

Special Edition

Response to the Mayor's Accusations

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Mayor Launches Attack Against the Belhaven Community Chamber of Commerce

As most of you know, Ms. Marian Keech donated a parcel of land to the Belhaven Chamber last December. This property is adjacent to the now closed Pungo District Hospital property. Immediately, the Mayor began pressuring the Chamber to give that property to the town in furtherance of his efforts to acquire the old hospital property via eminent domain. The Chamber's newly acquired property, which has never been used by the hospital except for a few parking spaces, has three double-wide trailers in a state of disrepair located on it and is appraised at \$136,000. The Chamber has refused the Mayor's request to "hand over" this property and "get out of the way of the re-opening of the hospital." This property has no direct bearing on the acquisition of the hospital property and the Chamber believes that the funds derived from the sale of the property would greatly enhance the capabilities of the Chamber and provide indirect benefit to the business owners and retail establishments in the Belhaven area.

More recently the Chamber was requested to appear before the Town Council to again provide reason as to why the property would not be given to the Town. The Chamber responded by letter re-iterating our position and stated we would not attend such meeting.

At the March 28, 2016 Town Council meeting, the Mayor took opportunity to insult and degrade the Chamber, its Directors and the Executive Director by making uninformed

and unsubstantiated comments and accusations. Below is a summary of his statements regarding the Belhaven Community Chamber of Commerce. The mayor's comments are italicized. The Chamber's responses follow each of the mayor's statements.

Mayor: *“We have a situation where the Chamber is trying to profit off of the hospital situation. The Chamber has decided to not support the hospital, the largest employer in town that actually saves people's lives. I don't know of any Chamber in the US that would not support its largest employer.”*

Chamber: The Chamber has taken no position on this volatile subject and in our April 2015 Newsletter, President Dianne Bowen stated, **“The subject of saving the hospital and whether the Chamber should take a position regarding it came up last fall during one of our monthly meetings. We discussed the issue at length and concluded that the Chamber should take no position with respect to the hospital. The Chamber is here to serve its members whether they are pro or con regarding the hospital issue or any other issue that may serve to divide us or create animosity.”** If the hospital was still actually here and operating the Chamber would continue its full support of the hospital and its support of fund raising events such as the Pirates on the Pungo Sailing Regatta that has raised over one hundred thousand dollars to support the hospital.

Mayor: *“Our Chamber has decided to do that and the reason is they have become involved in politics. Instead of running the Chamber that is good for the town and trying to do the best thing for the town, we have a “club” that is doing things in spite of the town.”*

Chamber: Over the last few years, the Chamber has increased its presence in the Belhaven area and is being innovative and very much involved in the business community of Belhaven. From publishing a monthly newsletter to sponsoring get-togethers such as “Business After Five” and the newly established “Bi-monthly Business Luncheon” to highlighting special monthly events such as “shop local” or our “Christmas in Belhaven” event, we are engaging with our business and community partners. At the Chamber's 2015 annual retreat, we asked the Town Manager about the Town developing a Vision Statement and Strategic Goals to aid in giving direction to our community. We also discussed creating some economic incentives or tax breaks to draw new businesses to Belhaven. To both of these suggestions we got a “no, not interested.”

Mayor: *“They're making comments that if it benefits the town then they don't want to do it. So we've got a group trying to villainize the town. The reason the Town is having a problem giving the Chamber money is they are not doing their mission of trying to bring jobs but actually trying to undermine the working of the town.”*

Chamber: Saying that Chamber Board members or the Executive Director said “if it benefits the town then they don't want to do it” is simply false. If the Mayor is referring to the current governing ability of the Town, the Chamber does have great concerns. The recent release of the State Auditor's report which highlighted a lack of oversight by Town officials,

found numerous problems with the Town's accounting, exposed potential misuse of travel funds and documented a lack of sound fiscal management. The dwindling reserves that are significantly impacting the town and the exodus of small businesses since this Mayor has been in office begs the question of just what is going on with the Belhaven town government. Nonetheless, the Belhaven Community Chamber of Commerce strives to promote and support our Belhaven, Bath, and Pantego Community local businesses.

Mayor: *"We also have the situation of where they have changed their by-laws reducing the number of directors from 12 to 7. That's a prime example of an organization trying to control who's in the organization. Their bylaws state that in 2015 there will be three new directors elected - they just didn't have the elections. You see how this small group is trying to keep themselves in control of the chamber? You can't just join the chamber; you have to be approved to be a member. You can't be on the board of directors unless you're approved."*

Chamber: Had the Mayor, through his real estate business, been a member of the Chamber, he would have seen that we published our proposed changes to the by-laws in the March 2015 Newsletter and then sent the proposed changes to all members for a 30 day review on two different occasions. We received some comments from our members and advice from attorney Misa Raynor, all of which were incorporated into our final draft and re-submitted to the members for review before final adoption. None of the respondents took exception to reducing the Board from 12 to 7 members. The Board size was reduced to make the Chamber more effective and more responsive. In prior years with 12 Directors, several Directors never attended a single board meeting and it was difficult to have a quorum in attendance. In 2015, four Director terms expired and one Director resigned which resulted in the Chamber not having any Director vacancies to fill.

The current Board members did not change any criteria regarding who can join the Chamber or be a Board member. Approval of membership and approval of Board members has been a requirement of this Chamber since its inception and is a typical requirement of any Chamber. The Chamber holds itself to high standards and expects its members to do the same. The same is true of its Directors.

Mayor: *"We have a situation here, where Jerry Stubberfield, Vice Chairman of the Chamber, was holding the money from the ICW for months and months before it was turned over to the proper committee."*

Chamber: Mr. Stubberfield served as Chairman of the Intracoastal Waterway (ICW) Celebration in 2015 which was held on September 21st. In 2014 the ICW Committee provided a \$1,600 gift to the Friends of Belhaven to assist in the completion of the downtown historic district classification. For 2015 the ICW Committee was approached by the Belhaven Renaissance Committee to provide funds to their organization. On August 13, 2015, Mr. Stubberfield sent an email to the Small Town Main Street (STMS) co-chairs explaining that the ICW funds would be transferred to their committee once the Belhaven Renaissance Committee (BRC) requested funds for a specific project. On February 29, 2016 Mr. Stubberfield re-

ceived an email from the BRC requesting \$3,200 for the installation of a gazebo, electrical hook up and landscaping. On March 22, 2016 via an email from Woody Jarvis, Mr. Stubberfield was requested to bring the \$3,200 to the STMS meeting on March 24th to go towards the construction of a gazebo. On March 23, 2016 Mr. Stubberfield requested clarification as to what exactly was the use of these funds. Mr. Jarvis replied with a clarification and a check for \$3,200 was presented to the STMS chair with both Mr. Stubberfield and Ms. Yvonne Deruiz signing the purchase agreement.

Mayor: *“The Fourth of July we had a situation where the post office box was closed by the Chamber causing problems.”*

Chamber: The bill for the July Celebrations post office box was mailed to the Chamber. Executive Director Lambeth took the bill to Town Clerk Jeanne Budge and explained the situation and that the bill was not the Chambers. With that, it was assumed the bill would be paid by the Town and had no knowledge that the box had been closed by the Post Office.

Mayor: *“We had a situation where Dr. Boyette requested to use the Water Street property as a temporary office but the Chamber didn’t even respond to it.”*

Chamber: Dr. Boyette stopped by the Chamber offices and asked if the Chamber would consider renting the building to a doctor friend of his. The Executive Director told Dr. Boyette that she would discuss with the Chamber Directors and for him to check back the next week. Dr. Boyette did not follow up on his request.

Mayor: *“We have a problem with ribbon cuttings, just to show you the attitude of these folks. If your business doesn’t add up to what they want, they won’t even talk to you about a ribbon cutting. They wouldn’t even talk to Arthur’s Convenient Mart about a ribbon cutting.”*

Chamber: The fact of the matter is that Arthur’s Convenient Mart is not a Chamber member. Ribbon cuttings are done for any Chamber member that requests it. Along this line, the Mayor recently objected to the updated Shopping Guide that the Chamber prepared complaining that it did not include all businesses. When told that the Shopping Guide was reserved for Chamber Members the Mayor thought that was unreasonable and not fair.

Mayor: *“This organization has been taken over by politics that don’t like the town. I’m not attacking them I’m just telling you what they’ve done. And I have a really big problem with them inserting themselves into the hospital property issue. They just jumped into a position to try to get money from the Town and it’s wrong. This organization is way off their mission, they’re not supporting the Town. They’ve made actual comments that they don’t support anything that benefits the town. I don’t see how this board can continue to give money to an organization that’s doing these different things.”*

Chamber: The Chamber has not “inserted themselves” into the hospital property issue but rather finds itself caught up in the Mayor’s attempts to reopen it. The day after Ms. Keech transferred the property to the Chamber and before the President could hold a meeting of the Board to discuss accepting the property, the Town Manager, the Mayor Pro-tem, two Council members plus other supporters of the Mayor were in the Chamber’s offices telling us how we

needed to give Ms. Keech's property to the Town. That property was donated to the Chamber with the full intention that we would be able to sell it and use those funds for the greater good of the community. It has been the Town Council's decision that our property along with the hospital property should be secured by the eminent domain process which by law requires that they pay a fair price for the properties. It has never been the mission of the Chamber to do the bidding of the Town Council but rather to advance the economic, industrial, professional, cultural, and civic welfare of the Belhaven Community and its surrounding area.

Mayor: *"Steve Carawan states that the Executive Director was in a meeting where she said three times, "my group will not do anything that benefits the town."*

Chamber: This is a falsehood. Neither the Executive Director, nor any Board member has ever made such a statement. The Executive Director works far more hours than her part-time salary requires, heading up various efforts in support of the businesses in and around Belhaven, greeting intracoastal travelers and offering to take them to the grocery store or wherever they need to go, managing many efforts to bring businesses in our community together, working on community projects and fund raising efforts and generally being the goodwill ambassador that Belhaven desperately needs.

Mayor: *"We need a chamber that represents the people. Any organization that is not for the hospital, not for saving lives, supporting 55 plus jobs now and not into serving veterans I have a problem with that and something is wrong with you. It shows ulterior motives, personal vendettas instead of trying to do what's best for the town. I'm not attacking them; I'm just telling you how it is."*

Chamber: The Chamber is the full-time representative for the businesses of Belhaven and the surrounding community, and we conduct and support many events and economic development activities that benefit everyone that resides in or visits the Belhaven area. Unfortunately, the Chamber like many others in our community, seems to be at odds with what the Mayor has decided is the Town's (only) priority. He has offended and insulted all of those who differ from his opinion. He has offered no real plan showing the sustainability of re-opening the hospital, yet he wants the Town to encumber a debt of over \$1.4 million. That raises the question of who is really trying to do the best for the Town. To borrow the Mayor's phrase, 'we're not attacking him; we're just telling you how it is.'

Note: At the March 28th Belhaven Town Council Meeting, the Council appointed Councilman Amos Wilson and the Town Manager Woody Jarvis to meet with the Chamber Board of Directors to discuss the issues brought up by the Mayor. The meeting was requested by Mr. Wilson to further discuss the Chamber's role and responsibilities with respect to the Town of Belhaven. Councilman Greg Satterthwaite was added to the group at the latest Council Meeting. The meeting was held at 4:30 PM on April 13, 2016, at the Belhaven Community Chamber office. The following is a summary of the Meeting:

Town Council/Town management present: Mr. Amos Wilson, Mr. Greg Satterthwaite and Mr. Woody Jarvis.

Belhaven Chamber Board members present: Dianne Bowen, Jerry Stubberfield, Karen Fisher, Lindsay Huber, Stan Lampkin and Executive Director, Diana Lambeth.

The discussion lasted for slightly over an hour. The initial reason for the meeting was for Mr. Wilson to better understand the Chamber's level of support for the Town. We explained the role of the Chamber as being an advocate for the businesses in the Belhaven community and a proponent for growth. We discussed and clarified our by-laws, the application process for membership and why membership approval is necessary and pointed out that all of these requirements have been a part of the Chamber's by-law since at least 1964.

Mr. Wilson's question regarding the Chamber's supposed lack of support for the Town was more an accusation aimed at whether or not the Chamber supports the hospital and Belhaven's need for emergency services. The Chamber Directors all agreed that having immediate access to emergency services would be very desirable. We also feel that the Chamber has never stated any opposition although the Mayor chooses to label the Chamber as standing in the way of the hospital's re-opening.

Discussion ensued regarding all the options the Town has put forward regarding the use of the re-opened hospital and the latest mention of a newly formed organization to address wounded veterans. After several other non-relevant issues were discussed, the question was asked why the .5 acre plot of land now owned by the Chamber, sitting adjacent to the hospital property but never owned by or used by the hospital, other than a few parking spaces, is considered by the Town a pre-requisite for obtaining the hospital property. Other than Woody Jarvis stating that it was included in the original eminent domain claim there was no real answer. The discussion ended shortly after that.

The position of the Belhaven Community Chamber of Commerce is that if the Town secures the hospital property and has a viable and sustainable operating plan, the Chamber would be amenable to modifying our existing deed to allow the hospital to use a portion of the property for emergency room access and egress.