

Annual State of the Town

Council & Citizens;

3-10-2021

We have closed the books on 2020 and we have survived one of the most challenging years of our lives. Thank you for all that you have done as citizens of our town to be a key part of the success of our town in perilous times. It is now the time that your leadership presents to you our annual "State of the Town Report". This is a time when we reflect not only on where WE have been but also look to the stars to see where WE are headed. Your current Council is dedicated to serving you and the best interests of the Town and we are quickly learning to adapt, improvise and overcome.

As elected officials, it is incumbent upon me as Mayor and the other members of the Town Council, to do what is in the best interests of the Town as a whole and not deviate from this path. You elected us to SERVE, not to run from problems, but to FIND solutions, not just point fingers at the problems and leave them for other councils to deal with at some ambiguous point in the future. In that regard, I think the current Town Council has performed well in the job of steering our ship. Throughout the years, our town's ship has sailed some rough seas, she has emerged intact. We have wind in our sails, clear sky on the horizon, yet there is still chop in the water that we must overcome. We cannot fool ourselves in thinking that challenges will not arise again, but our 2020 experiences have led us to be prepared for most anything that comes our way.

It is hard not to start with Public Safety considering the past year and the Covid-19 pandemic. Each one of us has been affected in some way by this pandemic. Some more than others and yet we are still here pushing onward. In March of last year council stood up to Covid-19 by initiating our "Feed the Children Campaign". We knew that we had children in our community that relied upon the school for their lunches, so council got together on a Tuesday with several teachers from HES and made the decision to help our children. As fate would have it, as we were discussing this, I received a call from Supervisor Tim Dudley wanting to discuss this very issue. We joined together and that very Friday we provided 80 children with bags of food staples to not only get them through the day but provide enough for a second and third day. This program continued until the start of school, two days each week. "Feed the Children Campaign" delivered a total of 2,780 lunches during the summer to our children and others in need. I want to thank each and every one of the teachers from HES that started with us and stayed with us until the very last. We could not have done this without you, and a special thanks to our County Supervisor Tim Dudley and his wife Sandra who were integral part of this program from the beginning as well. *This event shows our new way of positive teamwork with the county government.*

We also initiated the program of picking up prescriptions from local pharmacies and delivering them to our senior citizens and shut-ins who were too worried to venture out. Our "Feed the Children Campaign" often delivered lunches to some Senior citizens and shut-ins as well.

Town Council put in place procedures to handle remote meeting, adopted ordinances allowing this and put in place an Emergency Operations Plan. On April 7, 2020 the Town of Hurt officially declared a state of Local Emergency. Town Hall was not immune from Covid-19. In the fall, our

protocols were actually implemented when the mayor and staff were exposed directly to Covid-19. With our plan in place, Town Hall was closed and locked down within 10 minutes after being notified. We instituted quarantine for two weeks while Town Hall was disinfected and sanitized. During this time, town operations were handled remotely never losing a step. Thanks to Public Safety Director Mike Jones and Town Council working together, there was a plan and procedures in place. Our town was one of the first in the state to implement such a plan and rated very highly for steps taken in preventing any additional exposures. The Town of Hurt seeks to be proactive in every way.

The Hurt Police Department is evolving as Council works to staff up. As each of you are aware, policing is becoming more challenging throughout our country and finding qualified officers is very difficult. We have improved the police department's operational procedures, obtained marked patrol vehicles for better visibility to everyone, developed a more professional uniform that clearly supports our community policing philosophy, and upgraded our compensation package in an effort to attract top caliber officers. We will remain dedicated to this effort. We continue to work with Director Jones to add additional officers to The Hurt Police Department. We are determined to keep our status as one of the safest towns in Virginia with one of the lowest crime rates in the Commonwealth.

In a more positive note, Corporal Jason Lovelace started a new journey and has completed his qualifications allowing his promotion to Chief of Police for the Town of Hurt. Congratulations are in order and well deserved as this was not an easy task in such a short period of time. Chief Lovelace received many outstanding comments in regard to his training and understanding of his new duties. Chief Lovelace will be the cornerstone of The Hurt Police Department moving forward as we continue to upgrade the department and hire additional officers. Congratulations to both Chief Lovelace and former Chief Mike Jones for his expertise and mentorship to Jason, well done to both. Mike Jones will now be tasked the duty of Deputy Town Manager and Director of Public Safety & Emergency Management.

I'm sure most of you have noticed that Town Hall has smiling new faces to serve our community. In June of last year, we implemented a completely new software accounting program that will allow us to better serve the town. It's actually easier to us than the previous program, offers better tracking and reporting modules, and the integration with the on-line payment service is seamless. This system allows you to monitor your billing and you can average your utility or tax payments online. Many of our residents like this feature allowing pre-pay monthly verses the quarterly payment system. We also implemented an off-site remote disaster recovery system that will allow us to be up and running within a few hours should we have on site issues. We have also totally upgraded the Town's computer system to a Dell state of the art system that provides more and better security to protect your privacy. I know many of you are concerned about the cost here. But this was an actual savings over the older service agreement that was in place. Prices were negotiated with Dell, and a new IT service provider that allowed us to purchase this and save money. Rest assured, we look at every purchase to see how and if we can save the town money. We renegotiate contracts at every opportunity and fight any increases.

Staff is also working to broaden our area of outreach to you. We are taking steps to utilize Facebook more and better as a tool to keep you updated. We used our federal CARE Grant Funds to

build a new and more user-friendly website to help keep you posted as to what's going on in town. We have purchased a portable information sign that can be strategically located in town to provide you with information. Again, this purchase was made using CARE Grant Funds. We will be implementing the CODE RED phone system soon. This will allow anyone interested in receiving a phone message from Town Hall in case of emergencies or public notices to be notified via phone. Staff member Kelsie Sligh is our new Social Media/Clerk Assistant, and she is working very hard to keep you updated as to what is going on in our town. Another area in which we are working to upgrade our Town is in the Audit process. For years our Clerk and Treasurer position has been a shared position. According to Generally Accepted Accounting Principles the Clerk/Treasurer position should not be a shared position and the auditors have recommended this change for years. I have been in discussions with the auditors regarding a solution that will be implemented very soon.

Ellen Brumfield, our newest staff member has assumed the Clerk's position and is fitting in very well. She, Kelsie and Colleen are working very hard to reduce our delinquent debt issues. I am happy to announce that this is moving in the right direction.

Public Works is an area that is seeing many changes as well. Colleen McGrath assumed the position of Public Works Coordinator in November of 2020 right in the middle of "meter reading" for the November billing cycle. She jumped in the middle of meter reading on a cold rainy day, often on her hands and knees, working with members of council to get the job done in a timely fashion. Colleen is at this time fulfilling the duties of this position very well. As many of you are aware, the town has in the past received many notifications from the Virginia Department of Health in regard to our water quality issues from time to time. We are now moving forward working with Peed & Bortz Engineering and the Virginia Department of Health to rectify this situation. You will soon see phase 1 construction starting between the Town of Hurt pump station and the Altavista Water Works station across from the Riverside Minute Market. There are also changes that will be made to our Water Tank as well. The Hurt Public Works Coordinator and the Town of Hurt Public Works committee are working hand in hand with Peed & Bortz Engineering Firm, the Virginia Department of Health and Town of Altavista Public Works Department to successfully modify the systems to satisfy the Consent Order issued by the state Department of Environmental Quality. Within the next 30-60 days, you will also see water meter REPLACEMENTS taking place under the direction of our Public Works Coordinator. We purchased Cellular Read Meters that when installed will send a signal every 30 seconds to our computers at town hall updating a locations water use. The software and meters are fully integrated so that physical water meter reading will be a thing of the past. Some of these meters are so sophisticated that we can control the flow of water through the meter from town hall and we will also be notified immediately if anyone tampers with the meter as well as system leakage. Again, this purchase was made using Care Funds thus saving the town a huge sum of money.

You may have noticed a new Dodge Ram town truck at town hall. This was purchased as a second Public Works vehicle utilizing again Care Funds, thus another savings for the town.

Additionally, Public Works Coordination McGrath is working on her Class 5 Water Works license. Once that certification is achieved, it will be the highest level of professional certification ever achieved by our Public Works Director.

Another local accomplishment is completion of The Staunton River Bridge. It opened this past December in record time. This beautiful bridge is now back in service as it joins the two communities of Hurt and Altavista. We thank Virginia Department of Transportation and English Construction Company for their hard work and blistering construction pace.

Economic Development has been a focus of our town for the past several years and we are starting to see the benefits of this hard work. Staunton River Plastics, a Fortune 500 company, is in the process starting construction at the old Klopman Mills site. This will bring 250 well-paying jobs to our community. This is the first, as I am sure of many as the Town of Hurt and Staunton River Regional Investment Financial Authority continue to work together to bring industry and business to the Town of Hurt. I am proud to say the Town of Hurt, Supervisor Tim Dudley and Pittsylvania County have a fantastic working relationship on matters of Economic Development.

Last but certainly not least, I would be remiss if I did not include the financial status of our Town. Hurt has remained debt free. With this said, there will be a point coming on the horizon when the town will have to assume some debt to finance the mandated Consent Order issued by the Virginia Department of Health. We have received a grant from the state in the amount of \$400,000 to help finance this mandated project.

Our taxes and fees remain low in comparison to many towns our size and we work very hard to keep this pace.

All of us are aware of our aging water system infrastructure that is quickly approaching 40 years of operation. We are seeing signs of the system's age in more frequent break downs especially during the winter months. However, we still cannot forgo the position we are in with our water system and it's all the more important for us to financially prepare for the inevitable. A major breakdown is a question of WHEN and not IF! In the past year we have taken steps to better prepare the town for this day by budgeting additional dollars for this very expenditure. **As of February 15, 2021, our reserves totaled \$639,920 a 45% increase over the prior year.** We accomplished this not by cutting the necessary items in the budget but by pinching every dollar we spend, saving on contracts, negotiating every process, and increasing our infrastructure reserves.

In closing "we must remember to watch closely and listen diligently to everyone, because there are people who still need our help. There are some among us who have struggled and received little to no support." It is incumbent upon all of us to make sure NO one is left behind as our town moves forward. Our community is incomplete without the total sum of its parts strong. We must work together, and all walk together to preserve what we all love — our beautiful home: "Hurt."

Gary Hodnett
Mayor, Town of Hurt