

K.G. MAN TREKS 60 MILES TWICE TO REGISTER CAR

Long drives, long lines to visit DMV

BY CATHY DYSON
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Buying a car was the easy part; getting it properly registered in the midst of a pandemic took James Barrett of King George County on a long and winding road.

He would emphasize the “long” part of it, for sure.

The retired soldier, who’s spent almost 45 years in the service and government work, started looking on Friday for a way to get the new title, tags and registration for the fire-red 2005 Ford Mustang he bought from his neighbor. The transaction can’t be completed online, and since Virginia Division of Motor Vehicles sites shut down in the early days of COVID-19 and have reopened in phases, the facilities are taking customers by appointment only.

He went online and started looking at available openings, everywhere from Tappahannock to Massaponax, from the DMV Select in King George to DMV Mobile-Go sites in the region.

No appointments were available, anywhere, for the rest of October. Or November. Or even December. The earliest appointment Barrett could find was Jan. 5.

“It was really ridiculous,” he said. “What’s [my car] going to do, sit here until January and not be used?”

A neighbor told him the DMV Select in Orange County was open on a first-come, first-served basis. Barrett had already taken a day of annual leave from his government job and thought, what the heck, he’d drive the 60 miles to get the help he needed.

“I was shocked to see around 75 to 80 people in line waiting to go into the DMV,” he said.

He drove home, fuming so

NEED THE DMV?

To make an appointment with the DMV, visit dmv.virginia.gov/general/#appointments.asp

much he called a TV station in Washington and the governor’s office in Richmond to complain. Then he made a plan to return Monday at “o-dark-30,” as the ungodly hours of early morning are often described by military people.

He left his home at 4:15 a.m., arrived in Orange 90 minutes later and found 10 people in line ahead of him. When the doors opened at 8:30, he guesses there were at least 60 people behind him.

When he left at 10:20 a.m., he estimated the line had grown to more than 100 people.

“It was ludicrous, really,” he said. “I cannot tell you how many times I thanked the staff there to allow their office to be open without appointments, and there were people from all over.”

As Barrett waited, he chatted with others in the line, which circled the small building’s parking lot and occasionally blocked

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traffic at nearby businesses. He found he wasn't the only one who'd driven through six localities or more to get there.

People had come from as far away as Williamsburg, Hopewell and various points in Northern Virginia. Some had been there once or twice before and hadn't been seen.

Of the 51 DMV Selects in Virginia, 10 of them, including the one in Orange, are operating without appointments, said DMV spokesperson Jessica Cowardin. She said a list of those sites is available on the DMV website.

The message on the answering machine at the Orange Select spoke to the busy circumstances the workers are facing. It detailed what transactions could be made there and ended with: "Due to the volume of customers, we're unable to answer any phone calls. We hope the above message will answer your questions."

A DMV worker who stepped outside on Tuesday, when a Free Lance-Star photographer was taking photos, said the facility will start using a numbering system and limit customers to 75 per day.

James Barrett's experience reflects what Cowardin described as

"the new normal at DMV." She said customers "love the appointment system once they are able to use it," and several people had posted smiley faces about the experience. One wished DMV would operate by appointments only all the time.

The appointments are in high demand, Cowardin added, "so naturally we hear from customers who are having difficulty scheduling."

The DMV website encourages people to complete transactions through email or online whenever possible. It states that it's taken "every precaution in planning a thoughtful, phased approach to safely reopening," and that appointments are required to minimize the number of people at DMV offices and testing sites.

The facilities closed as a result of the pandemic from March 18 through May 18, creating an obvious backlog. Gov. Ralph Northam last month acknowledged long waits faced by customers and gave Virginians another 60 days to renew their driver's licenses, learner's permits and identification cards, if they expired by the end of October.

DMV also gave most people who had driver's licenses and ID cards about to expire the option to renew them online or through the mail instead of visiting a DMV site. Those credentials are for two years only, not the typical eight years.

The governor also encouraged customers to renew their licenses and registration online whenever possible. The DMV website, dmvnow.com/appt, details which transactions can be completed that way and which require an in-person visit.

DMV is booking appointments for the next 90 days. A check of the schedule for the Spotsylvania County DMV in Massaponax showed that no appointments were available through the end of January—which is as far as the calendar goes—for popular transactions such as renewing driver's licenses or new vehicle registration, which is what Barrett had done.

The DMV site encourages customers to check back regularly for appointments and says that more offices will be opened in coming weeks. Statewide, DMV is averaging almost 11,000 appointments during the weekday and almost 5,000 on Saturdays at 73 customer service centers and DMV Connect sites.

Barrett acknowledges that going to the DMV was never a joy ride, but "the bottom line was you knew you were in there, and you were eventually going to be seen. Now it's impossible to get an appointment, and so you're stuck."

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K.G. cuts red tape to help pandemic-squeezed family

BY CATHY DYSON

THE FREE LANCE-STAR

The pandemic has created all sorts of financial, medical and personal hardships, and the King George County Board of Supervisors recently cut through red tape to help one family deal with some of the fallout.

Brian and Carolyn McGee wanted to help her mother, Debra Coleman, who lives in Maryland, after she lost much of her income due to COVID-19. Coleman is a physical therapist who treats elderly people in their homes, and her work was shut down when hospitals temporarily suspended elective surgeries in the wake of the virus.

She was set to retire in September, but lost some of her retirement savings as a result of the economic downturn. Her daughter and son-in-law looked into putting a mobile home on their 11 acres in the rural Shiloh District, but discovered the zoning allows only one residence.

It's not a development, it's not a business, it's someone's private property, it's 11 acres. Let them exercise their property rights and put a dwelling on there.

—JEFF BUECHE, KING GEORGE SUPERVISOR

The McGees sought a special exception to put a manufactured home on their land for her mother, who lives about three hours from King George.

"The special exception will allow us to support her, not from 132 miles away, but from our own front yard," Carolyn McGee told the Board of Supervisors last month.

In addition to the request, the McGees asked if the board could decide the matter themselves instead of sending it to the Planning

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Commission first. Localities typically have planners review a matter—to consider land-use issues and zoning ordinances—and hold a public hearing before making a recommendation to the supervisors.

Then the issue is reviewed again, and another public hearing is held by the supervisors.

Board members agreed this wasn't a controversial issue and agreed to put it on the fast track.

"It's not a development, it's not a business, it's someone's private property, it's 11 acres," said Supervisor Jeff Bueche.

"Let them exercise their property rights and put a dwelling on there."

Supervisor Chair Cathy Binder also appreciated what the McGees are doing because it hit close to home for her. Binder had been traveling to "the top of New Jersey" to care for her ailing father, who died July 30. He'd lived in the same house since he was 9, and despite her pleadings, wouldn't move closer to her in his later years.

"I'm in favor of it because I understand the position you're in," Binder said. "It's wonderful that you're willing to take in your mom."

Then, after she and fellow board members unanimously agreed this week to allow the exception, after no one spoke against it at a public hearing, Binder congratulated Coleman and the McGees.

"Enjoy your time together," she said.

Supervisors stressed in August how much they value the input from the Planning Commission and that they were skipping over them to cut down on time, and expenses, for the McGees.

The couple presented letters from neighbors who said they didn't object to the plan. Supervisor Annie Cupka, who drove by the property, noted that there weren't many homes along the quiet, dirt road.

"I don't think this will be a problem at all," she said.

Carolyn McGee and her mother thanked board members for their consideration. Having the home on their property will give Coleman her independence, without the financial stress, and allow the McGees to take care of her as she ages, the couple wrote in a letter to the board. The action also will help with Carolyn McGee's work schedule; she's a lieutenant in the King George Fire Department.

The board's approval did come with some conditions, including that Coleman be the only one to live in the mobile home, which must be removed within six months of her no longer needing assistance.

Supervisor Bueche initially balked at the conditions, suggesting they imposed on the McGees' property rights. He thought the manufactured home would be put on a foundation and that it would be expensive to remove.

When Zoning Administration Heather Hall explained that a manufactured home and mobile home are one and the same—and that it will roll out on wheels, just as it rolled in—Bueche agreed to keep the requirements in place.

County officials also explained that a special exception due to hardship is set up to expire when the hardship no longer exists.

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KING GEORGE RESIDENTS SOUND OFF ON MEMORIAL AT COURTHOUSE

BY CATHY DYSON
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Those who want the Confederate monument removed from the lawn of the King George Courthouse view it as a reminder of racism while others want it to remain as a memorial to their ancestors—and their differing opinions do not necessarily fall along color lines.

Last month, Dave Jones, who's white and a descendant of a soldier who fought for the Confederacy during the Civil War, asked the King George Board of Supervisors to move the memorial to a graveyard "where it belongs, as opposed to allowing it to remain in the heart of our county as an insult to all black citizens."

His request produced a chorus of responses from residents, just as similar discussions have been prompted across the nation by George Floyd's death and the Black Lives Matter movement.

One of those who expressed an opinion at last week's Board of Supervisors' meeting was Corey Truxon, who is Black. He said if people get rid of everything "they're offended by, you're going to lose a lot in life. Not all of these monuments or statues are built on

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MONUMENTS NATIONWIDE

Since George Floyd's death in late May, public officials in localities across the country have removed, relocated or renamed 59 Confederate symbols, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center.

Of the total, 38 Confederate monuments were removed, five of which were relocated elsewhere. The Confederate flag also was removed from the Mississippi state flag and a police uniform in South Dakota. In addition, the names of 14 public spaces were renamed including eight schools, one college, two park trails, two roads and one body of water.

The 59 symbols are among 125 total that have been removed from public spaces since the Charleston church shooting in 2015. Almost 1,800 Confederate symbols remain, including 725 monuments, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center.

—Cathy Dyson

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hate. We as a society can learn from them and the past struggles to measure how far we have come as a society.”

In an email which was read to the board, Truxon said he'd never been bothered by Confederate flags, statues or memorials.

“I do get offended by Caucasians who feel they know best as to how I should feel or think,” Truxon stated. “This ‘white guilt’ is killing America faster than anything.”

He suggested putting the issue on the ballot and letting voters decide. Caroline County officials considered the same option for the Confederate monument on the courthouse lawn in Bowling Green, but decided against a referendum this week.

King George officials said they want to gather information about exactly who is memorialized on the obelisk.

Its inscription states that it was erected by the Ladies Memorial Association of King George to honor family members who fought for the Confederacy, but local historians have suggested the names of Union soldiers were added later, said Supervisor Chair Cathy Binder.

The board doesn't want to make a decision “until we know the facts,” said

Supervisor Jeff Bueche, adding he would not be part of a “knee-jerk reaction” based on someone saying he doesn't like it or is offended.

Several residents said just that at last week's Board of Supervisors' meeting.

Robert Ashton spoke on behalf of the King George branch of the NAACP and said such a memorial in front of the courthouse honors those who fought to keep others enslaved.

“We recognize that slavery existed in the U.S., and it should be taught in the school system, but it is not necessary that persons from the Civil War be memorialized as great heroes who were suppressing African Americans,” he said.

Marsha Stonehill, the wife of Supervisor Jeff Stonehill, said she didn't understand the desire to memorialize the Confederacy when “what was being fought for was the right to treat people as inhuman, the right to rape them, beat them, remove body parts and separate them from other family members.”

Susan Park said removing the monument wouldn't “mean we've solved the problem of racism, but it's a good step in the right direction.”

Residents Don Shelton, Roy Graham and Cynthia Miller said they have family members' names on the monument and did not want it removed from its

place of prominence.

Shelton said his ancestry includes European, Native American, Irish and African American blood, like many represented on the memorial. He said they “didn't want to fight a war, but they had to,” adding the monument's current location is “the only place I can go and honor my ancestors.”

Well-known county historian Elizabeth Lee said in an email to The Free Lance—Star last month that she was so bothered by the debate over the monument that she was on “high blood pressure mode.” She said before the discussion began, most people didn't even know the memorial was there, much less get offended by it.

Many of those whose names are inscribed didn't own slaves, she said.

“In fact, many of them were descendants of Native Americans and African slaves. Their families were dirt poor,” Lee said, hers included.

Another historian, Bob Baird, told board members that some of the older people in King George have learned how to respect each other's customs and property as they lived together in “peace and harmony.” He wished there was more of an effort to educate young people about their successes and failures.

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