

The Greater Richlands Area Chamber of Commerce and the Richlands Town Council held a meeting at the Richlands Incubator on Thursday, February 6, 2014 at 7:00 pm with the following present:

Chamber of Commerce
President: Karen Patton
Executive Director: Ginger Branton
Members: Vickie England, Peter Mulkey, Jeff Jessee, Alita Whited, Barry Alley, Regina Sayers, Elaine Ward, Travis Hackworth.

Town of Richlands
Mayor: Jannis White
Town Manager: Tim Taylor
Town Clerk: Susan Whitt
Council Members: Joe McCracken, Rod Cury, Doug Ratliff, Mary Ann Strong and Larry Johnson

Southwest Virginia Community College: Mark Estepp, President; Doug Branton, Professor; Greg Horn, Professor.

Citizens: Lynna Mitchell, Bill Patton

Press: Adam Howington, Richlands News Press

Karen Patton opened the meeting. She spoke about the challenges faced by the Richlands Chamber and the Richlands Town Council everyday and how they are handled. She suggested that both consider everyday problems as stepping stones instead of obstacles and that the Town Council and the Chamber join forces to step across the obstacles.

She also suggested focusing on one or two main obstacles:

One is to define a vision for the citizens of Richlands and the surrounding areas; the other is to look at the development of Richlands and the surrounding areas.

There is so much information available for developing a vision for the Greater Richlands area we need to guard against creating a vision that is too broad or a vision that is too generic that eventually says nothing. We need to be mindful of the temptation of the vision that focuses on quantity not quality. Both the Richlands Chamber and the Richlands Council need to be committed to finding the best vision possible for growth of our great community.

We need to stop doing things that just aren't working. We need to create a vision in which the Town of Richlands is known for excellence, honor, integrity, and providing outstanding quality of service. We need to promise less and deliver more.

She welcomed the Town Council and invited the Council and the Chamber to join forces for the good of the town and the surrounding areas.

Ginger Branton presented hand-outs to everyone with an overview of the Chamber of Commerce. Chambers of Commerce have been around since the 17th Century. The first Chamber in the United States was in New York. The first incorporated Chamber was in Charleston, SC. The Richlands Chamber actually started in 1953 as an opportunity for business men (not women) to get together to address some of the situations that were forthcoming in the community. It encompassed a larger area just like the Chamber does today. In 1991 the Chamber became incorporated. Ginger said that when she first started at the Chamber, she couldn't find the corporate papers. The Board felt that it was important that the Chamber be incorporated so we became incorporated in 1991.

Back in 2005, we did a strategic planning session and the hospital was gracious enough to pay for the consultant to come in and do the strategic plan. The consultant found that the mission statement that we had was too broad and too long. So we have a new one and this is the same mission statement we have until this day. "To provide pro-active leadership for economic opportunity and enhance our community's quality of life to benefit our members in the greater Richlands Area."

She spoke briefly about their Annual Report. There are now only two divisions within the Chamber, Economic Development and Membership Services. She mentioned the benchmarks for 2013, specifically the Lead program that the Chamber started. It was introduced in 2011, and our first class was in 2013. We (John Willis and I) visited Chambers across Virginia and sought information about their Lead programs and gleaned those things we felt were more appropriate for our area and represented our mission statement. Ours is modeled after the Wise County Chamber, which was initially started through the University of Virginia. We started out last year with 12 participants and we graduated 11, one of the participants moved. This year, we have kicked off the program with 12 participants as well. We also have the Lead brochures available tonight. She asked everyone to encourage people to be a part of this Lead Program, to apply for the program for next year. It is a very good opportunity for the participants to get a grasp and understand things on a town, county and even a state level. Peter Mulkey was gracious enough to let us come to the hospital and spend the day with him. We visited the 911 Center, the Commonwealth Attorney's Assistant, toured the Courthouse, and toured the Jail. We also toured the Water Treatment Plant and the Sewer Treatment Plant.

We are also connecting with southwest Virginia, allowing an opportunity for us to network with other Lead graduates of southwest Virginia. Drew Lumpkin came last night; we had a gathering, and shared with the graduates from this past year. We are going to start other networking opportunities where we can connect with other lead graduates from other parts of southwest Virginia. We need to start nurturing our knowledge on the things that we need to know about and how we can help make a difference to our citizens. That is our new project that we have undertaken. You can read the rest of the benchmarks that we have and all of the divisions that we are involved in.

The next to the last sheet is our program of work and how we are identified and what we anticipate on bringing forth again and one is a big issue in Richmond, and that is a partnership opportunity. We used to have educational forums. We are going to introduce those again. Dr. Michaelene Meyer is the new superintendent of Tazewell County Schools and we are partnering with the community college. We are planning a meeting and you are certainly welcome to get involved, it will probably be the end of March or the first of April. The state is making different guidelines with education. We are requesting that they re-evaluate the Standard of Learning, the high stakes testing. We, as the Chamber Board, don't feel like it's working. We are tired of them teaching to the tests. So we went on record with a Resolution that was part of a packet that all of the school systems in Southwest Virginia, and all of the Chambers endorsed. We are trying to stay abreast of everything that we feel like is important to nurture, to grow, to educate, in offering opportunities for our citizens and our young people so that they will stay here and will pursue the career that they choose to pursue here. We as a town and we as a chamber are instrumental in making that happen.

Our key goals: quality education is one of our first priorities, governmental affairs-we serve as the conduit to address any governmental issues that we have, especially going to Richmond. Ginger said she didn't mind getting up close and personal with our representatives, she has been doing that for 30 plus years. She has worked with many of them on different projects over the years. She complemented the Town Council on having the vision for the restoration projects such as the Section House Restoration and the tourism initiative that will be going on once it is completed.

We want to be a true partner with the Town of Richlands. We want to be able to nurture a relationship with all of you similar to what we have had in the past. Not necessarily in the direction as in the past, because the Chamber has taken a totally different direction, especially with the Lead Program and the other initiatives that we have adopted through the Chamber. We are here for you. We want you to maximize the talent that the Business population that is right here in this room can offer you. We want you to step forward as much as we are stepping forward to lend you a hand. She offered for anyone to share their vision.

Vickie England expressed her opinion as far as the Lead Program. She invited everyone on the Town Council to come and visit at least one time. She said she thought they would be pleased to see how Richlands is stepping out in this new program.

Regina Sayers said she was proud of the graduates that are continuing to meet to work on community projects and to see how they can be of service to the community. Their commitment is the key.

Ginger Branton added that she thinks it is time to “get the citizens pants on fire”. With the economy the way it is, with things that are happening in the country, we really need some excitement in our town. She said that with all the great minds in the room, certainly together they could accomplish great things for this Town. We need to strive for that. She mentioned that she loves going by the Bearded Moose, the new restaurant in Town, it is packed and all the cars parked along the street. That is exciting to me. That is revenue that can be turned into projects.

Councilwoman Mary Ann Strong said that she appreciated the Chamber taking the initiative and putting out the invitation for the Council to come and meet, share ideas and work with each other. The Chamber is very blessed with Ginger and her energy and enthusiasm and Council is very blessed with our Mayor Jan who has the same qualities of energy and enthusiasm. As a newcomer on Town Council, she said she still has a lot to learn but she doesn't feel that this is about finances. She said with regards to the Richlands Festival (Carnival) and the Freedom Festival, she would like to help with both.

Ginger said she couldn't thank the Town (all departments) enough for all that they do with the carnival. She said it couldn't be accomplished without them. Having it in Town and having it be that focal point in the center of our Town, brings a lot of people into town. She had told Tim Taylor at an Economic Enhancement meeting that she loves when she has to wait for traffic to clear and you have to wait to cross the street.

Regina Sayers said that it would help her as a Chamber Member to see those events and to see how they intersect to see that they have the same goals going forward so that the Chamber and the Town could have a true partnership.

Alita Whited said that our town is struggling; you may have one business open and have another one close. The economy is bad; even now Jewell Smokeless is talking about merging or selling out. We have already lost so many jobs. The future of Richlands is at stake. None of us would be here if we didn't love this place and want what is best for it. We have got to communicate. She said the last time she looked on the Town's website, it was so outdated. There wasn't even one picture of Richlands that you could pull off. We need Facebook; we

need an up-to-date website; the Chamber needs a link with the Town; the Town needs a link with the Chamber. She said if we don't all pull together we will be another McDowell County. Mayor White said that the Town was in the process of doing a new webpage and felt that everyone would be pleased with it. It was very near completion. She said they have the Freedom Festival page on Facebook that has a lot of news on Richlands. Alita said we need to flood Facebook with things going on in and around Richlands.

Vickie England said that one of the things that Drew Lumpkin talked about last night was to have things that are available. She said for a long time, she didn't know about the hiking trail up at the Cuts. There are things that we have in the community that people don't know about. We need some highlights, either on Facebook or on the website. We need to have highpoints of things to do in Richlands, Cedar Bluff and the whole area. We need to pin point what those things are and share them.

Mr. Taylor spoke about the new website, it is modern, we want to make sure it is right before we put it out there. We want to make sure the information is correct. It is a little busy; it is a workable website for things such as utility services, etc. But there is plenty of room for activities, calendars. We are trying to embrace social media, I know the Police Department has used it more than anybody and it is helping them tremendously. They are able to get help from the community. We move a little slower because we don't want to make mistakes. We are little behind; it was already supposed to be out. But I am thinking that within a couple of months, we will be able to do that. We are doing it with limited staff and limited budget. We are doing it in-house with some of the IT guys from the County. Council has looked at it, it is functional and I think it will work fine.

He mentioned the access channel on Time Warner Cable, and the fact that they are broadcasting the council meetings live.

Doug Ratliff spoke about his vision for Richlands. Richlands has a tremendous infrastructure and wants to share. Tim and all of the guys have done a wonderful job with infrastructure and we have a regional water plant. The most important thing to help Richlands is to grow. All of the communities have to come together. When you google Richlands, it's 6,000 people. We have 21,000 people surrounding us. If we could all come together and be one town, then we would have a chance to grow. It is the only way it is ever going to happen.

Vickie England said that in the meeting last night, when they were discussing applying for grants, if you had the Richlands, Cedar Bluff, Claypool Hill areas all together and called it Richlands and that would be the population, how much more you could draw in.

Doug Ratliff suggested doing burroughs, for example have two representatives from Claypool Hill, two from Cedar Bluff, and because of population, 4 or 6 from Richlands. That way each area has a voice and come together as a Town. That is the only thing that is going to save Richlands. This makes sure that no one is swallowed up, it is a mutual agreement.

Joe McCracken said everyone would have to come together at that point and to do that he suggested a referendum and let the people decide on what they want instead of 6 people on the Council deciding. He said he would like to have everyone's input instead of just Richlands Town Council, or just Cedar Bluff Town Council or just Claypool Hill. He said he would rather see it put on a referendum and see what the people decide.

Doug Ratliff said that we need to educate the people. Just like the independent study that was done two years ago; and we are going to do another study; in Cedar Bluff a family of four would pay \$300 some extra dollars in taxes to Richlands if we merge. But in return, they would gain over \$3,000.00 in their pocket just from the water that we can save them on the rates. We can put 10 times more in their pockets than what they would ever pay to Richlands. You have a few people at Claypool Hill that say they don't want anything to do with Richlands and we need to educate the populous. If we have a referendum it would fail unless we could educate them and show them what they would be gaining so that they would want to be a part of Richlands.

Joe McCracken said to educate the people and then put the referendum out there; it should be everyone's choice.

Doug Ratliff said without Richlands, Claypool Hill's fire insurance would triple but they don't want any part of Richlands. Vickie England said if their house catches on fire, then they depend on Richlands. They take those amenities but yet about 20 or 30 people voice that they don't want any part of Richlands, yet they are using us to ride on.

Ginger Branton asked if he was suggesting having some sort of community forums where we can start educating people on what the dilemma is and how we can better serve ourselves.

Mark Estep spoke to the issue. He said he thinks that it is absolutely critical to educate our brothers and sisters of southwest Virginia because we spend so much time on little community vs. little community arguing with one another, in the rest of Virginia...Virginia is ROVA and NOVA. There is northern Virginia and rest of Virginia. We spend our time arguing with one another while NOVA consumes all of the resources. If you look at the Commonwealth of Virginia, if you draw a line from Northern Virginia up around DC and do a crescent and swing down through Richmond and swing over to Tidewater, that is 6 million people that live in that crescent. There are only 8 million in Virginia. 2 million

people live in the rest of the state. We don't have a chance. If we don't agree that Cedar Bluff, Richlands and Claypool Hill and other communities need to band together, we know what is going to happen. We see it in the community colleges all of the time. There are 23 community colleges in the state. If you take the community colleges that are in that crescent, they like to call it the "golden crescent", that is 75% of the population of the community colleges. They wield such power and authority budget-wise. At SWCC for example, even if the enrollment grows, my budget will still go down because they are growing so much faster. The thing that we need to communicate to people is that it's not Claypool Hill vs. Richlands, it's NOVA vs. ROVA. It is the important for southwest Virginia to realize it's us against the rest of state that will just overwhelm us simply because of population. The 6 million to 2 million population split is getting worse all of the time and will continue to get worse. It can't be us against us.

Joe McCracken said he wasn't saying that he wasn't for taking Claypool Hill or that he isn't against taking Claypool Hill but can the Town afford to take in these areas. That is the study that we need to have done.

Doug Ratliff said the study has already been started. We have already contacted a firm that will be doing an independent study. We have a contract to review. Tim Taylor said it would be a comprehensive study to look at all the resources that we have and what it would look like to take in those areas that might be in question, what it would take to service those areas, and to what level and the economics involved to do that. We would need to include the Planning Commission in any open forums that we have. That vision is what that group is for too.

Doug Ratliff said that part of the study will show both sides, what benefits will Claypool Hill have vs. Richlands. Pros and cons. Richlands will have nothing to do with the study, it is independent.

Ginger Branton asked if the Town was breaking even with taking in the Doran and Hidden Valley areas. Mr. Taylor said the Town was not in it to make money, we are in it provide services at a decent rate with a little bit of a rainy day fund. All the things that we committed to by discussion with the County, we have done, except maybe a few street lights. We are providing services to all of the areas that were identified. The down-turn of the economy has made us struggle with what we have been doing with the big picture. Most of the time when you do an annexation or boundary adjustment into town from a county, the Town will take a loss because of providing the services out of the box. Soon as 12:01 a.m. hits, then everyone is all together so you have to provide the services for certain things, like police, fire, rescue. Utilities are a different matter because they are being serviced. But long term, it is almost always a benefit.

Doug Ratliff said Richlands is already ahead of the game because they already serve 21,000 people with Fire and Rescue. We have regional water; we supply water to Buchanan, Russell and Tazewell Counties. Richlands has a great infrastructure to be shared. Tim Taylor said that has to be looked at because those services have to be provided. So that is what the study will do.

Mary Ann Strong asked how long the study would take to be completed. Mr. Taylor said they had given them a time line; it is not a long time. Doug Ratliff said he thought it was 6 weeks. Mr. Taylor said it would take a little longer because as most people don't realize, the Town has a \$15 million dollar budget. It has already been surveyed, so that helps but the other things, such as street lights, etc. that grows to a different level because folks in most of those areas look urban but they are not. They don't have urban services that everyone has grown to expect. And plus, there is all of the zoning that comes with it. I hate to use the word "taken", because it is really not that. You merge, or you become a partnership and everyone is sharing everyone else's stuff. It is like bringing someone into the family. All of these things that you once had that you only shared with 6,000 people, now belongs to 27,000 and you have every right that everyone has that has been there from day one. That is the beauty of it. There are risks with a bigger population and you can do more.

Travis Hackworth said the main thing that they were dealing with is the misinformation. People just don't know that. From childhood they have been biased, Cedar Bluff against Richlands. It's Claypool Hill against Cedar Bluff and we don't want to be taken in because of this. I think it would help if you could show them on paper or show them the study and make it available. Forums are great if you can get people to attend. You have churches, schools, etc. where you have mass populations that you are going to be dealing with. Invite those leaders into the forums.

More discussion ensued about Richlands water rates vs. Cedar Bluff's water rates.

Travis Hackworth suggested appointing certain leaders in the community to work as negotiators or liaisons to try to bring those two together. You are so far apart right now, I would love to see it happen, but I just don't think it will.

Rod Cury asked him to explain. Travis replied that Cedar Bluff is a historical little town that has its own bragging rights. I think they would feel like they are being stripped from that recognition. I do like the idea of the burroughs and having representatives from each area. You have some proud people that live there.

Doug suggested the Chamber should take the lead on educating the people. He also stated that Hidden Valley is still Hidden Valley although it has been annexed into Richlands.

He said they had to move on two fronts, do the study and then move ahead as the education is going on. He said Richlands doesn't have ten years to wait for people to be educated.

Ginger said to clarify, after the study is done, Council wants to do public hearings. Doug replied that he wants to do two things: public hearings and education but at the same time, if the study is favorable, moving toward the Board of Supervisors.

Ginger asked Tim Taylor to explain how boundary adjustments are done and how often they can be done. Boundary adjustments, if it is a county, which it would be, by law you can do a voluntary boundary adjustment, which is a simple ordinance type of adjustment. You can't have any rigid agreements, like if you do this, then I will do this or I will do this for so many years. Once you do that, there is a requirement in the code that you have to go to the commission of local government to let them examine all of those documents. They want to check for the best interests of both communities so that no one gets taken advantage of. Voluntary would be the least expensive way. But if that doesn't work, we would sit down around the table with the County and say here is our report, let's talk about the report and let the experts come in and you can ask them questions independently. We would have enough knowledge at that point hopefully that we could say, okay that sounds good, we will have our public hearings in the communities. It is really that simple.

Ginger asked if the County would say "not on your life" then is it dead in the water. Tim said no then it's an annexation. It could be that part that lies out of town (and this has happened before when we took in Doran/Raven) that a group of citizens would sign a petition that says we petition you that we want to be part of Richlands. It can happen both ways. If that becomes an issue then you go with the County, the procedure there is different, then it goes to the Commission of local government, they will have a fact finding mission. They will do their own study and then once they have rendered a decision on that they will have a three judge panel picked, not from any judges in the areas, and they will be independent and will listen to both sides as well as the commission having their report too. But the three judge panel will make the final decision.

Doug Ratliff said he would hope that the Chamber would make an effort to get all of the communities together in one town for education. But at the same time, hopefully the Town will be moving in the direction of the Board of Supervisors and beyond if we have to.

Ginger said she didn't see a problem on trying to educate people on where we are and where we are going to go and how we are going to continue to live.

Peter Mulkey agreed. The Chamber needs direction from the Town how they can help. I think we can help broker some of those things. We need to identify key people in all of these locations to bring together who at that point and time could come to a reasonable conclusion (if it makes sense, based on the study). I think that is how you begin to move people forward. I think when you try to do it, in this case, with a governing body, and then you try in one sense go over someone's head and you go to the Board of Supervisors, you will get major push-back. To me, if you can do this, you bring people together on the same page. You work behind the scenes and then your governing bodies come together and have it presented, then it's going to work. But until we do that, it's not going to go anywhere.

Regina Sayers agreed with Peter Mulkey. She said that all you would do is create hard feelings. We have a greater voice in numbers. We all know money is shrinking; everyone is taking home less pay than years ago because health care costs and food costs are greater. We do get a lot of our funding through Older American's Act and things like that. Those dollars are shrinking. Some AAA's on Aging, some Centers for Senior Living, depending on your size, will not survive. Those that are not strong in numbers and don't have a lot of programs. We will survive because we have 250 people, we have several programs, we have public transit; we have a lot of things going on. At our Centers for Independent Living, we have 5 employees and they may not survive. We need to merge. There is a push-back from them like you wouldn't believe. We have to go about it by talking to the Board Members and the people they serve, get them to come together. They will survive if they join us, if they don't join us, they will not. We may have to merge and take over someone like New River Valley because they are smaller than we are. Eventually it will happen and it will leave a really bad taste in everyone's mouth when it happens that way. Like Mark said, we can get people together, educate them, work on it, and then it will work. Then it will be a win-win situation.

Peter Mulkey said you go 60 miles down the road; probably our steepest competition is Welmont. We have partnered with Welmont on certain things, such as their cardiovascular program. When you say Welmont, most people think it's a very strong organization and it is, they said they are now looking for a partner. If you read between the lines of what they are saying, we can't make it without a partner. Even the people that we look on as being strong, behind the scenes they are looking for partners. That is what we all have to do is figure out how we can partner. When you take 6,000 and turn it into 21,000, certainly you can do this. He made an observation on what Mark Estep had said, and this is not political. Our current governor that was just elected, how many times did he come to southwest Virginia during his campaign? He said it was only one time that I know of. The reason why is that he didn't need southwest Virginia. So we need to start seeing the writing on the wall that they don't need southwest Virginia so if we don't do something ourselves, we will become like McDowell County.

Vickie England asked if anyone from the Town had talked one on one with the Town Council or Mayor of Cedar Bluff. Several members said they had. She asked how they felt about this. Most said they were defiant.

Rod Cury said his experience was different. What he found was that they started with the premise that they have been neighbors and friends for a long, long time. He said that he thought if they used that approach, they could accomplish a little more.

Peter Mulkey agreed but said he thinks it needs to start with the common citizen in those areas. We need to figure out who outside of council is in both of these areas that can we pull together and begin dialogue. Who can start engaging their particular council people to say “we really need to look into this”. Vickie England said she thought it should be business owners.

Tim Taylor said that whoever it is needs to have knowledge and facts and an understanding at least of the governmental side. The growth of the business side will follow that.

Peter Mulkey also said if you can go to a business owner like Travis who has a business in Cedar Bluff and show him that we can save you this amount on water, on taxes, etc. Those are things business people are going to look at. That is where you need to build that momentum that starts to push the elected officials to say we need to look at this, it makes sense for all of us. There is not going to be a winner or loser in this thing. There will be a winner all across the board.

Travis Hackworth asked where Jim and Linda Singleton stand on this issue. Rod Cury said he thought they had a bigger view and that they looked at this as a regional and cooperative measure. He said he didn't feel they were opposed to it.

Travis asked Ginger if the Chamber could put together a meeting for business leaders in Cedar Bluff and just throw that idea out there. He said we need to do something proactive, this is something we have talked about for 10 years.

Ginger said that several years ago they did have some meetings between Cedar Bluff and Richlands, there were actually here in the incubator. Jim Singleton did attend. He sees the writing on the wall but he is also caught between a hard place and a rock. He does business in Cedar Bluff.

Doug Ratliff said to let them know that we don't want to take over, just to merge and to share resources. There was some discussion about police coverage. Doug said the big savings for the communities, especially Cedar Bluff, is when the Police Force comes together and they don't have that extra

expense. Like their Fire Department that they have spent millions on. If we have one fire department and one police department, you will save tremendously just on that governmental side. Tim Taylor said it's the benefits of shared resources, it is proven in a lot of areas. We have so many things in common, we have the same schools. Doug said no one would lose their job, that if Cedar Bluff merges with us, everyone there would have a job, no one would be pushed out.

Regina Sayers said that one service they are not providing in that area right now is transportation (in Cedar Bluff). They would then be able to provide that service to the citizens of that area that recently lost that service. There are a lot of people that do not have transportation in Cedar Bluff.

Vickie England made mention that there is no governing body in Claypool Hill. Mr. Taylor said they are governed by the County. Things would have been a lot different if the area had its own leadership, not necessarily the Town of Richlands. If they had leadership they would have a say in zoning, in everything.

Ginger asked Tim what he sees evolving from this and what are the steps to take. He said Richlands Citizens have the most to lose because they have the most resources. They have the most urban resources of any community around. They have to protect that while looking at the broad picture. That is why this Council is burdened with that type of study so that you can look at that. Once it happens, then all of a sudden, everyone is a citizen then. Every share that you have, every obligation that you have, every debt that is the general obligation of the taxpayer becomes everybody's. If Cedar Bluff has some general obligation debt, then I am a citizen, part of that is mine. It is not a takeover, we adopt them or they adopt us.

Travis Hackworth said that one major problem in Tazewell County is zoning, or the lack thereof. Now they have broken it up into sections. Now the Western District of the County are the ones that fight it the worst, it is the farmers. You would think if anyone would want zoning, it would be the farmers. Everyone gets grandfathered in as what they are and that is one major push-back we are having on the Planning Commission is that they don't want it. In reality, you are protecting what they have instead of taking it away. When I have a one on one conversation with anybody in ten minutes I can change their views on zoning. I ask them if they would like to have a pig farm or a junkyard beside of your house. Absolutely not. Well then you are for zoning, aren't you. Do you realize in Tazewell County someone can open up an adult bookstore in Claypool Hill. There is no zoning to stop it. It is wide open and you let people see that. With the merge, you would gain zoning.

Tim Taylor said the myth that goes away is there is a body that controls that. No, you control your own future. That is the beauty of it.

Travis said he has clients that come in and are looking for housing or land, you would not believe the push-back because there is no zoning. There is no protection against losing their value. Even companies look at that. Virginia only has 5 counties that are not zoned and we are one of them. It has been threatened by the State if we do not zone ourselves, the State will come in and zone us. I don't want Richmond zoning us. We know our land better than they do. There is a lot of push back and I feel that it is mainly due to misinformation. They don't realize what they are fighting against.

Doug Ratliff mentioned the previous study that the Town had done a few years ago by Art Meade from the Cooper Center of UVA. Mr. Taylor said that one was not very comprehensive. Art Meade used to be a Manager for the Town of Bluefield; he has a lot of expertise in that. He came down as a volunteer, as an agent of the Cooper Center at the request of Council to look at it. Doug suggested it be stop-gap until we get the major study done, something for the Chamber to be looking at. Mr. Taylor said the one they need is the independent study that is being done now. If Council releases the contract and the scope of work, then I will provide it to you and you can distribute it. Art would be a good person to come in to explain it. Not everyone understands the governmental side. He said that if we sign the contract with the Community Planning Partners, they are very good. They have been very helpful over the years. But we would have to pay them.

Ginger said she felt that it is important for everyone to understand the same thing, to be able to share the same facts. Ginger said in order to do justice to the business community, they would have to know and understand the facts and would have to know the direction that the Town is pursuing.

Tim Taylor suggested Town Council appoint someone for the spot on the Chamber Board and let them be the representative and if they don't know the answer, they can get it for you. Doug recommended Mary Ann Strong for the spot.

There was some discussion about publishing water rates, etc. for Richlands and the surrounding areas. Mr. Taylor spoke to that and said it creates animosity. You can't really publish the current rates and promise these will remain the same with the obligations that may be incurred with the merge. Doug suggested publishing the rates as they are now.

Rod Cury said there were so many good ideas shared tonight, where do we leave this. Once we have the report from the study, share it with the Chamber. Mark Estep agreed and said it is important if we are going to be the conduit in any of this, we have a slot for the Town of Richlands on the Chamber Board, we need to expand those slots and have a slot for Cedar Bluff and for the Board of Supervisors. Let them decide who wants to be a part of this. I think that is

where it starts. We don't want to run the danger of only having a representative from Richlands because we represent more than just Richlands.

Everyone agreed. Travis also said they need to appoint someone that will attend the meetings.

Mayor White commented on all of the great ideas discussed this evening and said she would be willing to work with anyone.

With no further business to discuss, the meeting adjourned at 8:45 pm.

Jan White, Mayor

Susan Whitt, Clerk