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Campbell County passes resolution opposing Gov. Northam's recent executive order

Sarah Honosky
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Residents attended the Campbell County Board of Supervisors meeting on Tuesday, Dec. 1, 2020, where citizens and the board discussed, and the board passed, a resolution opposing Gov. Ralph Northam's most recent executive order.

Sarah Honosky/The News & Advance

RUSTBURG — Campbell County supervisors have passed a resolution rejecting Gov. Ralph Northam’s recent executive order, declaring the county a “First Amendment sanctuary” and directing the county to express opposition to the governor’s new safety guidelines that limit the size of gatherings, among other restrictions.

Northam’s executive order, issued last month, caps indoor and outdoor gatherings to no more than 25 people in an effort to suppress the spread of COVID-19 as cases climb locally and nationally. It also directs restaurants and bars to stop on-site alcohol sales at 10 p.m. and close by midnight.

The county’s new resolution, approved unanimously Tuesday evening by the Campbell County Board of Supervisors, parallels the Second Amendment sanctuary resolution passed by the board more than a year ago and calls for the rejection of Northam’s mandates, which the board deems “unconstitutional.”

The proposed resolution states the governor’s mandate is in violation of the Constitution of Virginia and seeks to oppose enforcement of the executive order. Specifically, it states no county funds will be used to restrict “the First Amendment,” and requests the sheriff’s office “not assist any state law enforcement officer, state health agent or federal agent” attempting to enforce the order.

Since the pandemic began, there have been 1,224 positive cases of the virus reported in Campbell County, with 39 hospitalizations and 13 deaths. The county’s 7-day average of 32.2 new daily cases reported per 100,000 people is higher than the state’s average of 27.1, according to the Virginia Department of Health.

Dozens of Campbell County residents turned out to back the resolution, many a united front in camo, blue jeans and ballcaps. When Concord District Supervisor Matt Cline began to read the resolution, there was a flurry of movement as they took off their face masks in a show of support. The same solidarity brought the crowd to its feet as residents praised the county for passing the resolution and, in turn, dismissed the few residents who took to the podium to speak in opposition.

The Campbell County resolution is modeled off of similar ones that have emerged around the state, distributed by various conservative organizations or brought before boards in neighboring counties. Last week, Bedford County opted not to discuss a “No Shutdown” resolution, citing too-harsh language that overextended the county’s power — like paragraphs directing local sheriff’s offices to arrest officials enforcing the governor’s mandate.

Cline introduced his First Amendment sanctuary resolution at the meeting after Brookneal District Supervisor Charlie Watts and Sunburst District Supervisor Steve Shockley read their own statements of support.

“It’s a sad day in the United States of America and the Commonwealth of Virginia when a governor using unlegislated mandates is harassing, fining citizens, business owners and elected officials, forcing compliance through fear and intimidation,” Cline said. “I took an oath to protect and defend the constitution of the United States of America, and that oath does not have an expiration date. Moreover, our position as an elected official obligates us to take a stand for the rights and liberties of citizens that we serve.”

Drafted this past week, Cline said the resolution seeks to continue the board’s support for local law enforcement and maintain its positive “working relationship” with its county departments.

Previously, Cline emphasized county supervisors do not have the authority to direct constitutional officers, like those in the sheriff’s or commonwealth’s attorney’s offices. He said Campbell County’s resolution will not seek to threaten the funding of its county departments.

Much like the Second Amendment sanctuary resolution, Sunburst District Supervisor Steve Shockley said it is a largely symbolic gesture, one that supervisors hope will be heard by local legislators and spread statewide. He called executive orders a “slippery slope,” one he fears will escalate into greater infringements on the rights of county residents.

It is unclear what true affect the resolution will have for the county. The Virginia Department of Health is charged with enforcing the mandate, not local law enforcement, and Campbell County Attorney Tripp Isenhour said he still is evaluating the implication of the resolution. In an interview with The News & Advance on Wednesday, he was unable to say the effect it would have on the county.

He said the governor has “broad powers” to enact orders concerning public health, and Virginia localities are limited in what they can do concerning public health.

County agencies have “very little role” in enforcing executive mandates, Isenhour said, and enforcement falls instead to the state health department.

Campbell County Administrator Frank Rogers said that even prior to the resolution, the county was not involved in enforcement of the mandates.

“I don’t think it presents a wide swing in our operational behavior,” Rogers said of the resolutions passing, but added that county staff will be “all the more cogent” of not overstepping the board’s direction to stay uninvolved in enforcement.

Like Isenhour, Rogers said the county still is evaluating what the resolution directs, and how it “may or may not” affect daily operations.

Campbell County Sheriff Whit Clark told The News & Advance on Wednesday he supports the resolution but it will not affect the way the sheriff’s office operates.

“We are not enforcing any of that,” he said of the mandates. “We haven’t been and we’re not going to.”

He said although it isn’t clear if the resolution has any “teeth,” it was symbolic of the feelings of many citizens of Campbell County.

At the Tuesday meeting, Chairman Watts excused the boardroom’s crowd, one that far surpassed the 25 person cap, by saying the limit could not limit the operation of government business, and that the board was required to allow for public comment and would do nothing to restrict it.

“Just like it’s not the government’s role to wash your hands during the flu season, it’s also not the government’s proper role to shut down or restrict your place of business or church for the same purpose,” Watts said. “These restrictions cross a line that it’s hard to come back from. I believe free people have a duty to push back against these actual restrictions.”

While much of the room was in unanimous agreement, a few outliers, like 79-year-old James Cerillo, spoke against the resolution. Looking around the room, he said his wife did not want him to attend the meeting, that she was at home crying, worried he had attended a “superspreader activity.”

He said they are scared to death of the virus and that America was losing the battle.

When asked about the Campbell County resolution and others like it being discussed by nearby localities, Centra CEO Dr. Andy Mueller said Wednesday it is important communities remain vigilant, even when that means taking precautions that are sometimes difficult.

“I’m not a politician or an elected official and don’t have to make policy decisions about governing areas. But as a physician, as a scientist, as a health care leader, my hope is that we’re all doing our part to help reduce and diminish the spread and transmission of this disease,” Mueller said.

He said it was more important than ever that localities work together to ensure they do the “right and smart things.” With a vaccine on the horizon, he said, these next few months are crucial in “being able to bend the trajectory” of COVID-19.

For some, like Chris England, owner of The Clubhouse Bar & Billiards in Campbell County, the executive orders have hurt business, he said at Tuesday’s meeting, and have strengthened his support for such a resolution. He thanked the county for becoming a sanctuary and hopes to see the movement “go up the chain,” so it garners further results statewide.

Before COVID-19, he said, he had more than 50 employees. Now he is down to about a dozen. The new restrictions on alcohol sales take his best 16 hours of the week, he said. He added his profits have taken a deep dive, and the restrictions are taking the food off of his employees' tables.

"I believe that we ought to protect the vulnerable, protect the high risk, but let everybody live their life," England said. "I'm asking for you, as the board, to take my sentiments as one of the few restaurants and bars in Campbell County, and push it up the food chain to Governor Northam. Let him know how it's affecting us, how it's affecting our county."

Wes Gardner, a county resident and spokesperson for the local militia, said it took guts to pass the ordinance. He said there is no way to know if there will be "repercussions from Richmond," but if so, that he will stand with the board.

As he spoke, most members of the room rose to their feet. All those who earlier had taken off their masks had not replaced them, and wouldn't for the remainder of the meeting.

"I pray to God that this takes foothold," Gardner said, "and becomes a wave that goes across the state."

https://newsadvance.com/news/local/govt-and-politics/lynchburg-mayor-recruitment-firm-shed-light-on-search-for-city-manager/article_8f4467e2-e113-5fb0-9af8-8a9c431e503c.html

Lynchburg mayor, recruitment firm shed light on search for city manager

Sarah Honosky
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Douglas Stanley speaks before city council after being appointed as the new city manager at Lynchburg City Hall on Aug. 11. Stanley resigned Aug. 21, one week before the job was to begin.

Kendall Warner/The News & Advance file

As the six-month search for a new city manager drags on, city leaders must now decide if they will stay with the consulting firm that already has cost \$17,000 in fees and led to the shortest city manager tenure in Lynchburg history.

The firm identified, and the city hired, former Warren County Administrator Douglas Stanley on Aug. 11, only to have him resign Aug. 21, one week before the job was to begin.

According to the city's contract with the consulting firm hired in March to recruit a new city manager, Strategic Government Resources will "repeat the process at no additional professional fee" if the candidate selected resigns or is fired within 18 months.

Lynchburg Mayor MaryJane Dolan said council has not yet made a decision on whether it will work with the firm moving forward and at this time it would be "doubtful."

The sudden resignation, and the scrutiny of SGR and city council's appointment, follow the circulation of emails allegedly sent by Lynchburg's newly appointed city manager.

Two email threads began to circulate Aug. 12, the day after former Warren County Administrator Douglas Stanley was appointed by Lynchburg City Council. One email thread later was shown to never have existed, according to documents provided by Warren County's interim attorney — but the second email conversation, from 2014, was real, and in it Stanley used vulgar language offensive enough for council to consider it grounds not to hire him.

Until then, Lynchburg Mayor MaryJane Dolan said, the council had no knowledge of the emails. Council's search for a new city manager — who would replace current city manager Bonnie Svrcek, set to retire Sept. 1 — had been going on for about six months.

"Those emails were not available to us when we were making our decision," Dolan said. "We did not see them, and we had a competent search firm that did all the background investigation."

The firm made them aware of the other allegations against him, and noted his proximity to a 2019 embezzlement scandal in Warren County. Both the firm and the city found he had no oversight or involvement in the scandal.

Dolan said the decision to select Stanley was a “unanimous council decision.” If council had access to those emails prior to Aug. 12, she said they likely would have moved in another direction.

The search firm, Texas-based Strategic Government Resources has clients in about 47 different states, and conducts 125 executive recruitments annually. Its search yielded about 30 candidates for the Lynchburg city manager position, Dolan said.

These candidates were vetted the firm until eight semifinalists remained, and Dolan said finalists were selected for in-person interviews.

Jennifer Fadden, president of executive recruitment for SGR, told The News & Advance on Wednesday the firm has a “long proven process” that does a thorough vetting of all candidates. Among other services provided, the firm conducts a background check on its finalists, as well as a media search that goes back 10 years and reference checks.

Fadden said five people from Warren County weighed in on Stanley as a reference and gave “glowing” recommendations. None of them mentioned the emails. She added when asked about any additional information that could cause community concern, Stanley made no mention of them, either.

Since the emails were not public record, Fadden said, and were never publicized in Warren County, she said they did not emerge during the vetting process.

Dolan said both she and the firm felt Stanley had been thoroughly vetted.

“For something like this to crop up was just shocking to all of us,” Dolan said. Moving forward, she said “I think we are going to be a little gun-shy.”

City council members Jeff Helgeson, Ward III; Randy Nelson, at-large member; and Vice Mayor Beau Wright did not respond to The News & Advance’s requests for comment. Ward II Councilman Sterling Wilder and At-Large Councilwoman Treney

Tweedy said it was a personnel matter, and deferred to Dolan. Chris Faraldi, Ward IV, said because of the sensitivity of the matter, he did not have any further comments to add.

City council is slated to discuss the search in a closed session Sept. 8.

Fadden said the firm would be happy to continue the search for Lynchburg city manager, and are fully prepared to do so if council desires. A clause in the contract dictates SGR guarantees satisfaction.

According to the contract between SGR and the city of Lynchburg, compensation for SGR's "professional services" was \$18,500, with a not-to-exceed maximum price of \$26,500. To date, the city of Lynchburg has paid a total of \$17,754.59 to SGR for services rendered.

If the city terminates its agreement with SGR, the firm still will be compensated for all of its work "satisfactorily completed up to and through the date of termination." SGR still will provide all of the information obtained during the search process to the city.

"I don't want to lay blame on anyone," Fadden said. "I think it's an unfortunate chain of events that, of course, now looking at it, sure, we can all second guess the actions that were taken."

She said the firm will continue to press candidates to disclose anything that would not be publicly available in their background to avoid these situations in the future.

Dolan said it was "gallant" of Stanley to resign, which he did last Friday in a letter of resignation that was circulated in a city news release. In it, he apologized for any "unwanted attention" brought to the city, and said he felt it was in the city's best interest for him to withdraw.

"I think he could see our community was very concerned about the information that was emerging," Dolan said. "It would not be easy for him to get over. It was a real black cloud that would be hanging over his ability to be successful as a city manager in Lynchburg."

Stanley was slated to begin Sept. 1, following Svreck's retirement.

City Attorney Walter Erwin said he was not aware of any instances in which a city manager or a city manager candidate has resigned in this manner.

"As far as I know this is an unprecedented situation," Erwin said.

Until an interim city manager is appointed, Deputy City Manager Reid Wodicka will carry out the duties of the city manager.

https://newsadvance.com/news/local/education/fate-of-rustburg-middle-school-at-the-heart-of-community-conversation/article_fa4a2900-8124-5719-a8ce-699697e39c83.html

Fate of Rustburg Middle School at the heart of community conversation



Rustburg Middle School is shown July 21. In June 2019, the school board unanimously decided the complete rep division's top priority for its capital improvement plan.

photos by Kendall Warner/The News & Advance

The first high school in Rustburg was built in the 1890s — a two-room schoolhouse located at the foot of Long Mountain, a simple, wooden structure with a large, stone foundation, only 20 by 50 feet.

It was built at the site where the current Rustburg Middle School now sits, which until around 1980, served the county as Rustburg High School.

More than a century after the wooden high school was constructed in 1919, the great-grandson of the original builder is playing a leading role in the construction of the new Rustburg Middle School.

Clif Tweedy, director of public works and deputy county administrator in Campbell, like so many others from Rustburg, has a layered family history that can be traced back generations in the area — and at its heart is the old Rustburg High School, which has found its way to the epicenter of a county-wide conversation about the fate of the 100-year-old structure.

Tweedy's great-grandfather George Coleman built the original high school, and at the time, Tweedy said the planning process for the high school was likely a short conversation — at most, a little sketch on a piece of paper, with dimensions and the direction to build two rooms.

With no AC and no plumbing, the school required little more than windows, a wall and a roof.

Now, the discussion surrounding the future of the school — and the plans to replace it — has stretched over a decade.

A new Rustburg Middle School would be the first new secondary school in the county in more than 40 years, and Superintendent Bobby Johnson said the initial study of the county's public school facilities was conducted in 2009.

The assessment identified Rustburg Middle School as the number one priority, and though the original recommendation was to consolidate secondary schools, that consolidation plan was shot down by the board of supervisors in 2015.

Following the rejection, the assessment recommended that if the county had to remodel the school, they should do a full replacement of the facility.

In June 2019, the school board unanimously decided the complete replacement of Rustburg Middle School would be the school division's top priority for its capital improvement plan.

“That discussion has been going on for years, it's been the number one priority from the assessment and the school board's CIP for years, so it's not a new conversation,” Johnson said.

In recent weeks, it came to the community's attention that the request for proposals soliciting plans for the construction of the new middle school included a line that “demolition of existing school facilities must be included as part of this project.”

For some, this news came as a punch to the gut.

Last week, Gary Reynolds, Rustburg High School Class of 1971, spoke before the board of supervisors, urging them to reconsider the demolition and instead “to adaptively reuse the 1919 brick building as part of the new middle school complex.”

Backing him is a petition to save the old Rustburg school building that has netted more than 300 signatures in about a week.

The petition states that the building is “at the heart and soul of Rustburg,” and now alumni from across the decades have stepped up in an attempt to save it.

Reasons behind the signatures are wide-ranging and impassioned — from multiple generations of a family attending the institution, to positive stories of racial integration in the 1960s.

“Rustburg is my community; the schools are my community,” said Reynolds in a conversation with The News & Advance this week. “In Rustburg, like every other small community, the schools are typically a landmark that represents a generation of educators and students.”

He hopes to help preserve the history and the heritage of the building, not only for the school system but for the generations of grandparents, parents and children that have passed through its halls.

In the basement of the historic courthouse last week, Robert Merryman, Campbell County Historical Society president, held in his hands a large brass bell once used to signify the change of classes in the 1919 school before the installation of the electric bell.

Like many of the artifacts in the historic courthouse museum, it was rescued from a woman who had received it from a former custodian. So many historical archives, he said, are pulled out of trashcans after administrative shifts and changes of power.

He, more than anyone, wants to see the community's history preserved.

"I think there will be a real outcry," he said of the potential demolition. "The big test though, is that people need to show interest."

Tony Mitchell, graduating class of 1968, said if he walked into the school right now, he could take you right to his locker — locker number four, down the hall from the office. He could retrace the steps to his eighth-grade homeroom class, and tell you the names of the teachers and coaches.

"It's memories that will never go away," Mitchell said. He said the school deserves more than a plaque and fears the demolition will destroy the school's history along with it.

For many families, ties to the school go back more than a century. Tweedy only discovered his unique connection to the school's site in recent months after reading reports about the history of Rustburg that his mother had written.

His grandmother and grandfather taught at the school, along with his mother and daughter. Tweedy said he even taught there for a few weeks as a substitute teacher.

“My family has been in Rustburg a long time, and most families have some connections to it,” Tweedy said.

Like many others, he hopes the new plans for the school will be able to incorporate the original structure in some way, but that will be an ongoing conversation as plans are finalized.

“I love old things, and I have a lot of old stuff in the family,” Tweedy said. “But at some point, if the quality is not there and the functionality is not there, just because it’s old does not mean that you can easily keep it.”

Concerns about the schools aging infrastructure have long been a part of the conversation, with a deteriorating electrical and plumbing system, and maintenance issues that plague students and teachers throughout the school year — like a flooded library, leaking windows and an permeating rubber smell bad enough to stop a Standards of Learning test half-way through.

Both the county and those calling to save the historic structure agree that there is a clear need to upgrade and expand the school.

Doug Harvey, Rustburg High School class of 1970, who worked for more than 30 years in Virginia museums and historic sites, said he has a lifelong interest in saving historic buildings, and the 1919 brick school is one of them.

Harvey said the existing two-story brick building is eligible for the State and National Registers of Historic Properties, which could afford the county tax credits to rehab the school, potentially integrating the current structure into the plan — much like the county did with Concord Elementary School in 2009.

Harvey said simply using old materials from the school or incorporating a design would not be enough. With so many of Rustburg’s 18th-and 19th-century buildings disappearing, like the old hotels and hardware stores, it’s crucial to retain what he called the “hub of the community.”

That Rustburg alumni have rallied around the effort has been a testament to the strength of Rustburg roots.

“I’m seeing names and getting in touch with people who I have not seen or heard of in 40 or 50 years,” Harvey said. “Some of them are across the country, but they all hark back to this, where I got my start in life. That’s powerful stuff.”

Reynolds said he wants to work with the county to further this conversation, and after a meeting with Johnson, he left with a good feeling, and hopes that the project will continue to be open to community input.

At this point, Tweedy said nothing is locked in as far as designs are concerned. At the end of August, the joint committee leading the project — consisting of school board members and county supervisors — will review the five proposal finalists from the contractors who responded to the request for proposals.

“It’s an important building,” Tweedy said. “I’m glad we are having this conversation. Hopefully we get to a place where everybody is happy with the outcome.”

Johnson said the conversations with the community are just getting started, and he and Campbell County Administrator Frank Rogers have directed the county’s financial advisers to explore the potential savings that could be captured through tax credits, as well as develop a better idea of the financial feasibility of renovation versus replacement. He said they expect to see the analysis sometime in the next month.

Though it would likely add cost to the project, and slow the timeline that has already been put in motion, he said it is information he will bring to the joint committee.

“In lots of communities, certainly a community that has as much tradition and history as Rustburg does, the school buildings are often the center of the village, and many of the people that have gone through it for many years, they are fond of it,” Johnson said. “I understand that. I understand exactly why people would want to preserve it. The question is: is it feasible, in the end?”