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Town Council 2023

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THE STATE OF THE TOWN OF HURT, VIRGINIA - March 2023

Greetings Council Members & Citizens:

It is my honor and privilege to report to you the State of the Town of Hurt, Virginia.

This is my third opportunity to formally share with you the opportunities, challenges, accomplishments, and aspirations for our town from the perspective of being your mayor.

Last year, in my second State of the Town Address, I spoke of our history as we understood how we got to our current state of affairs and place in history. In that message, I also briefly referenced our future. This year, my focus will solely be on our future and what we are doing to secure a promising future for our town, citizens and businesses. You are who we serve and why we serve.

My main goal, since being elected to council, to my current role as mayor has been a single focus - **to put plans and goals in place to prepare** our town for its transformation into a better future. This year is no different as we are constantly planning and preparing for the future. **Remember, the windows of “excuses” always outnumber the doors of opportunity! We open doors, not peek through windows.** We have made and are continuing to achieve significant achievements as we manage plans for growth and improvements, along with executing strategies for long term, sustainable growth.

Part of the duties of being the leader of our town is to understand that not everyone will agree with my ideas, processes and decisions. That is to be expected and desired as a town needs its citizens to be active in their own governance and to feel free to speak their minds. I hear and experience resistance from some in regard to my management style, which is to operate the town as a business would be operated. Key precepts of this style are integrity, honesty, accountability, inspections, structure and putting the right people in place to ensure that the town has the best staff we can get to steward our current and future growth. We **must** think decades ahead, so that we will never have to recover from missed opportunities. A few people feel this is no way to manage our town. I respectfully disagree

and our track record has proven our choices to be successful. A simple comparison of the changes made over the past three years versus the ten (10) years prior along with the review of the recent advances we have made will validate this approach. We are growing, evolving and will be expanding. Localities similar to us, some as far away as Buena Vista have inquired about what we are doing to reach the success that we have. Towns using the same professional accounting software as we use are calling Clerk Kelsie Anderson and Treasurer Ellen Brumfield for advice on how to better do things in their towns. Mr. Joe Smith, our Director of Public Works, constantly fields inquiries about the success of our new electronic water meters and their incredible value. I stand by our business management process, and I encourage anyone to look at where we are versus 2012. The positive change is abundant and appreciated by all.

The Town is on the map and is being noticed, locally and regionally, for our success. We are open for business.

I want to thank our council members - individually and as a whole, for their service to the citizens and support of town operations. I know that change can be challenging and there is no guarantee of success. Courage is what our council has shown, courage that is taking us to a better place to live, work and thrive. In order to truly succeed, you **must** have a vision as to where you desire to go and you must have realistic operational plans outlining how to get there. Some may call it a vision and absolutely - we have one and it is working. For many years, we simply floated with the tides of time without plans or direction, aimlessly meandering through time, putting things off until later and later, as a result things just did not get done. The Town just went with the flow but now we are directing the flow. In the business world, we refer to that way of operating as "lost opportunity" and this town simply allowed multiple good opportunities to pass by. As mentioned earlier, today's council has adopted our growth strategy and staunchly support the efforts of us all. Now, the town is strongly united in its desire to go to good and then great! Simply put, the town's survival and growth is our first goal. **NO EXCEPTIONS.**

This has been a very busy year for staff as well as council. Every decision we make is viewed from the simple less of perspectives "How does this benefit the majority of our residents?" Some of our accomplishments include but are not limited to:

ORDINANCES: A complete restoration of our ordinance books and codes was required to modernize the language and bring them into a professional document format aligned with our peer towns. Council also unanimously voted to use Municode, a professional company, to codify our ordinance books and maintain them. They will also post our ordinance changes to the internet and keep our ordinances updated and available for review online. Council has worked on this for years and now it is reality. Recently, we have developed a more professional nuisance ordinance that addresses property maintenance and

nuisance/debris/junk vehicle concerns that protect the properties in our town from the few who do not keep their property in ordinance. The modifications in the ordinance allow for enforcement that is fair, equitable and efficient to all with specific due process for enforcement action. The town has a duty to protect the vast majority of the residents who take great care of their property and should not have to suffer damage due to non-compliant property in their neighborhood. A more detailed ordinance in regard to the keeping of chickens includes the regulation as well as licensing requirements.

STAFF & CITIZEN SAFETY: Our staff has recently experienced incidents of workplace aggression, threats, and abuse. The addition of an ordinance allowing the banning of those persons from Hurt Town Hall who use violent and aggressive behaviors to intimidate and threaten our staff will provide a safer workplace in congruence with OSHA standards and state law. Council has unanimously voted to increase the security of town hall. It's the town's obligation to protect our citizens who transact business in town hall, as well as the town's property, and ensure that citizen information contained in our clerk & treasurer's offices are secured. Considering where we are as a nation and state with the violence that surrounds us, it is only logical to take this step. Our staff, who are also your staff, deserve to have a safe place to work free from intimidation and threats.

TOWN WATER & TAX BILLING: We are now better able to efficiently manage our water billing and collections thus eliminating the six-figure uncollected water debt that has plagued the town for many years. This applies to taxes and tax collections as well.

INFRASTRUCTURE BUDGET PROTECTION: We reworked our rates and fees by adding transfer fees and infrastructure repair and maintenance fees for businesses designed to better protect our vital infrastructure and added the ability to collect fees associated with businesses that use our water or sewer.

SMART FEE STRUCTURE PAYMENTS: We also added to our rates and fees a more "fair and equitable" fee structure for our water meter fees. Our residents pay a \$8.00 per month meter fee and this money goes into our "Capital Infrastructure Repair and Maintenance Account". This is something the town has neglected for years. Now with the additional "fair and equitable" fee structure, businesses who use larger than 5/8" meter will pay a proportional increase based on size and volume. It was simply not fair for a business with a 2" meter to pay the same base rate as you, a resident, pays with a 5/8" meter. Businesses are treated fairly according to the water consumption that they use.

NEW BUSINESS: I've pushed our solar company, Clean Footprint and Pivot Energy, to escalate the commencement of construction on our solar farm. Engineers have been on site preparing the plans and permits to begin construction. By escalating this project, it may be

possible to start drawing income 18 months earlier than expected. What does this do for you? Quite simply, once this solar farm is online, the revenue will pay for the cost of construction and debt service the town will have for both phase I and phase II of our consent order projects as ordered by the Commonwealth of Virginia. This will save our town, and our residents approximately \$30,000 a year in debt service.

RESPONSIBLE FISCAL MANAGEMENT: I also had the opportunity to renegotiate our grant for phase II of our consent order. This is another example of business experience paying off for our town. This is a major accomplishment for our town. By renegotiating the debt owed to the state for our water expenses, our town saves \$790,000. This is a remarkable savings as it would have to be financed for 30 years and the debt service would be substantial. This is debt service that our taxpayers no longer have to pay and that is money back in our citizen's pockets.

Part of our business plan is to take our town "Green". We would like to be one of the first towns in the Commonwealth of our size to carry the "Green Town" label. You may ask what the benefits for our town are. One of the first is healthy environment for our residents to live and work in. Another very important point is the industries that like to be associated with and gravitate to the "Green Label" locations. In particular is the Technology industry.

FIRE SUPPRESSION, CLEAN WATER & ACCURACY: In an emergency situation, the availability of water is crucial. In the past, our hydrant system was ill maintained and unreliable. Now, our hydrants are safe, responsibly maintained, routinely serviced, and mapped for easy location by the fire department. We have completed our work on our fire hydrants and Joe has each located on a Google Earth Map. He, along with Tom Fore, completed exercising each hydrant to ensure it to be in good operational condition. This is a routine maintenance process that was not properly done in the past. It ensures that the valves inside the hydrant can be easily opened by a firefighter, when needed. He has also installed reflectors to the hydrants for easier locating for our fire department at night or covered by dense vegetation.

Parts Inventory; Our Town has never had a parts inventory for our water system. Yes, you read this correctly! We didn't have replacement parts. This caused a significant delay in the repair of the system and kept you from having clean water available. We are currently purchasing an inventory for frequently used parts.

We have added modern water meters to every place in town that are automatically read by radio. The signal is sent to town hall, and we now can detect a water leak in your house and notify you as soon as we are aware of it. This is a free service that can protect your

property as well as keep you from paying for leaks. It also provides for very accurate billing so you can know with certainty exactly how much water you use.

PROFESSIONAL STAFF: For the first time since around 2002 our town has a fully licensed Commonwealth of Virginia water system operator. This is a huge step for our town. This ensures that our water system is carefully maintained and serviced along with having an onsite expert available to respond in the event of an emergency to our aging water infrastructure.

SCHOOL ZONE TRAFFIC SAFETY: Shortly, we will enhance the safety of our children, their parents and school staff as they are dropped off and picked up for school. Over time, we have noticed that certain drivers ignore the speed limits as well as drive recklessly through these zones during school hours. A change in state law allowed localities with this problem to install new technology that measures the speed of all vehicles passing through the school zone during select times to calm traffic. The device will measure the speed of all vehicles and take a photo of those speeding 5+ miles per hour over the limit. It will automatically send a civil traffic citation to the registered owner charging a fine for speeding. Hopefully, this will deter reckless drivers and speeders in our school zone and save the lives of our children, teachers and parents who are in those zones as they drop off and pick up their students.

EMERGENCY NOTIFICATIONS OF RESIDENTS: In an emergency, time is critical. We have designed our notification call out system to notify residents who have signed up for this very important service. Signups receive a call or text (either or both) depending on their preference of important information. You will be notified rapidly on things that could affect your safety, health, and security. Examples of notifications that you could receive as items such as water issue notices, boil water notices, criminal activity, suspicious activity, missing persons and a variety of other public safety issues and any other information we feel important to you. Information is powerful in an emergency and now as a resident of the Town of Hurt, it is free and at your fingertips. This is something that had been needed for years, and now it is reality and you can use it to keep you and your family safe and informed. This is an example of your tax dollars at work and how it directly benefits all who choose to use it.

FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY OF YOUR TAX MONEY: You work hard for your money. Part of your hard-earned money goes to the town to help ensure that we can maintain essential services of police, fire, water, public safety, and economic development. Our town is now receiving audit reports annually that have greatly improved over the past ten years. This is a significant improvement as we were consistently out of compliance in the past. You should feel comfortable knowing your town is being professionally

managed/independently audited as it should be, and our fiscal responsibility is confirmed by independent auditors. Yes, we have an independent accounting firm overlooking our fiscal matters to ensure that your hard-earned tax dollars are being spent properly and legally.

PRIDE IN OUR TOWN & HOPE IN OUR FUTURE: As your mayor, I am very proud to be the person that you trust to lead our town to go from good to great. Neglect is no longer part of our language and with your help, we will continue looking forward to making The Town of Hurt a wonderful place to live and work for future generations yet to come. What we do today brings hope and opportunities for tomorrow. With your support and caring, we are all part of building a better town for our children.

THANK YOU FOR CARING!

Gary Hodnett
Mayor Town of Hurt