interior lots will depend on the sale of the perimeter lots.

Mary Moses, who resides at 103 W. 2nd Street North, voiced opposition to the proposal and raised numerous concerns. She emphasized the need for additional businesses to support local residents and keep spending within the community. She also noted that there is limited property available for commercial development and expressed concerns about the capacity of the area's water and sewer systems.

Michael Mason also spoke and raised questions regarding appraisals and financing for modular homes compared to double-wide homes. He stressed the importance of maintaining separation between residential development and retail businesses and encouraged the Council to carefully evaluate the ability of existing infrastructure and services to support the proposed homes.

AGENDA ITEM 5 – JOINT PUBLIC HEARING - Preliminary Site Plan Review for the former Walmart Property (continued):

Paul Clark, 146 Azalea Lane, spoke in opposition to the proposal, emphasizing the community's need for additional businesses rather than more housing. He stated that attracting businesses would generate tax revenue and provide employment opportunities for local residents. He specifically mentioned the need for a department store and expressed concern that additional housing near the site could discourage commercial investment. He also noted that young people need local employment opportunities as much as they need housing.

Shawn Eldridge, 1571 Main Avenue West, commented on the proposed home values, noting that the projected price range of \$250,000 to \$275,000 would be considered at the lower end of the housing market.

Mr. Lawson read the following email sent for Public Comment from Chris Maness. I serve as a member of the Scott County Board of Supervisors, representing District 6, which includes Duffield and the communities around it. I am unable to attend the next joint meeting in person; however, I would be grateful if you would share the following comment on my behalf, offered in the spirit of regional partnership and in support of expanded housing across Southwest Virginia. I write to encourage the Big Stone Gap Town Council and the Big Stone Gap Planning Commission to permit the construction of housing, as they see fit, at the site of the former Walmart. I recognize that the significance of this issue is not always fully appreciated across the region, but I believe housing is among the most pressing needs facing our shared future. Without it, we make it far more attractive for the next generation to leave, and we risk seeing our towns steadily shrink and contract. We need housing of all kinds, and we need it now, particularly starter homes and higher-density options such as townhouses, condominiums, and apartments. The need is concrete. In Duffield, which I represent, we are adding two hundred new jobs, yet Scott County does not have 200 new homes to accommodate the workforce those positions will bring. We will be looking to our neighbors throughout the region to help meet that demand. Additional housing also makes it easier to attract businesses and service providers that would benefit our residents. For these reasons, I respectfully urge the Council and Commission to welcome the housing that can be built. By all means, ensure it is of high quality and a genuine benefit to residents, but please build as much as the site will responsibly allow, because the region is going to need every single house if we are to stop the outflow of residents and move towards growth. Thank you for your time and for the opportunity to contribute to this important conversation. I look forward to continuing to work alongside you and our neighboring communities.

Mayor Johnson closed the Joint Public Hearing and reconvened the Regular Council Meeting.

AGENDA ITEM 6 – COMMENTS FROM CITIZENS

Joyce Palmer, representing the Lonesome Pine School and Heritage Center, inquired about the possibility of relocating the Veterans Plaque to the walkway at the Lonesome Pine School and Heritage center near the flags. She suggested that doing so could increase visibility and attract more visitors to the area.

AGENDA ITEM 6 – COMMENTS FROM CITIZENS (Continued):

Paul Clark, 146 Azalea Lane, requested the installation of a traffic camera at the intersection of Dogwood Terrace and Gilley Avenue due to ongoing traffic concerns. Mr. Clark said he was also the Chairperson of the Lonesome Pine Arts and Crafts and wanted to express concerns about smoke originating from the island across the river. He said the smoke had become so heavy at times that it has negatively affected visitors and patrons attending the event and they had to leave. He stated that additional concerns regarding Azalea Lane, which he noted has not been paved in thirty-five years. He said that he has spoken to Town Council numerous time regarding the paving and was told there was no money but then Country Boy Hill was paved again. He said that that Boyd's paving done his driveway and they stated that they could pave the entire roadway for less than the estimated cost of the patchwork repairs currently being considered and encouraged the council to evaluate long-term paving solutions.

Juanita Collins, 831 Quillen Road expressed concerns about the condition of the roadway and requested that it be paved. The resident noted that the road is very narrow and that a utility pole is positioned so close to the roadway that vehicle mirrors have struck it while passing.

Michael Mason, 692 2nd Avenue East, commented positively on the appearance of A.K. Fraley Park and thanked those involved in its upkeep. He also discussed the town's paving plans, stating that residents would benefit from a clear guideline and timeline for future paving projects, so citizens know what to expect and when improvements are scheduled.

Mary Moses, 103 W. 2nd Street North, encouraged the town to develop and communicate a snow removal plan well in advance of winter weather events. While commending Public Works staff for their efforts, she noted that snow removal had been a concern in previous years and emphasized the importance of notifying residents ahead of time regarding planned operations. She also suggested that the town improve communication methods to keep citizens better informed about public services and community issues.

James Terrell of 476 Ridge Place thanked the council for its work on behalf of the community but expressed disappointment that the tax rate remained unchanged. He stated that he had hoped taxes could be reduced. He also raised concerns regarding enforcement of the town's inoperable vehicle ordinance, which was adopted on July 9, 2024. He asked what additional steps could be taken to remove abandoned or inoperable vehicles from properties and improve neighborhood appearance. According to his comments, little progress has been made over the past two years despite notices being sent to property owners. He stated that some residents have refused to comply with those notices, resulting in ongoing concerns throughout the community.

Mary Moses, 103 W. 2nd Street North, spoke about the importance of maintaining and improving existing properties throughout the town. She expressed concern about a rundown property located on a corner lot and suggested that efforts should be focused on cleaning up neglected properties and improving existing community assets. She also asked about the town's policies and regulations regarding vacant properties.

AGENDA ITEM 6 – COMMENTS FROM CITIZENS (continued)

Natasha Lee, Wise County Building and Zoning, discussed concerns related to zoning and code enforcement. She noted that zoning officials are currently working to establish a more effective process for handling violation notices. She stated that, at present, the Town's options are limited and that property owners often view violation letters as little more than a nuisance.

Joyce Palmer commented on plans for a memorial park and acknowledged that another proposal is being considered. She suggested that resources might be better directed toward improvements at the school rather than developing an additional memorial location.

Michael Mason addressed the issue of inoperable vehicles within the community. He encouraged residents to notify town officials directly about concerns rather than relying solely on county authorities, emphasizing the importance of keeping local leadership informed about ongoing issues.

Leann Polier, 1512 Holton Avenue East, expressed support for the council and noted that the community benefits from low taxes. She stated that residents choose to live in the area because of its affordability and quality of life. While acknowledging that improvements are still needed, she thanked the council for recent track repairs and suggested that new reserved seating should be considered as a future project.

Linda Roach noted that empty buildings downtown remain vacant and suggested that the town evaluate successful approaches used by neighboring communities to attract businesses and encourage redevelopment. She also commented that renters have limited housing options available and emphasized the need to improve existing homes while continuing efforts to attract new businesses.

AGENDA ITEM 7 - GENERAL ORDER OF BUSINESS

- a. Approval of the minutes of the Council Workshop Meeting of May 05, 2026.
Recommended Action: Approve as presented.
- b. Approval of the minutes of the Regular Council Meeting of May 12, 2026.
- c. Recommended Action: Approve as presented.
- d. Departmental Reports for the month of May 2026.
- e. Recommended Action: Received and filed.
- f. Approval of the minutes of the Special Council Meeting of May 19, 2026.
- g. Recommended Action: Approve as presented.
- h. Approval of the minutes of the Public Utilities Committee Meeting of May 21, 2026.
- i. Recommended Action: Approve as presented.
- j. Approval of the minutes of the Budget Finance Audit Committee of May 22, 2026.
- k. Recommended Action: Approve as presented.
- l. Approval of the minutes of the Special Council Meeting of May 22, 2026.
- m. Recommended Action: Approve as presented.

Motion by Hughes, seconded by Bloomer, that the General Order of Business be approved as presented. Motion resulted as follows:

Ayes: Bloomer, Gilley, Harris, Hollinger, Johnson, Lyke

Nays: None

Abstain: None

Absent: Hughes

AGENDA ITEM 8 - TOWN ENGINEER'S REPORT

Matt Lane provided updates on several ongoing projects:

- **Phase 3 Project:** The design phase has been completed, and easement agreements are currently being finalized. Party reviews and audits remain underway.
- **Hospital Sewer Shed Project:** The surveys have been completed, and the layout is finalized and the preliminary design complete.
- **ESG Project:** Engineering plans have been completed, and the project is currently obtaining permits with advertisements to go out in the next two to three months.
- **Proctor Street Sidewalk Project:** Comments and responses from the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) have been received. The project is expected to be advertised for bids within approximately 30 days.
- **Sunrise Village Project:** Preliminary design work is underway, working on the hydraulics section of the project with VDOT.

AGENDA ITEM 9 – TOWN MANAGERS REPORT**AGENDA ITEM 9a – Resolution 13-2026 – Reappoint John Morrissey – Planning Commission**

Mr. Lawson asked that Council approve Resolution 13-2026 being a resolution reappointing John Morrissey to a four-year term on the Big Stone Gap Planning Commission to expire on August 31, 2030.

Motion by Lyke, seconded by Bloomer, that Council approve Resolution 13-2026 being a resolution reappointing John Morrissey to a four-year term on the Big Stone Gap Planning Commission to expire on August 31, 2030. Motion resulted as follows:

Ayes: Bloomer, Gilley, Harris, Hollinger, Johnson, Lyke
Nays: None Abstain: None Absent: Hughes

AGENDA ITEM 9b – ORDINANCE 14-2026 – FY2026-2027 Proposed Budget

Mr. Lawson asked Council to approve Ordinance 14-2026 being an ordinance adopting the budget for the Town of Big Stone Gap, VA for the fiscal year July 1, 2026 through June 30, 2027, appropriating funds for the fiscal year and placing levies upon all real estate, personal property, bank stock, licenses, fees, consumer utility services, meals tax, vehicle license tax, cigarette tax, transient occupancy tax, and all other levies previously imposed or modified herein.

Motion by Adam Harris, seconded by Crystal Lyke, that Council approve Ordinance 14-2026 being an ordinance adopting the budget for the Town of Big Stone Gap, VA for the fiscal year July 1, 2026 through June 30, 2027, appropriating funds for the fiscal year and placing levies upon all real estate, personal property, bank stock, licenses, fees, consumer utility services, meals tax, vehicle license tax, cigarette tax, transient occupancy tax, and all other levies previously imposed or modified herein. Motion resulted as follows:

Ayes: Bloomer, Gilley, Harris, Hollinger, Johnson, Lyke
Nays: None Abstain: None Absent: Hughes

AGENDA ITEM 9c – PROCLAMATION – Dandelion Darlin Boutique, LLC

Mr. Lawson asked Council to approve a proclamation welcoming Tyra Danielle Parks, owner of Dandelion Darlin Boutique, LLC, located at 323 Shawnee Avenue in Big Stone Gap.

Motion by Lyke, seconded by Harris, that Council approve a proclamation welcoming Tyra Danielle Parks, owner of Dandelion Darlin Boutique, LLC, located at 323 Shawnee Avenue in Big Stone Gap. Motion resulted as follows:

Ayes: Bloomer, Gilley, Harris, Hollinger, Johnson, Lyke
Nays: None Abstain: None Absent: Hughes

AGENDA ITEM 9d – Parade Permit

Mr. Lawson asked Council to approve a parade permit for the 4th of July Festivities on Friday, July 4, 2026 at 4:00 pm.

Motion by Lyke, seconded by Gilley, that Council approve a parade permit for the 4th of July Festivities on Friday, July 4, 2026 at 4:00 pm. Motion resulted as follows:

Ayes: Bloomer, Gilley, Harris, Hollinger, Johnson, Lyke
Nays: None Abstain: None Absent: Hughes

AGENDA ITEM 9e – Veterans' Plaque Location

Mr. Lawson discussed the proposed Veterans Memorial Park project. I believe some of you may remember that, prior to my tenure as Town Manager, there were plans to develop a Veterans Memorial Park on the property located between the public library and Bullitt Park. A sidewalk has been in place there since before I arrived, and that land has long been designated for that purpose. At that time, the group working to establish the Veterans Memorial Park was unable to secure the funding necessary to complete the project. The Town Council agreed that any funds raised by the group would be matched by the Town to help create a meaningful and well-designed memorial for our veterans. Several years later, discussions began regarding Ballard Health, Sports Medicine, and the redevelopment of the former Armory property. As part of the agreement when that property was sold, the responsibility for preserving and relocating the memorial plaque was included in the contract. To clarify, there has only ever been one plaque associated with that site. There were not multiple plaques. If there is confusion regarding additional plaques, they were not part of the Armory property when it was transferred. The only plaque at that location was the one installed outside as part of an Eagle Scout project honoring local Desert Storm veterans. I want to explain the situation as clearly as possible. Due to meeting procedures, we cannot engage in back-and-forth discussion during the public comment portion of the meeting, but I am happy to meet with anyone afterward to answer questions and provide additional information. Over the years, several individuals and groups have expressed interest in obtaining the plaque. Requests have ranged from displaying it on private property to placing it in personal collections or veteran-related displays. The Council has listened carefully to multiple presentations regarding the plaque's future and has considered all perspectives. As a result, there is an item on tonight's agenda concerning the relocation of the plaque to a larger Veterans Memorial Park. The vision for this park includes recognition of all veterans, service flags representing each branch of the military, and the opportunity to create a meaningful and lasting memorial space for the community.

AGENDA ITEM 9e – Veterans’ Plaque Location (Continued) :

I would also like to address the Proctor Street Sidewalk Project referenced by our engineer. This project has been in development through VDOT for more than eight years and was one of the first grant-funded projects pursued during my tenure. The sidewalk is intended to connect the Southwest Virginia Museum to our Greenbelt trail system, allowing pedestrians to safely travel from the Greenbelt, past the baseball fields and track, through Bullitt Park, and ultimately to both the public library and the museum. As future opportunities arise, our goal is to continue expanding safe pedestrian access throughout town. For perspective, the Veterans Memorial Park concept has been under consideration for approximately 12 to 15 years, while the sidewalk project has been in development for nearly a decade. Projects involving state agencies, grants, and infrastructure often require many years of planning and coordination before they come to fruition. Like the Eagle Scout project that originally installed the plaque, community groups have recently come forward with both ideas and financial support. I would encourage everyone involved to work together toward a shared vision. The more collaborative our efforts are, the better the final result will be for our veterans and our community. A well-maintained and thoughtfully designed memorial area can also help discourage vandalism. While we have experienced occasional vandalism along the Greenbelt and in other public spaces, we continue to address those issues through community partnerships and court-directed service programs. In some cases, young people who have participated in these efforts have demonstrated strong work ethic and community pride, which can lead to positive opportunities in the future. Many projects underway in town are not always visible to the public unless individuals attend meetings or actively follow the process. We understand that it can be difficult to know about every initiative, and we appreciate those who take the time to stay engaged.

Tonight, Council is being asked to consider approving the proposed location for the Desert Storm Veterans Plaque. Regardless of where the plaque is ultimately placed, the broader vision of a Veterans Memorial Park with service flags and additional commemorative features can still move forward. The Council will make that determination based on what it believes is in the best interest of the community. It is important to note that there is only one plaque involved. The proposed display would consist of the plaque and accompanying flag elements, and we hope that all interested parties can come together to support a unified memorial effort.

In the past, we were forced to cancel the Veterans Day parade due to a lack of participation from local organizations and veterans’ groups. At that time, the Town challenged the public to partner with us by contributing toward future veterans-related projects, with the Town matching those contributions dollar for dollar. Despite that effort, no public donations were ever received. As we move forward, I would encourage everyone who is passionate about these projects to continue supporting them through participation, fundraising, and advocacy. Community involvement strengthens our ability to pursue grants and other funding opportunities. When we can demonstrate strong public support, it significantly improves our chances of securing outside funding for projects that honor our veterans. I am more than willing to meet with anyone who would like additional information. Please contact Town Hall at 276-523-0115 and schedule a time for us to meet and discuss these matters in greater detail.

With that, Agenda Item 9C concerns the location of the Veterans Plaque. The request before Council is to ask Ballad Health to return the Desert Storm Veterans Plaque, which was relocated from the former Armory site, so that it may be installed in the new Veterans Memorial Park.

AGENDA ITEM 9e – Veterans’ Plaque Location (Continued) :

The project originated as an Eagle Scout initiative and can continue to grow into a larger memorial as funding and community support become available. Mr. Lawson asked Council to request Ballard Health return the Desert Storm Veterans’ Plaque that was removed from display at the former Armory location to the Town in order to be displayed in the new Veterans’ Park as part of an Eagle Scout Project.

Motion by Lyke, seconded by Gilley, that Council request Ballard Health to return the Desert Storm Veterans’ Plaque that was removed from display at the former Armory location to the Town in order to be displayed in the new Veterans’ Park as part of an Eagle Scout Project. Motion resulted as follows:

Ayes: Bloomer, Gilley, Harris, Hollinger, Johnson, Lyke
Nays: None Abstain: None Absent: Hughes

AGENDA ITEM 9f – PROCLAMATION – The Wicked Willow Hair Co.

Mr. Lawson asked Council to approve a proclamation welcoming Lakin Carter, owner of The Wicked Willow Hair Co. located at 2124 4th Avenue East in Big Stone Gap.

Motion by Harris, seconded by Lyke, that Council approve a proclamation welcoming Lakin Carter, owner of The Wicked Willow Hair Co. located at 2124 4th Avenue East in Big Stone Gap. Motion resulted as follows:

Ayes: Bloomer, Gilley, Harris, Hollinger, Johnson, Lyke
Nays: None Abstain: None Absent: Hughes

AGENDA ITEM 9g – Projects Update

Mr. Lawson reported the following updates:

- Paving work has been completed on Country Boy Hill, and roadway striping remains to be finished.
- Planning continues for the July 4th Extravaganza, with event timing and scheduling still being finalized.
- Council presented a Proclamation today at the Visitors Center to the Garden Club celebrating National Garden Club Week.
- Preparations are underway for the upcoming District 3 Little League Tournament at Bullitt Park.
- The Town manager explained that the Town previously had a certified individual who was authorized to perform certain enforcement duties; however, the Town currently does not have a licensed person available to perform this work. The required certification is currently held at the County level, which is why County personnel are assisting with enforcement matters within the Town. He noted that recruiting individuals with the required certification has been challenging. Similar issues have been experienced by surrounding localities, as qualified personnel are difficult to find and the responsibilities of the position can be demanding.

AGENDA ITEM 9g – Projects Update (Continued):

- The Town Manager explained that the Commonwealth of Virginia has strict protections regarding private property rights. While the Town would like to address many property-related concerns as quickly as possible, there are legal limitations on entering private property, removing items, or taking action without proper authority. Even when violations are identified and notices are issued, obtaining compliance through legal action can be a lengthy and difficult process due to protections provided under state law for property owners and tenants. The Town Manager stated that when the Town has cooperation from property owners, successful projects can be completed that improve the appearance and quality of the community. The Town has completed several projects through funding opportunities and partnerships that have resulted in noticeable improvements.
- The Town has explored working with local businesses to remove vehicles; however, cooperation from property owners is often required. In many cases, vehicles are considered private property and may have personal significance to owners or families. The Town cannot remove or dispose of private property without proper legal authority or a court order.
- The Town Manager emphasized that while there are challenges with enforcement, the Town continues to work within the limits of state law to address violations, improve properties, and enhance the community.
- The Town Manager stated that significant efforts have been made to attract businesses, including grocery stores, retail establishments, and other commercial opportunities. Outreach has been conducted with businesses throughout the Tri-Cities region and with companies that have shown interest in locating in smaller rural communities; however, these efforts have not resulted in new development.
- The Town Manager noted that the previous departure of a major retailer, such as Food Lion, may have created concerns for potential businesses considering investment in the area. The Town continues to seek opportunities for new retail and commercial development and has worked with developers, real estate professionals, and business representatives regarding potential projects, including downtown development, hospitality, and retail opportunities.
- A significant challenge identified is the availability of privately owned properties. Many downtown buildings remain privately owned, and the Town cannot require property owners to sell or redevelop their properties. Some buildings are used for storage purposes, and owners may be unwilling or unable to make the necessary improvements or sell the properties. While the Town has explored potential opportunities and received interest from developers, successful redevelopment depends on property owners' willingness to participate.
- The Town Manager explained that while the Town Council has the authority to adopt ordinances and implement programs, there are limitations under state law regarding private property rights. The Town continues to work with County officials to clarify enforcement responsibilities and determine how existing ordinances can be strengthened and effectively implemented.

AGENDA ITEM 9g – Projects Update (Continued):

- The Town Manager noted that decisions regarding private property development are ultimately determined by property owners unless the Town purchases the property, which would require consideration through the budgeting process and available funding.
- The Town Manager further explained that comparisons with surrounding communities must take into account differences in tax bases. Some nearby localities may have lower tax rates because they have a larger commercial and property tax base. Big Stone Gap operates with a smaller tax base while continuing efforts to maintain services, support community improvements, and encourage future growth.
- The Town Manager explained that while the Town's tax rate may appear higher than some surrounding communities, those localities often have a larger commercial and property tax base to support their budgets. Big Stone Gap operates with a smaller revenue base while continuing to provide services to a larger population.
- The Town Manager stated that the Town continues to work toward maintaining a strong downtown community, supporting improvements, and encouraging growth while being mindful of financial responsibilities.
- It was noted that the current fiscal year budget remains approximately the same as the previous year's budget despite significant increases in expenses. Costs have increased in several areas, including employee salaries, healthcare, insurance, fuel, materials, and other operational expenses.
- The Town Manager discussed the impact of increased construction material costs, particularly pipe used for infrastructure projects. Material prices increased significantly following the COVID-19 pandemic and have not returned to previous levels. As a result, some long-term projects that were planned using earlier cost estimates now face funding challenges due to higher material expenses.
- The Town Manager acknowledged residents' concerns regarding taxes and costs, noting that he is also a resident of Big Stone Gap and understands the financial impact on citizens. The Town continues to operate responsibly while balancing the need to maintain services, complete projects, and manage rising expenses.
- Regarding modular homes versus double-wide homes, our engineering team is fully knowledgeable about the differences between these housing types, including their construction standards, foundation requirements, and installation procedures.
- In Virginia, once the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) approves a home as modular, it receives a state-issued certification plaque. Local governments then have limited authority to prohibit or reclassify the home and challenging that designation could create significant legal issues.
- The Commonwealth of Virginia recognizes the ongoing housing shortage affecting not only our region but communities across the country. As a result, state policies have been designed to support the development of additional housing opportunities. Once a modular home has received state approval, that designation carries considerable legal weight.
- Moving forward, Mr. White and I plan to meet and discuss potential approaches and strategies for future development within our community. Ideally, we would all like to see well-planned neighborhoods with attractive homes, quality yards, and appealing views.

AGENDA ITEM 9g – Projects Update (Continued):

- There is certainly demand for higher-end housing, and we have prospective residents who are willing and able to invest in homes here. However, many choose to relocate elsewhere because suitable housing is simply not available.
- Much of our existing housing stock no longer meets the expectations of today's homebuyers. For example, many older homes were built with only one bathroom and limited parking. Modern families often require multiple bathrooms, larger living spaces, and adequate parking for several vehicles. The expectations of today's buyers are very different from those of previous generations.
- At the same time, we face challenges in residential construction. Finding qualified builders has become increasingly difficult, and many local residents have experienced lengthy delays in building new homes. Builders often focus their efforts in larger, faster-growing markets such as Johnson City and Kingsport, where development opportunities are more plentiful and projects can be completed more efficiently.
- For that reason, projects like this can play an important role in attracting investment and encouraging additional residential construction in our area. While this particular site may not be everyone's first choice for housing development, successful projects can help demonstrate demand and encourage builders to undertake future projects within our community.
- Housing and economic development are connected. We often discuss the need for additional jobs, and significant employment opportunities are already coming to our region, including approximately two hundred jobs in Duffield. Historically, many residents of Big Stone Gap have commuted to neighboring communities for work. Even during the coal industry's peak, many workers traveled outside the town for employment.
- That pattern of regional commuting has long been part of our community's economic structure and will remain so in the future. Fortunately, Big Stone Gap was established in a way that supports that model. Our downtown, community character, and overall quality of life continue to distinguish us and contribute to our success in many areas.
- As we plan for the future, expanding housing opportunities will be an important part of ensuring that our community can attract new residents, support economic growth, and remain a vibrant place to live and work.
- This community has always been a strong and welcoming place to live, and I believe we can return to that level of prosperity and growth if we continue making steady progress, one step at a time. However, we must also acknowledge the challenges we face. Rebuilding confidence in our community and attracting new investment requires patience, persistence, and long-term commitment.
- One of our ongoing challenges has been economic development and retail recruitment. We have actively pursued a wide variety of businesses, from large retailers to agricultural and specialty stores, in an effort to bring additional services and opportunities to our area. Despite significant efforts and discussions over the years, many of those opportunities have not materialized. Factors such as traffic counts, market demographics, workforce availability, and regional economic conditions have all influenced those outcomes.

AGENDA ITEM 9g – Projects Update (Continued):

- As a result, we continue to work diligently to identify and pursue every viable opportunity available to us. Whether those opportunities are large or small, we remain committed to seeking investments that will benefit our community and contribute to its long-term success.
- With regard to paving and infrastructure improvements, those projects are dependent upon available funding and budget priorities. We regularly assess road conditions throughout the community to determine which areas have the greatest need, particularly those with the highest traffic volumes and the most significant deterioration. Our goal is to allocate limited resources where they will have the greatest impact.
- Concerning Dogwood Road, I have discussed that issue numerous times with staff and state officials. There remains an ongoing dispute regarding contractual obligations related to how portions of that project were intended to be completed and maintained. Until those matters are resolved, our approach has been to continue making necessary repairs and patching the roadway to maintain safety and usability.
- If there were a cost-effective solution that would allow us to fully reconstruct the roadway within our current budget, I would certainly support pursuing it. However, the reality is that comprehensive paving and infrastructure improvements require substantial funding and careful planning.
- As we move forward, our objective is to continue identifying opportunities to secure funding and incorporate additional paving projects into future budgets. At the same time, we must prioritize projects based on need and available resources. Past approaches to paving schedules were not always sustainable, and over time some roads deteriorated to the point where more extensive repairs became necessary.
- For example, the paving work completed on Country Boy Hill was part of a Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) project. Originally, the project included additional improvements, including sidewalk work and full paving of certain sections. However, as construction costs increased and project timelines extended, available funding was no longer sufficient to complete every planned component. In fact, portions of that project were planned years before my tenure, and some elements had to be scaled back because state funding could not keep pace with rising costs.
- This highlights a challenge faced by many local governments: municipalities are often impacted by funding decisions and project adjustments that occur at higher levels of government. Nevertheless, we remain committed to advocating for our community, pursuing available resources, and addressing infrastructure needs as effectively as possible.
- While there are certainly challenges ahead, there is also opportunity. By continuing to work collaboratively, prioritizing investments wisely, and pursuing every available avenue for growth and improvement, we can strengthen our community and position it for future success.

AGENDA ITEM 10 – FAIR HOUSING PRACTICES

The Town Manager stated in reference to Agenda Item 10 - Fair Housing Practices that the Town of Big Stone Gap is committed to promoting and upholding fair housing practices and ensuring equal housing opportunities for all residents. We strive to provide every individual with the opportunity to obtain safe, decent, and affordable housing free from discrimination.

The Town prohibits discrimination in the sale, purchase, rental, occupancy, or financing of housing based on race, color, religion, national origin, sex, age, familial status, disability, veteran status, gender identity, sexual orientation, or source of income.

The Town Manager of Big Stone Gap serves as the designated official responsible for receiving and investigating complaints related to alleged fair housing discrimination. As a community, it is important that we remain informed about and committed to the principles and requirements of fair housing.

This agenda item is presented annually as part of the Town's ongoing commitment to fair housing and in support of projects funded through the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program. By recognizing and reaffirming these principles each year, the Town demonstrates its dedication to equal housing opportunity and compliance with applicable state and federal regulations.

No questions or comments.

AGENDA ITEM 11 - COMMITTEE REPORTS

None

AGENDA ITEM 12 - COUNCIL COMMENTS AND DISCUSSION

Councilman Bloomer thanked residents for attending and participating in the meeting. He expressed appreciation for the efforts of both town staff and council members, noting that they continue to work hard despite budget challenges facing the community.

Councilman Harris said first, I want to say how glad I am to see so many people attending these meetings. Since I joined the council in November, we have often had only one or two people come out to express concerns or learn about how local government works. It is encouraging to see this level of community engagement. Part of the process is understanding how our meetings operate, including following Robert's Rules of Order. While we may not always be able to answer questions during the public comment portion of a meeting, these meetings are still an important opportunity for citizens to stay informed and engaged. I encourage everyone to continue having conversations with Mr. Lawson, Ms. Hawkins, myself, and the rest of the council. We are your elected officials, and we want to hear from you. I understand firsthand how difficult it is when a business closes. I worked at Food Lion when it closed. I was only 18 years old with a family of my own, so it was a challenging transition. Fortunately, things worked out, but I know many people experienced hardship during that time. We absolutely need businesses in Big Stone Gap, and I believe we are working hard to attract and support them. As Mr. Mason mentioned, he could not find a pair of socks locally. While we may not have every retailer someone is looking for, we do have businesses such as Family Dollar and other local stores that provide many everyday necessities.

AGENDA ITEM 12 - COUNCIL COMMENTS AND DISCUSSION (Continued):

It is important for us, as citizens, to support the businesses we have. If we do not utilize them, we risk losing them just as we lost other businesses in the past. We have great local businesses like Gap Lumber that many people sometimes overlook. Let us make an effort to support those businesses and the people who operate them. When we spend our money locally, we are helping strengthen our community and economy. I also want to thank our police officers, EMTs, town staff, and all of the employees who work hard every day to keep Big Stone Gap moving forward. It is a busy time for our town, and I can assure you that work is being done every day to address challenges and create opportunities.

Councilman Hollinger said he was glad to see this kind of turnout tonight. I know many of us are on Facebook, and I have seen plenty of discussions and concerns shared online. My encouragement is this: come to the meetings, attend council meetings, planning commission meetings, and other public meetings whenever you can. Listening firsthand is the best way to stay informed and understand what is really happening. Do not rely solely on something you read online to shape your opinion. These meetings are held regularly, and you're always welcome to attend. I would love to see this level of participation continue every time we meet. Community involvement makes our town stronger, and your presence matters. Thank you all for coming tonight. I truly appreciate your involvement and interest in our community. And thank you to Mr. Lawson, Ms. Hawkins, Chief Russell, and all of the employees who work hard on behalf of the Town of Big Stone Gap.

Councilwoman Lyke First, I want to thank everyone for coming out and participating in tonight's meeting. Community involvement is extremely important, and it is encouraging to see so many residents taking an active interest in the future of Big Stone Gap. I would also like to address the discussion about shopping locally and supporting our businesses. I understand that concern. However, we recently welcomed a new locally owned business, Dandelion Darlin, in the Shawnee Shopping Center, offering a variety of merchandise, including clothing, jewelry, candles, and gift items at very reasonable prices. In fact, the shorts I am wearing today came from her store, and they were only \$15. Supporting local businesses has always been important to me. We also have businesses such as Family Dollar, CVS, Tracy's, Ball's TV, Gap Lumber, and several other locally owned establishments that provide a variety of products and services. Many of these businesses carry quality merchandise at affordable prices while also supporting our local economy. As a community, we often talk about bringing new businesses to town, and I agree that continued economic development is important. However, we must also support the businesses that have already invested in Big Stone Gap. Many local business owners have shared that they struggle because residents often choose to shop elsewhere. If we want our local businesses to survive and grow, we have to make a conscious effort to support them whenever possible. My family's roots in this community run deep. My family has owned businesses here, and I have personally chosen to invest in Big Stone Gap whenever I can. Every vehicle I have owned was purchased locally, and I make it a point to support local merchants whenever possible. For example, I frequently shop at CVS and other local businesses before considering larger retailers outside the area. I also want to address the common question of why more businesses are not locating here. Economic development is not as simple as many people may think. Just last week, I met with Congressman Morgan Griffith in Washington, D.C., to discuss funding opportunities and economic development initiatives for Southwest Virginia. I have traveled to Richmond and participated in numerous meetings focused on bringing resources and opportunities to our region.

AGENDA ITEM 12 - COUNCIL COMMENTS AND DISCUSSION (Continued):

The reality is that attracting new businesses is increasingly difficult, especially for smaller communities. Across the country, even large retail chains are downsizing or closing locations. We have repeatedly approached corporations, retailers, and grocery store operators about locating in Big Stone Gap. Town staff, economic development officials, and property owners have worked tirelessly to recruit businesses to our community. Unfortunately, many companies simply choose not to expand into smaller markets despite our best efforts. That being said, I believe one of the best ways to encourage future investment is by demonstrating strong support for the businesses we already have. When local businesses succeed, it sends a positive message to potential investors that our community supports economic growth.

I'd also like to speak briefly about the Veterans Memorial and Eagle Scout project. I have tremendous respect for our military. My family has a strong military background, and honoring our veterans is something that is very important to me. Likewise, I have a great appreciation for the Eagle Scout program. Becoming an Eagle Scout is a significant accomplishment that develops leadership, responsibility, and community service. My brother was an Eagle Scout, and it was something that meant a great deal to my grandfather as well. Eagle Scout projects provide young people with valuable experience that benefits them throughout their lives, including college applications and future careers. When young people come forward with projects that improve our community, I believe we should support them whenever possible. The proposed location near the library offers greater public visibility and allows multiple military displays and flags to be incorporated into the memorial area. Additionally, with the skate park and other recreational amenities nearby, the location receives significant foot traffic and provides an opportunity for more residents and visitors to appreciate the memorial. Another topic that was mentioned tonight was communication and public announcements. I want residents to know that there are several ways to stay informed about what's happening in Big Stone Gap. For those who use social media, both the Town of Big Stone Gap and the Visitor Center maintain active Facebook pages that regularly post updates about town projects, road work, events, and community activities. For residents who do not use Facebook, information is also available on the town website at bigstonegap.com where you can access the community events calendar and view upcoming activities, meetings, and announcements. In addition, important announcements are regularly included on the back of utility bills, which has been a valuable communication tool for many residents. We recognize that not everyone has internet access, and that's why we continue to utilize multiple methods of communication to reach as many citizens as possible. Access to reliable internet remains a significant issue throughout Southwest Virginia. During my recent discussions with Congressman Griffith, we talked extensively about expanding broadband access and exploring opportunities to bring additional internet service options to underserved areas. This is an issue that directly impacts education, economic development, and quality of life, and it remains a priority for many of us working on behalf of the region. The information is available, but sometimes it requires looking through different sources to find it. Whether it's Facebook, the town website, utility bill announcements, or direct contact with Town Hall, we encourage residents to stay engaged and informed. In closing, I want to thank everyone for their participation tonight and for their continued interest in our community. While we may not always agree on every issue, we all share the same goal of making Big Stone Gap the best community it can be. Before we adjourn, I'd also like to remind everyone that the Blue Star Memorial wreath placement ceremony hosted by the Garden Club will take place this Friday at 10:00 a.m. Any council members or members of the public who would like to attend are certainly welcome.

AGENDA ITEM 12 - COUNCIL COMMENTS AND DISCUSSION (Continued):

But just remember to thank our town employees and our police officers because they're doing a lot for us and you know they do a lot behind the scenes and like I said they're getting ready to work around the clock right now just go up to them and say thank you.

Vice-Mayor Gilley expressed support for the council's efforts and encouraged residents to contact town staff or council members directly when seeking information or answers to questions. He thanked Mr. Lawson for answering a lot of questions tonight and wished everyone a safe and enjoyable Fourth of July holiday.

Mayor Johnson thanked those in attendance and announced the upcoming Tour de Crackers Neck cycling event scheduled for June 20. The event will feature approximately thirty riders with the route beginning at Bullitt Park, registration and activities beginning at 9:00 a.m. rain or shine. He said if anyone has any questions and sees him out somewhere just ask and he will get you an answer, he thanked everybody once again for coming out.

AGENDA ITEM 13 - ADJOURNMENT

Motion by Lyke, seconded by Harris, that the meeting be adjourned. Motion resulted as follows:

Ayes: Bloomer, Gilley, Harris, Hollinger, Johnson, Lyke

Nays: None

Abstain: None

Absent: Hughes

Meeting adjourned at 8:35 pm.

Minutes Recorded & Transcribed by
Amanda L. Hawkins–Town Clerk/Treasurer