

Town Council Work Session Minutes
3:30PM November 4, 2024
101 Chalmers Ct, Berryville, VA 22611
Main Meeting Room

In attendance: Jay Arnold, Mayor; Erecka Gibson, Vice Mayor; William Steinmetz, Ward 1 Representative; Diane Harrison, Ward 2 Representative, Grant Mazzarino, Ward 3 Representative; Ryan Tibbens, Ward 4 Representative; Keith Dalton, Town Manager; Cynthia Poulin, Treasurer; Jean Petti, Deputy Town Manager.

1. Mayor Arnold called the meeting to order at 3:30pm.
2. Mayor Arnold led the Pledge of Allegiance
3. Approval of Agenda

Mr. Dalton noted that the Work Session minutes from October 7, 2024 are included for reference, not adoption. Ms. Harrison requested to amend the agenda to add a discussion of billing cycles and bill text. Ms. Gibson made a motion to approve the agenda as amended and it passed by a unanimous voice vote.

4. Unfinished Business

Mayor Arnold recognized Berryville's Treasurer, Mrs. Poulin, who summarized the rate/fee structure options as presented in agenda packet. She invited questions/discussion from the council members.

Ms. Gibson opened discussion by noting the duality of encouraging water conservation while relying on water/sewer revenue to support utility maintenance and the water plant upgrade. Ms. Harrison noted that the 2019 Rate Study generalized that most of Berryville's ratepayers were conservative in their consumption.

A brief discussion of the benefits and drawbacks of a tiered rate system ensued. Council determined to not pursue this option at this time, but requested staff explore the expense of administration of tiered billing.

Mr. Mazzarino and Mr. Steinmetz asked staff if recent drought events have impacted revenue, costs, and forecasts. Mr. Dalton responded that weather poses challenges to operations, but has not substantially altered usage. He added that brief interludes of increased or steeply reduced usage occur, but historically have not persisted.

Mr. Tibbens recapped the number of 'heavy users', and this prompted a review of protocols for addressing leaks and the several complaints received from gardeners and pool owners about water usage impacting sewer invoices, even if the water does not pass into the sewer collection system.

Mr. Dalton emphasized that the five-year schedule of rate increases is a roadmap, but that Council would need to vote on each increase, allowing for adjustments. However, the schedule of projected increases is an essential element of financial planning for the water treatment plant upgrade. He also noted that the projected minimal sewer increases may need to be revisited at intervals.

Council next examined the impact of administrative fee increases versus rate increases. Mr. Mazzarino expressed a desire to protect those on fixed incomes, particularly seniors, from high fixed costs (i.e. administrative fees), but not to the detriment of families, whose usage rates would likely trend high. Ms. Gibson indicated support for water rate increases rather than administrative fee adjustments, as the projected revenue need is largely driven by the water plant upgrade.

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Mr. Dalton asked if Council would be ready to act on the proposed five-year plan at the December 10, 2024 council meeting. The Council responded in the affirmative.

5. New Business

Ms. Harrison opened the New Business portion of the meeting with a request that rates be listed on utility invoices. Mrs. Poulin noted that there may be information that needs to be moved/removed in order to make the change, but it will be instituted.

Ms. Harrison also requested a consistent day for meter reads, citing variability in metering cycles as responsible for inconsistencies in perceived usage. Mrs. Poulin responded that meter reads are usually on the 20th or 21st day of each month to allow for the sixty-ish “re-reads” that are requested following high, low, or zero usage alerts. Mr. Dalton interposed that a fixed due date for invoicing drives some of the variation in meter-reading, especially as staff generally does not read meters on weekends or holidays. He requested Mrs. Poulin forecast the meter read dates for two years and identify any months that may result in a particularly short or long meter reading cycle.

6. The meeting was adjourned at 4:55pm by unanimous consent on a motion by Mr. Mazzarino.