

ALERT FEATURED

lynchburg city council

## 'Inner squabbles' on display as Lynchburg City Council meeting turns heated

**Bryson Gordon**

Feb 15, 2023



Lynchburg City Councilors (from left to right) Chris Faraldi, Ward IV; Jeff Helgeson, Ward III; Martin Misjuns, at-large; and Mayor Stephanie Reed, at-large.

Bryson Gordon

**D**isagreements over decorum and the evening's agenda during Tuesday's regular Lynchburg City Council meeting turned into an argument between two councilors, resulting in the city's mayor and vice mayor raising the possibility of disciplinary action.

Mayor Stephanie Reed says that as council entered a closed session — off-limits to the public and the press — near the end of the meeting, Ward III Councilor Jeff Helgeson told her, “You’re the stupidest person I’ve ever seen.”

Reed replied, “I’m sorry?” — a response that can be heard **on an online video of the council meeting**, just before the audio cuts off.

After the cameras were turned off, but before the news media left the council chambers, Reed asked Helgeson, “How dare you?” to which Helgeson responded, “How dare you, young lady?”

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As the tension escalated, a Lynchburg police officer in the room interjected while Helgeson and Reed argued on the dais.

In an interview Wednesday morning, Reed said, “I was shocked when I heard Councilman Helgeson say that I was the stupidest person he’d ever seen.”

“I am a 48-year-old woman. And I will not be talked to that way. He can be frustrated about how the meeting went. He can be frustrated that it didn’t go the way he wanted to. But that doesn’t ever justify him speaking to me that way, or degrading me in that manner,” said Reed, who serves in one of council’s three at-large seats.

In an interview Wednesday morning, Helgeson denied calling Reed “the stupidest person I’ve ever seen” and instead said he called the meeting “the stupidest thing on earth.”

“Obviously exasperated and so, you know, wasn’t referring to her at all,” Helgeson said. “Wasn’t talking to her. I was getting my books and frustrated and saying, ‘This is the stupidest thing on earth,’ under my breath. And if she thinks I was talking to her, I apologize.”

Helgeson said in an interview Tuesday after the meeting he was frustrated about council changing — or in some cases, not changing — the evening’s agenda, and also because he felt Reed interrupted him during portions of the evening’s meeting.

During the 4 p.m. work session, Reed read a statement regarding Ward I Councilor MaryJane Dolan, who was unable to attend the work session and the 7:30 p.m. regular meeting due to a family emergency.

In the statement, Reed said Dolan requested most votes be tabled until the body’s Feb. 28 meeting, allowing her the opportunity to weigh in on several items council had positioned for Tuesday.

Council was expected to vote on whether it would maintain a 1993 agreement with the Lynchburg City School Board regarding unspent money; whether to appropriate \$1.1 million in unexpended funds to the schools’ capital project fund; and were prepared to hold several closed meeting sessions.

At the end of its regular meeting, after a debate over whether to make changes to the agenda, council voted to move one closed session item — an evaluation of the city attorney — to a later meeting because it was not time-sensitive, while keeping the other two time-sensitive closed session meetings on Tuesday.

Helgeson and At-large Councilor Martin Misjuns opposed going into closed session for only the two most time-sensitive items, instead wishing to address all three.

After the vote, Reed asked, “May I have a motion to go into closed,” before Vice Mayor Chris Faraldi, who represents Ward IV, said, “We’re in closed.”

Helgeson immediately said, “That’s what we just did,” and the exchange between him and Reed followed.

Ultimately, council voted not to certify the closed meeting because topics that were discussed went outside the specific purview of the session. Closed sessions are only used for certain specific matters that council is legally allowed to discuss outside the public eye.

“I’ve been patient for 20 years,” Helgeson, who first joined council in 2004, said Tuesday after the meeting. “I’ve never had my patience attacked and threatened as much as today.”

He attributed the events of the evening to “inner squabbles” among council.

Faraldi took up for Reed after the meeting, adding, “If we need to find disciplinary action to whatever degree, that’s now on the table as well.”

“... I take the actions of this council incredibly seriously and I personally will not stand for any action that is unbecoming of a member of city council in Lynchburg. And we may disagree on policies, we may disagree on proposals, but tonight proved a point. And I want the public to know this is exactly why I voted to make Stephanie Reed the mayor of this city,” Faraldi said.

“This is exactly why I voted to make myself vice mayor. This is exactly why in 18 years Jeff Helgeson has never been vice mayor, never been mayor. This is exactly why we saved the city from that nightmare.”

On Wednesday, Helgeson pushed back against criticism of his decorum and conduct on the dais, and said Faraldi shouted “taunts” at him as Helgeson answered reporters’ questions outside of City Hall on Tuesday night.

“He should know better,” Helgeson said. “He should, you know, he’s done this a lot. And he continues to kind of prod and poke and taunt even when we’re sitting there talking. That is the decorum that is totally unbecoming.”

Before these events transpired, during the roll call portion of the 4 p.m. work session, Reed reiterated some of council’s rules of procedure and decorum following the first two meetings of the year.

Additionally, the mayor took a stand for her husband, Dale Reed, a permanently disabled veteran who she said has been criticized recently for being “out of touch” on the city’s real estate tax because of an exception giving tax relief to permanently disabled veterans in Lynchburg.

Misjuns and Helgeson took exception to Reed’s monologue, with Misjuns accusing her after the meeting of breaking the rules of procedure for bringing up her own personal issues involving her husband.

Misjuns added in an interview Wednesday that any disciplinary action potentially taken against him or Helgeson for their conduct “demonstrates [Faraldi’s] desire to have authoritarian rule over city council instead of representing the citizens,” while further accusing Faraldi and Reed of “manipulating” the rules of procedure.

Even after the events of Tuesday night, Faraldi said he “absolutely” feels comfortable working alongside Misjuns and Helgeson in the coming months.

“I have every full faith that they will recognize when they’re wrong. And admit that and apologize and then get on with the business of the city,” Faraldi said.

Council’s next meeting is scheduled for 4 p.m. on Feb. 28 in the Council Chambers inside City Hall, 900 Church St. in Lynchburg.

**VEUER**



Here are a few expert ways to help your kids figure out fact from fiction when reading the news online. Veuer's Keri Lumm has more.

**By Bryson Gordon**

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ALERT FEATURED TOP STORY

## Police, fire chiefs detail firearm incident after bullet-stricken laptop produced at city council meeting; body jilts workplace resolution

**Bryson Gordon**

Jun 29, 2023



In this file photo, Lynchburg City Council is shown in session on Feb. 28. Council approved an amendment to Lynchburg City Schools' fiscal year 2024 budget to transfer money to fund legal fees for the division as it prepares to petition for unitary status from a 1971 desegregation order to allow for close-to-home rezoning.

Paige Dinger,

The News & Advance file

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Bryson Gordon

**A**s Lynchburg City Council neared discussion on one member's proposed workplace resolution that he described would "promote merit, excellence and opportunity in city government," the vice mayor introduced a surprising motion that jilted the resolution, pairing it with a rebuke of the councilor's treatment of city staff.

Well into Tuesday night's meeting, Vice Mayor Chris Faraldi offered up a substitute motion to approve a resolution amending the recently-adopted Lynchburg City Schools budget, but it was offered with a caveat: Council's meeting "adjourns immediately upon its adoption," despite one item remaining on the agenda.

That item was a discussion on At-large City Councilor Martin Misjuns' proposed resolution to "promote merit, excellence and opportunity" in municipal government operations, a resolution he recently said would "contribute to improving workplace culture and ensuring our taxpayers are not funding unnecessary and divisive concepts in the workplace."

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More than a dozen residents who spoke out did not agree with the councilor's description. One person spoke in favor of its merits.

Joy Shaughnessy said while the resolution sets out to produce a more cohesive workforce, "I do however strongly disagree that this resolution has any hope of achieving that outcome for our community."



"This resolution attempts to equate the absence of a discussion about history, racism and sexism with a reality that is actually absent of those issues. Unfortunately, not talking about these issues does not make them cease to exist," Shaughnessy added.

M.W. Thornhill IV was another resident who spoke out against the resolution, posing a question: "If the actual mission is to place the well-being of our citizens in our city first, why wouldn't we want to understand each other better?"

Other residents offered more scathing remarks on the resolution, such as Lanaux Hailey, who referred to it as an attempt to "muzzle" the First Amendment.

However, the agenda item that partly fueled a large crowd of residents to fill council chambers drew little-to-no-discussion on its merits from those with the votes to decide it's fate. A 5-2 vote by council approved amending the school budget and briskly adjourning council's meeting.

Misjuns and Ward III Councilor Jeff Helgeson were the opposing votes on Faraldi's motion, with Helgeson calling Faraldi's "parliamentary trick" a "low class" move.

The item to amend the school's budget originally was slated for council's consent agenda due to its support from council last meeting. Consent agenda items typically warrant little discussion, but Faraldi motioned early in the meeting to move the item from the consent agenda to the general business section.

The schools' budget item was again moved, this time ahead of the resolution debate, later in the evening by Faraldi, who asked council to consider the schools' item first so those in attendance for that item could leave before what was expected to be an extended debate over Misjuns' resolution.

However, when speaking to why he included the caveat to adjourn the meeting, Faraldi said he did so because "it was downright insulting to see how city staff were treated and I do not believe that resolution has earned the right to even be debated."

Misjuns defended his resolution, later adding he was planning on bringing it forth as an item to be placed on a city council work session in the near future to hammer out the details.

The councilor's defense began with him holding a laptop over his head with what he claimed to be a bullet hole in it, resulting from an incident that he alleged happened "in a city workplace," but provided no more details during Tuesday night's meeting, such as the timing or department involved in the incident.

Wednesday afternoon, Lynchburg Fire Chief Gregory Wormser and Lynchburg Police Chief Ryan Zuidema offered more context in a joint statement.

"On January 14, 2016, there was an incident that occurred at Lynchburg Fire Station 7 (2624 Lakeside Drive) where a fire department employee accidentally discharged a firearm inside the building," the chiefs said. "There was a non-life-threatening injury to the same employee and no other injuries were reported. The Lynchburg Fire Department (LFD) immediately contacted the Lynchburg Police Department (LPD) to investigate this incident.

"LPD officers and detectives responded and conducted a criminal investigation based on this report. At the conclusion of the investigation, LPD provided then Lynchburg Commonwealth's Attorney Michael Doucette with their investigative findings. Mr. Doucette reviewed this information and ultimately determined that criminal charges against the involved employee were not warranted."

The chiefs said in the statement the employee involved will not be named, as it is both a personnel matter and no criminal charges were filed.

After Misjuns defended the resolution Tuesday night, Faraldi flatly said he was retaliating against Misjuns for his actions toward city staff, saying he is "downright disrespectful to our city staff. You are downright insulting to their character. You are downright offensive to their reputation."

Faraldi said the manner in which Misjuns engaged staff over email regarding the resolution was the reason the vice mayor was retaliating against Misjuns.

"This hasn't even earned the right to be discussed because of how bad you handled this," Faraldi added.

After the vice mayor's allegations of poor treatment toward city staff, The News & Advance obtained emails that revealed the back-and-forth between several councilors and city employees Faraldi referred to.

In an attached letter to Misjuns' resolution, the councilor requested the resolution be placed under the general business section of the meeting's agenda. However, according to the emails provided, it appears the item initially was placed under the roll call portion of the work session agenda.

Multiple city councilors told The News & Advance the common procedure for similar resolutions would be to place the item under the roll call section of a work session, then determine if it should be placed on a regular meeting agenda for further discussion or action.

Even though the agenda item landed on roll call, Misjuns asked why the item was "kept off," but it later was explained to him the item was on the roll call section as council had "previously done with councilmember agenda item requests." Later in the email, a city employee told Misjuns that the item was then moved to general business per a conversation between Misjuns and the city manager.

Despite the item being on the agenda, Misjuns said city staff was obstructing his request and even threatened it would "come into account during performance reviews."

"I've always been direct with my expectations of city staff," Misjuns told The News & Advance about the emails. "Elected officials should never be obstructed from conducting the business of the citizens they represent. As I am accountable to the citizens, staff is also — through us."

After the meeting, Faraldi maintained there are "elements of the resolution that I would support. Truly there are," but reaffirmed the manner it was brought forth was "wholly inappropriate."

Misjuns said Wednesday it's his belief the resolution will remain on city council's agenda for its next meeting, given the fact it was not tabled or stricken from the agenda.

"I will never let a personal beef between myself and another councilmember get in the way of good public policy for the citizens of Lynchburg," Misjuns said.

After perhaps the most contentious council meeting since the body's early skirmishes in January and February, when asked about the seemingly growing tensions amongst councilmembers, Faraldi said it's not necessarily a bad thing to have such discourse among city leaders in a public forum.

"Just because we have disagreement doesn't mean everything is wrong," he said.

"... Has it been rough in the past few months? Maybe. But I would also look at some of the other instances of intense moments over the last three years I've been elected and it's not a bad thing for us to be having these discussions."

Council will meet next at 4 p.m. on July 11 for its work session, followed by its regular meeting at 7:30 p.m. inside council chambers in City Hall, 900 Court St. in Lynchburg.

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**By Bryson Gordon**

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ALERT FEATURED TOP STORY

lynchburg

## School funding, real estate tax rate take center stage again as Lynchburg City Council nears tax rate adoption

**Bryson Gordon**

Apr 26, 2023



Councilman Jeff Helgeson walks through people protesting outside of City Hall on Tuesday in Lynchburg. Paige Dingler photos, The News & Advance

Bryson Gordon

**A**s Lynchburg City Council’s budget calendar begins to wind down, the tenor of city residents on both sides of the real estate tax rate argument continues to climb as council moves toward adoption.

Council is now less than two weeks away from its scheduled first reading of the fiscal year 2024 budget, planned for May 9. A second reading and vote is currently scheduled for May 23.

Tuesday night, minutes before council was set to begin its regular 7:30 p.m. meeting, a crowd of residents grew from a few voices to a louder chant, imploring council to not make a large cut in the real estate tax rate.

“Keep our city a city; it can be done at \$1.01,” was the chant of several dozen protesters who joined outside of City Hall, asking the councilors — some of which walked through the protesters on their way into the meeting — to adopt a real estate tax rate to \$1.01 per \$100 of assessed value, rather than the majority of council’s proposed 89 cents tax rate.

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Council recently voted to reduce the real estate tax rate to 89 cents per \$100 of assessed value pending an official ordinance from the city, a 22-cent reduction from the current real estate tax rate of \$1.11 per \$100 of assessed value, and a 16-cent reduction from the city manager’s proposed \$1.05 per \$100 of assessed value.

At council's proposed rate of 89 cents, the real estate tax bill for a \$200,000 home in Lynchburg would be \$1,780, while a bill at the city manager's proposed \$1.05 would be \$2,100.

The difference between the two proposals — 16 cents — equates to roughly \$12 million in revenue for the city.

No official ordinance has been adopted to date, however council is expected to formally vote on one during its May 9 regular meeting, after it was presented to council during its 4 p.m. work session on Tuesday.

The 89-cent tax rate has the support of four councilors — Vice Mayor Chris Faraldi, Ward III Councilor Jeff Helgeson and At-large Councilors Martin Misjuns and Larry Taylor.

In a packed council chambers Tuesday night, about 50 residents took their turns to speak during the meeting's public comment section, with a majority of the speakers imploring council to fully fund the budget request of Lynchburg City Schools' Superintendent Crystal Edwards, which would include her 15-50 Plan, a proposal to bring starting teacher salaries up to \$50,000 and classified employees' hourly wage to \$15.

Isla Wasson, an 8th grader at Dunbar Middle School for Innovation, told council, "As a student, I feel the need to express how immensely beneficial a raise in the payment of our educators and school employees would be."

"These committed individuals devote their time, energy and attention to their occupation with the intent of educating and supporting the youth of Lynchburg," she continued.

Although a majority spoke in favor of the 15-50 Plan, some residents maintained the real estate tax rate should be at 89 cents, such as Curt Diemer and Tyler Turner, who argued people are fleeing places where taxation is high.



While council did not formally discuss the proposed budget or tax rate during its 7:30 p.m. meeting, perhaps the clearest picture of what's in the proposed budget was given during the body's work session earlier in the evening.

During the work session, Chief Financial Officer Donna Witt presented to council a budget with a real estate tax rate of 89 cents that includes the following:

\$3 million for public safety compression/progression salary plan;

\$2.6 million for a 5% general wage increase for general city employees;

\$2.1 million in increased funding for Lynchburg City Schools.

An additional roughly \$2.3 million also will be allocated, mostly to new positions for public safety offices across the city.

Virginia Attorney General Jason Miyares, who made a stop in Lynchburg on Tuesday, told reporters at the University of Lynchburg that he gives council "two thumbs up" after previously criticizing them for considering cutting public safety funding several weeks ago.

Miyares said he got the information that they were cutting public safety funding from a "draft budget that was online," but was "pleased" by council's decision to fully fund public safety in the new proposal.

In order to fund all of the new initiatives in the budget with an 89-cent tax rate, the gap in the budget is about \$9.1 million, according to Witt. Closing the budget gap likely would include department service level cuts.

Providing context on long-term budgeting in Lynchburg, Witt said since 2008, "we've really looked at budgeting differently," pointing to the fact that most departments were flat funded or less while the public safety budget has grown.

“That’s not a judgement that it shouldn’t have ... I say all of this because when I show you what departments cut, it was really, really difficult,” she added. “... I had to tell people that their jobs were on the chopping block today.”

To close the gap by \$1.3 million, several department service level cuts include closing the Templeton Senior Center, permanent closure of the collection windows in City Hall, eliminating hanging banners and holiday decorations, elimination of the city’s contribution to the Lynchburg Regional Business Alliance, reduced funding for Miller Park’s pool season by 10 days, reduced funding and contracted services for snow removal, and a host of other reductions.

Mayor Stephanie Reed, speaking to the elimination of the city’s contribution to the business alliance, said “we’re shooting ourselves in the foot” when it comes to business growth and development in the city.

From those reductions, council could look at decreasing expenses by budgeting for vacancy savings and reducing funding for vehicle replacement, which would net about \$4.6 million in savings. Additionally, council could reduce funding for human and social services, reduce its Blue Ridge Regional Jail contribution, eliminate salaries for councilmembers and eliminate “discretionary external service providers.”

However, even with all of those reductions, council still would need to find \$2.05 million to completely close the budget gap. The two options provided to council to do so: The use of one-time funding in the budget or removing the additional \$2.1 million in funding to Lynchburg City Schools, offering them level funding to fiscal year 2023 — \$40.8 million.

Even as **council eyes changing how it funds the school system** from a lump sum to categorical funding, where they can drop money in nine specific “buckets,” Helgeson said it’s “not equitable” and “not fair” to ask other city departments to take a 3% departmental cut and not the school division.

Helgeson, a longtime proponent of reducing the “real estate tax burden” on citizens, said he wants the school division to return to level funding from last year — \$40.8 million — and then reduce another 3% off the budget, putting its local funding at about \$39.6 million. He added due to the state funding by composite index, the school division still will see growth in its overall budget.

“It’s a fairly easy way and a fairly straightforward way and actually a fair way, because we’re saying, ‘hey whatever department ... cut your budget by 3%,’” Helgeson said. “But we’re not saying [to] the biggest contributor cut your budget by 3%?”

Helgeson later said Edwards’ 15-50 Plan is “more gimmicky than it is practicality.”

Misjuns continued his push to focus more on instruction and transportation in categorical funding, saying he wants to fully fund the transportation category to address shortages there.

Like Helgeson, Misjuns criticized the 15-50 Plan, calling it a “joke” that the plan would put new teachers and veteran teachers making the same amount if the starting salaries are raised to \$50,000. Edwards **said in December** that the salary plan would “ripple” through all teacher pay tables, seemingly affecting more than just the starting salaries.

Ward I Councilor MaryJane Dolan and Ward II Councilor Sterling Wilder, both of whom stand opposed to the 89-cent tax rate, continued to preach about the “long-term affects” of reducing the tax rate.

Dolan said it’s “very, very nearsighted” to think that bumping starting teacher salaries to \$50,000 won’t help bring in talented teachers to the division, just because some veteran teachers may not be at \$50,000 right now.

Wilder continued to question why council is trying to “micromanage” the school board by using categorical funding. He also said the departmental cuts will slow growth citywide.

“I want to be in a city that’s growing. I want to be in a city that’s thriving. I want to be in a city that’s making investments ... so I am not in favor of cutting certain things,” Wilder said.

Both Wilder and Dolan appear willing to support a real estate tax rate of 99 cents, 10 cents higher than the majority’s proposal.

According to City Manager Wynter Benda, council must adopt a budget 30 days prior to the end of the current fiscal year.

As of now, council is scheduled to meet on May 2 for one final budget reconciliation meeting, followed by the first and second readings of the proposed budget on May 9 and 23.

City council’s meeting on May 2 is scheduled for 4 p.m. in the second floor training room inside City Hall, 900 Church St. in Lynchburg.

**By Bryson Gordon**

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