

Supervisors agree their salaries — deliberately lowest in Virginia — should remain unchanged

‘You do it from your heart and soul,
and not from your bank account.’

BY BEN PETERS

Rappahannock News staff

Members of the Rappahannock County Board of Supervisors earn just \$2,400 annually, making them tied with Craig County as the lowest paid elected officials in the role statewide, according to data from the Virginia Association of Counties.

While it appears intuitive that a small rural area like Rappahannock lacks the budget to more equitably compensate its officials, the Supervisors’ pay also reflects a deliberate effort on behalf of past and present members of the body to ensure it remains the lowest in Virginia.

The Supervisors last amended their own pay in 2003 to double monthly earnings from \$100 to \$200 following lengthy talks to ensure the salaries still remained on the bottom of the association of counties’ ranking, according to former County Administrator John McCarthy. “It was quite a pride at the time,” he said. Meeting minutes dating back to the 1990s made note that Rappahannock Supervisors’ pay was the lowest in the state.

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Stonewall-Hawthorne Supervisor Van Carney, who opposes granting himself and other members of the body a raise, identified the distinction as yet another quirky Rappahannock anomaly that sets the county apart from so many others in the state.

A 'symbolic' wage

Today there's consensus among the body that their pay should remain unchanged, despite the Supervisors' growing roles in the community as they graduate from primarily overseeing small-town zoning matters and a modest budget to undertaking vast initiatives like expanding internet access and managing millions of dollars in COVID-19 stimulus.

Interviews with all five members found that some spend nearly two dozen hours each week — sometimes more depending on the season — working in their role as a Supervisor between attending public meetings for various assignments, maintaining constituent relations and working on initiatives. That's on top of the hours put into their day jobs.

Most members' desire to leave their pay unaltered reflects an attitude that holding elected office in Rappahannock shouldn't be a career opportunity for officials to financially enrich themselves, but rather a part-time job where they serve at the pleasure of the public while earning a living elsewhere.

"I like the story of George Washington, who went to work as president and when his term was over [and] his time was over in D.C., he went back home and farmed his land," said Chair and Wakefield Supervisor Debbie Donehey, who owns Flint Hill's Griffin Tavern. As chair, Donehey's salary is double that of a rank-and-file member at \$4,800 annually.

Since Rappahannock's Supervisor elections are staggered, changes to their salary under Virginia law can only be made in years when at least two members are up for reelection and won't be enacted until the following January when the new board is sworn in. Even if the Supervisors' current salary had been adjusted for inflation in 2022, members would still be earning just below \$4,000 annually.

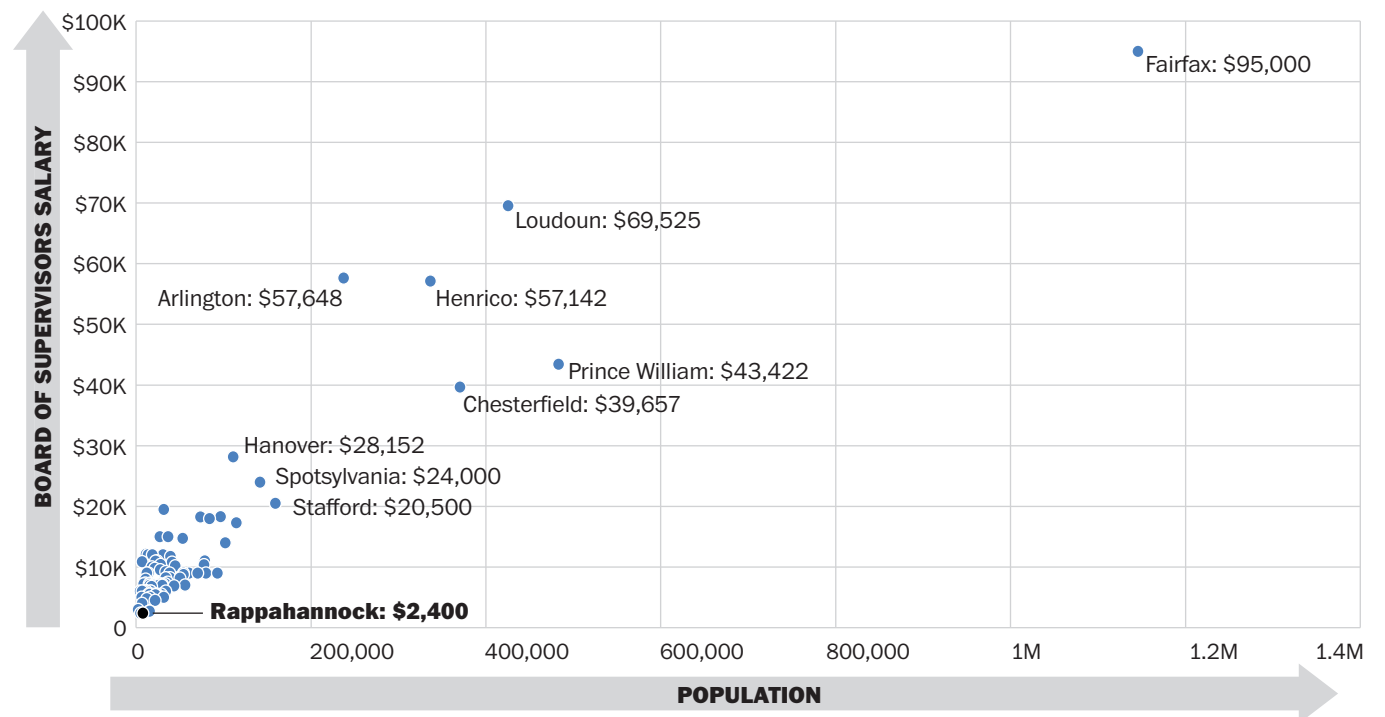
According to Charles Hartgrove, director of the Virginia Institute of Government at the University of Virginia's Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, there is a longstanding tradition in the state for elected officials to work part-time for relatively low wages, as is done in the Virginia General Assembly.

"A lot of local governments in Virginia and beyond have struggled with this because, let's be honest, it's never looked upon favorably for elected officials to give themselves a raise," he said. "The political realities of it sometimes make it really challenging for elected officials to look at their pay in an objective manner."

The county's budget couldn't afford for the Supervisors salary to be raised without a hike in property taxes, widely understood to be unpopular with Rappahannock voters. "Do I think this

Comparing supervisor salaries

Rappahannock's Board of Supervisors are paid among the lowest of all other Boards of Supervisors across Virginia. Those counties with the highest salaries also have the largest populations.



Among Virginia's smallest counties, Rappahannock's Board of Supervisor salaries are tied for the lowest in the state with Craig County.

Population of smallest Va. counties	Board of Supervisors member salary	Board of Supervisors chair salary	Administrator salary
Cumberland 9,713	\$6,000	\$7,200	\$143,000
Richmond 8,947	\$6,000	\$7,000	\$121,275
Mathews 8,495	\$7,200	\$7,700	\$140,000
Rappahannock 7,406	\$2,400	\$4,800	\$148,922
Charles City 6,696	\$10,890	\$12,100	\$124,032
King and Queen 6,606	\$4,000	\$4,000	\$122,827
Surry 6,569	\$6,000	\$7,000	\$134,400
Bland 6,210	\$5,000	\$5,500	\$148,406
Craig 4,885	\$2,400	\$2,900	\$62,457
Bath 4,276	\$6,000	\$6,000	\$116,359
Highland 2,226	\$3,000	\$3,000	\$73,910

Source: Virginia Association of Counties

By Laura Stanton for Foothills Forum

ought to be a fully-funded, full-time position to serve on the Rappahannock County Board of Supervisors? No, it shouldn't be," said Piedmont Supervisor Christine Smith. "And the notion that it could be is frankly absurd."

Hampton Supervisor Keir Whitson, who works full-time at global law firm White & Case where he earns significantly more than as an official, views

Rappahannock pays its Supervisors less than other counties with smaller populations.

the meager salary he and his colleagues make to be symbolic of the social contract that exists between Supervisors and citizens.

"It's either we're going to get symbolic pay for the sake of getting paid, or we're going to get a real salary," he said. "And I would never, ever want, request [or] expect a quote unquote real salary ... For a county of 7,300 people — that would be a huge burden on the taxpay-

ers and I don't think it's right."

Counties in Virginia with larger populations, and therefore more complex governments and economies, generally pay their Supervisors more. In Northern Virginia counties like Fairfax and Loudoun, Supervisors earn \$95,000 and \$69,000 respectively, the two highest in the state. There, Supervisors also have staff to help them manage the job. Still, Rappahannock pays its Supervisors less than other counties with smaller populations, including Surry, Bland, Bath, King and Queen and Highland counties.

After tax withholding, Whitson, who opted out of the health insurance plan offered by the county (the only benefit available to Supervisors), said he makes less than \$100 each month for his work. Had he taken insurance, Whitson would have owed the county each month since his Supervisor salary wouldn't cover the cost.

Jackson Supervisor Ron Frazier, who takes county health insurance alongside Smith and Carney, said his plan costs more than he earns monthly through his Supervisor salary.

Frazier, the longest serving member currently on the board and the sole dis-

sender of the 2003 pay raise granted to the Supervisors, said he doesn't feel adequately compensated for his work, but has little interest in pushing for change because he feels the county is wastefully spending money elsewhere, including on broadband expansion, and therefore can't afford to pay them more.

A semi-retired electrician, he currently works as a contractor for the federal government, but would not disclose the nature of his work or which agency he conducts it for.

'It's not about the money'

Maintaining such a low salary leaves many wondering if it could crowd out or discourage low-income workers from seeking office since it's an impossible wage to live on for a job that demands so much time and energy.

Historically, Rappahannock's Board of Supervisors has been comprised of farmers and other blue collar workers, but today the demographics most likely

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CHARLES HARTGROVE, DIRECTOR OF THE VIRGINIA INSTITUTE OF GOVERNMENT:

“A lot of local governments in Virginia and beyond have struggled with this because, let’s be honest, it’s never looked upon favorably for elected officials to give themselves a raise.”

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to run are workers with means or retirees, Whitson said. Both groups have the time and financial resources necessary to sustain themselves through their tenure. “You want a good pool of candidates ... [but] there are many people who are precluded from running for office because they need to get paid,” Whitson said.

Campaigning can also be expensive. Carney, whose day job is managing Sperryville’s Pen Druid Brewery with his brothers, self-financed \$1,000 toward his 2021 campaign, almost half a year’s salary.

But members agreed that it’s not a large enough concern to act upon since elections have remained competitive, suggesting there are enough individuals interested in seeking office who aren’t deterred by low wages. “I think that so far we’ve done pretty well in terms of having community support in civic duty and people standing up for it and saying, ‘Yup, I’ll do it’ and not expecting anything,” Carney said.

Other government roles in Rappahannock, where the median household income is more than \$80,000, pay fairly well. County Administrator Garrey Curry earns nearly \$150,000, more than most of his peers in counties the size of Rappahannock.

Many constitutional officers also make more than six figures, including Clerk of the Circuit Court Peggy Ralph, Commonwealth’s Attorney Art Goff and Sheriff Connie Compton, according to data provided by Curry. But those roles’ salaries are set by the state based on population size.

“A lot of people that I’ve talked to, they don’t work for Rappahannock County because of the pay,” said Smith, who works as a full-time account executive for the Elkwood-based Communications Corporation of America. “But we do the work for the county out of a sense of duty and love of the county. And frankly because of the intangibles: the quality of life and out of commitment to a beautiful rural community. That drives us to serve and that’s the kind of reward you can’t monetarily compensate for.”

Whitson noted the personal satisfaction and experiential value he derives from the job. “It’s a really interesting life chapter and I’m grateful for the opportunity. It’s unlike anything I’ve ever done ... it’s not about the money,” he said.

Donehey said of being a Supervisor: “It’s almost like working for a nonprofit ... You do it from your heart and soul, and not from your bank account.”

‘Obstructionism’

- Experts: Delay of key broadband vote eroded norms
- Former official: Supervisors’ actions akin to ‘brinkmanship’

BY BEN PETERS

Rappahannock News staff

Supervisors Christine Smith and Ron Frazier’s decision to skip a Rappahannock County Broadband Authority meeting in September, jeopardizing a contract to expand internet access in the county, reflected an erosion of democratic norms, government experts said.

“Is it stonewalling, or blatant, out and out obstructionism? Sorry,

I think it’s the latter, and that kind of behavior and a democracy doesn’t go well together,” David Kerr, an adjunct professor of political science at Virginia Commonwealth University and a former Stafford County School Board member, said of Smith and Frazier’s decision.

Experts and former Rappahannock County officials interviewed said that the way Smith and Frazier conducted themselves in blocking the county’s ability to fulfill its financial obligation by not attending the meeting while subsequently drawing a rebuke from the county’s chosen internet provider was both without local modern precedent and illustrated a notable breakdown of democratic values on the Board of Supervisors.

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NORMS

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“This is emblematic of where American politics is, and that is we are losing our ability to compromise — and even to accept defeat with grace ... and [Smith and Frazier] didn’t accept loss. They are using every available means to thwart a decision that’s already been made,” said Dr. Jeremy Mayer, associate professor in the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University.

“And that kind of scorched earth politics is spreading across America today. And it’s a bad sign in a democracy, because a democracy falls apart if you don’t accept defeat with, if not grace, at least civility,” he said.

In interviews, former local county officials largely disapproved of Smith and Frazier’s conduct, although several were reluctant to call it anti-democratic. But among their supporters, Smith and Frazier have been hailed as dogged fiscal watchdogs willing to challenge the status quo by asking what they describe as difficult questions to hold the oftentimes unresponsive internet provider to account.

After withholding their support on Sept. 19 to approve a payment for broadband expansion and suggesting that the meeting be continued to a later date, Jackson Supervisor Frazier and Piedmont Supervisor Smith on Sept. 26 did not attend what was planned to be the continuation, blocking the county’s ability to make the payment.

Hampton Supervisor Keir Whitson, who remains in recovery after having suffered a heart attack in July, did not attend the Sept. 19 meeting, leaving the body without a tie-breaking vote needed to approve the payment. Smith and Frazier were accused by many, including Chair and Wakefield Supervisor Debbie Donehey, of taking advantage of Whitson’s health emergency to block the payment, and, in effect, broadband expansion.

Both said they wouldn’t approve the payment without reassurance from All Points Broadband that “universal coverage” means residents in Rappahannock’s remote corners will receive service. The company, which is responsible for installing fiber in Rappahannock and seven other counties, has assured the county numerous times that all eligible residents will receive service.

Frazier, who declined to offer his support for the payment in the lead up to the meeting, said he couldn’t attend because he had work on site at a government facility. Smith said she did not show up because she “didn’t think there was anything to do” since the body had not received at the time what she deemed to be sufficient assurance from the provider.

Their move left the body without a quorum and impeded its ability to approve on time the county’s first quarterly payment for broadband expansion by Oct. 1, which it was contractually obligated to fulfill after the Board of Supervisors in May entered into an agreement with All



BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER

The Board of Supervisors and Broadband Authority met on Oct. 3 and approved authorizing the broadband funding with a 3-2 vote.

GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR DR. JEREMY MAYER:

“This is emblematic of where American politics is, and that is we are losing our ability to compromise — and even to accept defeat with grace.”

Points and a regional authority to finance the project. Both Smith and Frazier, who opposed entering into the contract, have been against the county’s broadband expansion plan for more than a year and were the only two officials in the region to not support proceeding with the project.

Smith and Frazier did attend the Oct. 3 regular Board of Supervisors meeting where the Broadband Authority ultimately approved the payment two days after the deadline — without the two Supervisors’ support. The body also approved all future quarterly payments owed to the company, ensuring that financial obligations toward the project will not be blocked in the future.

But Frazier and Smith’s skipping of the previous meeting contributed to All Points issuing a critical statement admonishing the county for failing to make the payment deadline, saying Rappahannock’s inaction also placed other counties in the broadband expansion agreement at risk. All Points General Counsel Mark Zaruba, in the statement sent to Donehey, threatened to not commence broadband construction in Rappahannock until the county earmarks in full what it owes the company, which it did on Oct. 3.

Frazier, when contacted for comment last week, denied that his behavior was norm breaking and called Donehey not canceling the Sept. 26 meeting “theater” since she knew hours before it began that the body would lack a quorum.

“We are NOT ‘Opposed to broadband expansion,’” he said in a statement, speaking of both himself and Smith. “I am opposed to voting for anything without reading the material first, and especially opposed to voting for anything with nothing to read.”

Also contacted for comment, Smith said: “It may surprise you to know I truly believe we should continue to be able to disagree agreeably. Now that the votes are done and the money’s spent, we really need to come together to successfully provide oversight for this \$100 million dollar 8-county project.”

Mayer called Smith and Frazier’s actions anti-democratic behavior that erodes trust and civility on the Board of Supervisors. He urged actions to restore good feelings among its members.

A lack of trust among Supervisors could create a vicious cycle wherein members repeatedly cause trouble out of bitterness or polarization and in turn make government more toxic and less efficient, he said.

While county politics have become more divisive in recent years, former Rappahannock County Commonwealth’s Attorney Peter Luke said elected Rappahannock officials during his nearly three decade-long tenure often made efforts to get along with one another and strived for congeniality. “Sometimes they had to lick their wounds,” he said. “But they didn’t seem to ever hold it personally against other board mem-

SUPERVISOR RON FRAZIER:
“We are NOT ‘Opposed to broadband expansion.’ I am opposed to voting for anything without reading the material first, and especially opposed to voting for anything with nothing to read.”

bers in the fact they were on the losing end of a vote.”

“Most of the board members that I can think of all ... when they got whipped, they were gracious. They didn’t strike out at other board members or try to circumvent what the intent of the board obviously was,” Luke said.

Officials learning to compromise and accept defeat is a step that can be taken in working to restore democratic order in government, Mayer said. “It has to be a decision by both the winners and the losers to show grace and charity and a willingness to disagree agreeably,” he said.

“One of the ways you won’t save this is by intensely focusing on blame,” he said.

Kerr called Smith and Frazier’s behavior “unconscionable,” and a reflection of the breaking down of good governance at local levels across Virginia. A former Stafford County School Board member, Kerr likened what happened in Rappahannock to what he described as recent dysfunction on the Spotsylvania County School Board where a slim majority abruptly ousted the superintendent and replaced them with a ➔

➔ candidate with no education experience.

“In my mind, it does, like the broadband commission, represent a breakdown in the norms and consensus approach to governance that has, for so long, made local government in our area work so well,” Kerr said of his analogy to the Spotsylvania School Board. “Once the agreement/contract/whatever is agreed to, you don’t sabotage it later. That’s because the credibility of the county is behind it. Or, that’s the goal. Undermine that, and the local government will suffer terribly. And in the longer term the citizens and the taxpayers.”

Several former local county officials interviewed said that because of Rappahannock’s small size, the county is often best served when in partnerships with other localities. Examples include the county’s involvement with the regional jail or its internal communication system that is integrated with neighboring counties.

Missing the broadband payment deadline could have damaged the county’s reputation and its prospects of entering into future agreements with counties that may have lost trust in Rappahannock, they said.

Kerr agreed. “This kind of ‘we lost the vote, but we’ll get you later’ behavior is becoming all too common,” he said. “And I worry, if, and we’re

not there yet, it becomes the norm, that it will make it very difficult for local governments to enter into agreements because it will be difficult to find partners and vendors willing to trust them.”

Former officials also said Smith and Frazier’s move was without precedent in recent county history. They said that while it’s not unusual for meetings to be canceled due to lack of a quorum, there is no recent instance where officials skipped one and in effect — whether intentionally, or not — blocked the approval of a routine payment of the county’s outstanding bills.

Luke, who retired in 2011, said he can’t recall a time during his tenure when elected officials blocked legislation by denying a quorum.

“I’m not aware of any prior board members that ever intentionally skipped a meeting to gain some kind of political advantage,” he said. “In fact, I’m not even sure I can ever recall a meeting where we didn’t have a quorum [with a] printed reason. Generally, the board members were very responsible in coming to meetings,” Luke said, noting exceptions for sick leave or vacation time.

He continued, “Those are sort of justifiable excuses, certainly for an absence, and not with the intent to kind of circumvent what they thought might otherwise happen.”

A former local official and long-

time observer of county politics, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive matters, likened Smith and Frazier’s behavior in skipping the meeting to “brinkmanship,” or resorting to extreme measures while risking placing the county in legal crosshairs to get their way politically.

“I really don’t know what those two were thinking,” Kerr said of Smith and Frazier. “It was certainly highly irresponsible. They took exception to the overall agreement, lost in the approval vote, and then wanted to delay payments, which in the end put the county at more fiscal risk. As we say in Britain, ‘that’s bad form.’”

The county government observer noted that over the years they’ve seen members of the Board of Supervisors skip meetings where they didn’t appear to want to vote on a particular issue and would provide an excuse for not attending, but a key piece of time-sensitive legislation wasn’t stalled because of it.

Donehey could have called a special meeting for the day prior to the deadline, but said she chose to hold it during the regular Board of Supervisors meeting on Oct. 3 to make it as convenient as possible for members of the Broadband Authority to attend. Smith and Frazier could also have skipped another special-called meeting, blocking another quorum

(although Smith, when asked, said she wouldn’t have done so).

Donehey declined to be interviewed for this report and Whitson did not return a phone call seeking comment. “I was elected to show up and I will continue to do that. I am not interested in political stunts,” Stonewall-Hawthorne Supervisor Van Carney said in a statement. “I am interested in getting work done for folks and for getting folks broadband.”

Recently retired Stonewall-Hawthorne Supervisor Chris Parrish called Smith and Frazier’s blocking of the payment very unusual, but said it was a powerful means to “boycott” the situation. “People do what they do to get what they want,” he said. “And this was an effective way to do that. I’m not really sure what they thought the end result would be. I wonder if they regret doing it? But it’s grandstanding, in a nutshell.”

While the former officials interviewed agree Smith and Frazier’s behavior was norm breaking, unlike the experts, they were reluctant to say it was anti-democratic. Parrish, who retired in 2021, noted that quorum procedures are designed so that meetings can be rescheduled. He called Frazier and Smith’s skipping of the meeting a “legitimate” means of conducting themselves, even if he disavowed it. “You could also say, ‘well, that’s politics,’” Luke said.

Threatening letter sent by town attorney strains relationship with The Inn

BY BEN PETERS

Rappahannock News staff

Washington Town Council on Monday unanimously approved a resolution prohibiting town staff from communicating with residents or businesses about legal matters following a chain of events that led the town's attorney to send a letter to The Inn at Little Washington that the business' attorney deemed threatening.

The letter, sent Friday afternoon to Inn General Manager Bob Fasce by Town Attorney Martin Crim, alleged that an unofficial stop sign placed by The Inn on a private street it owns at the intersection of Middle Street and Main Street near Patty O's Cafe & Bakery created a "public nuisance," according to a copy of the email obtained by the Rappahannock News.

In the letter, Crim ordered The Inn to take the sign down immediately and threatened legal action against the three-Michelin starred restaurant and hotel if it failed to act the day the message was sent.

While the town had previously asked The Inn to install the stop sign because

some were concerned about traffic at the intersection, Crim argued the one used was "substandard" because of its size, color and lack of notice that the intersection is a four-way stop.

"I ask that you make this your highest priority so as to avoid possible injury or death to motorists and/or pedestrians ... If you are unable to put up a proper sign, then you will need to take immediate action to prevent vehicles from entering Main Street without stopping, such as blocking off this portion of the road" wrote Crim, who took office in January.

Warrenton-based attorney Joe Pricone, who spoke on behalf of The Inn during public comment at the meeting, called the correspondence "inappropriate."

"I don't think that's the correct way to notify a private business of what the town perceives as a problem," he said, arguing that the sign was legal.

The letter was penned after Town Administrator Barbara Batson was contacted by three residents complaining that motorists were allegedly not abiding by the unofficial stop sign and creating unsafe street conditions, she said. Crim also

alleged in the letter that "several near misses have occurred" at the location. Pricone said The Inn reviewed surveillance tapes and found that each motorist captured on video stopped at the sign.

The identities of the people who complained were publicly withheld, despite Town Council member and Inn Chef-Proprietor Patrick O'Connell insisting that they be disclosed. According to Batson, one of the complainants was an elected member of the Town Council. Treasurer Gail Swift, who presided over Monday's meeting, would not comment on which member of the body complained.

O'Connell suggested that those who complained may have been "using town government to act out possibly their own personal vendettas against The Inn."

After Batson received the complaints, she attempted to reach Mayor Fred Catlin, who was away on vacation, about how to proceed. Catlin, she said, did not return several messages over the course of last Thursday and Friday.

In the absence of a response from Catlin, Batson notified Crim about the circumstances on Friday during their regular weekly meeting and he decided to take matters into his own hands, viewing the situation as a potential lia-



A letter about this stop sign sent by the Town's attorney to The Inn at Little Washington led to a dispute with the business.

bility for the town, and sent the letter to The Inn, according to Batson and Town Council Member Joe Whited's recollection of the events.

Catlin, who was still away on vacation during Monday's meeting, did not return a phone call seeking comment.

During the meeting, O'Connell called the incident a "setback" in The Inn's relationship with the town. He described the circumstances as part of a broader historical pattern of attacks levied against him and his business.

"It's really about finding a way to move forward in a neighborly and reasonable manner with the largest property owner and biggest taxpayer in the community with respect on both sides," O'Connell said of his business.

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