

## Alex Bridges Government Writing W13

### Warren County supervisors OK firing range near historic park

By Alex Bridges

The Northern Virginia Daily

A firearms training facility in Warren County can resume outdoor shooting now that it has a permit.

Supervisors voted 4-1 at a special meeting to grant a conditional-use permit to Travis Dodson that allows him to operate a shooting range on Water Plant Road.

Chairwoman Cheryl L. Cullers, Vice Chairwoman Delores R. Oates and supervisors Vicky L. Cook and Walter J. “Walt” Mabe voted in favor of a motion to approve the permit for an outdoor recreation facility at 650 Water Plant Road. Supervisor Jerome K. “Jay” Butler voted against the motion. The property lies in the North River magisterial district represented by Oates.

Travis Dodson plans to operate the outdoor shooting range as part of his firearms training facility on the 50.4-acre property that he and his wife bought in 2020. Vacant woodland and pastures and Interstate 81 and Interstate 66 surround the property. Dodson lives in Frederick County east of Stephens City and owns Middletown Firearms in Middletown.

Director of Economic Development Joseph Petty, who also serves as interim planning director, explained that the board can revoke the permit if the applicant fails to abide by any of its attached conditions, which include:

Activities associated with the commercial operation shall not produce sound levels which exceed 60 decibels during hours of operation at the nearest property line.

Activities associated with the commercial operation shall be by appointment or reservation only. Outdoor discharge of firearms shall take place only from 10 a.m.-6 p.m., Monday-Saturday, and from noon to 4 p.m. on Sunday. Classroom instruction shall take place only from 8 a.m.-7 p.m., Monday-Saturday, and from 10 a.m.-5 p.m. on Sunday.

The maximum number of occupants per class shall not exceed twenty-five students and five instructors. Special events which exceed the maximum number of occupants allowed shall be limited to no more than ten events per calendar year with no more than seventy-five people per event. A Warren County special entertainment permit shall be issued for each event.

The applicants shall have the well/drinking water tested annually for lead contamination and a copy of the results shall be submitted to the Planning Department.

Supervisors took action at the end of the 3 1/2-hour meeting after hearing support for and opposition to the permit request. Supporters urged supervisors to approve the permit with many speakers saying that the area lacks firearms training centers. Opponents said the near-constant sound of gunfire from an outdoor shooting range disturbs the rural environment and adjacent Cedar Creek and Belle Grove National Historic Park, deters visitors and negatively affects property values.

Larry Andrick said at the public hearing that he lives about a half-mile from the shooting range. Andrick said he's "pro-gun" and "pro-small business" but opposed the shooting range because of the noise it would generate.

"I'm sure everybody at the shooting range will have ear protection ... on to protect their hearing, then they go home to their quiet neighborhoods," Andrick said. "Meanwhile, I'm sitting at my back deck listening to gunshots eight hours a day."

Miles Adkins lives in Hunting Creek Circle in Stephens City. Adkins said at the public hearing he has a background in occupational safety, has written insurance policies for firing ranges and is a pistol instructor with the National Rifle Association. He spoke favorably of Dodson's range.

"So what I would say is, you know, Travis has went above and beyond any kind of safety requirements," Adkins said. "I think with these kind of safety measures, we're gonna see zero safety accidents. But, if we have people out there, with all the new gun owners out there trying to shoot a soda can, learning from Uncle Bub, then I think we are putting ourselves at risk."

Several of the opponents of the proposal said they did not oppose a proposed shooting range but the location.

The Dodsons said they used a decibel meter, recently calibrated, to measure the sound of firearms discharged at the range. County code restricts noise levels to 62-67 decibels. But noise from traffic on the adjacent interstates made it difficult to test for sound at the property borders, Dodson said. Traffic sound by itself exceeds 70 decibels, Dodson said. He added that the Warren County Sheriff's Office has not received any formal noise complaints about the shooting range.

Some opponents questioned the test readings and the methodology, with one person explaining that environmental factors can alter the volume and trajectory of a gunshot.

The Dodsons also said they would work with Belle Grove and the national park service to coordinate training exercises around events held at the historic site. However, Belle Grove representatives contend the historic attraction holds events year round.

Most of the people who spoke in favor of Dodson's request do not live near the property or in Warren County. Supporters commented favorably about his shooting range. Some supporters downplayed the noise concerns and said they can hear more generated by traffic along the nearby

Interstate 81 and Interstate 66. Some also said gunshots from the range pale in comparison to the noise from Civil War battle reenactments performed at Cedar Creek.

Some of the speakers questioned how someone at Cedar Creek could know gunshots came from the range or from somewhere else. Mabe asked the same hypothetical question.

Opponents included residents who own property near the shooting range and representatives of the national park and the Belle Grove historic site. Some opponents also called into question the fact that Dodson operated the shooting range for months without a permit. Dodson halted the use of the outdoor range when the Planning Department, in response to complaints, warned him he needed to obtain a permit.

Several speakers representing Belle Grove and the park said they have had visitors who were turned off by the sound of gunfire and some left without continuing their tour.

Oates said she and Cullers visited the site and the surrounding area. Oates and Cullers both said they could not hear the gunfire during a test to see if the sound traveled from the range off the property.

Supervisors raised questions about how the Dodsons would try to mitigate the noise generated at the range. The Dodsons said they would like to build an enclosed shooting facility but that would cost several million dollars.

## **Warren County supervisors pan schools' bonuses plan**

**By Alex Bridges**

**The Northern Virginia Daily**

Warren County leaders showed no support Tuesday for the School Board's plan to give bonuses to its employees.

The School Board requested that the Board of Supervisors transfer money between categories in the division's current budget's operating fund. School Board Chairwoman Kristen J. Pence presented the request to the supervisors at a work session on Tuesday. Pence and Superintendent Christopher Ballenger responded to and answered supervisors' questions.

Chairwoman Cheryl L. Cullers, Vice Chairwoman Delores R. Oates and supervisors Jerome K. "Jay" Butler, Vicky L. Cook and Walter J. "Walt" Mabe attended the work session.

The request also includes transfers from savings to pay for mowers, literacy kits for all elementary schools and other funds to help balance the budget. Supervisors focused their attention on the proposed bonuses.

The School Board wants to reward the employees who stayed on this year and took on more responsibilities and work as a result of positions going unfilled, Pence explained.

The School Board agreed on May 18 to spend \$1.9 million to provide a net bonus of \$1,500 to each full-time employee and \$750 to each part-time employee, Pence said. In response to Mabe's question, Pence said the board has accounted for the full cost of the bonus, which is \$2,250 gross for each full-time employee. The funds come as a result of positions left unfilled through the current fiscal year, Pence said. The division also saw savings when they filled a vacant position by someone in a lower pay scale.

“As a School Board, we felt that everyone that showed up during the '21-'22 school year should be recognized and acknowledged for essentially doing the work of all of these positions that were not filled during that time because the work still had to get done, right, and it had to be picked up by these teachers, these instructional assistants, these cafeteria workers, bus drivers, everyone that had to fill in for the positions that were essentially paid-for positions but we were unable to fill them,” Pence said.

While supervisors commented that they acknowledge the work school employees do and that they deserve recognition, no member voiced support for the request to use division savings to pay for bonuses. Oates criticized the proposal to give bonuses with savings because it also would include employees leaving by the end of this school year. She noted that she brought up her concerns at a Monday meeting of members of both boards.

“One of the discussions and concerns that I had as a supervisor is that we are rewarding people who are no longer going to be working for us and, in all of my years in (the) human resources industry, I have never seen a reward for people who gave their resignation,” Oates said. “That is a problem especially since we are facing 75 resignations.

“So wouldn't it make more sense to take the money from the 75 people who are resigning and use it for sign-on bonuses for people that we are retaining or people that we're trying to recruit?” Oates asked.

Pence reiterated the challenges employees faced this school year.

“I do hear what you are saying about the people that are resigning,” Pence said. “They were here. They did the work.”

Pence went on to say she understood Oates' concerns and agreed with the supervisor that, in the future, maybe the School Board should rethink how it distributes bonuses and use the money for retention.

Mabe said he has no problem with bonuses in general but he has a problem with the division doing so after supervisors approved the School Board budget with funding in specific line items. Pence reiterated why the School Board wants to give bonuses.

## **Front Royal leaders oust town manager; councilman resigns**

**By Alex Bridges**

**The Northern Virginia Daily**

The Front Royal Town Council and the mayor have forced out Town Manager Steven Hicks after 20 months on the job.

During a work session Monday night, Mayor Christopher W. Holloway broke Town Council's 3-3 tie vote to approve a motion to terminate Hicks' contract.

Council members Gary L. Gillispie, Zachary Jackson and Amber F. Morris voted in favor of terminating Hicks' contract. Vice Mayor Lori A. Cockrell and council members Joseph E. McFadden and Letasha T. Thompson voted against the motion.

After the vote, Hicks stood up from his chair, gathered papers and other items. McFadden then rose from his chair and said "I resign." Both men then walked out of the council meeting room.

Council appointed Assistant Town Manager Kathleen Leidich to serve as the town manager in the interim.

Council members took action after they met behind closed doors for roughly an hour and 40 minutes during which they addressed the performances of Hicks and Interim Town Attorney James Cornwell Jr.

Council members also voted at the Monday work session on a motion to direct Holloway to request that Cornwall resign. The motion authorizes Assistant Town Attorney George Sonnett to step in as interim town attorney. With McFadden out, council members voted 4-1 to approve the motion, with Cockrell dissenting. The council usually does not vote or take official action at work sessions.

Council members and the mayor made no comments after approving the two motions. They then proceeded to conduct the work session discussions.

The Town Council must pay Hicks a severance equal to four months of his base salary of \$140,000 or approximately \$46,667 and compensation for accrued vacation time and sick leave, according to his employment agreement. Council also must pay for Hicks' health insurance for six months. The council in December 2020 approved a four-year employment agreement with Hicks that would have expired Dec. 7, 2024.

Reached by phone Tuesday, McFadden said he tried to stop the council from firing Hicks.

“Well, I believe that Mr. Hicks has done an outstanding job as town manager,” McFadden said. “He has moved forward every single initiative that council has asked him to move forward.”

Morris responded by email on Tuesday to questions about her vote to end Hick’s contract. Morris said she would not comment on specific personnel matters but did speak in general terms.

“When I was elected to do this job I promised to do what is best for the town and to make those decisions purely as a business decision, not an emotional, or personal decision,” Morris said in her email.

Outside the meeting room after he resigned, McFadden described the council as a “kangaroo court.” Morris stated in her email that she thinks the council did not take any unjust actions. She called out McFadden for his comment, which she called a “highly unprofessional and inappropriate.”

“Any vote ending in a split decision is proof that the checks and balances intended by our forefathers in creating this government are alive and well in healthy civic debate,” Morris stated. “We are each entitled to our own opinions.”

Holloway responded in a text message to a request for comment, stating he has been advised by legal counsel not to discuss the termination.

“The only thing I will address is (the) outburst and resignation of Joe McFadden. He has in the past thrown fits because the vote didn’t go his way, so last night didn’t really surprise a few of us. I think it’s better for the citizens that he’s gone and hopefully someone that has the best interest of the town at heart will come forward and take that seat,” Holloway stated. “As far as him referring to the meeting as a kangaroo court....looks to me the kangaroo has left the building.”

McFadden said in an interview Tuesday that council appeared poised to give Hicks a 2% pay raise retroactive to December 2021 and a \$3,500 bonus and intended to act on the matter either at the Monday work session or at the next regular meeting.

“It never was announced because we didn’t get there because certain members of my town council, certain members of my previous town council, have been working for a while to get rid of Mr. Hicks,” McFadden said.

The town’s handling of a housing development last year planned by the mayor’s construction company spurred some council members to push out Hicks, McFadden said. Questions arose early last summer about how Chris Holloway Construction received the greenlight to build a housing project even though the Planning and Zoning Department did not follow required

procedures. The Planning Commission raised concerns and pushed for then-Town Attorney Douglas Napier to investigate. Napier concluded in a report that while errors occurred, he found no wrongdoing on the part of any town official.

McFadden said he had concerns with the situation that arose over the mayor's construction project but had hoped he and the next council would move forward from that matter and focus on other issues facing the town "instead of micromanaging staff, micromanaging our town manager, really digging into staff issues, contacting staff, asking staff to do things, going into town hall on a regular basis." He went on to say that these instances were brought up at many council meetings.

"We just dealt with a continuous influx of pressure upon staff to complete tasks, to get things done, to move projects along ...," McFadden said. "I didn't really want to go too far into that. Again, you know I'm just happy to be away from it at this stage and not have to constantly argue for subjective and reasonable decisions versus, it seems like, personal-interest grab and move that happens here in the town of Front Royal, which is one of the reasons I got into politics and I thought I could change it in the first place.

"But, I tell you, the machine is just a little bigger than I am," McFadden said.

Several council seats and the mayor's post are up for election Nov. 8. Holloway decided to not seek re-election as mayor; Cockrell is running for the seat. Gillispie and Thompson are not seeking re-election to council.

McFadden said he resigned because he didn't want to serve on a council that repeated history. The council in 2012, which included Holloway, fired then-Town Manager Mike Graham, McFadden noted. The town has had several town managers and interim town managers between then and when council hired Hicks in December 2020.

When Front Royal needed to find a new town attorney, council members broached the idea of contracting with an outside firm to provide legal services, McFadden recalled, which he supported and some other jurisdictions do.

"It allows for somebody from the outside perspective to give legal opinions that are not based on any connection to anyone or anything within this town," McFadden said. "I think that's something the town continues to need and should continue to seek."

All members of council and the mayor are natives or long-time residents of Front Royal and there are no representatives of newcomers to town, McFadden said.

"Everybody knows everybody and everybody's interconnected," McFadden said. "So, you know, that's a shame because as we invite new companies, new people to move to Front Royal to start

their business here, to start their lives here, who knows if their interests are going to be kept in mind.”

McFadden went on to say he doesn't want to serve on a council that is now changing the town code to give itself more power over Front Royal's legal department. The town manager can no longer “lean on” the town attorney's office for legal advice, McFadden explained. Rather, the town attorney now answers directly to town council, McFadden said.

“I don't think that sounds very good when you talk about government,” McFadden said. “There's no independent review. There's no ability to have a second opinion. It's just insulating so no one can ever push or disagree with or prevent anything that anyone possibly has interests in doing. It's systemic and it's been systemic in Front Royal for generations.”