

Charles Townsend

Media Report

Draft

July 7, 2022

Part I Introduction

This report reviews electronically available news stories on Charles Townsend, candidate for the North Carolina House.

The Table of Contents in **Part II** of the report is a useful guide to the entire report and can be used as a stand-alone summary. In one section, it surveys the bulk of the news file, through the headlines we have assigned to each item.

Part III, the **Greatest Hits** section, identifies key points taken from available media articles.

Parts IV, **The News File**, contain edited copies of the most relevant electronically available stories.

We hope you find this useful.

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Part III Townsend: Greatest Hits from Media Review

Background

Townsend does not have his own campaign website. These profile items come from various points through the years.

From 2005 when he was completing his first term on the Fairmont Board of Commissioners.

- Townsend is a car salesman. He is a member of the First Baptist Church on North Main Street in Fairmont, where he serves as an associate minister. He is also on the executive board of the Robeson County Enterprise Community. (Robesonian, 8/8/05)

From 2013, when he was running for mayor.

- Townsend, 56, is a lifelong Fairmont resident. He is a self-employed insurance agent and associate minister at First Baptist Church on North Main Street. In addition to having served 12 years on the town board, he is a member of the board of the Lumber River Council of Governments and a board member of Robeson Health Care. (Robesonian, 10/28/13)

From 2022, when he announced his candidacy for State House.

- Townsend has some experience in public service. He served as the mayor of Fairmont for two terms, and on the Board of Commissioners for 12 years. He is a self-employed independent insurance agent and owns a carwash in Fairmont, sales storage building and rents U-Hauls. He also serves as an associate pastor at the First Baptist Church, located at 301 N. Main St. in Fairmont. Townsend is the son of W.J. and Willie Mae Townsend. (Robesonian, 3/5/22)

A 2020 North Carolina Public Radio interview mentions that he moved away at one point to Conway-Myrtle area to live near the beach, got married but his wife didn't like the beach and so they moved back to Fairmont. It wasn't clear if he's still married though. (NC Public Radio, 5/20/20)

Fairmont Board of Commissioners and Mayor

In 2001, Townsend was elected to the Fairmont Board of Commissioners. He served three terms and then was elected mayor in 2013, upsetting incumbent mayor Charles Kemp. He narrowly beat Kemp in a rematch in 2017 and then stepped aside when his term expired. He is now running for the State House.

Fairmont

The town of Fairmont was once a more prosperous town in the days when tobacco farming was big and they also had textiles. As Townsend said in a 2020 interview, the town today is more like a ghost town with many businesses that departed and a population of only 2100 (population declined 500 between 2010 and 2020 census). It is a town that has had to struggle to revitalize itself. A fire at a strip mall in April 2018 that destroyed several businesses didn't help.

- **Frank Stasio:** Talk about the when when town was busy. I mean, I'm trying to imagine these tobacco auctions and kind of what that town looked like. Paint the picture for us.
- **Charles Townsend:** It was busy. I mean, it was like a Fayetteville Hay Street on Saturday night, if you ever been to Fayetteville, North Carolina on a Saturday night.
- **Frank Stasio:** I've heard about it I've heard I've heard I've heard talk.
- **Charles Townsend:** About yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. And so there was, you know, like clothing stores. We had Leveston's. PR Floors. Fairmont Department store where people went shopping and they bring their family to town. You know, they had their money, they sold tobacco and, you know, it was just busy. Fairmount When we had tobacco.
- **Frank Stasio:** All right. Well, those days are gone. What's it like now?
- **Charles Townsend:** It's kind of dead. It's dead in Fairmount. It looks like a ghost town. On Main Street we had the drugstore we had is gone. And we only got a beauty shop, a couple of barbershops and a bank and Fairmont Department store is still here.
- **Frank Stasio:** And then on top of all that, there was a strip mall that burned down, right?
- **Charles Townsend:** Yes. We lost three stores to a fire and it. It kind of hurt the economy here because we lost a hardware store and we lost a meat store and a Dollar Tree. Dollar Tree have come back and relocated. (NC Public Radio, 5/20/20)

Known Budget and Tax Votes

As a Commissioner from 2001-2013, these are the known budget votes *from media accounts*. (A review of the actual minutes would be contained in a separate memo.)

2005. He voted for a budget that let the property tax rate stand instead of cutting it. That made it a net tax increase.

- The town Board of Commissioners voted to adopt a budget that keeps the tax rate the same, but two commissioners refused to sign off on the plan because it does not lop 5 cents off the rate as they had requested. Because of the revaluation of property, maintaining the tax rate is effectively a tax increase.

- Commissioners Charles Kemp and Wade Sealey did not go along with the other four commissioners - Antonio Currie, Mary Bruce Grantham, J.J. McCree and Charles Townsend - Tuesday night when the 2005-2006 budget was approved in a 4-2 vote. The budget takes effect on July 1.
- "I will not support this budget. In an effort to adjust numbers and complete the process, I believe one very important factor has been left out - the tax burden of the citizens," Kemp said. "It is just a simple factor of math that most of our citizens are going to face higher taxes when the notices are mailed. I just hope they don't start viewing this building as the House of Pain."
- Mayor Nedward Gaddy said the town has little choice but to leave the tax rate at 69 cents for every \$100 of worth of property. Kemp and Sealey had recommended the rate be dropped to 64 cents. (Robesonian, 6/23/05)

2011. He voted for a Budget with a four-cent property tax hike.

- The Fairmont Board of Commissioners on Thursday night approved a 4-cent hike to the property tax rate, doing so on the eve of the new fiscal year. Linda Vause, the town's finance director and acting manager, said the \$2.9 million budget, which takes effect today, was approved when Mayor Charles Kemp broke a 3-3 tie among the commissioners. The budget raises the tax rate from 69 cents for every \$100 of property to 73 cents.
- "We were presented various budget options over hours at four budget work sessions and this was the less drastic of them all," Kemp told The Robesonian this morning. "With decreasing revenues and increasing expenditures, and a fund balance that we did not want to dip into, employees we didn't want to lay off, and services we didn't want to cut, the only other option was to accept this budget proposal. That's why I voted for this particular plan that was offered.
- "I've been in local government in Fairmont for 34 years, 28 as a councilman and six as mayor, and this was the hardest and most difficult budget that I've had any association with," Kemp said.
- Charles Townsend, Wade Sealey and Waylon Lennon joined Kemp in voting for the budget, and J.J. McCree, Perry Ashley and Carol Leak-McKenzie voted against it. "No one wanted to raise taxes, but like other small towns our state revenues have been reduced over the past few years," Vause said. "Towns like us have been absorbing the loss, but this year we couldn't do that any more." (Robesonian, 7/1/11)

2012. Townsend was absent from the budget vote that kept the rate the same but had an increase in the monthly sanitation rate.

- The town Board of Commissioners on Thursday approved a budget for the fiscal year that begins Sunday that keeps the tax rate of 73 cents for every \$100 property but includes a sanitation rate increase of \$2 per month.

- The increase was proposed to help offset rising fuel costs and rate increases from Waste Management, a private company that handles trash pickup for the town.
- The budget does not include a cost-of-living increase for town employees, who have not been given a raise for five years. “We’re very fortunate in this town to have the quality of employees we have,” Mayor Charles Kemp said. “For them to not have been disgruntled and stay with us for the last five years is absolutely incredible.”
- Commissioner J.J. McCree proposed that the board revisit the option of a cost-of-living increase for employees once the town receives licensing fees from a business set to open next week. Walter Jones, who has gaming machines in Fayetteville and Dublin, is expected to place 50 Internet gaming machines in a building that used to house Dollar General in the Bo’s Shopping Center. Town officials expect the licensing fees to boost the town’s General Fund by more than \$45,000. (Robesonian, 6/29/12)

2013. He voted against an increase in the sewer and water rate.

- Mayor Charles Kemp, saying he had “no choice,” on Tuesday broke a tie vote among Fairmont’s commissioners to enact a 10 percent increase on the town’s base water and sewer rates. The new annual rate of \$46.71 comes out to \$4.26 a month — or 14.01 cents per day, as Commissioner Wayland Lennon phrased his motion to approve the proposed hike “to give some perspective.” The new rate will be effective on February’s bill.
- The proposed rate increase was added to the board’s agenda after a meeting with the Local Government Commission that Town Manager Linda Vause called “disturbing.” According to Vause, the commission would not give its approval for Fairmont to sell revenue bonds to pay for rehabilitation of sewer lines unless the town was able to raise revenue to make payments on the loan that will help to fund the \$1 million project.
- The commission recommended a rate increase of 10 to 15 percent and expected an answer today, Vause said. According to Vause, if the town did not comply, it would lose the \$600,000 Clean Water Management Trust Fund grant it received for the rehabilitation project.
- After much discussion, Commissioners Wade Sealey and Kim Ammons voted in favor of Lennon’s motion to approve the fee hike, and Commissioners J.J. McCree, Charles Townsend and Carol Leak-McKenzie voted against. (Robesonian, 1/16/13)

After he was elected mayor, he could only do tiebreaking votes. That never came up on budget or tax issues. In 2014, he did favor a one cent sales tax hike for the city, but that had to be approved by a GOP Legislature to give them the authority which never came.

- Gwendolyn Hunt is a bargain hunter. For her Main Street business, Gwen's Discount, she searches for the lowest prices on everything from jeans to cell phones to stock her shelves. Outside of work, she's just as frugal, even factoring tax into her shopping budget — which is why she's not so thrilled about a recent proposal to raise sales taxes in Fairmont by 1 percent. Raising sales taxes would allow the town to draw revenue from people who stop while traveling on Interstate 95 or N.C. 41, rather than solely relying on the town's 2,642 residents for more income, McCallum said. Last year, \$354,286.75 in collected sales tax was distributed back to Fairmont by Robeson County, according to a state Department of Revenue report.
- "There's not a lot of money here to begin with, if they do raise the tax up, I really think that would hurt me as a small business owner," said Hunt, who opened her store about a month ago. She heard about the hike from Mayor Charles Townsend when he came into her store on Wednesday, the day after it was proposed. (Robesonian, 2/22/14)

2013 Mayoral Campaign

Charles Kemp was well-entrenched when Townsend ran against him. These were the issues he mentioned.

- Mayoral candidates in Fairmont have different opinions on how local government should be administered, but all agree that among major issues facing their community are finding jobs and revitalization of the downtown.
- When local voters go to the polls on Nov. 5 they will have the chance to re-elect Charles Kemp, the town's mayor for the past eight years, or elect one of two other candidates as mayor — Bobby Charles Townsend, a 12-year veteran of the town council, or Channing P. Cunningham, a local preacher and state Department of Public Safety employee. Both Townsend and Cunningham say they are the candidate of "change."
- Townsend sees the need for job creation and revitalization of the downtown as major issues that must be addressed by the next mayor and town council. He said, however — without offering specifics — that he believes there are other possible ways to improve the local economy than those being employed by Kemp.
- "I'm running for mayor to give the citizens of Fairmont a choice," Townsend said. "I'm offering change and a different direction."
- "Before we can grow the downtown, or do anything else, we need to get out of debt," he said. "We have to look at all of the options."
- Another of his concerns, Townsend said, is operations of the Police Department. "I've had people come up to me and ask if there isn't something we can do so that our police office can be open 24 hours," he said.

- Revitalizing the downtown, and making other improvements in the community, is going to take everyone becoming involved, according to Townsend. “It’s going to take community involvement and community presence,” he said. (Robesonian, 10/28/13)

Townsend admitted he was surprised he won.

- Townsend said he was “surprised” that he was able to unseat the incumbent mayor. “Charles Kemp is hard to beat,” he said. “This was a tough, tight race to win.” Townsend said that he believes residents wanted new leadership.
- “I think that people are ready to look at a new mindset in the mayor’s seat,” Townsend said. “... I want to thank all of the people who supported me and I’m looking forward to moving Fairmont forward.” (Robesonian, 11/6/13)

2017 Rematch

The issue of economic revitalization was still a concern when Townsend and Kemp faced each other again.

- The municipal election in Fairmont pits an incumbent mayor against a former mayor who is a member of the town’s Board of Commissioners. Charles Kemp has been campaigning relentlessly, but it was Charles Townsend who rode in the mayor’s car at the recent Fairmont Farmers Festival. Kemp is white and Townsend is black, but the race is not about race - it’s about who can sell their vision for Fairmont’s future.
- Kemp and Townsend have deep ties to Fairmont and both have served as mayor and members of the Board of Commissioners. Kemp is currently a commissioner and has served on the board for 28 years and mayor for eight. Townsend is completing his first four-year term as mayor and served 12 years on the board.
- Townsend is an independent insurance agent and an ordained minister. Kemp is a retired school teacher and member of the board of directors of the Robeson Community College Foundation and the Fairmont Area EMS and Rescue Squad. He is a long-time volunteer with the Border Belt Farmers Museum.
- Mayor Townsend is advocating fiscal integrity and sustainable growth. “Maintaining financial stability is my top priorities,” Townsend said. “Fairmont needs growth but manageable growth.”
- The town has annexed land around exit 10 off Interstate 95 and would like to develop it. Townsend is a supporter but approaches the subject with caution.
- “There is a lot opportunity going down that road and potential to make money for the town,” he said. “We’re looking at it seriously, and it will require a lot of research and effort to make sure it is manageable growth. It has to be profitable for Fairmont,” Townsend said.

- Townsend said he would bring the community together around a brand, a community definition, “that everyone can buy into.” He believes in building a small, safe community that cares about developing its youth.
- ”We need community-based programs that expose young people to the job market,” Townsend said. “Our young people must compete on the world market in areas like robotics, biotechnology and the STEM fields.”
- Kemp, the challenger, offers four areas that he is focused on. ”First, jobs and the economy,” he said. “In the last 17 months, I’ve organized 12 job fairs in Fairmont, and I’d like to continue that.”
- While Kemp would agree the downtown has improved, he says it’s “an embarrassment” still. ”We have 62 available buildings and only 32 are rented,” Kemp said. “We need to improve Fairmont’s appearance, so that visitors see the best in us.”
- Kemp points to trash, overgrown lots and dilapidated housing as areas of concern for the next mayor. Finally, Kemp pledged he would run a transparent town government because “residents deserve to know everything, and we need to put it all on the table. (Robesonian, 10/31/17)

Townsend won by 87 votes. When he stepped down at the end of his turn, Kemp was finally elected again.

Other Appointments and Honors

During his time as mayor, Townsend was appointed by Governor Cooper to the Cemetery Commission.

- Gov. Cooper appointed the following individuals to the Cemetery Commission : Mayor Charles Townsend of Fairmont as a public member. Townsend is the Owner and Founder of ALFA Insurance Agency and an Associate Minister at First Baptist Church in Fairmont. He has served as the Mayor of the Town of Fairmont since 2013. (Press Release, 3/9/18)

And in October 2021, he received a regional leadership award because of his work on the Lumber River Council of Governments for more than a decade.

- L.E. McLaughlin, Jr. and Bob Gentry Regional Leadership Award. In September 2004, this prestigious award was renamed to honor the leadership of two dedicated former members of the LRCOG Board of Directors, Mr. L.E. McLaughlin, Jr. and Mr. Bob Gentry. While both members served with honor, they also served as friends, putting aside the often strained relationships between jurisdictions. Both men, while dedicated to their respective local governments, realized that successful endeavors often cross geographic boundaries. Their friendship became indicative of relationships made and strengthened at the LRCOG table and still serves as a wonderful example of regional leadership.

- This year's Regional Leadership Award recognizes an individual who has been a strong supporter of regionalism and an advocate for the Lumber River Council of Governments (LRCOG) for many years. He truly believes in the work of the LRCOG and the value of its regional solutions that have provided long-term health and economic prosperity for his local community. He is not only an advocate for the LRCOG but for other organizations working on the regional level as well. He strives to ensure that the greater good is achieved and that the rural voice is always heard in the halls of Jones Street. This year's winner is Mayor Charles Townsend of Fairmont.
- Mr. Townsend started his service on the Lumber River Council of Governments' Board of Directors in 2007 and has tirelessly advocated for the work and programs of the LRCOG throughout his tenure. Mr. Townsend has also served the LRCOG as a delegate to the North Carolina Association of Regional Councils' (NCARCOG) Forum. In this role, Mr. Townsend passionately advocated for the work of the LRCOG each year during the NCARCOG's Legislative Advocacy Day, imploring members of the NC General Assembly to better utilize and support the work of the LRCOG and the other councils of government across North Carolina. In addition, Mr. Townsend has successfully kept the LRCOG Board of Directors informed of the work that the NCARCOG is taking to support the LRCOG and our region at the state level.
- In addition to his service to the LRCOG, and as the Mayor of Fairmont, Mr. Townsend also gives countless hours each year to support the work of other organizations working to improve the health and welfare of the citizens of the Lumber River region. He serves as a member of the Robeson Health Care Corporation Board of Directors and Helping Hands Ministry, he is a Guardian Ad Litem volunteer and an active member of his church. (Richmond County Daily Journal, 10/26/21)

Miscellaneous Issues

Gambling

In 2009, he twice voted against ordinances to regulate video gaming machines.

- The town Board of Commissioners, with the mayor once again breaking a tie vote, on Tuesday approved an ordinance to control the proliferation of computer gaming machines that have cropped up in town.
- The vote was a replay of the board's action last month, when Commissioners Wayland Lennon III, Jay Capps and Wade Sealey voted in favor of the ordinance, and Commissioners Charles Townsend, Carol Leak-McKenzie and J. J. McCree voted against its adoption. Mayor Charles Kemp broke the tie vote in November, and again last night. The tie vote in November triggered the need for last night's action - a second reading of the ordinance. (Robesonian, 12/16/09)

In 2013, he voted against keeping the ban on sale of alcohol at public events.

- The Fairmont Board of Commissioners on Thursday voted to keep the town's parks and recreation areas dry during public events. The commissioners had twice discussed a proposed ordinance that would have allowed the sale of alcohol at town parks and recreational facilities, but did not take action. On Thursday, in a 4 to 2 vote, the commissioners decided not to amend an ordinance to provide for alcohol sales by vendors who were properly permitted.
- Commissioner Wade Sealey voted in favor the amendment, saying it would allow Fairmont to control alcohol consumption at public events. He said alcohol is already present at some of the events.
- Joining Sealey in supporting the amendment was Commissioner Kim Ammons; voting against were Commissioners Wayland Lennon, J.J. McCree, Charles Townsend and Carol Leak-McKenzie. (Robesonian, 5/9/13)

Praising Solar Farms

- Fairmont Mayor Charles Townsend said some manufacturers look for clean energy because "they want to be associated with solar energy." Townsend said the solar farms are positive for the town, which has about 2,700 people. The new farm will be the third built near the town in the last three years. "We're moving toward the future," he said. (Fayetteville Observer, 7/10/14)

2017 - Challenged Robeson County Democrats For Breaking Rules

- Townsend was among those who challenged the actions of the Robeson County Democrat leadership when they elected a chairman and executive committee. The North Carolina Democratic Party then ordered them to hold a new county convention.
- The North Carolina Democratic Party has ordered Robeson County Democrats to re-do precinct meetings and hold a new county convention after finding that local Democrats did not follow party procedure when they elected their chairman and executive committee members.
- The state party's 13-member Review Committee rendered its ruling Saturday after holding a hearing in response to a petition filed by several county Democrats charging that the process used to elect local party officers at the April 8 county convention violated the state party's Plan of Organization. The Review Committee consists of one representative from each of the state's 13 congressional districts.
- After several hours of testimony, the 11 members of the Review Committee present at the hearing in Raleigh voted 10 to one that state party rules were violated when local Democrats other than those elected convention delegates at precinct meetings were permitted to vote for their party leadership.

- "Basically the Robeson County Democratic Party is now defunct," Sheila Beck, a Democrat from Saddletree and chairman of the Lumbee Tribe's Elections Board, said. "Everything that the party has done since the convention, including the election of Pearlean Revels as chairman, means nothing."
- No date for the precinct meetings or countywide convention has been set, but John McNeill, a former Robeson County Democratic chairman and mayor of Red Springs, said he believes the convention will be held late this month or in August.
- The decision to allow all of the approximately 50 Democrats at the convention to vote for their party leaders, rather than just delegates from the 10 of about 40 precincts that were organized when the convention was held in April, ended with Ed Henderson, a Red Springs town commissioner who is black, not being re-elected to another two-year term as chairman. According to McNeill, Robeson County's Democratic Party for the past 46 years has operated under a "gentleman's agreement" that the party chairmanship would rotate by race to guarantee equal representation among the county's white, black and American Indian communities.....
- The petition challenging the convention results was filed by several black elected officials from Red Springs, Maxton and Fairmont. "The last convention, that allowed more than just delegates to vote, was not proper," said Charles Townsend, the mayor of Fairmont. "Let's do things the right way, no matter where they lead." (Robesonian, 7/4/17)

Part IV Townsend: The News File, 2001-22

2001

NOV 2001 Elected to Board of Commissioners

FAIRMONT

Mayor (four-year term)

Nedward Gaddy 579

Terry Evans 22

Rusty Perry 255 Town Council (four-year terms, three seats)

Tony Currie 369

Maitland Hunt 213

(i) Charles Kemp 444

Hayes Lewis 344

Charles J. McMillian 364 Charles Townsend 491

James F. Wilkerson 116 (Fayetteville Observer, 11/7/01)

2002

APR 2002 Moves to Fire Town Manager

Staff writer FAIRMONT -- Two Fairmont commissioners say Mayor Nedward Gaddy abused his power when he ruled that a motion to fire the town manager was out of order and adjourned the meeting before a vote.

Commissioner Jeffrey McCree made a motion on Tuesday night to fire Town Manager Ben Hill after a closed session to talk about industry. Commissioner Charles Townsend seconded the motion.

Gaddy called for a recess. During the break, Gaddy talked with the town attorney and the clerk. After the recess, Gaddy said the motion was out of order and adjourned the meeting.

"In my opinion, the mayor did an illegal act to keep us from voting at that time," McCree said on Wednesday. "If that is the case, anytime there is a motion he doesn't like, he can call a recess, say the motion is out of order and then adjourn. He overstepped his power. He did not give the commissioners a chance to vote on it."

Townsend said Gaddy did not handle the motion properly.

"The mayor needs to make sure he makes the right move when he has a motion on the floor," Townsend said. "He needs to respect every motion made by a commissioner."

Surprise move

Gaddy said on Wednesday that he ruled the motion out of order because he and other board members did not know Hill's employment was going to come up.

"It was something that came out of the blue," Gaddy said. "I wasn't aware of it until (Tuesday) night when the motion was made. It was a shock."

David Lawrence, a lawyer with the North Carolina Institute of Government, said mayors have the authority as presiding officers to determine if motions are out of order.

"Of course, the mayor cannot say a motion is out of order just because he doesn't like it," Lawrence said. "A board member can appeal to the whole board if he disagrees."

Only five of the six commissioners were at the meeting, Gaddy said. Commissioner John Jackson was in the hospital.

Commissioners Mary Bruce Grantham and Charles Kemp released a statement on Wednesday supporting Hill and Gaddy's decision.

"We think he acted properly and with foresight to avert a disastrous action which would not have been in the best interests of the citizens of Fairmont," the statement said.

"We both further state our complete support for Town Manager Ben Hill and the wonderful work he has done and is continuing to do for all citizens. We encourage all citizens who agree to step forward at this most crucial time and let the power of their voice be heard."

Manager surprised

Hill said he was surprised. He has worked for the town for 22 years, the last seven as manager.

"It was a shock," he said. "But basically I work at the pleasure of the board."

McCree said he made the motion because he believes Hill has not done a good job of recruiting industry.

"I feel it is time for us to look at stronger leadership and search for someone with good qualities who can help move us forward and build a better and stronger town," he said. "I feel Mr. Hill has not done that job."

McCree has been on the board three years. Townsend has been on the board four months.

Gaddy said Hill has moved the town forward. The town has completed construction of a \$7 million sewer plant, and a new medical and dialysis clinic will open soon. The town has received a grant for housing projects, he said, and is building a city park and community building.

"There are no words to express the good job he is doing," Gaddy said. "I back him as manager 100 percent." (Fayetteville Observer, 4/11/02)

2005

FEB 2005 Delay In Hiring Town Manager

Staff writer FAIRMONT -- Some Fairmont residents have started a petition asking the Town Council to delay naming a new manager until after the council hears their concerns.

The residents say they want the council to take its time and hire a qualified person.

The town has faced several problems in recent years. Fairmont faced possible state takeover last year because the town's reserves had reached low levels. Money had been taken from the reserves over a number of years to cover projects and to balance the budget.

Last summer, the town increased water and sewer rates, froze positions and put off hiring a town manager to save money.

The residents are scheduled to address the council during a meeting at 6 p.m. Tuesday.

2-year vacancy Fairmont has been without a town manager for nearly two years. Former Town Manager Ben Hill was fired in July 2003 after being accused of taking kickbacks on federal and state grants and of paying for equipment for personal use with town money. The State Bureau of Investigation has not completed its investigation into the allegations, said Special Agent Jerry Weaver.

Katrina Tatum is serving as interim manager.

Residents are asking town officials to conduct a thorough search for a new town manager.

"In the past few years we have elected to engage people who were not well educated, not trained in management techniques and lacking in people skills to fill the position on a part-time basis and finally making them fill the permanent position," the petition states.

Residents say this practice has led to problems, including mismanagement of funds, the loss of key personnel, inadequate planning and a conflict among council members. They want town officials to establish and follow a set of standards when reviewing applications.

More than 300 people have signed the petition, said Key McKee. McKee spoke on behalf of some residents during a January council meeting. The residents have formed a group called the Concerned Citizens of Fairmont.

McKee said the group has requested documents, including past budgets and minutes of open and closed meetings. He declined to comment further about the issue.

Mayor Ned Gaddy declined to comment on the petition until he receives more information.

Council members Charles Townsend, Wade Sealey and Mary Bruce Grantham could not be reached for comment. Council member Antonio Currie declined to comment.

Council member Charles Kemp said he would like to readvertise the position for a longer period of time. He said the position was advertised for 23 days during the first search two years ago. At that time, the council narrowed its list to three people, including Tatum. In June, the council decided not to fill the position so it could save \$81,000.

"I think what the concern is in the community is that we need someone professionally trained and qualified to be city manager," Kemp said. "I think it will serve the community well in the future if we look into that direction."

Council member Jeffrey McCree said he could not comment on the petition because the council has not been given a copy of the document. He said he is willing to listen to what the residents have to say.

"I am going to the meeting with an open mind," he said. (Fayetteville Observer, 2/7/05)

MAY 2005 Town Manager Candidates

With 59 applicants for town manager in hand, town commissioners will meet next month to narrow the field of candidates and set up interviews.

The board met for about 10 minutes in closed session Tuesday before announcing it would begin the next phase of the selection process during a budget workshop on June 7 at 6 p.m. The board has said that it would like to select a manager by June 30.

Commissioner Charles Kemp announced the names of the two applicants he would like the board to interview - former Montgomery County Manager Ronald Lee Matthews of Troy and Madison Town Manager Sharon Garner of Stoneville.

The rest of the commissioners said they would defer naming any candidates to be interviewed until they had seen all the applications. Town Attorney Rob Price told the commissioners that they still had to review nine applications that came in late last week.

"I think we should look at all the applicants before we start suggesting names," Commissioner Charles Townsend said.

Town officials would not say if interim Town Manager Katrina Tatum had applied for the job or name any of the applicants other than those mentioned by Kemp. Tatum did not attend Tuesday's meeting because of illness.

"It seems to me that this is something that should be discussed in closed session," Commissioner J.J. McCree said.

The town has been without a permanent manager since April 2003, when then Town Manager Ben Hill was placed on administrative leave. He was fired several weeks later.

Tatum held the job for more than a year before the board first decided to advertise for the position. The board narrowed the list to three finalists, including Tatum. But in June 2004, the commissioners decided to put off naming a permanent manager in an effort to save money.

Tatum told the board earlier this month that there may not be money in next year's budget to pay the salary and benefits of a permanent manager.

In other business, Annie Durant, chairman of the newly-formed Community Activities Committee, said a festival is planned for July 9. "A Day in the Park," which will be held in the town park across from Town Hall, will include games, music, karaoke and food.

"Our seniors need something to do and our young people need something as well," Durant said. "This is an event that can bring everyone together."

Durant said the committee plans to create a community calendar for the remainder of 2005 and all of 2006. The 10-person committee was organized to come up with events that would bring visitors to Fairmont and create a sense of unity among residents.

In other business, the board voted to ask the Federal Communication Commission to explain its March 9 ruling that said that some local governments - including Lumberton and Fairmont - can no longer regulate the rates charged by local Time Warner offices in the company's Raleigh division. A Time Warner official told the board last month that Fairmont was not one of the towns involved in the dispute over regulation.

"There is too much conflicting information," Mayor Nedward Gaddy said. "The FCC regulates all of this and they should be able to tells us where we are supposed to go." (Lumberton Robesonian, 5/19/05)

JUN 2005 Budget Discussion

Facing a \$130,000 deficit, the town Board of Commissioners may have to raise taxes and suspend its search for a new manager.

Neither option was met with enthusiasm Tuesday night during a budget workshop. The board decided to table any action until it meets again on June 16.

Commissioner Charles Kemp said he would like the town to cut its tax rate from 69 cents per every \$100 of valuation to 64 cents. Kemp said he would use the next nine days to go through the proposed budget "line item by line item" to see if he could identify more areas to reduce expenses.

"I just can't support leaving the tax rate at 69 cents," he said. "With the expected increase from revaluation, that is a tax increase and a pretty significant one for most our residents."

But interim Town Manager Katrina Tatum told the board that even if the board leaves the tax rate the same, the town will face a deficit.

Tatum said the budget has already been cut to "the bare bones," including gutting previously approved capital improvements. She said staff targeted other cuts, but added that board might disagree with them.

The proposed cuts include eliminating \$88,721 budgeted for a new town manager; \$24,300 budgeted to demolish nuisance property and code enforcement; \$13,848 for a part-time recreation director; and \$1,000 for the Fairmont Farmers Festival. Tatum also cut a police officer position at a savings of about \$37,000 a year.

Commissioner Charles Townsend made a motion that the board go ahead with the cuts, but withdrew it when told by Town Attorney Robert Price that doing so would effectively end the search for a permanent manager.

"Here it is 23 days before we're supposed to pick a manager and bam, we want to do this off the top of our heads," Kemp said.

Tatum said she told the board months ago that it would not have money to employ a manager at the suggested salary.

"It is not bam off the top of the head," she said. "The reason I'm still sitting here being paid \$50,000 for two positions is because you didn't have the money a year ago."

Tatum also serves as the planning director.

Commissioner Wade Sealey said he wanted the board to "give careful consideration" before voting on the cuts. Like Kemp, he said he would oppose any effort that does not lower the tax rate.

"I will not vote for a budget ... with 69 cents," Sealey said. "There is no industry and no businesses in this town. Residents cannot afford to pay the taxes of the town and the county. I'm going to have a hard time paying them myself."

Mayor Nedward Gaddy said the town can't hire a new manager and cut taxes too.

"We can't have it both ways," he said. "You can't spend more and take in less revenue without us getting more letters from the state about mismanagement. I suggested a long time ago that we hold off on looking for manager right away. We're not going to get someone to come in here and do two jobs like Katrina for what we're paying her. It is better to walk slow than run and fall."

New chief

In other business, Tatum introduced Robert Hassell as the new police chief. He starts on June 17.

The 10-year police veteran is currently a sergeant on the special response team with the Kingston Police Department.

"We're happy to have him come on board," Tatum said. "He comes highly recommended. All his superiors gave him glowing recommendations."

Hassell spent the day touring Fairmont with his family and talked briefly with officers in the department.

"I've heard a lot of good things about Fairmont and look forward to finding a home here for my family," Hassell told the board. "I'm looking forward to the future." (Robesonian, 6/10/05)

JUN 2005 Votes For Budget (Tax Rate Same)

The town Board of Commissioners voted to adopt a budget that keeps the tax rate the same, but two commissioners refused to sign off on the plan because it does not lop 5 cents off the rate as they had requested.

Because of the revaluation of property, maintaining the tax rate is effectively a tax increase.

Commissioners Charles Kemp and Wade Sealey did not go along with the other four commissioners - Antonio Currie, Mary Bruce Grantham, J.J. McCree and Charles Townsend - Tuesday night when the 2005-2006 budget was approved in a 4-2 vote. The budget takes effect on July 1.

"I will not support this budget. In an effort to adjust numbers and complete the process, I believe one very important factor has been left out - the tax burden of the citizens," Kemp said. "It is just a simple factor of math that most of our citizens are going to face higher taxes when the notices are mailed. I just hope they don't start viewing this building as the House of Pain."

Mayor Nedward Gaddy said the town has little choice but to leave the tax rate at 69 cents for every \$100 of worth of property. Kemp and Sealey had recommended the rate be dropped to 64 cents.

Gaddy said the staff has cut everywhere it could and the town still has a projected deficit next year of \$47,357. The budget eliminates \$88,721 for a new town manager; \$24,300 needed to demolish nuisance property and code enforcement; \$13,848 for a part-time recreation director; and \$1,000 for the Fairmont Farmers Festival. It also cuts a police officer position at a savings of about \$37,000 a year and combines the fire and police chief position for a savings of \$11,000.

"If we can meet our obligations and cut the tax rate, fine," Gaddy said. "But I don't want us to have to go back the middle of next year with tears in your eyes and a handkerchief in your hand asking the citizens to bail us out."

During the public hearing, John Jackson, a former town commissioner, said refusing to vote for the budget because it did not include a tax cut was "reckless."

"There are some of you that are looking ahead for Fairmont," Jackson said. "If it was not an election year, I don't think Mr. Kemp would be so reckless."

Kemp, who is up for re-election along with Currie and Townsend, did not respond to Jackson's comments. But Sealey did.

"I don't care whether I sit on the board or not," Sealey said. "I'm not running for anything. My concern is whether the citizens can afford this and I don't think they can."

Interim Town Manager Katrina Tatum based the tax rate on an expectation that the tax base would rise by 28 percent following revaluation. A Fairmont resident who owns a \$100,000 home has been paying \$690 in taxes. That number will rise to \$883 - an increase of \$193 - if that home is revalued at \$128,000.

"I don't want to put a burden on citizens either," McCree said. "But we don't know what the county is really going to do with revaluation. If they reverse it, our deficit will be \$150,000. We need to be realistic." (Robesonian, 6/23/05)

JUL 2005 Not For Funding Recreation Director's Position

To help curb the cost of police officers driving their cars home, Fairmont has instituted a lose-if-you-move policy.

The Board of Commissioners voted unanimously on Tuesday to accept Police Chief Robert Hassell's recommendation that officers who currently take their patrol cars home can continue to do so as long as they do not change their home address.

Investigators and any officer with the rank above sergeant are able to drive their assigned vehicles home, but under the new policy, those officers would not automatically be eligible. The new policy also restricts patrol cars to within one mile of the town limits.

Hassell said he tried to come up with a policy that would save gas, but also help officers. Under the new policy, all officers will be given the option to continue to take home their cars or accept a pay increase of 2.5 percent.

"They cannot take advantage of both," Hassell said. "This increase is in exchange for losing their take-home car and is a one-time increase to help resolve this issue."

All new hires would be subject to the new policy and would not be eligible for the raise.

Commissioner Charles Kemp expressed concern that the new policy would cause "a morale problem" in the Public Works Department.

Mayor Nedward Gaddy said he did not understand Kemp's argument. "The police already take cars home so how can that be a problem?" Gaddy said. "How can morale be affected?"

Interim Town Manager Katrina Tatum said about five Public Works employees - the director and workers on call - take vehicles home, but said there is no municipality in the state that allows all Public Works employees to drive vehicles home.

"If you remember we did at one time allow workers to take those vehicles home, but there was some concern that they were being used as personal vehicles," Tatum said. "There was even an instance of a person driving while under the influence in a town vehicle."

In other business, the board voted to amend the budget to include money for code enforcement and recreation and community activities. With a looming budget deficit of about \$45,000, the commissioners had cut out code enforcement to save about \$24,300 and eliminated a part-time recreation director to save \$13,848.

Kemp said the town has raised \$15,000 from video game license fees in the last 90 days, and that \$3,000 could be used to demolish two run-down houses and about \$7,000 could be used to pay a portion of a director's salary.

But when Kemp made a motion to do that, only he and Commissioner Wade Sealey voted for it.

Commissioners J.J. McCree, Charles Townsend and Antonio Currie said they had a problem with funding the recreation director's position. Commissioner Mary Bruce Grantham did not attend Tuesday's meeting.

Townsend said instead of hiring a director who would only have a budget of \$800, he would rather the money went to the Fairmont Activities Committee.

"I don't understand why we would give the money to an individual, if we have people on that committee who have volunteered to help with recreation," he said.

Kemp said that committee was never intended to handle the town recreational needs.

"Every time this comes up there seems to be a misunderstanding," Kemp said. "Some of their duties include recreation, but not all. We need someone whose sole focus is recreation."

McCree made a motion to provide money for code enforcement and to allocate money to the committee, with the board's oversight. Kemp was the only commissioner to oppose the substitute motion.

In other business, the board recognized Laverne Hunt for his 20 years of service. Hunt, a supervisor in the Public Works Department, was given a plaque. McCree told Hunt that he hoped he would stay with Fairmont another 20 years.

"Thank you ... this is very beautiful," Hunt said. "I don't know about 20, but I hope I'm here at least another 10 years."

The board recognized former interim Police Chief Alex Monroe, who resigned from the department on Thursday. Monroe had been with the department since February 1991, first as an auxiliary officer then as a full-time officer. He was named interim chief earlier this year and served in that post until Hassell was hired as chief in June. (Robesonian, 7/22/05)

AUG 2005 Files For Second Term

On July 1, Charles Kemp was one of the first candidates to file for office. On Friday, he was one of the last.

Kemp decided to withdraw an earlier bid for re-election to the Fairmont Board of Commissioners so he could join what is now a four-person race for mayor.

Kemp joined 10 other candidates who made it to the Board of Elections Friday, the final day to file for the Nov. 8 municipal elections.

Also filing were: Craymon Strickland Jr. for the Precinct 3 City Council seat in Lumberton; Robert "Bob" Williamson for the Pembroke board; Kevin Wells and Benton Finley, for the Parkton town board; incumbent Charles Townsend for the Fairmont town board; incumbent Wilton Caulder for the Orrum board; Mayor William Davis in Lumber Bridge; Eva Patterson-Heath for the Red Springs board; Debra Brown for mayor in Rowland; Sally McLean for the Maxton board.

Wells, Davis, Caulder and Finley didn't provide The Robesonian with any biographical information.

Fairmont

Kemp, 59, said he decided to run for mayor at the urging of residents. He said he wants to improve the town's image and create jobs.

"I would create a five-person Mayor's Committee on Business and Industry made up of citizens who have extensive experience in this vital area whose sole job it will be to seek out new business and industry for Fairmont, which will create good jobs for residents," Kemp said. "Jobs, commercial growth and tax base increase are priority No. 1 in my campaign."

Kemp said his second priority would be bringing residents together in the town.

Kemp is a social studies teacher in Dillon, S.C. He left the county school system in 1999 after 30 years. He is married and has three children.

He will face incumbent Mayor Nedward Gaddy and challengers Rusty Perry and Terry Evans. Evans, however, indicated on Friday that he plans to withdraw from the race on Monday.

Townsend, 48, was elected to his first term in 2001.

"I'm running to help develop Fairmont into being the kind of community that serves the needs of the majority of the people," Townsend said. "At the present, I'm working to develop a program to intervene with the youth and to get adult/parent intervention with the youth because I truly believe if we lose this generation, we have lost our future."

Townsend is a car salesman. He is a member of the First Baptist Church on North Main Street in Fairmont, where he serves as an associate minister. He is also on the executive board of the Robeson County Enterprise Community. (Robesonian, 8/8/05)

NOV 2005 Elected to Second Term

Calling it the fulfillment of a lifelong dream, Charles Kemp took the mayor's seat on Tuesday by defeating the incumbent and two other challengers.

Voters also re-elected Commissioner Charles Townsend and favored two political newcomers - Jay Capps and Wayland Lennon III - to fill three seats on the town board, dramatically changing its racial makeup. Kemp surrendered his board seat to run for mayor.

"I've wanted to do this for a long, long time," Kemp said Tuesday night. "You have a dream, then it comes true."

Kemp received 526 votes - 53 percent of the ballots cast - in the election, according to unofficial returns. Mayor Nedward Gaddy came in second with 397 votes, too few for a second term. He could not be reached for comment. Former Commissioner Rusty

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Perry and Terry Evans also ran, but were not factors.

"I got whipped," Perry said, "but the people have spoken."

Evans said he was disappointed, but will remain active.

"I feel great about running," Evans said. "I knew it would be hard, but I wanted to give the town a new perspective. Maybe I'll try it again in four years."

Kemp sees the mayor as "a cheerleader" who can rally residents.

"There are a lot of initiatives and programs that need to be looked at for the good of the community, including job enhancement, downtown revitalization and most important, bringing people together," he said. "I will be working between now and the day I take office on Dec. 20 on a strategy so we will be able to move forward immediately."

Kemp has served as a commissioner for 28 years. He is a teacher in Dillon, S.C.

In the commissioners' race, incumbent Antonio Currie failed to win a second term, receiving 388 votes, according to unofficial returns. He could not be reached for comment.

Currie's loss, along with that of the Gaddy, both of whom are black, shifts the racial makeup of the board. Blacks had held a 4 to 3 majority. The new board will be made up of five whites - Kemp, Capps, Lennon, Wade Sealey and Mary Bruce Grantham - and two blacks - Townsend and J.J. McCree.

"Working with the people for the people has always been my platform," said Townsend, who received 476 votes. "I know we're all working in the same direction. It may take a different route now, but it is still for the betterment of Fairmont."

Townsend is a car salesman and an associate minister at First Baptist Church on North Main Street.

Capps, who owns and operates Fairmont Department Store, made his first foray into politics a successful one. He garnered the most votes, 552, of the seven candidates. He could not be reached for comment.

Lennon received 488 votes, the second highest total among board candidates.

"I'm excited as I can be," he said. "This is an awesome feeling. I plan to go out there and get to work. I'm ready."

Lennon, raised in Fairmont, works for GMAC Mortgage. He is the son of Butch Lennon, a former town commissioner. (Robesonian, 11/9/05)

2006

JUN 2006 Votes To Hire New Town Manager

It was a one-two punch that surprised town employees who waited two hours Tuesday night to find out who their boss would be.

In a 4 to 2 vote, the town Board of Commissioners said Katrina Tatum, who led the town as interim town manager for three years, would be

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replaced by Howard Blake Proctor, a retired town manager from Georgia.

That vote was followed in rapid succession by two more, in which the board relieved Tatum of her duties beginning today and gave her a three-week severance package.

In all three votes, Commissioners J.J. McCree and Mary Bruce Grantham were opposed.

Commissioner Wayland Lennon, who made the motion to hire Proctor, said he was the best choice. Proctor and Tatum were among four finalists for the job. The board began with a pool of 18 applicants.

"I do believe the qualifications and the experience of this person will help lead the town of Fairmont into the future," Lennon said after the meeting. "When we did the face-to-face interview ... I liked his ability to be able to relate."

Also voting to hire Proctor were Commissioners Wade Sealey, Charles Townsend and Jay Capps. Mayor Charles Kemp only votes to break a tie.

Tatum, who sat stonefaced as the board announced its decision, quickly left the boardroom after the meeting was adjourned. She returned to her office and began packing up her things. Tatum declined to comment.

The seven employees who waited while the board met in closed session for more than two hours seemed stunned. Two department heads could later be heard crying in their offices in Town Hall.

"I think if you asked any of us, at least 95 percent would have wanted her to stay on as manager," said an employee who asked not to be named. "I know the kind of hard work she put in here at all hours of the night."

The same employee wondered who would lead the town until July 3, when Proctor begins work. Kemp, who planned to meet with town employees this morning, said he would help out.

"I'm going to have to run the show here with the expertise of the department heads until then," Kemp said.

Grantham declined to talk about the decision.

McCree was careful with his comments, saying he didn't want to sour his relationship with Proctor. He did say that he did not like the way the board terminated Tatum, whom he said had "worked tirelessly" to resolve some of the town's financial problems.

"She has done an outstanding job considering the shape that the town was once in," McCree said.

Tatum joined the town as code enforcement officer in 2000. She was named interim town manager in 2003 and held both jobs until today.

"She was the code enforcement officer when we asked her to take this job," McCree said. "She should have been returned to the position she was hired under."

Proctor will serve as manager and code enforcement officer. He will be paid \$48,000 a year and will be paid \$4,000 in moving expenses.

Lennon said the board terminated Tatum "to clear the way for the new town manger to come in."

"That is the normal practice when you have someone in a position of power to lay them off," he said. "All the department heads are charge of their departments ... for the next 10 days."

Proctor accepted position after speaking by telephone to Kemp and Lennon Tuesday night.

"The man's been managing for 27 years ... he's been doing this kind of work for a long time," Kemp said. "You can tell he is still enthusiastic about the job even after all that time."

Proctor, who lives in Clay County Ga., now works as consultant. (Robesonian, 6/21/06)

SEP 2006 Votes Against Contracting Code Work

Revitalization efforts continued Tuesday with the acceptance of a gift to help build a park in the downtown business district.

The town Board of Commissioners voted unanimously to accept \$8,000 from the Fairmont ABC Board to create the park in the spot that once was the old Capitol Theater building.

James Byrne, chairman of the Fairmont ABC Board, said a nice park will help all businesses in the district, including the Fairmont ABC store on Walnut Street.

"The ABC Board recognizes that the appearance of a town has a direct impact on the volume of trade that it has," Byrne said in a letter to Town Manager Blake Proctor. "This would add a great deal to our downtown revitalization program the council is working on."

Mayor Charles Kemp said the money will aid in the cost of planning and construction. Kemp said he will attempt to raise additional money through the sale of commemorative theater bricks.

"It's going to be a nice park - not just some grass and plastic fencing," Kemp said.

Also Tuesday, Kemp broke the board's 3-to-3 vote in favor of spending \$500 a year to hire the Lumber River Council of Governments to assist with code enforcement.

Commissioners Wayland Lennon, Wade Sealey and Jay Capps voted for the extra help, but Commissioners J.J. McCree, Mary

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Bruce Grantham and Charles Townsend were opposed.

"(LRCOG) will cover every square inch of town and identify problems," Kemp said. "It's a steal. I don't understand why anyone would oppose."

Under the program, COG will identify code violations. Actual enforcement will cost an extra \$57 an hour.

But McCree said one of the primary duties of the town manager was code enforcement and Proctor should be given more time to do it.

"He's only been here a few months," McCree said. "He hasn't had the time to get his feet wet."

Grantham also said she thought it was too soon to contract for help.

"I wouldn't object after we've done all we can," she said. "But let's do everything we can do and then go to them We have needs that are known to us, and we don't need to spend an extra cent on LRCOG."

John Jackson, president of the Coalition for Justice and former Fairmont code enforcement officer, opposed the plan during the public comment period.

Jackson and it would cost the town about \$14,950 a year on top of Proctor's \$48,000 salary to contract the service.

"As taxpaying citizens ... we believe this contemplated action is unacceptable" he said.

Jackson also said that former interim Town Manager Katrina Tatum served in the dual roles of administrator and code enforcement officer.

Proctor told the commissioners that the assistance would be helpful, but added: "I can do it, I've done it and I'm doing it now. Though it wouldn't be a bad idea to have a data base."

Lennon, who pitched the idea at the August meeting, said the program did not relieve Proctor from his duty to enforce code regulations.

Proctor said he is currently inspecting 11 buildings and several junked cars. At the request of Grantham, he will report on the progress of code enforcement at each meeting.

"If you're in violation, you're going get it," Proctor said. (Robesonian, 9/20/06)

2007

JAN 2007 For Boys and Girls Club

Like other residents in the Old Field area, Dosha McLean has lived with the aggravation of drainage problems for more than 30 years.

McLean said there have been times when rescue boats had to be deployed following a heavy storm. She said her mother, who lives a few houses away, has replaced her floors three times because of standing water.

The county Board of Commissioners voted Tuesday to apply for a \$850,000 federal grant to alleviate some the problems.

The majority of the money - \$465,000 - would be used to rehabilitate 12 houses in Old Field, a lowlying area in the southeast part of the town. About \$150,000 would be used for drainage improvements, and the rest would cover street improvements and the removal of three abandoned dwellings.

Mayor Charles Kemp said that the grant would only cover a portion of the work, but the town will continue to seek assistance until improvements are complete.

"We are going to ride this horse until we get every drainage problem fixed," Kemp said. "The residents deserve that."

The town would have to provide a \$37,500 match if it wins the grant. The town should know within a couple of months.

"It's been rough down here," said the 63- year-old McLean, who lives on Marvin Street. "When a bad storm comes, the manholes overflow, and the water really doesn't have any place to drain off. I'm for anything that will better this condition." Also Tuesday, the board approved a resolution to look for the \$15,000 needed to open and operate a Boys and Girls Club. Ron Ross, the director Boys and Girls Club of Lumberton/Robeson County, said he was confident that the town could find the money.

"There is state and federal funding available ... \$15,000 will look like no problem when you start looking into it," he said.

Commissioner Charles Townsend has been a vocal proponent of the club.

"We'll attract industry and we'll spend less money on policemen," Townsend said. "Once we show how much we care, (children) will show how much they care."

In other business, the board voted to table an ordinance requiring residents to get approval from the public safety director before burning leaves or grass. Residents would also need to purchase a \$50 permit.

Town Manager Blake Proctor said the measures would avert potential catastrophes and be a source of revenue. But at least one commissioner opposed the plan.

"This is a small town, and if I want to burn leaves, I'll burn leaves," Commissioner Mary Bruce Grantham said. "We aren't setting great fires ... people are leaving Fairmont and we don't need to push them away, and I feel like this is what this will do."

The board also voted to a ban hog, poultry or turkey farms within the town's jurisdiction.

"The further they are from town, the better," Kemp said. "I understand people need to make a living and this has become a lucrative venture, but it has to be tempered with citizens not having to live with obnoxious odors." (Robesonian, 1/17/07)

APR 2007 Votes Against Conference Call Meetings

The town Board of Commissioners on Tuesday approved an ordinance that will enable commissioners to participate in meetings by conference call.

But if an absent commissioner's vote breaks a tie, the board must revote with the missing commissioner in attendance.

The board voted 4-2 to pass the ordinance. Commissioners Wayland Lennon, Mary Bruce Grantham, Wade Sealey and Jay Capps voted in favor of it. Commissioners J.J. McCree and **Charles Townsend** were opposed.

"I can't see where there's anything wrong," said Sealey, who regularly leaves town on business. "Everyone has the potential to be gone when you can't get out of it."

Lennon, who initially pitched the idea to the board, told commissioners that he modifies his travel schedule so he can attend meetings.

"I believe it's important and it's very possible to conduct business over the phone," he said. "Regardless of where someone is sitting, it doesn't change the outpouring of words conveyed ... it's not only good for me, it's good for everybody."

The board tabled the proposal at its February meeting after commissioners expressed concerns about voting over the phone.

According to the ordinance, a commissioner can only participate by phone three times a year, and it must be because that person was called out of town unavoidably or had an emergency. The commissioner must call the boardroom five minutes before the meeting begins and pay the telephone bill.

Townsend said he is afraid that commissioners will unintentionally violate a law.

"There is a thin legal line we may cross and cause a problem for the town," he said.

McCree said that the commissioners have a responsibility to attend all meetings.

"The citizens elect us, and they come to see us in action," he said. "If we aren't here, they might as well not come."

In other business, the board approved a one-year moratorium on new storefront churches on Main Street. The five churches currently located on the street won't be affected.

"We are trying desperately to get our downtown registered as a historic district with the state," Mayor Charles Kemp said. "I believe if we allow more churches, it will detract from our ability to become a historic district."

Kemp said that an historic designation could lure businesses into vacant storefronts and spur downtown growth.

The board again voted 4-2 in favor of the resolution. Commissioners Grantham, Sealey, Lennon and Capps voted in favor, and Commissioners McCree and Townsend opposed.

"As far as churches, there's nothing wrong with them," McCree said. "They aren't bothering anyone; they aren't causing a nuisance."

Also Tuesday Kemp updated the board on the town's efforts to establish a summer recreation program. Kemp, who directed the summer recreation program from 1973 to 1982, said the board has up to \$7,000 in recreation money to pay for a program administrator. Kemp said the county Recreation Department would provide supplies, and he has asked the school system to open the gym at Fairmont Middle School. (Robesonian, 4/18/07)

2008

APR 2008 Youth Club Idea

Town officials say some Fairmont youths are hurting for a productive way to fill their time — and a Boys and Girls Club might fill the prescription.

"We have come to the conclusion that a Boys and Girls Club is needed," said Commissioner Carol Leak-McKenzie, who serves on a recently created Youth Advocacy Committee, during Tuesday's meeting of the town Board of Commissioners.

Commissioner Charles Townsend, who also serves on the committee, which includes religious leaders and youths, piggybacked her comments: "We need to build better youths in Fairmont. We need to show we care enough to find a place where they could learn and have fun. The Boys and Girls Club is what progressive towns and cities are doing."

There are Boys and Girls clubs in Lumberton and Pembroke. They provide after-school activities for youths at the cost of \$1 a year. Youths are required to use some of their time at the club for school work.

Townsend said he has talked to Ron Ross, the executive director for the Boys and Girls Club in Lumberton, about the process. The first step, Townsend said, is finding a building to rent for a reasonable price.

Townsend said he thinks the community building, which is expected to be completed in July, could work.

"The mayor has said previously that the community building could be the next home for a Boys and Girls Club," Townsend said.

But Mayor Charles Kemp said he has a new plan now.

"Once we get the community building opened and move the Robeson Community College classes in there, we can possibly use that building for the club," Kemp said.

Kemp said he's been talking to Ross about opening a club in Fairmont since December 2005.

"It's a conversation that never dies," Kemp said after the meeting. "It has to be an orderly process. I think our community would benefit by it — but you can't just fly the door open."

Townsend pushed for a time frame.

"That's the question — when?" he said. "It needs to be soon. It doesn't need to be prolonged."
(Robesonian, 4/16/08)

MAY 2008 Lobbying For Boys and Girls Club

Although it wasn't on the agenda, a commissioner and resident focused on the budget at the town meeting on Tuesday.

During the public comment period, Terry Evans talked about spending policies.

"There was over 40-some items way over budgeted," Evans said. "Some items are over 300 percent. Once you are over you've got to stop spending."

Commissioner J.J. McCree agreed, and said so near the end of the meeting during the comment period for commissioners.

"We do have one department at 100 percent," he said. "And another is at 125 percent."

Mayor Charles Kemp said: "There's not but one department over 100 percent, it's the Public Buildings Department because all of the air conditioners have broken and have had to be replaced."

"If we're approaching 100 percent in a department, do we have to amend the budget?" McCree asked.

Town Attorney Robert Price said: "Based on the little information I've got, the answer is yes, you need to amend the budget."

McCree said: "That is what I'm talking about. ... One is already over and one is going to be over next month."

McCree had another question for Price.

"If we appropriate money for a specific line item and it is spent any other way than what we voted on ... should it not come before the board?" he said.

McCree cited a situation in which money that was allocated for "Nuisance and Abatement" was spent for a 1983 mobile home on Jackson Street to be moved outside the town.

"As you've stated, yes, but I'm not sure you have the facts correct," Price said. He said he would investigate the situation.

After the meeting, Kemp spoke on behalf of Town Manager Blake Proctor, who did not attend the meeting because he was sick.

"We had a code, and we had revised the code with different years," Kemp said. "Mr. Proctor was acting on the first code, then realized there was a new one. He felt bad because the city had allowed (the owner of the mobile home) in, it was the town's responsibility to pay for the man to leave."

Kemp said it was a case of an "overlapping" ordinance.

"Unfortunately, we spent money out of Nuisance and Abatement that we shouldn't have. There was nothing illegal done. When Proctor found out, he immediately set it right. It will not be the first time a government official has made a mistake. It was an honest mistake and he thinks he did the right thing."

After the meeting, McCree expressed a larger concern.

"I just feel the trust and working together is not with the board at this time," he said. "During the year you're spending the money, but you don't have meetings to discuss if changes are made. I just don't feel comfortable with the way spending is going at this time ... and we have yet to amend the budget."

But Kemp pointed to the bottom line.

"The line items aren't the crucial matter here — it's the department balance that matters," he said. "We've been through a rough road with our finances. Mr. Proctor has years of financial experience. It's a procedure, it's a process — and that process will continue in June with the budget workshops."

Kemp offered more defense: "There's no way we could have known that the air conditioning units were going to break and that gas would be \$4.50 a gallon for diesel."

During the public comment period, Evans also expressed his annoyance at the price he pays for sewer services. He mentioned the town's new sewer agreement with three Columbus County towns. The residents of Cerro Gordo and Boardman will pay \$5.20 for every 1,000 gallons of water being treated, about half the price Fairmont residents pay.

"There should have been a lot more negotiation. They are not paying their fair share," Evans said. "Do the math — I did the math."

In other business, the town board:

— Adopted an agreement to continue participation in the North Carolina Small Town Main Street Program for 2008 and 2009.

— Rescinded the original sewer agreement with Columbus County. The board passed a revised agreement, but had failed to rescind the first one.

— Heard from Commissioners Charles Townsend and Carol Leak-McKenzie lobby on behalf of a Boys & Girls Club. They said the national organization would pay for the first year a club operates, but the expenses for a second year, which were estimated at \$85,000, would have to be paid for locally. (Robesonian, 5/21/08)

JUL 2008 Progress Toward Boys and Girls Club

The final phase of a three-part effort to bring and sustain a Boys and Girls Club in Fairmont was implemented at the Board of Commissioners meeting Tuesday night.

Mayor Charles Kemp said a six-member committee will spend the next 60 days looking for funding sources that would pay for the club's first year of operations. The start-up funds would come from the Boys and Girls Club of America's national office.

"There are a number of people who have said that the town of Fairmont has not been doing enough for the youth in our community," Kemp said. "We held a youth summit a few months ago and came up with some ideas."

Kemp said that he, Commissioner Charles Townsend, and others helped assemble the Mayor's Youth Advocacy Committee which concluded that a Boys and Girls Club would best serve the youths of Fairmont.

After they met with Boys and Girls Club of America representative Ron Ross, a committee was formed whose members had experience in raising money. They include Linda Link, Gentile Everette, Harold Salmon, Robert Delane Shaw, Phostenia McCrimmon, and Janie McFarland.

"These individuals have a wealth of expertise in finding grants," Kemp said. "We're hoping that over the next two months they will be able to find money to keep the Boys and Girls Club running after the first year." (Robesonian, 7/16/08)

2009

SEP 2009 Votes Against Double Rate Policy

fter another night of raised voices and heated arguments, the Fairmont Board of Commissioners - on a split vote - set utility rates Tuesday for East Side Park that are double the rates charged to town residents.

Mayor Charles Kemp was forced to break a tie vote, and he sided with Commissioners Wayland Lennon III, Jay Capps and Wade Sealey. The action upholds a billing rate for out-of-town utility customers that's been on the town's books since the 1970s.

Commissioners Charles Townsend, Carol Leak-McKenzie and J. J. McCree voted against the motion, saying they preferred a more reasonable billing rate.

Asked what the average bills would be under the double-rate policy, Town Manager Blake Proctor said the base rate for water would be \$38.68 per month, and the base rate for sanitary sewer would be \$42.22 a month.

Commissioner McCree sighed and shook his head.

At a workshop last month, McCree said, "I'd like to see us treat everybody as if they were in town." The commissioners have spent much of this summer debating what to charge for delivering water and sewer service to the East Side Park neighborhood, a poor community outside the town that suffers from bad drainage and rainwater contaminated by sewage.

The board earlier agreed to pursue a plan to extend sewer lines to East Side Park using grant money, and to take over water service from the county to customers in that area.

The stumbling block has been the rate the town would charge.

"We have been consumed, as a board, by this issue," Kemp said just before casting his vote to break the tie.

At meetings and workshops, spirited debate has evolved over the town's long-standing policy of charging all out-of-town water and sewer users double the rates charged to town residents. It hasn't been much of an issue over the years because there are only a handful of utility customers outside the town limits.

But the town is poised to seek grants amounting to more than \$1.2 million to extend sewer service and water to the East Side Park area, home to about 200 people, two churches and a community center.

Lennon, who had been willing to compromise and go for a rate less than the double rate, said Tuesday he changed his mind after hearing from countless town residents - at the grocery store, the gas station, and church - strongly opposed to granting out-of-towners the same rate charged people who live in town.

Lennon described the reaction as "an unbelievable outpouring" from town residents. "Everywhere I go, it's a very hot issue," he said.

Lennon said he reverted back to his original support of the double rate policy "because that's what the citizens asked me to do." The board also approved a survey of East Side Park residents to see who is interested in hooking up to the proposed sewer system. It may be a moot point because the Community Development Block Grant request being prepared for the town would require all homeowners in the area to connect to the system, according to an official with the consulting firm of Hobbs, Upchurch & Associates. (Robesonian, 9/16/09)

SEP 2009 Votes Against Abandoning Sewer Plan

A sewer system for East Side Park will not be built any time soon.

Faced with a survey showing only a handful of property owners willing to hook up to a proposed sewer system, the Fairmont Board of Commissioners on Tuesday halted all plans to seek the grant money needed for the venture.

The decision came when Mayor Charles Kemp broke a tie vote, again siding with Commissioners Wayland Lennon III, Jay Capps and Wade Sealey.

Lennon made the motion, seconded by Capps, that the town not proceed with the sewer plan because of the results of the survey.

Commissioners Charles Townsend, Carol Leak-McKenzie and J. J. McCree voted against the motion.

The vote mirrored one two weeks ago when the commissioners decided to stick with an existing billing rate for out-of-town utility customers that's been on the books since the 1970s.

Townsend, Leak-McKenzie and J. J. McCree argued for a discounted rate.

The commissioners have spent much of this summer debating what to charge for delivering water and sewer service to the East Side Park neighborhood, a poor community outside the town that suffers from bad drainage and seeping septic tanks.

The board had agreed to pursue a plan to extend sewer lines to East Side Park using grant money, and to take over water service from the county to customers in that area.

The board directed its engineering firm of Hobbs, Upchurch & Associates to survey the p r o p e r t y owners in East Side Park conc e r n i n g their interest in hooking on. Letters went out to all East Side Park addresses, asking property owners if they wanted sanitary sewer service at an average monthly rate of \$42.22, along with a requirement to get public water at an average cost of \$38.68 a month.

The firm reported that there are 64 units in the targeted area, 53 occupied and 11 vacant. Of the 53 occupied units, the firm received responses from 28. A total of 25 said they would not hook on at the proposed rates.

Three said they would.

The town was poised to seek grants amounting to more than \$1.2 million to extend sewer service and water to the East Side Park area. "We had a 90 percent chance of this application being successful," Town Manager Blake Proctor said.

Townsend continued to make a pitch for lower rates.

"When we overprice it, it won't be a good thing for them," he said.

Townsend said if the town offered a discounted rate "we won't make a lot of money but we'll make some." Capps said he spoke with many East Side Park residents and found "the demand was just not there" KEMP for a sewer system.

After the meeting, Kemp clarified his position.

"We are elected to represent the people who live inside the city of Fairmont," Kemp said.

The mayor also pointed out that the current rate structure has been in place for decades.

"These rates have been on the books in Fairmont since 1975," he said.

There have been areas bordering the town that were charged double for sanitary sewer until they were annexed into the town, he said. That was the case for about 35 homeowners along Golf Course Road who paid double for sewer service for about 10 years before being annexed by Fairmont, according to Kemp.

Kemp said the survey does not indicate whether homeowners in East Side Park would be willing to hook up to sewer if the rates were lower.

"I don't think the idea should be dropped. I think the county should address this issue," he said.
(Robesonian, 9/30/09)

OCT 2009 Seeking Third Term

The recession may be loosening its grip, but in Fairmont, the economy still tops the list of concerns .

The candidates for municipal office may have different ideas, but all seem to believe that there is a need to attract more businesses and new jobs.

On Tuesday, voters will elect a mayor from two candidates, and three commissioners from a field of five. All are four-year terms. Incumbent Commissioner Jay Capps is not running for re-election.

Mayor Charles Kemp is seeking reelection against John R. "Ronnie" Jackson, a former commissioner.

Incumbents Bobby Charles Townsend and Wayland B. Lennon III are being challenged by Perry Tatum Ashley, Terry Evans and James "Rusty" Perry.

Perry could not be reached for this story.

Kemp, 63, is seeking a second term as mayor. He was a teacher for 40 years - 30 at Fairmont High School - before retiring in June. He was a commissioner for 28 years before becoming mayor in 2005.

"In this economy, it's employment and that's why I've held 12 job fairs - with the Employment Security Commission, and two private companies - trying to find a climate where ASHLEY LENNON TOWNSEND EVANS people can find a job. We've got to get people to work," Kemp said. "All the cosmetic things are wonderful - new streets, buildings, lights - but that doesn't replace the opportunity for someone getting a job and making a real wage." He pointed to some recent successes, including bringing the Hagar company and Advance Recovery to town.

"Everything I've done in my life has prepared me to be mayor of this town," he said. "I love this job. I've thrown my whole soul into it. And because of that, I think the results are visible." Jackson, 66, served on the town board from 2003 to 2007 before losing his re-election bid.

Jackson was employed by the town in various positions for more than 25 years, including a stint as firefighter, fire chief, acting town manager, code enforcement officer and rehabilitation specialist. He retired in 1999.

Jackson said he would bring to the mayor's job "a strong knowledge of town codes and ordinances, zoning administration, subdivision regulations, housing rehabilitation, grant writing skills and the ability to listen and get along with all races of people." Jackson said, after several years of building up a healthy fund balance in KEMP JACKSON the town budget, the current administration has chipped away at it, the challenger said.

Jackson also complained of the current board's failure to extend sewer service to the neighboring East Side Park community. Jackson said grant money could have been used to extend the sewer lines, creating a new and needed revenue stream for the town.

"Look at the experience that I've got - 25 years working for the town," Jackson said.

The candidates competing for a seat on the town board include: Wayland B. Lennon III, 48, is a relationship executive in the software industry who is seeking his second term on the board.

"I really believe the town board has been able to bring positive changes to the town of Fairmont," he said, adding more work needs to be done.

"One of the things I believe we still have before us is continuing to enhance the business climate, and trying to bring more jobs here, and trying to make the budget situation even better," Lennon said.

He also said more attention is needed on youths.

"We should look at how we impact our children and their future. we just seem to be having so many challenges - not just here but in the state and the country. We need them (children) to learn and not to have babies and to make a future for themselves.

"We need to work together to make those things become a reality." LENNON Bobby Charles Townsend, 51, is seeking his third term on the town board. He is an insurance agent.

Townsend said there isn't one issue dominating the town, but he said the board needs experienced leaders willing to deal with tough matters when they come up.

Townsend was one of three commissioners who fought for sewer to East Side Park at a reasonable rate.

"I would hope that one day those people would be able to live in an environment where they'd have sewer and not have septic tanks running over," Townsend said.

Townsend had complained strongly about what he saw as the unfairness of charging East Side Park property owners double what town residents pay for the same sewer service.

"I appreciate the voters being supportive over the years, and look for their continued support, advice and input," he said.

Perry Tatum Ashley, 38, is making her first bid for public office.

"I want to serve the Fairmont community and support continued positive growth for Fairmont," she said.

Ashley, a physical therapist, said the No. 1 issue facing the town is "promoting more economic growth and striving to create new jobs for the town, and to seek TOWNSEND ASHLEY innovative ways to do that, we have to think outside the box." Another issue Ashley would like to address is high utility costs, particularly the rate residents are charged for sewer service.

"If fiscally possible, I'd like to try to decrease the sanitary sewer costs.

That's a concern for the residents here in Fairmont," she said.

Terry Evans, 45, works in management for Smithfield Packing in Tar Heel.

He ran unsuccessfully for a commissioner's seat once, and twice for mayor.

"I want Fairmont to heal from the financial wounds that have been created the last three years by the ruling board," he said.

Evans said the biggest issue facing town leaders is attracting more people to make Fairmont their hometown. It is important to "attract new residents to (help) pay off the water and sewer plant - a \$7 million operation," he said.

One way to help pay off that debt, Evans said, is to revisit the plan to extend sewer to East Side Park. Evans favors extending the sewer to that neighborhood but said "I didn't like that double rate." He also spoke of the town's finances.

"The public doesn't know, but I look at the meeting minutes, and we're in financial trouble, "he said".

You need someone in office to help ease these troubles. We got out of debt in 2003 and now we're back in debt again." EVANS. (Robesonian, 10/28/09)

NOV 2009 Votes Against Ordinance to Control Computer Gaming Machines

The Fairmont Board of Commissioners, with the mayor breaking a tie vote, on Tuesday advanced an ordinance that would help control the proliferation of computer gaming machines that have cropped up in town. Mayor Charles Kemp broke a tie vote to approve the first reading of a new gaming ordinance authored by Town Manager Blake Proctor with the assistance of the town's attorney Rob Price.

The ordinance is designed to control computer gaming establishments throughout town, and to eventually ban them from the central downtown area. "I have to believe I have a pretty good feel for the pulse of this city," Kemp said. "I know in my heart that this community does not want the downtown district to be a gambling center." The ordinance targets computers that are provided by establishments on which people can gamble use the Internet. It does not affect video poker machines. Kemp said the ordinance is important as the town's hopes that its downtown be recognized by the National Register of Historic Places next year. "It will take away from the cultural impact that we are trying to make," Kemp said. "You are going to have to move it out of the historic area." The ordinance says the gaming machines would be banned from the historic district one year after the designation is won, according to Kemp. Rev. Harold Salmon spoke against the gaming machines. "

Gambling is a menace to society - it takes food off the tables and destroys marriages," he said. Al Norris, who owns Sweepstakes on Main Street, also spoke at the meeting. "I do agree with what the reverend said, but I believe that gambling is like smoking, overeating, or anything else," Norris said. Before the vote, Commissioner Wayland Lennon III made an amendment to increase the amount of fees charged to computer gaming businesses. The proposed ordinance would charge a fee of \$1, 500 per computer per year for machines not connected to the Internet, and a fee of \$3, 000 per computer per year for those with Internet connection.

Commissioners Lennon, Jay Capps and Wade Sealey voted in favor of the ordinance. Commissioners Charles Townsend, Carol Leak-McKenzie and J.J. McCree voted against its adoption. Kemp said after the meeting, "We're not banning these games. We are just zoning them and charging them a privilege fee to operate." The ordinance must be voted on again at the December meeting. In other business: Kemp announced that Town Clerk Jenny Larson will step down as Fairmont Farmers Festival chairman. (Robesonian, 11/18/09)

DEC 2009 Second Vote on Regulating Computer Gaming (Against)

he town Board of Commissioners, with the mayor once again breaking a tie vote, on Tuesday approved an ordinance to control the proliferation of computer gaming machines that have cropped up in town.

The vote was a replay of the board's action last month, when Commissioners Wayland Lennon III, Jay Capps and Wade Sealey voted in favor of the ordinance, and Commissioners Charles Townsend, Carol Leak-McKenzie and J. J. McCree voted against its adoption.

Mayor Charles Kemp broke the tie vote in November, and again last night. The tie vote in November triggered the need for last night's action - a second reading of the ordinance.

And the matter may still be unfinished. After the vote, Town Attorney Robert Price said he believes the ordinance must go for another vote in January because the board made a few amendments to the document at Tuesday's meeting.

Town Manager Blake Proctor disagreed.

" I know you're the attorney and I'm not.

but state law says you can amend an ordinance on the first and second reading," Proctor said.

Price acknowledged the he "may be wrong," but he thinks another vote is needed.

Kemp declared the ordinance adopted, baring a formal legal opinion from Price later." I'm anticipating that he (Price) won't find that." The mayor concluded," It is the rule of the chair that the ordinance is in effect." The ordinance is designed to regulate computer gaming establishments throughout town, and to eventually remove them from the central downtown area.

The ordinance targets computers that are provided by establishments on which people can gamble via the Internet. It does not affect video poker machines.

Supporters said the ordinance is important as the town hopes that its downtown will be recognized by the National Register of Historic Places early next year. The ordinance says the gaming machines would be banned from the historic district one year after the designation is won.

Supporters say the town isn't banning computer gaming establishments outright but is controlling them and charging a privilege fee to operate.

The ordinance charges a fee of \$1, 500 per computer per year for machines not connected to the Internet, and a fee of \$3, 000 per computer per year for those with Internet connection.

Tuesday's vote came after two ministers spoke against computer gaming businesses.

The Rev. Harold Salmon said the board is elected and charged with the responsibility" to protect every citizen." He said computer gaming is a predatory practice that is highly addictive and highly profitable for those who run the businesses.

" It is morally wrong and therefore a sin," he said. ". It has ruined countless lives. I urge you not to step back. I urge you to unite in a solid stand." The Rev. Jesse Yarborough echoed those statements, saying the computer gaming businesses are" merely hightech approaches to gambling." Spouses say money is being lost to these computer gaming businesses, money that families need to survive, he said.

" We can learn from the negative examples of others," Yarborough said.

Kemp said, in light of the expected historical designation for the town, that Tuesday's vote was" drawing a line in the sand, and we quite possibly may have saved our downtown tonight." In other action: Superior Court Judge Frank Floyd administered the oath of office to Kemp, and to Commissioners Lennon, Townsend and newcomer, Perry Tatum Ashley. (Robesonian, 12/16/09)

2011

MAY 2011 Timeline For New Town Manager

The town Board of Commissioners learned Tuesday that it could be months before a new town manager is hired.

Last month the board agreed to enlist the services of Jim Perry, executive director of the Lumber River Council of Governments, to help find a replacement for Blake Proctor, who was fired from that job in early April. His dismissal came just a few days before his resignation was going to take effect. In an April 8 letter of resignation, Proctor said there was a rift between himself and at least three commissioners.

Finance Director Linda Vause is the acting town manager.

Town Clerk Jenny Larson said the town has received 21 applications for the town manager's position.

Perry on Tuesday presented a loose timetable for finding a new manager. It has the board agreeing on a list of candidates to interview by mid-August, with the first round of interviews in September, and the second round in September or October.

"It's going to run into the fall. It is a lengthy process to go through," Perry told the board.

Commissioner Perry Ashley suggested the town may be left "in a holding pattern" until a new manager is hired.

"I believe we need to act sooner," Ashley said.

"We can expedite the process ... we can speed it up," Perry said. He suggested narrowing the field of candidates immediately after a June 17 deadline to apply, especially "if you want to try to fast track it."

Mayor Charles Kemp, named by the board as the town's "in-house facilitator" to work with Perry in the manager search, said all of the applications will be available at Town Hall for commissioners to review after 5 p.m. June 17.

Commissioners Charles Townsend cautioned against moving too quickly

"We want to get someone in Fairmont to carry us forward," he said.

Meanwhile, Vause and department heads, guided by town commissioners, are preparing the 2011-2012 town budget. (Robesonian, 5/18/11)

JUL 2011 Votes For Budget With Tax Hike

MAYOR CHARLES KEMP: Broke 3-3 tie to adopt budget

FAIRMONT — The Fairmont Board of Commissioners on Thursday night approved a 4-cent hike to the property tax rate, doing so on the eve of the new fiscal year.

Linda Vause, the town's finance director and acting manager, said the \$2.9 million budget, which takes effect today, was approved when Mayor Charles Kemp broke a 3-3 tie among the commissioners. The budget raises the tax rate from 69 cents for every \$100 of property to 73 cents.

"We were presented various budget options over hours at four budget work sessions and this was the less drastic of them all," Kemp told The Robesonian this morning. "With decreasing revenues and increasing expenditures, and a fund balance that we did not want to dip into, employees we didn't want to lay off, and services we didn't want to cut, the only other option was to accept this budget proposal. That's why I voted for this particular plan that was offered.

"I've been in local government in Fairmont for 34 years, 28 as a councilman and six as mayor, and this was the hardest and most difficult budget that I've had any association with," Kemp said.

Charles Townsend, Wade Sealey and Waylon Lennon joined Kemp in voting for the budget, and J.J. McCree, Perry Ashley and Carol Leak-McKenzie voted against it.

"No one wanted to raise taxes, but like other small towns our state revenues have been reduced over the past few years," Vause said. "Towns like us have been absorbing the loss, but this year we couldn't do that any more."

According to Vause, one penny on the tax rate generates \$8,305. The average house in Fairmont is valued at about \$70,000, meaning the average taxpayer will pay about \$28 more, Vause said.

Vause said the budget includes no increase in user fees and no employee layoffs or new hirings. Employees for the third consecutive year will receive no raise, she said.

According to Vause, the budget includes a general fund of \$1.8 million and a water and sewer fund of \$1.07 million. The balance is basically grant money, she said.

"This is really a very, very tight budget," Vause said.

Vause had introduced a budget that included no tax increase. That budget, however, had included a higher estimate of revenue being generated through the sale of town-owned land and buildings that the town isn't using, Vause said.

"We still want to sell the property, but want to regroup on this. The real estate market is not good right now. We don't want to give this property away," said Vause.

Vause also said that \$12,000 for a new police vehicle that had been included in her original budget proposal was removed from the budget that was adopted. (Robesonian, 7/1/11)

OCT 2011 Votes Against Trading Old Weapons For New Ones For Special Ops

— The Fairmont Board of Commissioners on Tuesday shot down a request by the Department of Public Safety to trade antique weapons for firearms to equip a special operations team.

Chief Danny Parker provided five quotes from dealers that would give cash or newer weapons in exchange for two 9 mm submachine guns purchased by the department in 1969 and discovered during a recent inventory.

The top quote would provide seven heavy duty firearms in exchange for the two machine guns, a value of about \$10,900. Parker said the need for such weapons is crucial.

“We want to look forward to a special operations team for high-risk incidents, but if equipment is what the board is looking for, I’m willing to take whatever the board is willing to give,” Parker said. “We don’t know when a school shooting’s going to take place; let’s hope and pray that never happens. But I, as a police chief, want to be ready if that does take place.”

The motion was defeated in a 3-2 vote.

Commissioner J.J. McCree voted against, saying the money could be better used by the Police Department.

“If we do sell these weapons, I think the money should be put in a budget where you and [Town Manager] Linda Vause can decide what can best be used for the department,” McCree said. “You needed a police car last year and the money was not there. If you sell the weapons ... and you have a problem with the police car and the money’s not there, then the weapons still are not doing us any good.”

McCree said break-ins are an ongoing problem for Fairmont, and that the money could be used to raise salaries or hire more officers.

“We’re not gonna solve every breaking and entering. There just is no way,” Parker said. “As long as the money is taken from these weapons and used for something that can be useful, that’s what I’m after. I still (believe) that a team would be very important to the town of Fairmont.”

Commissioner Wayland Lennon III compared having a special operations team to homeowner’s insurance.

“If you go out the day they claim there’s gonna be a hurricane or a flood, you can’t go buy insurance. It’s too late after something’s happened,” he said.

Lennon and Commissioner Wade Sealey voted in favor of the motion, while Commissioners Carol Leak-McKenzie and Charles Townsend joined McCree in voting against it.

In other action, the board:

— Extended until Nov. 1 the time for Norma Mercer to pay the bid she placed on her home at 501 Iona St, which was foreclosed upon in July. Mercer's bid for the home was \$16,700.

Lennon was the only commissioner to vote against the extension.

— Heard from Joann Anderson, president and CEO of Southeastern Regional Medical Center, on aligning the services of the hospital with the needs of individual communities.

Anderson said the hospital is delivering on its customer service, financial, growth and image "pillars" but needs help on the pillar of "people."

"You are our community stakeholders," she said. "... Today, I'm asking for you to consider what we should be doing and how we should be partnering for the betterment of Fairmont and Robeson County." (Lumberton Robesonian, 10/19/11)

DEC 2011 New Town Manager Hired

The Fairmont Board of Commissioners didn't have to look far to find its new town manager.

During its regular monthly meeting on Tuesday, the board unanimously voted to hire Linda Vause, the town's finance director who has been acting as town manager since April.

The board agreed in April to enlist the services of Jim Perry, executive director of the Lumber River Council of Governments, to help find a replacement for Blake Proctor, who was fired from the position in early April, just a few days before his resignation was going to take effect

Perry brought a list of potential candidates to Tuesday's meeting. After a few minutes of discussion, Commissioner Wayland Lennon III made a motion to offer the position to Vause while allowing her to retain her position as finance director.

During the discussion, the issue of code enforcement came up.

"Code enforcement will still be something that would be under her. But, we would have someone to accommodate that," Lennon said.

"I feel honored and would do everything I can for Fairmont since Fairmont is home," Vause said. "We have a wealth of knowledge on our codes in our clerk [Jenny Larson]. I go to Jenny. I would like to bring Jenny in as my team, and we work it out together."

After what Mayor Charles Kemp called a "resounding aye" to approve Vause's hire, the board charged Vause with returning in January with a plan on how she and Larson will handle code violations. Vause and Larson have worked in their respective positions for about 13 years.

The board began its search in April but halted it during the budget process with the plan to revisit it in six months. There was concern during the November meeting about whether or not the town could afford to hire a full-time manager.

Also on Tuesday, the board rejected a bid of \$20,000 for a home at 501 Iona St.

The bid was placed by Theresa Pickett, whom Vause said has been searching for a place in Fairmont to open a day care facility.

The home was acquired by the town through foreclosure. Town Attorney Robert Price said the tax value of the home is \$93,100.

“If we reject the bid now, maybe she’ll come back with a little more, and at the same time, maybe we can clean some of that stuff out and look at our other options,” Commissioner J.J. McCree said.

The board unanimously approved a motion by Commissioner Charles Townsend to reject Pickett’s bid and explore other options. (Robesonian, 12/21/11)

2012

JAN 2012 Votes to Prohibit Out of Town Cops From Driving Police Cars Home

Public Safety officers didn't lose their ride on Tuesday when the Fairmont Board of Commissioners rejected a motion that would have prohibited officers living outside town from driving police cars home.

Commissioners J.J. McCree, Charles Townsend and Carol Leak-McKenzie voted for the motion, and Wayland Lennon III, Perry Ashley and Wade Sealey voted against, creating a tie that was broken by Mayor Charles Kemp.

McCree made the motion, saying the town needed to cut costs to rebuild its General Fund as mandated by the state Local Government Commission.

"They specifically told us to go back, raise what we could, cut what we could," McCree said. "... If we weren't under what the state was requiring, I wouldn't be considering this option."

A report provided by the Department of Public Safety indicated that the town spent about \$5,800 during 2011 for the 14 vehicles in the Administration, Investigation, Patrol and Fire divisions to be driven home by officers. The greatest distance an officer drove home was 16 miles.

In the past, officers have been allowed to drive the cars home in lieu of receiving a 2.5 percent yearly raise, according to the report. Chief Danny Parker said the town is actually saving money by allowing the use of the vehicles instead of giving raises.

Parker warned the commissioners of potential repercussions, reminding them that Fairmont's officers are the lowest paid in Robeson County and haven't received a raise in nearly four years.

"These guys understand the town's tight budget, but we've got some experienced officers and we need to keep them as long as we can," Parker said. "Because if not, the crime rate's going to go up because if we bring new officers in, those guys are not familiar with the criminals that are walking the streets These guys will have no choice because you're forcing them to have to seek other employment."

Parker said all but two of the vehicles are equipped with a GPS system that notifies him if an officer has strayed from his route home.

"Because we did raise the taxes last year, because of the other changes that we've made, the other consolidations ... I think we've done the types of things that demonstrate to the state that we're doing what we need to do," Kemp said.

"With Chief Parker's presentation showing that the town would face some public safety issues that would affect the citizens in a negative way, I wanted to vote to support the public safety department in the face of those potential challenges."

In other action, the board:

— Accepted a letter from the U.S. Department of Agriculture detailing the conditions of a \$385,000 loan from the department for repairs to the sewer system. The \$1 million project is being paid for in part by a N.C. Clean Water Management Trust Fund grant of \$600,000.

— Rejected a plan by Town Manager Linda Vause that calls for Town Clerk Jenny Larson and Public Works Director Ronnie Seals to handle the enforcement of the town's codes and ordinances.

— Rejected Emmett Sullivan's bid to purchase the properties at 319 S. Main St. and 309 S. Main St. for \$500 each.

— Heard from Tony Bridgett, executive director of the Dream Academy in Fairmont, who wants to organize several events in town for Easter weekend, including a Good Friday program, an Easter egg hunt and a basketball tournament. (Robesonian, 1/18/12)

MAR 2012 Appointed to Board of Lumber River Council of Governments

Also on Tuesday, the board:

— Appointed Commissioner Charles Townsend to the board of the Lumber River Council of Governments.

— Approved a \$600,000 grant contract with the Clean Water Management Trust Fund, which will help pay for sewer upgrades around the town.

— Heard from Landa Gaddy about the Youth Self-Improvement Program in Robeson County. (Robesonian, 3/21/12)

APR 2012 Votes Against Ammons For Commissioner

The Board of Commissioners on Tuesday appointed Kim Ammons to fill the seat of Commissioner Perry Ashley, who announced her resignation at last month's meeting.

In a tie vote broken by Mayor Charles Kemp, Ashley and Commissioners Wayland Lennon and Wade Sealey voted in favor the appointment, while Commissioners J.J. McCree, Charles Townsend and Carol Leak-McKenzie voted against it.

Ammons will be sworn in at the board's May meeting.

Ashley, who is resigning because she is moving from the town, nominated Ammons at the board's March meeting. Some of the commissioners objected to the nomination at the time, saying it didn't allow them time to provide their own nominations. But no other names were provided during the nomination period on Tuesday.

“I can’t speak for anyone else on the board,” Kemp said after the meeting. “I don’t know why another name was not brought forward, or other names. We gave everybody on the board 30 days to come up with additional names.

“I’m very excited about Kim Ammons joining the town board. She’s been an outstanding citizen in our community and has been of service both to senior citizens and in other civic ways, and she will make a fine addition to our town board.”

One resident, Chalmus Hood, told the board that the residents should have a say in who fills the seat.

“It could be a possibility that all the commissioners could resign and new commissioners be selected, and we would have no commissioners who were voted on by the public. That would seem unfair to the public,” he said. “... Just wait until the next possible election, and select a commissioner that way through the public, not through the board members. All commissioners should be elected by the general public.”
(Robesonian, 4/18/12)

JUN 2012 Budget Approved (Absent)

The town Board of Commissioners on Thursday approved a budget for the fiscal year that begins Sunday that keeps the tax rate of 73 cents for every \$100 property but includes a sanitation rate increase of \$2 per month.

The increase was proposed to help offset rising fuel costs and rate increases from Waste Management, a private company that handles trash pickup for the town.

The budget does not include a cost-of-living increase for town employees, who have not been given a raise for five years.

“We’re very fortunate in this town to have the quality of employees we have,” Mayor Charles Kemp said. “For them to not have been disgruntled and stay with us for the last five years is absolutely incredible.”

Commissioner J.J. McCree proposed that the board revisit the option of a cost-of-living increase for employees once the town receives licensing fees from a business set to open next week. Walter Jones, who has gaming machines in Fayetteville and Dublin, is expected to place 50 Internet gaming machines in a building that used to house Dollar General in the Bo’s Shopping Center.

Town officials expect the licensing fees to boost the town’s General Fund by more than \$45,000.

“I would like to, maybe around September or October, whenever things start coming in and leveling off, see if we can do something for the employees,” McCree said.

Town Manager Linda Vause agreed that the possibility of a salary increase should be discussed, but was hesitant to base a raise on revenue that may be cut off if Internet gaming machines are declared illegal by the General Assembly.

“I don’t consider the gaming money a continuous flow of revenue,” she said. “The state didn’t touch it this year, but who’s to say what’s going to happen next year?”

Commissioner Wade Sealey proposed disbursing money to employees as holiday bonuses.

“We all should be very proud of the quality of employees that we have here,” Kemp said. “Maybe we can do something down the road to right some of that ship.”

Also on Thursday, the board:

— Approved a write-off of uncollected water accounts for 2011-2012 in the amount of \$2,367.60.

— Approved a write-off of uncollected property taxes in the amount of \$1,300.66.

Commissioner Charles Townsend was absent. (Robesonian, 6/29/12)

DEC 2012 Votes Against Striking Golf Cart Requirement

The town’s financial situation is improving, an auditor told the Fairmont Board of Commissioners at its Tuesday meeting.

John Masters, of the S. Preston Douglas and Associates firm, said the town’s General Fund balance has increased slightly, but the big improvement was in the unassigned portion of the General Fund. He said the unassigned portion was at 12 percent during the 2011-2012 year, well above the 8 percent threshold required by the state.

“In the General Fund balance... there was a slight increase, and the unassigned portion of the general fund balance actually went up noticeably,” Masters said.

Masters said that the property tax collection rate for the town increased from 87.58 to 88.21 percent, but is still below the statewide average of 97 percent.

Mayor Charles Kemp said that the Local Government Commission only offered criticisms and didn’t recognize any of the improvements the town has made.

“In the world of education, with which I had 40 years of experience, I found that even in the most negative of student performance circumstances there could be found some form of praise or compliment,” Kemp said. “Such is obviously not the case with governmental financial overview. Try as we might against deep and formidable fiscal hurdles, strangers to Fairmont who sit and judge from afar find fault in our efforts with little praise for the Herculean efforts made by a board of concerned elected officials and a very competent professional staff.”

The board, with Kemp casting a tie-breaking vote, decided to remove a requirement that golf carts that use city streets have a sign on the back that says “slow moving.” Commissioners Wade Sealey, Wayland

Lennon, and Carol Leak-McKenzie voted in favor of removing the requirement and Commissioners Charles Townsend, J.J. McCree, and Kim Ammons voting against.

Lennon said that he had received a lot of complaints from people with golf carts who said they don't easily fit on the carts without blocking access to the rear of the vehicle. Commissioner J.J. McCree said that he was concerned with the visibility of the carts on overcast or foggy days.

"If it's gloomy or cloudy and you're not turning lights then the reflectors are just there and not doing anything," he said. (Robesonian, 12/19/12)

2013**JAN 2013 Votes Against Water and Sewer Fee Hikes**

Mayor Charles Kemp, saying he had “no choice,” on Tuesday broke a tie vote among Fairmont’s commissioners to enact a 10 percent increase on the town’s base water and sewer rates.

The new annual rate of \$46.71 comes out to \$4.26 a month — or 14.01 cents per day, as Commissioner Wayland Lennon phrased his motion to approve the proposed hike “to give some perspective.” The new rate will be effective on February’s bill.

The proposed rate increase was added to the board’s agenda after a meeting with the Local Government Commission that Town Manager Linda Vause called “disturbing.” According to Vause, the commission would not give its approval for Fairmont to sell revenue bonds to pay for rehabilitation of sewer lines unless the town was able to raise revenue to make payments on the loan that will help to fund the \$1 million project.

The commission recommended a rate increase of 10 to 15 percent and expected an answer today, Vause said. According to Vause, if the town did not comply, it would lose the \$600,000 Clean Water Management Trust Fund grant it received for the rehabilitation project.

After much discussion, Commissioners Wade Sealey and Kim Ammons voted in favor of Lennon’s motion to approve the fee hike, and Commissioners J.J. McCree, Charles Townsend and Carol Leak-McKenzie voted against.

Kemp called the split vote “surprising,” saying that “by not increasing rates, we would do much more harm to this community than by passing a \$4.26 base rate increase.”

“The state agencies would not permit us to do the things that are essential to provide basic services for our community if we did not raise these rates,” he said. “I had no choice but to do what was best for the citizens of this town.”

The increase is not enough to repair or replace the town’s well on Gertrude Street, which is in danger of failing. The board approved an emergency water agreement with Robeson County, which will allow the town to receive county water if needed. The agreement was signed with the contingency that a 90-day notice be given before any fee increase.

The board increased the water and sewer fees by \$2 a year in July.

The faces of the board were grim as they heard from Ronnie Seals, director of Public Works, who told them that a clarifier in one of the town’s sewer plants had broken and the plant was down. Seals said he had received estimates for parts that totaled about \$10,000, and guessed that the job would cost the town about \$25,000 and take at least a month to complete.

“The situation we’re in now, we’re not talking just about Fairmont,” he said. “We’re talking about Proctorville, we’re talking about Orrum, we’re talking about Cerro Gordo, we’re talking about Fair Bluff.”

Vause told the board that the town “luckily” had about a \$30,000 contingency in its budget that has not yet been touched and should take care of the project. The announcement required no action from the board, but Seals and Vause both said that the commissioners should be made aware when a large repair to the town’s infrastructure is necessary.

Seals said the town “was still in operation” because it has two sewer plants. He said if the second plant was to go out, the town would have to find someone to haul its waste at a cost of about \$7,000 per day.

“This is a little different then the well,” he said. “We can get by without the well — we’ve got backup county. When this goes down, we’re getting by with one. But this other one, if for God’s sake something was to happen and it goes down, we’re in big trouble.”

As the meeting came to a close, Vause said that the town would open its garbage collection up for bids when Waste Management’s contact is up. (Robesonian, 1/16/13)

FEB 2013 Named to Transportation Planning Committee

In other action on Tuesday, the board:

- Approved having a vacant lot on Webster Street surveyed and sold as surplus.
- Approved an amendment to the Sewer Use Ordinance, which will put the town in compliance with waste-water limits.
- Named Commissioner Charles Townsend to Robeson County’s Transportation Planning Committee.
- Moved the town’s regular meeting date from the third Tuesday of each month to the second Thursday of each month. (Robesonian, 2/20/13)

MAY 2013 Voted Against Keeping Ban on Sale of Alcohol at Public Events

The Fairmont Board of Commissioners on Thursday voted to keep the town’s parks and recreation areas dry during public events.

The commissioners had twice discussed a proposed ordinance that would have allowed the sale of alcohol at town parks and recreational facilities, but did not take action. On Thursday, in a 4 to 2 vote, the commissioners decided not to amend an ordinance to provide for alcohol sales by vendors who were properly permitted.

Commissioner Wade Sealey voted in favor the amendment, saying it would allow Fairmont to control alcohol consumption at public events. He said alcohol is already present at some of the events.

Joining Sealey in supporting the amendment was Commissioner Kim Ammons; voting against were Commissioners Wayland Lennon, J.J. McCree, Charles Townsend and Carol Leak-McKenzie.

The board also unanimously adopted a resolution to send to the state General Assembly opposing the closing of the Robeson Correctional Center, a minimum security prison on N.C. 711 west of Lumberton. The resolution offers several reasons why the prison should remain open, including that it provides inmate labor at \$1 a day per prisoner to local municipalities, including Fairmont, for cleanup and maintenance work. (Robesonian, 5/9/13)

OCT 2013 Running For Mayor

Mayoral candidates in Fairmont have different opinions on how local government should be administered, but all agree that among major issues facing their community are finding jobs and revitalization of the downtown.

When local voters go to the polls on Nov. 5 they will have the chance to re-elect Charles Kemp, the town's mayor for the past eight years, or elect one of two other candidates as mayor — Bobby Charles Townsend, a 12-year veteran of the town council, or Channing P. Cunningham, a local preacher and state Department of Public Safety employee. Both Townsend and Cunningham say they are the candidate of "change."

"There's really only two issues — the need for jobs and the need for downtown revitalization," said Kemp, who served on the town council for 28 years before becoming the town's mayor. "I plan to focus on these issues 1,000 percent from the day I'm sworn in (again) until the end of my third term. I'm calling this a downtown Renaissance."

Kemp, 67, taught high school history at Fairmont High School for 30 years before teaching another decade at Dillon and Lake View high schools in South Carolina. He retired in 2009.

He graduated from North Carolina Wesleyan College in 1969 with a bachelor's degree in History, is a member of the Trinity Methodist Church in Fairmont, and is a member of the Fairmont Chamber of Commerce. In 2012, he received the Dr. Collie Coleman 'Spirit of Unity' award from The University of North Carolina at Pembroke.

Kemp, who has lived in Fairmont all his life, said his dream is that someday the town will recover its vitality and be the prosperous community it was during the days when tobacco drove the local economy.

"In the past three years I've held 27 job fairs where 1,800 people have been exposed to employers," Kemp said. "... I wake up every morning and go to bed every night trying to find ways to find jobs for the people in this town."

Kemp says that if re-elected, he will announce his choice to fill the newly created position of director of Downtown Development. He said that after a year of searching, he has found the right person to fill the

position that will be responsible for recruiting new businesses to the downtown, retaining and maintaining existing businesses, and come up with “creative and interesting activities to enliven and promote the downtown.”

Kemp said that during his years as mayor numerous new programs have been established to serve all residents of the community, especially the town’s elderly and youth. Among his accomplishment he cites are the creation of the Fairmont High School Youth Council; establishment of the Seniors in Touch program, which offers monthly social activities for the town’s seniors; and the inauguration of the town’s annual Fourth of July ceremony and activities.

“All the things I have done benefit all of the people of Fairmont and not just one specific group,” Kemp said.

Townsend sees the need for job creation and revitalization of the downtown as major issues that must be addressed by the next mayor and town council. He said, however — without offering specifics — that he believes there are other possible ways to improve the local economy than those being employed by Kemp.

“I’m running for mayor to give the citizens of Fairmont a choice,” Townsend said. “I’m offering change and a different direction.”

Townsend, 56, is a lifelong Fairmont resident. He is a self-employed insurance agent and associate minister at First Baptist Church on North Main Street. In addition to having served 12 years on the town board, he is a member of the board of the Lumber River Council of Governments and a board member of Robeson Health Care.

‘Before we can grow the downtown, or do anything else, we need to get out of debt,” he said. “We have to look at all of the options.”

Another of his concerns, Townsend said, is operations of the Police Department.

“I’ve had people come up to me and ask if there isn’t something we can do so that our police office can be open 24 hours,” he said.

Revitalizing the downtown, and making other improvements in the community, is going to take everyone becoming involved, according to Townsend.

“It’s going to take community involvement and community presence,” he said. (Robesonian, 10/28/13)

NOV 2013 Wins Mayor Election; Defeats Incumbent

The following are the results from today’s municipal elections. All the figures provided are final and unofficial. (*) denotes winner. (i) denotes incumbent.

FAIRMONT

Mayor (4-year term)

Charles Kemp (i)396 votes

Channing P. Cunningham35 votes

*Bobby Charles Townsend480 votes (Robesonian, 11/4/13)

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Mayor Charles Kemp lost his bid for a third four-year term as mayor Tuesday to a veteran member of the town’s Board of Commissioners. Voters also elect two new members of the Board of Commissioners.

Kemp, 67, was defeated by Bobby Charles Townsend, a 12-year town board member. Channing P. Cunningham, a local preacher and state Department of Public Safety employee, finished a distant third.

Unofficial results show Townsend winning with 480 — or 52.69 percent — of the 911 votes cast. Kemp received 396, or 43.47 percent of the votes, and Cunningham pulled in 35, or 3.84 percent of the votes.

Kemp served as a commissioner for 28 years before becoming mayor.

Results won’t be official until canvassing takes place on Tuesday at 11 a.m.

Townsend said he was “surprised” that he was able to unseat the incumbent mayor.

“Charles Kemp is hard to beat,” he said. “This was a tough, tight race to win.”

Townsend said that he believes residents wanted new leadership.

“I think that people are ready to look at a new mindset in the mayor’s seat,” Townsend said. “... I want to thank all of the people who supported me and I’m looking forward to moving Fairmont forward.”

Kemp, who had campaigned on what he said was a record of progress in Fairmont, especially in job creation and downtown development, could not be reached Tuesday night.

Fairmont voters also elected three commissioners — Amelia “Ann” McLean, with 498 votes, Terry Evans, 458 votes, and incumbent Kim Prevatte Ammons, 377 votes.

Other candidates included: Andrew Grimsley, 359 votes, or 17.61 percent; and a write-in who received 347, or 17.02 percent, of the votes. Monte McCollum ran an organized write-in campaign, but it was unknown late Tuesday night if all of the write-in votes went to him. (Robesonian, 11/6/13)

DEC 2013 Sworn In as Mayor

After eight years in office, Charles Kemp handed the duties of mayor over to Charles Townsend, who was sworn in along with three newly elected town commissioners on Thursday night.

Kemp delivered an emotional speech before leaving the meeting early. In front of a crowd of about 100, he detailed his career in public service and thanked the town government's employees.

"They literally are the reason for this town's daily successes. Over the past eight years we have become a family and I will miss each one," he said. "I have been honored to serve as the mayor of this wonderful little town in which I grew up, went to school and by choice returned to live in. I have never regretted one day of that decision nor have I regretted one vote, action or initiative I undertook during the past eight years."

Amid shouts of "amen" from the crowd, Townsend, who has served on Fairmont's Board of Commissioners for 12 years, said "love, peace and joy" will be motivate his actions as mayor.

"I want it to feel inclusive. I want everybody to feel welcome. I want everybody's ideas on the table," he said.

Amelia McLean struck a similar tone.

"What the world needs is more leaders with great moral standards," she said. "I stand tonight to say that you will always find me standing firm on what is right." McLean is a pastor in Dillon, S.C., but lives in Fairmont.

Terry Evans, who also serves on the Robeson County Planning Board, told attendees that economic growth is on Fairmont's horizon.

"Fairmont is even inside this thing," he said, holding up a binder containing plans for the county. "If you hold on, the jobs are coming, the money is coming."

If residents aren't happy with his work, Evans said they should feel free to petition for his removal.

"If I cannot do what I promise to do, you do not have to wait four years to get me out of office," he said.

Monte McCallum, who works in mental health and also coaches basketball, won his seat as a write-in candidate.

"It feels great just to see that the people took the time not only to vote but to write me in," he said.

He assured his constituents that he would continue to be accessible to them.

"My ears are open to all of you," he said. "I am a community person so a lot of you know me."

Commissioner J.J. McCree was appointed mayor pro tem.

Outgoing Commissioner Kim Ammons joyfully thanked her colleagues for the “wonderful experience.” Wayland Lennon, also an outgoing commissioner, was absent. He did not seek re-election.

After the ceremony, Mayor Townsend got right to work leading the rest of the meeting, which included no new actions.

“I tried not to show it, but it was a bit overwhelming,” he said after posing for photos with dozens of friends and supporters. “But I know I can do it.” (Robesonian, 12/12/13)

2014

FEB 2014 Favors One Cent Sales Tax Hike

Gwendolyn Hunt is a bargain hunter.

For her Main Street business, Gwen's Discount, she searches for the lowest prices on everything from jeans to cell phones to stock her shelves. Outside of work, she's just as frugal, even factoring tax into her shopping budget — which is why she's not so thrilled about a recent proposal to raise sales taxes in Fairmont by 1 percent.

"I really feel like we're being asked to pay enough, to be honest," the lifelong Fairmont resident said.

The rate hike, which first needs approval from the Republican-dominated General Assembly, would raise sales taxes in the town from 7 to 8 percent, generating an additional \$153,000 a year for the local government that has struggled with declining tax revenue and rising expenses. Approval from the General Assembly would only mean that it would be put before voters in a referendum.

"We're kind of in a situation where we have a lot of fixed income residents, so instead of putting a burden on them by raising water and sewer, we thought about having a penny sales tax increase ...," said Monte McCallum, the recently elected Fairmont commissioner who pitched the idea.

Extra revenue from the tax hike would go into the town's General Fund, which gradually shrank from more than \$700,000 in 2007 to \$270,964 at the end of the past fiscal year, according to an audit. Five and a half percent of that balance is not assigned to an expense. The Local Government Commission recommends that municipalities leave 8 percent of their General Funds unassigned to ensure their financial security.

Raising sales taxes would allow the town to draw revenue from people who stop while traveling on Interstate 95 or N.C. 41, rather than solely relying on the town's 2,642 residents for more income, McCallum said. Last year, \$354,286.75 in collected sales tax was distributed back to Fairmont by Robeson County, according to a state Department of Revenue report.

"There's not a lot of money here to begin with, if they do raise the tax up, I really think that would hurt me as a small business owner," said Hunt, who opened her store about a month ago. She heard about the hike from Mayor Charles Townsend when he came into her store on Wednesday, the day after it was proposed.

Hunt said many Fairmont residents work in Lumberton and, if the tax rate were raised, they would spend their money there.

McCallum isn't buying.

"I really don't see that as a problem ... if someone did work in Lumberton and bought items in Lumberton before they got to Fairmont, I'm pretty sure that it would balance out," he said.

Johnny Dunson, who owns F.F. Palace Restaurant, also on Main Street, said he doesn't see many out-of-towners in Fairmont.

"They come through 95 not off 95," Dunson said. The restaurant has been open for three years, and if Disney memorabilia lining the walls is any indication, sees many families.

McCallum said most residents he's spoken to understand the reasoning behind the proposal.

"We're trying to dismantle some of the problems that we were having in the past," McCallum said. "We're trying to have an outlet until we can physically see some of the changes we have made."

Linda Vause, Fairmont's town manager and finance officer, said some financial changes were made that "haven't been seen to fruition yet," such as contracting out the Department of Public Safety's communications services to the Robeson County Sheriff's Office. An audit of the 2013-2014 fiscal year "should look better," she said.

A customer at Webster's Pharmacy on Main Street said a sales tax increase isn't "the right way to go about" fixing the town's financial woes.

"I think that kind of tax will affect folks locally ... the ones that really need the help," said the lifelong Fairmont resident, who didn't want to provide his name. He said he'd could get behind contributing a little more to the town if his money were designated towards specific expenses.

"It just seems wrong to pick out one community," he said

Rep. Garland Pierce, who represents District 48, which includes includes parts of Robeson County, said it will be tough to get approval from the General Assembly.

"The present party in power is not too much in favor of tax increases ... that's a hard sell in the General Assembly, any tax increase is a hard sell," Pierce said.

Robeson County's government is seeking a 1 percent increase in the sales tax as a way to create a revenue stream to pay perhaps for a new jail and technology school. If that were to happen, Robeson County, at 8.25 percent, would have the highest sales tax in the state.

Robeson County voters in 2010 approved a quarter-cent hike in the sales tax rate during a referendum. (Robesonian, 2/22/14)

MAR 2014 "Vital To Have Strong Police Department"

Fairmont residents and town commissioners alike took the microphone at a meeting Thursday night to voice concerns over a proposal to contract out the town's emergency services, with commissioners saying the issue had been "blown out of proportion," citing coverage from The Robesonian.

The commissioners stressed that no action has been taken towards contracting out those services.

Commissioner Terry Evans asked at the board's February meeting for Town Manager Linda Vause to conduct a feasibility study on dissolving the town's Police and Fire departments — which are merged under Public Safety — and contracting out those services to the Robeson County Sheriff's Office and the Fairmont Rural Fire Department.

The request was put forth as a way to save money.

Five residents on Thursday asked the board not to dissolve the departments, expressing concern that response times would slow.

Tim Prevatte recalled for the board a night when he awoke to find two strangers peering into his wife's car, which was packed with Christmas presents. Prevatte lauded Fairmont police for arriving at the home before his wife finished speaking to 911 dispatchers.

The board told the crowd it's not likely that they would vote to eliminate the departments.

"It is vital to the community that we have a strong Police Department," Mayor Charles Townsend said. "When a commissioner makes a recommendation it is procedure that we say 'OK, we'll look it into.' But I don't think you have anything to fear about that happening."

Some commissioners spoke disparagingly about articles in The Robesonian on the proposal, saying they stoked residents' fears.

"[Evans] said 'let's do a study. The next thing we hear is that we're talking about terminating (the departments), and when you say terminating that means cutting it out. The headline said words that really brought fear into my heart and I know that wasn't what we said here,'" said Commissioner Amelia Ann McLean, referring to a headline from Feb. 18 that read "Fairmont to study eliminating police, fire."

The Robesonian did not have a reporter at the meeting, and instead spoke with Vause by phone that night. The reporter misunderstood, believing a formal vote had been taken.

That story incorrectly stated that the board had voted to approve Evans' request. There was no vote following the request.

"No one ever said that we'd take away your Police Department or your Fire Department," McLean said. "... That's the most ignorant thing we could do to each other."

Commissioner J.J. McCree told residents to get their own information on the town government and "don't have to rely on the newspaper because it's been proven they are inaccurate."

The Robesonian has published three articles on the proposal — one reporting that the study had been requested, an opinion piece critical of the idea, saying it was unlikely to move forward, and a letter to the editor from a Fairmont resident.

The board told the crowd it's looking into any and all solutions to its financial troubles.

“We are in trouble. Every department in this town is being look upon to see if changes can be made, if things can be cut back or increased ...,” McLean said.

In other business, the board:

— Voted to move its regular meetings to the third Tuesday of each month. Currently, meetings are held the second Thursday.

— Set a date for a second public hearing on the town’s application for Community Development Block Grants amounting to about \$4 million. A public hearing was held on the matter Thursday but no residents asked to speak. The grants will be used to repair sewer lines throughout the town. Vause said more details will be provided at the board’s next meeting.

— Recognized Fairmont Middle School’s basketball team and band for their achievements.

— Authorized the sale of Water and Sewer System Revenue Bonds amounting to \$385,000 to be applied to an outstanding Bond Anticipation Note of the same total.

— Accepted a bid of \$1,200 for the sale of property located at 505 Gertrude St.

— Shared a letter from the Local Government Commission regarding the town’s financial statements for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2013, which the board receives each year. The commissioners also signed off on a response to the letter detailing its current efforts to cut costs and increase revenue.

— Struck several items from the night’s agenda, including voting to accept bids for the sale of five properties, and a closed session because Town Attorney Rob Price was not present. (Robesonian, 3/30/14)

JUN 2014 Action Taken Related to Town Employee (Details Not Released)

-- Members of the Fairmont Board of Commissioners took action related to a town employee in a closed session during an emergency meeting Monday, but did not announce the action taken.

The board of commissioners called the meeting last week to discuss personnel and attorney-client privilege, according to the town notice. All six commissioners, the mayor, town manager and town attorney attended Monday’s meeting.

No one from the public attended the meeting.

Commissioners went into a closed session meeting at 4:34 p.m. and returned at 5:47 p.m.

Mayor Charles Townsend announced action was taken in the closed session, but that it was confidential because it was related to personnel. He did not indicate if the action was a recommendation or final action.

A Fayetteville Observer reporter objected, citing the state meetings law that says that action cannot be taken in closed session during a public meeting.

Rob Price, the town lawyer, said a state law protected the private action.

Objections were raised again by the Observer, but Price said the objection was out of order. Townsend ended the meeting.

After the meeting, Price said the commissioners' action in private followed proper legal procedures.

He cited a section of the same state open meetings law that states, "Final action making an appointment or discharge or removal by a public body having final authority for the appointment or discharge or removal shall be taken in an open meeting."

Price also cited the town's personnel policy. He said the policy allows the town manager and commissioners to meet privately to discuss the status of an employee while the employee is involved in a criminal investigation. The status to be discussed can include suspension, he said.

Disciplinary action, or recommending a candidate for a job interview, can be done in private, said Mike Tadych, a lawyer with the North Carolina Press Association.

More serious action related to an employee is only allowed to be taken during a private meeting, depending on who makes hiring and firing decisions for the municipality, he said.

If the town's board of commissioners or council members have the authority to hire and fire employees, it can take action in private. However, if the town has a manager or administrator that makes those decisions, the board of commissioners or council members do not have authority to take action in private meetings, Tadych said.

"Provided it wasn't the removal or termination of the person, they can do that in closed session," he said. "If they don't have the authority to fire, they shouldn't be having a discussion on this person anyway."

Fairmont government is comprised of a manager, mayor and six commissioners. It was unclear Monday night who makes hiring and firing decisions for the Robeson County town.

In a government with a town manager and board of commissioners or council members, the mayor and council set policy and hire a manager to implement their policies. A manager has specified statutory authority, including the hiring and firing of employees, according to the state league of municipalities. (Fayetteville Observer, 6/10/14)

JUL 2014 Praising Solar Farms

Helen Livingston's family has owned a 300-acre farm near Maxton for generations. Now 45 acres of the land is covered with more than 26,000 dark solar panels, making it part of a growing movement to harvest electricity from the sun.

Solar farms like Livingston's are cropping up all over North Carolina, shining rays of hope on economically depressed areas by bringing jobs, a constant stream of revenue and the potential to attract eco-friendly industry and economic investment.

North Carolina has become a leader in the country in the growth of the farms, and Robeson County is near the top of the state in terms of solar capacity.

Chris Dunbar, vice president of operations for Asheville-based FLS Energy, calls North Carolina the "East Coast hub" for solar energy. FLS is one of the companies with several solar projects across North Carolina.

"If you want to talk to people who know about solar, you come to North Carolina," Dunbar said.

Solar farms convert sunlight into electricity. Their panels capture the sun's rays as direct current energy, before inverters turn it into alternating current power that is fed into the power grid. The power is used in homes, businesses and utilities.

North Carolina now has more than 120 solar farms, according to the N.C. Sustainable Energy Association, putting it at the top of several reports on solar capacity and the construction of solar farms.

Last year, North Carolina added more solar capacity than all but two other states, according to the Solar Energy Industries Association. In the first three months of this year, the state moved up to second in the country, according to a May report by SNL Energy, an online publication that covers energy issues.

The state was fourth last year in installed solar capacity with enough to power 64,500 homes, the association said.

The creation of the farms translates into millions of dollars invested in North Carolina, according to the Solar Energy Industries Association. In 2013, about \$787 million poured into North Carolina, an increase of 156 percent over the previous year, with more growth expected this year.

The growth is led by three companies with solar projects dotting the state at a rapid rate. Together, they account for more than 20 farms in the Cape Fear region.

Robeson County has become one of the focal points for the state's growth. It ranks second in the state for capacity behind Catawba County and has the fifth highest number of farms in the state, according to the N.C. Sustainable Energy Association.

With eight farms completed, it has more farms than any other county in eastern North Carolina, according to the association.

Dunbar said available property makes Robeson County a great place for solar farms.

"I think it starts with cheap land," he said.

The growth isn't slowing down, despite some resistance from some residents who don't want farms in their neighborhoods.

"Overall, they've been well received," said Robeson County Manager Ricky Harris. "It's a positive venture."

A local investment

Solar farms are growing in North Carolina as a result of the decreasing cost of generating the power; tax incentives that make it easier to turn a profit; and state policies that set contract prices for the electricity.

Some supporters fear those advantages could be diminished in the future. The N.C. Utilities Commission is considering a request to change the contract policy. Some tax incentives are scheduled to sunset in 2016.

Joel Olsen, president of Cornelius-based O2 Energies, said the Utilities Commission will make decisions based on suggestions from power companies that would change existing rules of how renewable energies facilities sell power. One suggestion would reduce the size of a solar generating facility that would qualify for a set contract price.

"This drastic change that the utilities want would stifle competition in the regulated monopoly power market, and makes little sense in light of the growing numbers of jobs created by the renewable energy industry in our state," he said. "Commissioners should reject it."

A decision could come by this fall.

Olsen said incentives for solar power pay off. His company has seven operating solar farms, three under construction and six in the development stage, he said. Three are in the Cape Fear region, including one near Fairmont that's being built with FLS Energy.

Every dollar in tax credits returns \$1.92 in state and local tax revenue, he said.

Robeson County Manager Ricky Harris said the property values increase when solar farms are built.

"The solar farms do create a revenue stream for the county," he said.

The farms have other benefits, too, Olsen said. For example, a 20-acre solar farm next to Fairmont High School provides power to the town's downtown and other homes and businesses in the area, Olsen said.

On a cloudy Wednesday, the farm was operating at about 50 percent capacity. In the rain, the facility still works at about 20 percent, Olsen said.

"This is local energy," he said. "It was built here, and it's generating here."

In addition to generating local jobs, some components of solar panels are built in the area, Olsen said. Pilkington, a glass manufacturer in Laurinburg, makes the fronts of the panels, while Dupont in

Fayetteville makes the back sheets. Horne Brothers Construction in Fayetteville does grading and other work on solar farm sites, he said.

Olsen said energy companies hire local workers to build the farms.

”One of the good things about solar is it’s not only distributed energy, it’s distributed opportunity,” he said.

A 30-acre farm under construction in Fairmont hired about 15 people who live within a mile and a half of the facility, said David Fowler, the site superintendent.

”There’s been very little turnover,” he said. “These guys have just been outstanding.”

Blair Schooff is vice president for sales and marketing of Strata Solar, which is leasing the land owned by Livingston and her brother. The Chapel Hill-based company has about 60 solar farms, including 19 in the Cape Fear region. They expect to have about 20 more farms operating by the end of the year, he said.

Schooff said Strata tries to cluster their farms close to each other so work crews can have steady work near their homes.

Paul Hinkson, a superintendent overseeing work at a Strata Solar farm in Erwin, said about 50 of the 60 people working on the site were hired locally.

”A lot of these guys were on my last crew in Newton Grove,” he said.

A tool for the future

A tool for the future

In some cases, the benefits of building solar farms aren’t immediately apparent. For many counties struggling to recruit new industry, solar farms have become a tool to drive economic development. Olsen and others said building solar farms can attract companies that want to get energy from renewable resources.

Google, QVC and Apple have operations in North Carolina that rely heavily on solar power.

Ashley Cagle, executive director of the Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation, said solar farms are planned near an industrial megapark in both Moore and Montgomery counties. The 3,000-acre park is designed to attract environmentally friendly companies.

”We feel like we’re getting into the game,” Cagle said. “It definitely fits into our goal for the park.”

Fairmont Mayor Charles Townsend said some manufacturers look for clean energy because “they want to be associated with solar energy.”

Townsend said the solar farms are positive for the town, which has about 2,700 people. The new farm will be the third built near the town in the last three years.

"We're moving toward the future," he said.

Dixon Ivey Jr., Robeson County's county's zoning administrator, said another farm has been approved for construction in Robeson County, and six others are proposed. If all seven are built, the county would have the second highest number of farms and could have the largest capacity.

Kenneth Rust, who owns the McDonald's in Fairmont, said he is happy to have a solar farm providing energy for the restaurant.

"This is one of my personal passions," he said.

Rust, who owns seven McDonald's in Robeson and Scotland counties with his wife, Lisa, said the area has suffered economically.

"I'm just excited for economic development in Fairmont," he said. "It's nice to see a bright spot."

On Wednesday, Townsend, Rust and other Robeson County officials toured the farm next to the high school and another one under construction on Turkey Branch Road with executives from O2 Energies. The elected officials said they were impressed with the farms.

Livingston said she and her family had not considered leasing their property for anything but traditional farming until a Strata representative approached them in 2011. The solar farm was a good option because the family has traditionally been environmentally conscious, she said.

"This kind of came out of the blue for us, but we were absolutely thrilled," she said.

Livingston said she is happy that the solar movement is spreading across the state.

"North Carolina is being referred to as the second sunshine state," she said.

Facing opposition

Facing opposition

Solar farms have been generally well received, but a few have faced resistance.

In Moore County, the Planning Board denied changes to zoning laws that would allow a solar farm, focusing on government subsidies to the solar industry and whether the county would have to pay to clean up solar farms that closed. County commissioners, which had final say on the matter, later voted to approve the changes and allow solar farms in the county. A solar farm in the county near Eagle Springs is nearing completion.

One planned solar farm in Rowland last year generated some controversy but was settled, Harris said. Residents were concerned about how close the farms were located to homes, their possible effect on property values and potential health risks.

Betsy McCorkle, director of government affairs for the N.C. Sustainable Energy Association, said education is important when a solar farm is proposed for an area.

"The more people learn about solar farms, the more they like them," she said. "Sometimes uncertainty about a project can bring negative feelings, but once members of the community realize that these farms are very quiet, odorless, and have a significant positive impact on the county's tax base, they are usually asking how soon another one can be brought online."

Livingston said she thinks some people have misinformation about solar energy.

"How can people be all excited about fracking and landfills, but scared of solar," she said, referring to a method of horizontal drilling for natural gas that uses chemicals and sand to fracture rock. The General Assembly has cleared the way for fracking.

Livingston said a solar farm near her home in Laurinburg faced opposition last year. The City Council voted against the farm, but the move was overturned in court, she said.

"The arguments against solar just don't hold water," she said.

Connie Oxendine, who lives next to the solar farm operating in Fairmont, said she doesn't mind the farm itself, but she isn't happy that sheep graze on the property.

"Sometimes it smells," she said.

Olsen said O2 Energies lets sheep graze on all their farms, and donkeys protect the sheep. When the grass gets low in Fairmont, the animals are moved to a nearby solar farm in Maxton.

But Oxendine said her family was told they couldn't have livestock when they bought their property 14 years ago.

"It just irritated me, made me mad, when I found out they were going to put livestock out there," she said.

When Olsen was told of Oxendine's complaint, he said the company wants to work with the neighbors.

"With that feedback, we can adjust," he said.

Looking to the future

Looking to the future

James Hunt, who lives in the third house from the Fairmont solar farm, said he has no complaints about it. He said Fairmont and the area benefits from the solar farm.

”It’s helpful to not have to burn coal or natural gas to produce power,” he said.

Supporters say the future can be bright for solar in North Carolina.

State universities are providing research for the industry.

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s Energy Frontier Research Center for Solar Fuels recently received \$10.8 million from the U.S. Department of Energy’s Office of Basic Energy Sciences. The center will use the money to study how to make solar energy technology better so devices can produce fuel more efficiently.

N.C. State University’s N.C. Clean Energy Technology Center, formerly called the N.C. Solar Center, helps develop technology and policy initiatives in solar and other clean energies for businesses, policymakers and other organizations.

McCorkle said the solar industry needs a policy signal from state officials that North Carolina still wants to be a leader in solar.

”The solar industry is working under constant uncertainty, which stalls new investments. Policymakers should be doing everything they can to signal that this is an industry we want in North Carolina,” she said.

Olsen said the cost of solar energy is going down while most other forms of producing power are increasing.

”The future of the industry depends on legislative and regulatory certainty,” he said. “North Carolina has been lucky to have that, and we hope that it will continue.” (Fayetteville Observer, 7/10/14)

SEP 2014 Police, Fire Departments Separated Again

Fifteen Robeson County sheriff’s deputies will be pitching in part-time to keep Fairmont safe.

Town Manager Linda Vause announced at a town meeting that the deputies will be employed on an as-needed basis to bolster the staff of Fairmont’s newly-independent Police Department.

The Board of Commissioners during its July 15 meeting voted to split the town’s police and fire divisions, previously joined under the Public Safety Department. Kimothy Monroe was named interim chief.

Vause said the new arrangement is a “win-win” for the small police force and for the town. The police division employs about a dozen people.

”That will be saving a tremendous amount from paying people full-time with benefits,” Vause said. The part-time officers will earn about \$14 an hour. Vause said the spots are still being filled.

In a related matter, the board agreed to pay half of one officer's salary as part of the Governor's Highway Safety Program, which allows local police to participate in county-wide traffic enforcement. The town will pay \$21,852 towards the salary and federal funding will be requested for the remaining \$21,853.

The commissioners considered forming a special fund, proposed by Commissioner Monte McCallum, that could hold revenue generated from town events then could be used to support such events.

After some discussion, the board decided to hold a special meeting on the proposal.

McCallum expressed concern that other commissioners didn't support his efforts to hold more events in town that would generate revenue. Several board members refuted that.

"Anybody can have an event ... as long as the town's not at risk," said Mayor Charles Townsend.

McCallum said events he has tried to organize, like the May Day celebration and a recent concert featuring R&B singer Roy C, should have been embraced by the town like the annual Farmer's Festival.

The date of the special meeting has not been set, but it is expected to be held within a week.

In other business, the board:

- Heard a presentation by Vanessa Abernathy, of the Robeson County Arts Council, on upcoming Arts Cruising events. The "cruises" begin at the public library in Lumberton and end at different destination towns, where an arts event will be held. Fairmont will host the event on Feb. 12.
- Approved a contract with Waste Management for waste collection. Vause said the approved rates went into effect in August and resulted in \$3,600 in savings.
- Voted to appoint Cynthia Dudley to a three-year term on the town's ABC Board. (Robesonian, 9/16/14)

OCT 2014 Vote On When to Schedule Town Events

A May Day Festival that drew thousands to downtown Fairmont will become a fixture of the town's social calendar.

The Fairmont Board of Commissioners during a regular meeting on Tuesday voted unanimously at the request of Commissioner Monte McCallum to add the event to its regular event schedule, which had been limited to a Fourth of July celebration, the Farmers Festival and a Christmas parade.

Additionally, the commissioners agreed that any other proposed town event must be brought before the board for approval at least 30 days before it is set to be held. Before the vote, Commissioner Carol Leak-McKenzie put forth a motion that the calendar remain limited to the three major events and that special events must be proposed two months ahead of time. That motion failed to get enough support.

The vote followed a debate that has spanned three board meetings, including a special meeting called in part to discuss events.

McCallum, who organized the May Day Festival, last month proposed forming a special events fund and holding more events that would financially benefit the town.

"You've got to have something that generates revenue. You've got to have something for someone else to do other than what's normally being done ... That's the norm. That's what you had before. It's time to begin something new," McCallum said, questioning why the topic was being discussed again.

Some board members expressed concern about the liabilities and costs associated with holding more events, especially since a tight budget has already been passed.

"What we are saying is we have a calendar of the events that we are sponsoring right now. The Public Works guys, they've already got vacation put in for the rest of the year. The Police Department has vacation put in for the rest of the year," said Commissioner J.J. McRee.

McCallum and Mayor Charles Townsend clashed as Townsend tried to bring the matter to a vote, and McCallum insisted he was within his rights to continue a discussion.

"I'm not loud-talking anyone. I'm talking among myself to the people. This is me talking. This is silly," McCallum said.

By the end of the meeting, all agreed they were tired of disagreeing.

"We all sit here close together. We don't have to get excited, it's OK. We're going to work together regardless ...," Townsend said.

Commissioner Wade Sealey said board members should schedule time in between regular meetings to air such concerns, saying the board would get more done.

"I apologize for the outburst," McCallum said at the end of the meeting. "I just get passionate when I'm talking about the town of Fairmont."

In other business, the board:

- Passed a resolution allowing the town to apply for a \$28,800 Department of Transportation grant to develop a Comprehensive Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan. If awarded, the grant will go towards studying the community's needs concerning sidewalks and bike trails.

- Removed a property located at 501 Iona St. from the surplus property list. Commissioner Amelia McLean hopes to use the space as a shelter for women and children. It's unclear if the town would own the building, or donate it for that use.

- Heard a request by Commissioner Terry Evans that the town and Town Attorney Rob Price look into implementing a fine for sagging pants. (Robesonian, 10/21/14)

2015

AUG 2015 Clashes With Commissioners on Forming Economic Development Committee

Fairmont commissioners argued about forming an economic development committee, but took no action after accusing Mayor Charles Townsend of going rogue in that effort- a claim the mayor denies.

The discussion lasted 13 minutes, with Townsend and several commissioners raising their voices and cutting each other off.

During the board's June meeting, Commissioner Terry Evans suggested forming a committee to encourage economic development in Fairmont. The matter concluded with Townsend asking each commissioner to come to the board's August meeting with the name of a person to potentially appoint. The matter was not listed on Tuesday's agenda and Evans asked that it be added to new business.

"At this point you have asked me and everybody to bring a name for a person to serve on the board. In the meantime, I've been invited to a meeting Thursday and we may need to do this and we may not even need to do this because of this meeting Thursday," Townsend said.

Commissioner Monte McCallum questioned Townsend about the committee.

"So the committee was chosen out of the blue?" McCallum said. "... Don't you think it's common sense for a mayor to advise his commissioners about what's going on if he's putting in place a committee?"

Townsend insisted he had not formed a committee. According to Greg Cummings, economic development director for the county, the committee meeting Thursday was initiated by a Fairmont businessperson who approached his office. It is separate from the North Carolina Small Town Main Street program, on which Townsend serves as coordinator and Commissioner Carol Leak-McKenzie serves as chairperson.

The discussion grew heated as McCallum continued to question Townsend, and Townsend tried to move the meeting along, even after Evans offered a motion to dismantle the committee the board had discussed forming in June. Evans also said he was not told about the committee meeting Thursday.

Although no vote was taken, the discussion concluded after Commissioner Wade Sealey motioned to table talk about the board-appointed committee.

"Let's use common sense and let this thing slide til next month. It's not going to hurt 30 more days," he said.

After the meeting, Townsend referred a reporter's questions about the committee meeting on Thursday to acting Town Manager Linda Vause, who said the meeting would also include Cummings and members of the Fairmont Chamber of Commerce.

Talk about the conflicting committees was not point of contention addressed Tuesday.

Vause used the manager's input portion of the meeting to deny "rumors" that she earns a salary of \$125,048 and that Town Clerk Jenny Larson earns more than \$58,000.

Vause earns \$55,000 and Clark \$39,411.

Although Vause did not say where the rumors had originated, Evans had requested a special meeting to discuss finances, and after Tuesday's meeting said that would no longer be necessary since Vause had answered concerns about her salary.

The \$125,000 figure, listed in the town's financial reports as expenditures for the Finance Department, represents Vause's salary as acting town manager and finance officer, salary for another employee, insurance for both, telephone, legal advertising and other departmental costs, Vause said. (Robesonian, 8/19/15)

2016

JAN 2016 New Town Manager

Katrina Tatum, who previously served as Fairmont's interim town manager, has been tapped to take over that position full-time.

Fairmont Mayor Charles Townsend announced Tatum had accepted the job on Friday, the day after the Fairmont Board of Commissioners voted 4-2 to hire a full-time manager. Tatum also worked previously as town manager in Maxton.

Tatum will begin her new position on Feb. 1.

"Katrina can help us move forward," Townsend said. "It's going to take the whole community and the whole board to move forward so hopefully she can come in and pull us together."

The hire comes after months of discussion by the board over whether the town could afford to hire a full-time town manager to take over some of the duties currently held by Linda Vause, the town's finance officer. The town had set aside \$26,650 for a town manager — half the salary for the position — in its current budget, but unforeseen expenses, like a collapsed sewer line in need of repair, have since come up.

Commissioners Charles Kemp and J.J. McCree on Thursday night voted in opposition of an immediate hiring of a manager.

Vause has served as the town's finance officer for about 15 years and, in addition to that position, was made interim town manager in April 2011. The interim distinction was dropped in December 2011 and she became the permanent town manager. In March, Vause asked board members to add "acting" to her title and begin looking for a full-time manager.

Townsend said Vause has done a "great job" as town manager and that he's "looking forward to good working relationship" with Tatum.

Tatum worked as a code enforcement officer for Fairmont from 2000 to 2006, taking on the additional job of interim town manager in 2003 until she was replaced in June 2006. She is credited with helping the town get out of a financial bind after a flood-relief housing project flopped. The town was ordered to pay back \$127,434 to the N.C. Redevelopment Center after the developer for the project defaulted. Tatum negotiated that figure down by half.

Tatum served as Maxton's town manager from June 2007 to July 2009, when she resigned the position. (Robesonian, 1/15/16)

JAN 2016 Split on Board

There is a chasm on the Fairmont Board of Commissioners that could grow wider to the benefit of no one, certainly not the town's residents, if its members don't try to settle disagreements amicably while acting as adults.

In one corner are Charles Kemp, a longtime commissioner and former mayor, who was returned to the board by a mandate-suggesting margin in November, and fellow veteran Commissioner J.J. McCree. In the other corner are veteran Commissioners Terry Evans, Amelia McLean and Monte McCallum, as well as newcomer Cassandra Gaddy.

The mayor, Charles Townsend, only votes to break ties, so he seems to be in the middle, which is where a mayor should be.

The board last week split on a decision on whether to hire a new town manager immediately or wait until the beginning of the new fiscal year, which arrives July 1.

Kemp and McCree argued that the town needed to wait until the town's bank account is more robust. But Evans, McLean, McCallum and Gaddy, eager to move because of the availability of Katrina Tatum, voted to go ahead and fill the position, which had been vacant for years.

Both reasonable positions.

The silliness began on Tuesday night, when the board split again with Evans, McLean and Gaddy voting to put Rod Heasley, the chairman of the newly formed Fairmont Economic Development Committee, on a short leash, requiring that he and other members of the committee clear with the commissioners any communication with the media. They appear upset with Heasley, who has experience in economic development and is volunteering his time and expertise, for appearing on a radio show with Kemp and also speaking with this newspaper for an article on the committee, doing so without first consulting with the commissioners.

If Heasley had said take this no-paying job and shove it, who would have blamed him? Instead, he opted for the high road and said no big deal.

Make no mistake, this has little to do with Tatum or Heasley and everything to do with board personalities.

Kemp, who has spent 28 years as a commissioner and eight as a mayor, is a tireless advocate for the town who is never hesitant to take his message directly to the public or the media - a letter to the editor he wrote on the situation will be published in this newspaper on Friday. By doing so, he risks the appearance of grandstanding and alienating fellow board members, which undermines his job as a commissioner of putting ideas into action.

The other commissioners would be wise to recognize Kemp's knowledge of municipal matters as well as his zeal, and look at him as an asset, not as white noise. Kemp, likewise, needs to be respectful when his opinions are not universally shared and lobby quietly, not always with a bullhorn.

We were pleased to see that the board voted in favor of Kemp's recommendation for a retreat on Feb. 23. It could be a good time for the commissioners not only to talk about what's best for Fairmont, but what is best for the board - which really are the same thing. (Robesonian, 1/20/16)

NOV 2016 Response to Matthew

Fairmont officials on Tuesday reflected on how their town responded in the wake of Hurricane Matthew.

"I'm really proud of the Fairmont community for how they stepped up," said Town Manager Katrina Tatum. "Everybody worked together."

The commissioners in October set aside their regular monthly business to talk strictly about the Oct. 8 hurricane. Tuesday was their first full regular meeting since the storm and commissioners took the opportunity to point out the hard work of town staff and residents alike.

In a recent call with FEMA, the town estimated it had suffered \$843,000 in damage and losses from the storm, with the figure likely to rise.

Commissioner Cassandra Gaddy commended staff for quickly collecting storm debris while Felecia McLean-Kesler touted employees for keeping water running. Commissioner Charles Kemp recalled how employees, under the direction of Public Works Director Ronnie Seals, drove through flooding to Boardman to refuel a generator at the sewer plant. He also gave a shout-out to Officer Chris McManus for carrying a disabled man "200 yards" in floodwater to safety. Commissioner J.J. McCree thanked new Police Chief Jon Edwards for coming to work before he was set to start the job.

Tatum returned the thanks to the board for helping with everything from hauling debris to answering phones.

"You may not have seen them but they all stepped up and did something during the storm," she said.

Tatum said more town residents would likely have been prepared for Hurricane Matthew's onslaught had they signed up for CodeRED emergency alerts from the county. She said staff would look at holding a registration day on a Saturday.

"When we begin to think like that every day - that we'll give whatever it takes to make people's lives better - Fairmont is going to be a better place," Mayor Charles Townsend said. "... Let's not wait until tragedy comes, let's not wait until people are in danger. Let's continue to try to make people in Fairmont better than they are anyplace else in the world."

In other business, the board:

- Heard an update on efforts to demolish dilapidated structures. Two houses on Liberia Street have been torn down since the September meeting.

- Authorized Tatum to advertise for proposals from disaster consultants to work with FEMA on behalf of the town.
- Took no action on a discussion about working with the county to expand free recreation programs in Fairmont. Kemp said he would like to bring back the town's 10-week summer program.
- Voted to close Main Street from N.C. 130 Bypass to Railroad Street from 4:30 to 8:30 p.m. on Dec. 2 to accommodate the Holiday on Main Twilight Christmas Parade. Festivities begin at 6 with the parade starting at 6:30 p.m. (Robesonian, 11/15/16)

FEB 2017 Seeking Annexation of I-95 Site

- State Rep. Garland Pierce has filed a voluntary satellite annexation bill for Fairmont that the town manager says is important to the growth of that community.

Town Manager Katrina Tatum said that Fairmont wants to annex almost 350 acres at the intersection of Interstate 95 and Chicken Road.

"It is vital to our economic development efforts," Tatum said.

Pierce filed the local bill on Jan. 25 and the next day it was referred to the Committee on State and Local Government for review and further action.

Pierce said earlier this week that voluntary annexation bills like the one proposed for Fairmont usually are approved by legislators and he does not expect the bill to face opposition.

If approved, the annexation would become effective June 30 of this year.

The two lots, located approximately four miles out of the town's jurisdiction, encompass about 348 acres. A 141.88-acre tract is owned by Luther Barnes and others, while a 207.62-acre tract is owned by Sara L. Fox.

Mayor Charles Townsend told Pierce in a letter that Fairmont's Board of Commissioners had voted unanimously on March 29, 2016, to support the annexation. A public hearing on the proposal was held on June 27, 2016, during which there was no opposition, Townsend said.

Tatum told The Robesonian earlier this week that proposals were already under consideration by property owners and others about how the property could be used. According to Tatum, plans for use of the property include: location for a truck stop; site of a hotel; and an office building.

Tatum said that she had hoped the bill would have been voted on in both the state House and Senate during last year's short legislative session, but the deadline was missed. She said former Sen. Jane Smith said she had encountered opposition.

"She said she didn't file the bill because she had met with some opposition from someone in government," Tatum said. "But when I asked who was opposing the annexation so I could speak with them she refused to tell me. To this day, I don't know who opposed it."

Tatum said that she recently contacted all of the House members and newly elected Republican Sen. Danny Britt and supplied them with all of the information concerning the annexation process.

After reviewing the proposal, Pierce, the senior member of five-member legislative delegation, introduced the bill in the House. If approved, it would then go to the Senate.

Pierce said earlier this week that he does not know when the bill will be heard by the Committee on State and Local Government.

Pierce is a Democrat from Wagram. (Robesonian, 2/3/17)

JUL 2017 Critical of How County Dem Convention Organized

The North Carolina Democratic Party has ordered Robeson County Democrats to re-do precinct meetings and hold a new county convention after finding that local Democrats did not follow party procedure when they elected their chairman and executive committee members.

The state party's 13-member Review Committee rendered its ruling Saturday after holding a hearing in response to a petition filed by several county Democrats charging that the process used to elect local party officers at the April 8 county convention violated the state party's Plan of Organization. The Review Committee consists of one representative from each of the state's 13 congressional districts.

After several hours of testimony, the 11 members of the Review Committee present at the hearing in Raleigh voted 10 to one that state party rules were violated when local Democrats other than those elected convention delegates at precinct meetings were permitted to vote for their party leadership.

"Basically the Robeson County Democratic Party is now defunct," Sheila Beck, a Democrat from Saddletree and chairman of the Lumbee Tribe's Elections Board, said. "Everything that the party has done since the convention, including the election of Pearlean Revels as chairman, means nothing."

No date for the precinct meetings or countywide convention has been set, but John McNeill, a former Robeson County Democratic chairman and mayor of Red Springs, said he believes the convention will be held late this month or in August.

The decision to allow all of the approximately 50 Democrats at the convention to vote for their party leaders, rather than just delegates from the 10 of about 40 precincts that were organized when the convention was held in April, ended with Ed Henderson, a Red Springs town commissioner who is black, not being re-elected to another two-year term as chairman. According to McNeill, Robeson County's Democratic Party for the past 46 years has operated under a "gentleman's agreement" that the party chairmanship would rotate by race to guarantee equal representation among the county's white, black and American Indian communities.

The agreement, McNeill said, is that a member from each race can serve a two-year term as chairman and another two-year term as chairman if they choose to seek re-election. At the April convention, however, Henderson, who just finished his first two-year term and wanted another term, was defeated by Pearlean Revels, an American Indian.

"This was Ed's year to serve," McNeill said. "By not following this longstanding agreement, the Robeson County Democratic Party kicked the African American population that's so much needed here to win election in the rear end."

McNeill acknowledged, however, that the gentleman's agreement that has governed selection of Robeson County's Democratic leader over the years is not part of the state party's regulations and requirements.

McNeill said that Henderson did a good job as chairman considering the “time and situation” during which he served. Democrats took a beating locally during the General Election, with two Republicans elected to the General Assembly and Robeson County favoring the GOP from top of the ticket and Donald Trump on downward.

McNeill has blamed a depressed Democratic turnout locally, especially among blacks, for the results.

”It wasn’t easy to organize and win an election with the challenges of Hurricane Matthew,” he said.

The petition challenging the convention results was filed by several black elected officials from Red Springs, Maxton and Fairmont.

”The last convention, that allowed more than just delegates to vote, was not proper,” said Charles Townsend, the mayor of Fairmont. “Let’s do things the right way, no matter where they lead.”

Those defending the local party’s decision to allow anyone to vote at the convention include Johnson Britt, Robeson County’s district attorney. Britt made the motion to suspend party rules and allow all Democrats present at the convention, not just delegates, to participate in the election of the party leadership.

”If we want more people to come out to the convention and participate in the party we have to allow them to take part,” said Britt. “Historically Democrats have been the party of inclusion.”

Britt, who is white, also said he opposes the continued use of the gentleman’s agreement governing the rotation of party chairman by race.

”What difference does the chairman’s race make? In this day and age race shouldn’t matter in who holds public office,” Britt said.

McNeill said that he believes when the next convention is held and the state party regulations about who can participate in elections and vote on policy is followed, the results will be “drastically different.”

”There was a huge mistake made at the convention,” McNeill said. “It was clear violation of the state Democratic Party’s Plan of Organization That plan is a 42-page document that tries to handle any situation that can come up. It tries to address issues to avoid conflict.”

The Robesonian was unable to reach Revels for comment. (Robesonian, 7/4/17)

JUL 2017 Kemp Seeks Rematch

In Fairmont, Charles Kemp filed as a candidate for mayor, a position he previously held for two terms.

Kemp, 71, served as a town commissioner from 1977-2005, then as mayor from 2005-2013 and was elected as commissioner again in 2015.

Kemp retired from teaching after 40 years. He is a graduate of Fairmont High School, and North Carolina Wesleyan College, where he earned a degree in History and Political Science. He is married to Pam Kemp.

Past and current affiliations include co-curator of Border Belt Farmers Museum-Fairmont, 2014 to present; South Robeson Rescue Unit board of directors, 2015 to present; and Robeson Community College Foundation, 2015 to present, and he is a member of Trinity Methodist Church in Fairmont.

"I am a candidate for the office of Fairmont mayor because I feel that strong leadership is needed in that office and that is what I am capable of providing. My many years serving the citizens of Fairmont as both a town commissioner and as mayor previously for eight years, can be most effective in improving our community."

Charles Townsend is currently the mayor of Fairmont. (Robesonian, 7/7/17)

OCT 2017 Overview of Mayoral Race

The municipal election in Fairmont pits an incumbent mayor against a former mayor who is a member of the town's Board of Commissioners.

Charles Kemp has been campaigning relentlessly, but it was Charles Townsend who rode in the mayor's car at the recent Fairmont Farmers Festival. Kemp is white and Townsend is black, but the race is not about race - it's about who can sell their vision for Fairmont's future.

Kemp and Townsend have deep ties to Fairmont and both have served as mayor and members of the Board of Commissioners. Kemp is currently a commissioner and has served on the board for 28 years and mayor for eight. Townsend is completing his first four-year term as mayor and served 12 years on the board.

Townsend is an independent insurance agent and an ordained minister. Kemp is a retired school teacher and member of the board of directors of the Robeson Community College Foundation and the Fairmont Area EMS and Rescue Squad. He is a long-time volunteer with the Border Belt Farmers Museum.

Mayor Townsend is advocating fiscal integrity and sustainable growth.

"Maintaining financial stability is my top priorities," Townsend said. "Fairmont needs growth but manageable growth."

The town has annexed land around exit 10 off Interstate 95 and would like to develop it. Townsend is a supporter but approaches the subject with caution.

"There is a lot opportunity going down that road and potential to make money for the town," he said. "We're looking at it seriously, and it will require a lot of research and effort to make sure it is manageable growth."

"It has to be profitable for Fairmont," Townsend said.

Townsend said he would bring the community together around a brand, a community definition, “that everyone can buy into.” He believes in building a small, safe community that cares about developing its youth.

”We need community-based programs that expose young people to the job market,” Townsend said. “Our young people must compete on the world market in areas like robotics, biotechnology and the STEM fields.”

Kemp, the challenger, offers four areas that he is focused on.

”First, jobs and the economy,” he said. “In the last 17 months, I’ve organized 12 job fairs in Fairmont, and I’d like to continue that.”

While Kemp would agree the downtown has improved, he says it’s “an embarrassment” still.

”We have 62 available buildings and only 32 are rented,” Kemp said. “We need to improve Fairmont’s appearance, so that visitors see the best in us.”

Kemp points to trash, overgrown lots and dilapidated housing as areas of concern for the next mayor.

Finally, Kemp pledged he would run a transparent town government because “residents deserve to know everything, and we need to put it all on the table.

”There will be no secrets, no agendas,” Kemp said. “I’m not a politician, I’m a public servant whose job is to serve the public.”

The race to fill three seats on the Board of Commissioners is being contested by five candidates, three of them are incumbents.

The incumbents are Terry Evans, who is employed by Smithfield Foods, Felicia McLean-Kesler, who works for the state prison system and Monte McCallum, an entrepreneur.

The challengers are Stein Ellefson, a hardware store owner, and Sam Hunt, a former Fairmont police chief who is currently employed at the North Carolina Welcome Center. (Robesonian, 10/31/17)

DEC 2017 Sworn In To Second Term

After swearing in three commissioners and a mayor, the Fairmont Board of Commissioners voted unanimously Tuesday to take the first step toward establishing a youth center.

The board members voted to accept the gift of the former post office at 105 S. Main St. from Don Ray, a Georgia resident. The commissioners instructed Town Manager Katrina Tatum to get estimates for renovating the building for its new use.

Ray stipulated the building be used for a youth center in perpetuity. He also stipulated that Commissioner Charles Kemp be appointed director of the facility. That posed a problem.

The Institute of Governments advised the town that an elected commissioner cannot hold another position with the town, thus being his or her own employer.

"It is the potential for conflict between the two positions that is important, rather than whether or how frequently a conflict actually arises in practice," the institute advised, citing "Ethics, Conflicts, and Offices; A Guide for Local Officials."

"Under common law, a person generally cannot hold two positions when one of them is subservient to the other," the institute noted.

Kemp withdrew his name from consideration as youth center director.

"In order to facilitate this matter, I am withdrawing my name from consideration," Kemp said. "We need this building. We'll never get this chance again.

"Our youth need this program," he said. "This is the right place and the right time. I am excited."

Kemp endorsed Mayor Charles Townsend's proposal of appointing an advisory board to oversee the youth center.

After the meeting, Kemp said the building's owner would accept the counter offer. Kemp had brokered the gift arrangement with Ray.

"The advisory board idea is wonderful," Kemp said. "We are getting a sound building that will take \$20,000 to \$30,000 to renovate."

Kemp met Ray by chance on the streets of Fairmont and proposed the gift idea.

"He and I struck up a conversation and hit it off," Kemp said. "At the time, he was trying to decide what to do with the building."

Townsend wants the youth center to have a science, technology, engineering and math program.

"Our schools are not getting the scores that we need from our children," Townsend said. "I would like to introduce a STEM program to you in January."

In other business, Town Manager Tatum advised residents with hurricane damage claims to apply at the county office for funding from a Community Development Block Grant program.

District Court Judge Judith Daniels administered the oath of office to Mayor Townsend, and Commissioners Terry Evans, Monte McCallum and Felicia McLean-Kessler before the business portion of the meeting began. All were re-elected Nov. 7 to four-year terms.

Townsend spoke to the people gathered in the South Robeson-Fairmont Heritage Center on Main Street after the induction ceremony.

"This is our town," he said. "We need to come together to make progress because only we can do it by working together.

"I will be mayor for all the people of Fairmont." (Robesonian, 12/19/17)

2018

FEB 2018 Youth Center Advisory Board Debate

- The Fairmont Town Board of Commissioners took two steps forward and one back Tuesday in establishing a youth center.

The commissioners seemed to do an about-face on the establishment of a citizen advisory board, eventually tabling the issue until the their March meeting.

During debate Tuesday, a majority of the commissioners argued that an advisory board is not needed. The commissioners asked in January for guidelines for a board.

"It may be better for whoever runs the youth center to have their own board," Commissioner Monte McCallum said.

"An advisory board may limit what can be done for youth," Mayor Charles Townsend said.

Issues with maintaining membership on citizen boards and legal liabilities for the town were discussed Tuesday.

Commissioner Charles Kemp, who has been a strong advocate for the youth center, said he "did not see the harm in having seven citizens, chosen by this board, to weigh in. I can't see how it would be unproductive, and I believe community input is appropriate."

Town Attorney Rob Price said an advisory board would have no effect on legal liabilities.

"In terms of creating liability, I don't see it," Price said.

Commissioner Terry Evans proposed that the town manager should have oversight of the youth center.

The commissioners decided they will discuss youth center operations with third parties.

Town Manager Katrina Tatum said several groups have expressed interest, including SWELL, or STEM Wellness Empowering Lifelong Learning, a Rockingham company.

Representatives of the company made a presentation to the commissioners on Tuesday. They said the company takes a holistic approach with youth that involves assessing life factors, including mental health and substance abuse.

"We're not just about giving snacks after school. It's a structured learning environment that is also fun," said Denise Cozart, SWELL's mental health coordinator. "Our programs are not a one-size-fits-all, but we already know there are problems here with education and legal issues for youth."

SWELL focuses on STEM learning and aims to educate youth for 21st century jobs. STEM stands for science, technology, engineering and math.

"It's not just about youth. It's about communities," said James Hamilton, SWELL's finance director.

Mayor Townsend expressed optimism about what a youth center can do.

"We could be a place where good things happen for our youth and our community, and everyone will have to be engaged," he said.

The commissioners appointed three members to fill vacancies on its Economic Development Committee. The new members are Sam Johnson, an optometrist; Mark Madden, a banker; and Terry Hunt.

The newest members were recommended by Tatum, who was tasked to find one more member to fill out the board.

The commissioners approved selling the town's 1990 Volvo fire truck, which has proved unreliable and difficult to drive. And they authorized Tatum to contract with a financial institution to finance equipment, asking that she get the best interest rate and terms possible.

The commissioners approved a new policy to seek larger deposits from habitually slow-paying customers of utilities. Current utility deposits are \$75 for homeowners and \$150 for renters. The town will now require customers to pay an additional deposit equivalent to the amount their bills are overdue.

The town also will get tougher with nonpaying sewer customers. The board approved a policy to place liens on owner-occupied properties that are delinquent. (Robesonian, 2/20/18)

MAR 2018 Appointed to Cemetery Commission

Gov. Cooper appointed the following individuals to the Cemetery Commission :

Ebbie Hendren of Concord as an owner or manager of a cemetery. Hendren is the Vice President and CEO of Carolina Cemetery Park Corporation. She is also a board member of the Cemetery Funds of North Carolina, Inc. and Vice President of the North Carolina Cemetery Association.

Mayor Charles Townsend of Fairmont as a public member. Townsend is the Owner and Founder of ALFA Insurance Agency and an Associate Minister at First Baptist Church in Fairmont. He has served as the Mayor of the Town of Fairmont since 2013. (Press Release, 3/9/18)

JUN 2018 April Fire Destroys Three Businesses

-- Store manager Stein Ellefson was working at his parents' Hardware True Value when he noticed the smoke blowing through the parking lot on a Friday afternoon in April.

After walking outside, he spotted fire on one post on the opposite end of the strip mall on North Walnut Street. Once police arrived, he was told that he needed to leave immediately as a precaution.

Ellefson said he first checked inside the store, making sure no one was in the aisles or in the restroom, and scooped up Cleo, the cat that had been hanging around the business for roughly three years. He plopped

the cat in the cab of his Dodge pickup before he began moving the outside lawn equipment from the fire lane.

Along with a few hundred people, he watched the blaze spread through the three businesses that operated from the shopping center on the edge of town: the hardware store, a Dollar Tree and The Meat Store.

Once that April 20 fire reached the asphalt roof of the Dollar Tree, authorities said, it became hard to extinguish. The wind was blowing from the south, pushing the flames up to the other stores. Employees made it out of the building safely, and no injuries were reported.

But the destruction left approximately 43 people without jobs.

In the process, the small Robeson County town of Fairmont -- which has long struggled economically since the closure of its tobacco markets and the decline of the textile industry -- lost three vital businesses.

"It was completely destroyed," said Ellefson, who had worked at the hardware store for 35 of his 52 years. "There's nothing in there. The steel beams were twisted because they were so hot."

The origin of the fire was ruled electrical, said Fairmont Fire Chief Vernell Freeman.

Ellefson estimates he's approached 10 times a day by townspeople asking when the hardware store will reopen. "I feel bad," he said. "I can't tell them anything I don't know."

He said his parents are not going to rebuild: "It's still up in the air. If I can, I will. There are no buildings here in town to put anything in."

The owner of The Meat Store could not be reached for comment.

The Dollar Tree has not made a decision, said a spokeswoman for the company.

Fairmont Mayor Charles Townsend said he was uncertain if the town would be getting those businesses back.

"They haven't even counted up all the losses," Townsend said. "I would love to see them reopen. There's the tax revenue that comes from them there, and the community would be able to spend more of their money in Fairmont. That makes a difference."

Ellefson said the town can't afford the setback in business.

"Fairmont is struggling to survive," he said earlier this month, standing before the now fenced-in, gutted ruins of the brick-and-cinder-block strip mall building. "Tobacco and textile drove this town."

---Fairmont, with a population of more than 2,700, lies in the southern part of Robeson County. Its residents are a mix of African-American, American Indian and whites. Based on statistics from Data USA, the poverty rate in Fairmont stands at 42.3 percent. The median household income is \$20,265, and the median property value is \$68,100.

At one time, Charles Kemp said, 60 businesses operated from downtown, where many of the storefronts now sit empty.

Kemp, 72, is a former Fairmont mayor who sits on its Board of Commissioners. A born promoter, he has never been above the use of hyperbole, or resorting to some old-fashioned hucksterism when it comes to selling people on the merits of the town.

He's quick to say he loves the town "with all my heart."

In the mid-1950s, Fairmont was regarded as one of the major tobacco markets in the world. Tobacco provided a lot of jobs, and the smell of cured tobacco permeated the hot, humid air around town for decades. But those days when tobacco was king have long since passed, as health concerns, anti-smoking efforts and other factors led to a decline in demand.

"I can't lay my finger on why Fairmont has not progressed in the last five to 10 years," Kemp said.

"Losing three businesses in a town like Fairmont," he said, "is much worse than if it happened in towns like Fayetteville or Lumberton. People loved that Dollar Tree store."

On May 4, the McDonald's on North Walnut Street held a fundraiser, setting aside a percentage of its profits that day for the employees who had lost their jobs in the fire. Just over \$6,000 was raised, Kemp said, and each of the workers received a disbursement of \$260.33.

Those stores weren't the only key businesses, as McDonald's, Dollar General, Food Lion and Fresh Foods IGA are among those that maintain a strong presence in the town.

Kemp has long pushed for an uptick in its economic development: For new business to locate "In the Dear Old Town of Fairmont," as he calls it in his monthly newsletter of municipal business and goings-on. Fairmont does not have its own newspaper.

The June edition of the Fairmont Newsletter includes tidbits on the Hector McLean Public Library hours, upcoming radio shows, recreation news and the fast-approaching Fourth of July Celebration with what Kemp describes as its "usual bang up fireworks show."

He said the fire and ensuing loss of the three stores has dramatically changed life in Fairmont. The merchandise and meats available in those three businesses were affordably priced for the lower-income residents who helped make up their loyal customer base.

"The Dollar Tree had some of the cheapest things," said Stafford Singleton, 62, who has lived in Fairmont the last decade after growing up in Lumberton. "That True Value was one of the cheapest hardwares around here, and The Meat Store had bundles of meats at lower prices. People really say they miss True Value. "

Singleton said he shopped at the stores.

So did Brianna Hunt, a 24-year-old Fairmont native who works at Fairmont Eye Clinic. During her lunch break, she sat on a bench and smoked a cigarette outside Angie's Touch of Class. Her mother and one of Hunt's aunts work at the downtown shop.

"True Value has been here since I was born," she said, "and it was a family-owned business. Really, the only hardware we had. It was a go-to store when you had a leak or your plumbing was messed up. Everybody was excited about getting the Dollar Tree. We only had that about two years. We're hoping it will reopen, but I've heard that it won't."

The national retailer opened in Fairmont in 2016, bringing 30 new jobs to town.

As Mayor Townsend described it, the stores had become "a habit to their community." Even for him.

Lewis-Brady Builders Supply on North Walnut Street carries some hardware items, Townsend said, but the locals often have to drive 11 miles to Lumberton for many of their hardware needs.

"I have a lot of emotions. I want to say, frustration. Disappointment," said Ellefson, the manager of the True Value hardware. Overwhelmed with emotion, he stepped back and turned away.

After regaining his composure, he said, "I can't sleep at night, and it has been two months. Basically, I felt like I let down all the people that I've worked for, for 35 years. You know everybody in this small town." (Fayetteville Observer, 6/14/18)

2019

JUN 2019 Tiebreaker Vote Against Afterschool Program

A town commissioner walked out of a meeting Tuesday after the board voted against allowing an after-school program at a youth center.

Terry Evans said the board was “spinning its wheels” on the youth center, recalling the center’s past and the lack of programming since the 1990s. If something is not done, the cycles of abuse and other systemic issues will continue to plague children in the community, he said.

Mayor Charles Townsend acted as a tiebreaker in the Board of Commissioners’ vote to reject a proposal by the Stephens Outreach Center Inc. to introduce a “safe space” after-school program at the center.

”We have not been spinning our wheels (on the youth building). Staff have been working very hard ... so that we could put the new building up,” Town Manager Katrina Tatum said.

The commissioners also approved a \$3.3 million budget for fiscal year 2019-2020 that keeps the property tax rate at 73 cents for every \$100 of property, and also leaves fees for water, sewer and garbage pickup the same.

The budget includes a one-time bonus of \$350 for full-time employees and a \$175 bonus for part-time employees. There is no cost of living increase in the budget, but Tatum said one might be considered during the next fiscal year after the town receives reimbursements from FEMA.

In other business, the board Melvin Ellison resigned from the ABC Board to take the position as manager of the ABC store. The board named Dewayne McCormick to finish the remainder of Ellison’s term on the board.

The board also decided to continue using Waste Management of Carolinas Inc. as its solid waste contractor.

Members of the board voted to discontinue the use of “The Shortest Route to the Beach” billboard along Interstate 95. The billboard was erected to direct beach traffic through the town as a means to bring in extra revenue from travelers. It cost more than \$500 a month.

However, Tatum said a study by the North Carolina Department of Transportation determined that just 400 cars were estimated to have passed through town as a direct result of the billboard’s message during the five years it has been used.

Commissioner Charles Kemp voted to keep billboard, and suggested securing money from local businesses to cover the expenses. (Robesonian, 6/18/19)

JUN 2019 Amended Budget Approved

The commissioners met Thursday to approve an amended budget for fiscal year 2018-2019 to reflect setbacks from Hurricane Florence.

Commissioners Terry Evans, Monte McCallum and J.J. McCree and Mayor Charles Townsend formed a quorum for the meeting in Town Hall during which the amended budget was approved. Commissioners Casandra Gaddy, Charles Kemp and Felecia McLean-Kesler were not present.

The adjusted budget shows that the town has yet to receive a Federal Emergency Management Agency reimbursement of \$91,428 for work to repair damages caused by Hurricane Florence and a N.C. Emergency Management reimbursement of \$30,476.

The 2018-19 budget also was adjusted based on an estimated property tax valuation of \$119,610,410 and a collection rate of 90%.

Town Manager Katrina Tatum said the general fund looks great, however the town water fund did not fare as well after Hurricane Florence.

"Our water fund does not look as good because there is money owed by FEMA," Tatum said.

Town Clerk Jenny Larson said the town filled out paperwork for reimbursement from FEMA.

The board also approved a write-off of \$9,169.28 in uncollected water accounts for the year. A write-off of 2008 property taxes in the amount of \$12,379.94 also was approved.

The fiscal year ends Sunday, which made the action necessary. (Robesonian, 6/27/19)

2020

MAR 2020 Terminating Contract of Town Manager

After a Board of Commissioners meeting during which there was a heated debate over the town manager's contract and a vote to end her contract, Katrina Tatum chose to stay in the job.

At the end of the meeting, Mayor Pro Tem J.J. McCree read aloud minutes from a May 17, 2016, commissioners meeting. According to the minutes, Tatum would be employed by the town under a three-year contract with an annual salary of \$62,700. The contract was to be revisited annually.

"We have not revisited that contract and renewed it," McCree said.

Commissioner Monte McCallum said it was revisited by the board in July.

Town Attorney Rob Price said the contract did not set a term limit.

"There is nothing in the contract that says three years," Price said.

Mayor Charles Townsend acted as the tie-breaker in a 3-3 vote on terminating the contract. Townsend voted with McCree, Charles Kemp and Heather Seibles to terminate the contract. McCallum, Terry Evans and Felecia McLean-Kesler voted against termination.

The commissioners followed Price's suggestion to reverse the decision after Kemp and Seibles said they never intended to fire Tatum, only to get rid of the contract.

"My vote was to terminate the contract. That was the only thing I voted for," Kemp said.

There has been no contract for any other town manager in his 44 years of service on the board, and he remains in opposition of one, Kemp said.

Kemp and Seibles said Price should have explained the implications of their vote before it was made.

By terminating the contract, the commissioners gave Tatum the option to resign or leave with the understanding she was fired, Price said.

"That's the whole purpose of an employment contract," Price said. "... You don't terminate the contract, you terminate her."

Town Clerk Jenny Larson said the vote arose from a misunderstanding.

"In May 2016, they voted for three years, but the contract was never written," she said.

The contract wasn't adopted until December 2018, Larson said.

McCallum called the vote as a "disgrace and a travesty."

"You can't even give a good reason why!" McCallum shouted. "No reason because this (Tatum) has been the best thing to come to Fairmont in years."

Tatum said the contract allowed her protections she didn't have before when the same thing happened in 2006. After six years of service as the town manager, commissioners then voted her out.

"I would have been a fool to come back here without protection, and it was done at your hands," she told commissioners.

Tatum said she is not sure when she will return to work, but suggested it might be Monday.

"I have to stay because I have committed to doing some things," she said. "I am an honorable person."

Among those things are bringing a new business into Fairmont and putting new ordinances in place to help the town "flourish," she said.

The 66-year-old said she is not sure when she will retire, but the Tuesday night's action on her contract made her rethink things.

"This night has really drained me and caused me to question the government I work for," she said.

Tatum returned as the town's manager in 2016, during a time when the town was \$300,000 in debt, McCallum said.

"The state was ready to take us over," McCallum said.

In other business, Townsend declared a state of emergency for the town because of the coronavirus.

Fairmont's Water Department will limit one customer at a time inside of the office effective Wednesday.

The Fairmont Police Department will enforce a curfew beginning Thursday at 8 p.m., with children under the age of 18 to be accompanied by an adult or guardian if out at night.

Utility bills will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis and consideration will be given to residents who are senior citizens or have small children in the home. The town will follow state standards regarding rental restrictions.

Fairmont also will follow the actions of Robeson County as it relates to the virus.

The senior citizen's feeding site in the town's fire department will distribute to-go meals until March 27. The site will remain closed until April 6.

The town's Easter egg hunt scheduled for April 4 has been postponed until further notice.

Also on Tuesday, 18-year-old Niquay Byrd was recognized for rescuing Ernest Page from his burning home on McKoy Street on Feb. 28.

"Tonight, we come to recognize Niquay Byrd as a hero," Townsend said, prompting a standing ovation. (Robesonian, 3/14/20)

APR 2020 New Acting Town Manager

The Board of Commissioners here voted 4-1 Tuesday to name a former Robeson County manager interim town manager to replace Katrina Tatum upon her retirement in May.

During a meeting held via video conference call, Ricky Harris was picked to be the interim town manager. Harris retired as county manager in December 2018, after serving in the role for about 6 1/2 years. Harris was named interim county manager in 2011. The interim status was removed in 2012.

Mayor Pro Tem J.J. McCree, and commissioners Monte McCallum, Heather Seibles and Charles Kemp voted in favor of the decision. Commissioner Terry Evans cast the lone opposition vote. Commissioner Felecia McLean-Kesler did not take part in the meeting.

Evans did not recommend a candidate, while expressing his disapproval of the selection process.

"I think that we all should've been able to see the list of names (of potential candidates)," Evans told Mayor Charles Townsend. "... I'm not going to let you decide who to choose."

Townsend said the Lumber River Council of Governments gave him a list of six possible candidates. He contacted all six, and Harris was the only candidate who expressed interest, Townsend said.

"Ricky Harris was the only one that would take it at this time," the mayor said.

On April 6, Tatum turned in a notice of her intention to retire effective May 7.

She has served the town in many capacities. She was a code enforcement officer from 2000 to 2006. She took on the additional job of interim town manager in 2003 and held the position until she was replaced in June 2006. Tatum returned to Fairmont on Feb. 1, 2016, to serve as town manager.

The mayor did not say when Harris would begin his duties, but said he hoped it would be before Tatum's exit.

Harris said he is thankful for the opportunity to help.

"I think it's an honor that Fairmont would consider me for their interim manager as they search for someone," Harris said. "I just look forward to the opportunity to serve the fine folks of Fairmont."

Harris managed more than 1,100 people as county manager. He said he looks forward to using his experience to serve Fairmont.

"This is just a temporary fix for now," Townsend said of the position.

Tatum shared words of gratitude with the commissioners Tuesday.

”Thank you very much for allowing me to serve,” she said.

Tatum also said she was grateful to Fairmont’s residents and is available by phone if any of them needs help after she retires.

”I just want to thank Miss Tatum for her service,” McCallum said.

Town Attorney Rob Price described Tatum as an “exemplary” town manager who showed “extraordinary” diligence and capability.

”It’s been a privilege to work with you,” Price said. “Thank you, and God bless you.” (Robesonian, 4/21/20)

MAY 2020 NC Public Radio Interview

Summers were spent at his father’s gas station. Charles Townsend met all sorts of folks while manning the ice house. In the muggy lowlands of Robeson County, ice was a sought after commodity — no matter if you were raising tobacco or bidding on it in the warehouses. But as the cash crop went into decline, and Townsend considered his career prospects, he chose to leave the town of 2,000 people to work in retail. Fairmont, NC Mayor Charles Townsend explains the struggles of rural economics to host Frank Stasio.

Fairmont is located in Robeson County, south of where I-95 crosses I-74. Since returning, Townsend has rediscovered the town’s character. Through working a variety of jobs, from substitute teacher to insurance agent, he measured the needs of his community. That experience urged him into public service.

At the beginning of his mayoral tenure, he used his leadership to prioritize skills-training and instilling confidence in the town’s young people, as he would have wanted for himself. But after witnessing main street shutter, he could no longer deny the discouraging realities of rural economics. Holding out hope for sustainable development in the wake of timber, textile and tobacco, he continues balancing the need for strong education with economic initiatives.

But COVID-19 has presented yet another challenge: two of the area’s largest employers, meat processors and the state prison system, are hot spots for infection.

Host Frank Stasio talks with Fairmont Mayor Townsend about his changing understanding of success in the small community. (NC Public Radio, 5/20/20)



Frank Stasio: [00:00:00] This is the state of things. I'm Frank Stasio. We return to our ongoing series of conversations with North Carolina mayors today. We've been checking in with local leaders across the state. Up to now, we've heard from four counties Pasquotank, Cherokee, Cumberland and Durham. Today, we head south on I-95 and take Exit ten to visit what used to be known as the biggest little tobacco market in the world. Tobacco wasn't the first commodity boom for this town of 2600 people. Timber and textiles before that. Nowadays, however important, employers include meat processors and the state prison

system. Joining us from southeastern corner of this state, I'd like to welcome the mayor of Fairmont, North Carolina, Charles Townsend. Mayor Townsend, welcome to the State of Things.

Charles Townsend: [00:00:45] Good morning. How are you?

Frank Stasio: [00:00:47] I'm doing well. Take us back to the heyday of tobacco. You were working in your father's gas station, right?

Charles Townsend: [00:00:53] Yes, I was working there at my father's gas station. And tobacco was a big part of the summer. Yes.

Frank Stasio: [00:01:04] Well, I'm guessing that you got to see a lot of people come through. And it must have been a pretty interesting place because, you know, tobacco in what way? Tobacco growing, tobacco auctioning. You bring it in, you're bringing people in from all over, right?

Charles Townsend: [00:01:17] From all over. Basically, their families and the community worked in the fields to harvest that tobacco.

Frank Stasio: [00:01:25] Yeah. So. So what were the what were the summer? What was it like for you? Because now, of course, with the interstate, when was that around? I don't know. I don't know if that was in your time that it got built or extended.

Charles Townsend: [00:01:38] Yes, it was. Yeah. Yeah. I was around when the Interstate 95 got built down through run right at the corner from out here, exit ten, about eight miles out of town. Yeah.

Frank Stasio: [00:01:54] So what was it like, a lot of people passing through then, and or were you mostly engaged with with people in town?

Charles Townsend: [00:02:02] Well, we did have a couple. We had a lot of people here that generally allowed people to stop and getting gas and get them on the beach. And we would tell them, take 4 to 1 down to South Carolina, hit it again, steam.

Frank Stasio: [00:02:24] That was when the gas station was the GPS of the world. Right? That's when.

Charles Townsend: [00:02:28] Yes. Definitely.

Frank Stasio: [00:02:29] A lot of arguments over whether to stop and get directions. But once you did, that's where you went. You also worked at the Icehouse, right?

Charles Townsend: [00:02:36] Yeah. We run Icehouse and that was we supplied the farmers and the warehouses with ice. It was in the summer months and you got to have cold water. And that was a busy thing for the summer for me to work and have money to buy school clothes.

Frank Stasio: [00:02:57] A lot of migrant workers at that time.

Charles Townsend: [00:03:00] You know, I wasn't aware of all the migrant workers at that time. We didn't have a lot of them because, like I said, families worked tobacco fields. You know, you live on as a sharecropper. Most of the sharecroppers had children, and that's who they look for, the laying on families.

Frank Stasio: [00:03:21] Now, at a certain point, I know you chose to leave town. Talk about your decision and where you went.

Charles Townsend: [00:03:29] Well, I went to Conway, Myrtle Beach area. I was a Pick and Pay shoe store manager. And I went there to be a Pick and Pay shoe store manager.

Frank Stasio: [00:03:43] Was it your idea then that you were leaving Fairmont forever and you're going to keep moving on or what?

Charles Townsend: [00:03:51] Well, yes, I want to live at the beach and I wanted to sell timeshare and live at the beach because that was the life I wanted to live. I knew there would be plenty of people to sell to and that's what I wanted to do.

Frank Stasio: [00:04:04] What happened?

Charles Townsend: [00:04:06] Well, that's kind of what brought me back to Fairmont. I got married and my wife didn't like the beach, so we moved back to Fairmont and I [unintelligible].

Frank Stasio: [00:04:20] Now you shuffled between a few jobs, right? Because you were also a substitute teacher. And yeah.

Charles Townsend: [00:04:26] Talk about that on the car business. I started subbing in the school system and getting involved in community.

Frank Stasio: [00:04:35] What kind of involvement beyond beyond teaching, which is a deep involvement. But what other things were you doing?

Charles Townsend: [00:04:41] Trying to find ways to help young people be better are cheap. But.

Frank Stasio: [00:04:50] We lost a little bit of that. You're trying to help them achieve what?

Charles Townsend: [00:04:55] To function better and be better achievers in the school system. Mm hmm. Yeah. At the church I was going to, the church I go to at the time, I was like, okay, we still I'll talk to the pastor and we start a Saturday academy. But on Saturday mornings, you know, any child parent that felt like their child needed some extra help. I was able to get some students that needed to do some community service from the local university to come down and work with these children. And it built a really they built a bond with these children and a lot of them did a lot better on the their final tasks at school.

Frank Stasio: [00:05:39] And what were you seeing that led you to believe that you needed this kind of extra work or that the kids needed this kind of extra work.

Charles Townsend: [00:05:46] That a little better than half of children in the third grade fell into EOG.

Frank Stasio: [00:05:53] Eog. End of grade.

Charles Townsend: [00:05:55] Yes.

Frank Stasio: [00:05:56] So they were failing that.

Charles Townsend: [00:05:57] Yes.

Frank Stasio: [00:05:58] Wow. So you thought you'd catch them early? How did it work out and what was the response in the community?

Charles Townsend: [00:06:08] Okay. Say that again. I kind of lost you there.

Frank Stasio: [00:06:10] All right. Well, I wonder how that project worked out and what the response was from the community when you decided to open this up.

Charles Townsend: [00:06:17] Well, but did it from our church. So the church was really receptive to it and the different auxiliaries. First. It's not clear from his desire that more.

Frank Stasio: [00:06:37] You know, you're breaking up a little bit. I think what we're going to try to do is make another connection with you and talk to the mayor of Fairmont, North Carolina, right now. Charles Townsend is the mayor of Fairmont and he's been there for a number of years, first elected in 2010. And we'll talk more with him about the farm, the tobacco auctions and the ways in which that used to be a bustling town. Textiles, then tobacco. Things have moved out. Of course, those industries are now lost. We'll talk about Mayor Townsend's efforts to bring to bring back commerce and to bring back economic health. I also want to remind you that we want to hear from you in our next movies on the radio. You can be on the show next time we do movies on the radio. I want to hear about your drive in or outdoor theater memories. Since a lot of us may be spending more time outside watching movies than inside movies on the radio is going to take you to the drive in. And we'd like to find out about your memories, whether it was a cult classic that you saw or perhaps maybe you weren't watching the movie at the drive in. Who knows? All of those stories are welcome on the next movies, on the radio shot at. Dawg Or you could tweet at us at the hashtag Sot movie. And we're back now with Charles Townsend of Fairmont, North Carolina. Talk about the when when town was busy. I mean, I'm trying to imagine these tobacco auctions and kind of what that town looked like. Paint the picture for us.

Charles Townsend: [00:08:00] It was busy. I mean, it was like a Fayetteville Hay Street on Saturday night, if you ever been to from North Carolina on a Saturday night.

Frank Stasio: [00:08:11] Well, anyway, I've heard about it I've heard I've heard I've heard talk.

Charles Townsend: [00:08:15] About yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. And so there was, you know, like clothing stores. We had Leveson's PR floors. Fairmont Department store where people went shopping and they bring their family to town. You know, they had their money, they sold to tobacco and, you know, it was just busy. Fairmount When we had tobacco.

Frank Stasio: [00:08:41] All right. Well, those days are gone. What's it like now?

Charles Townsend: [00:08:47] It's kind of dead. It's dead in Fairmount. It Looks like a ghost town. On Main Street we had the drugstore we had is gone. And we only got a beauty shop, a couple of barbershops and a bank and Fairmont Department store is still here.

Frank Stasio: [00:09:08] And then on top of all that, there was a strip mall that burned down, right?

Charles Townsend: [00:09:12] Yes. We lost three stores to a fire and it. It kind of hurt the economy here because we lost a hardware store and we lost a meat store and a Dollar Tree. Dollar Tree have come back and relocated.

Frank Stasio: [00:09:31] So what's it like? Because I know that you're you're trying to, you know, you're working on revitalization efforts, and you want your location to be maybe the centerpiece of that. Talk about your vision for how things could turn around.

Charles Townsend: [00:09:44] Things could turn around when we can. First of all, the first step is get the community together and find out what exactly it is that they want to buy into. You know, because if the community buy into it, I'm sure the work and downtown is where it needs to start. Because it'll remove the older, the older look, the dilapidated buildings. If we did that and no matter what we start outside of downtown, that old place would still be there.

Frank Stasio: [00:10:27] So what do you you know, somebody's been in the community all your life and, you know, has had has roots in that community. What would that look like if you assess the strengths of your neighbors, what it would be like to take those strengths and rebuild a downtown, how would you imagine it might turn out?

Charles Townsend: [00:10:47] I think Fairmont would be a great place. I only can imagine Fairmont being a great place. And we, you know, we've had some good people that grew up here and there's some good people that are here still living. And that's why I served, because I believe in the people in this town and. So Fairmont could be a place where you could have some entertainment. You could shop. You could be enjoy a safe environment. And you can have somewhere to work and, you know, survive for your family.

Frank Stasio: [00:11:28] You're kind of you're kind of right on the way to the beaches to I suppose you could use that in your favor.

Charles Townsend: [00:11:33] Yes, we are right on the way to the beach. Yeah, I can if you, you know, on the way to the beach. And you just wanted to stop by our small town and enjoy some good old country food or country hospitality. This would be the place.

Frank Stasio: [00:11:50] Because right now, Fairmont is near a state prison, which I'm sure employs some people from the town, and then quite a few meat processing plants which offer jobs. But they're dangerous places to work at this time, especially susceptible to outbreaks of the virus. Also important jobs. Talk about the role of those those employers in your community.

Charles Townsend: [00:12:13] Okay. Those employees are you know, they at a time now where this is what they knew how to survive for their family. And it was it worked really well. And they're taking all the precautions that they can to go to work every day and come back home safe and their family be safe for them being around them. And it's a it's a scary thing to them, but they still know that, you know, we're going to make the best of this, you know, and we're going to come out on the winning end. And, you know, all the same the community can do is this if you're not essential to keeping the public safe and keeping the public the economy moving in a good direction, stay home.

Frank Stasio: [00:13:07] Is that an easy message to send in your community? I'm wondering if there's if there's a real sense of agitation that perhaps we've been closed too long. Are people anxious and are they how are they feeling about the reopen orders? Did they feel it should have happened earlier? What's what's your sense of how the folks in your town feel about about where we are right now with stay at home?

Charles Townsend: [00:13:29] I think I think it's getting a little everybody is a little bit antsy. They're tired of staying in the house. You know that that you know, the cabin fever. You know, everybody has been, you know, getting a little tired of that. But when we see the numbers rising every day, you know, like 31 cases in the town of Fairmount. Hmm. You know? Yeah. Yeah. I mean.

Frank Stasio: [00:13:52] 20 2500 people total. Yeah.

Charles Townsend: [00:13:55] Yeah, we know it's not time, right, to open back up yet.

Frank Stasio: [00:14:00] That's interesting, because you and you're a businessman yourself, you've got an insurance salesman, you run a car wash, you're selling structures. How have your businesses fared during all this?

Charles Townsend: [00:14:10] Well, what I've done is this. I'm a I serve I'm the Robeson County Church and Community Center, the board of directors. And we take the afternoon and we give out food to people. They have a supply of food coming in to them. And we don't wash cars. I've insurance people are going to people that's going to keep insurance, going to make sure they make that connection. They're paying that online. A lot of them. They called me on the phone when I said, we can go online and pay it. And but we spend a lot of our time now. Me and my brother giving out food and some volunteers. We got some dedicated volunteers that come and help us give out food. People don't get out of their car. We have it and we pass it to them in a box and they keep on moving.

Frank Stasio: [00:14:59] So what is it that you miss the most about Fairmont? Or maybe, you know, what has been the most difficult part of this stay at home for you?

Charles Townsend: [00:15:09] The most difficult part about the stay at home for me is understanding that we have a lot of young people that don't have Internet. And don't have the kind of discipline to seek opportunity to continue to learn in the summer. Months have been the months that the kids lose a lot that don't have those kind of. It carries the character that continue to seek and learn during some of us. They lose a lot of what they learn all year.

Frank Stasio: [00:15:40] Well, it sounds like character, character and infrastructure if you don't have Internet, right?

Charles Townsend: [00:15:44] Right. Yep. So we need to continue to educate our people that this this could be the norm for a long time. And but if you want to continue to strive and be better. Let's let's let's kind of find ways. Ask for help, look for people that can help you steer your way into what we're facing and make the best of it.

Frank Stasio: [00:16:12] Well, Charles Townsend, I want to thank you so much for talking with us.

Charles Townsend: [00:16:17] You're welcome. And thanks for giving me an opportunity to share, you know, my insight and feelings about the town of Fairmont. (North Carolina Public Radio, 5/20/20)

JUN 2020 Tiebreaker Vote to Accept Town Attorney Resignation

A heated argument erupted Tuesday between the town's commissioners and mayor over why the town attorney resigned.

Town Attorney Rob Price submitted a letter of resignation via email to the town on Friday. When it was all said and done, Mayor Charles Townsend acted as the tiebreaker in a 3-3 vote to accept Price's resignation.

Commissioner Terry Evans, who said Price had served the town well, asked the attorney to explain his reason for resignation.

"First, I have served as the town attorney since, I believe, 2003, and what led to this was the manager (interim Town Manager Ricky Harris) called me and said that the mayor had asked him to call me and to inform me that the board wanted to hire a new attorney," Price said.

Commissioners Monte McCallum, Felecia McLean-Kesler and Evans said they were not a part of the decision to hire a new attorney. They voted against accepting the resignation.

"The board didn't know anything about this," McCallum said. "Maybe it's just specific ones."

McCallum said the Board of Commissioners should be informed before taking votes at meetings.

"To find the majority in the meeting, don't you think the board should know what's going on?" McCallum asked. "... The board consists of six members, not four, not three."

"The board is the majority. If you take the vote, you'll see who the majority is," said Townsend with a laugh. "That's how you tell."

The commissioners voted 4-2 to accept a one-year contract with Jessica B. Scott, an associate at Pembroke-based private law firm Hunt & Brooks, Attorneys & Counselors at Law and Pembroke's town attorney, to provide legal counsel. Evans and McCallum voted no. The contract is effective July 1 to July 1, 2021, "unless renewed by commissioners."

The board will pay the firm \$600 a month to attend monthly board meetings and provide legal guidance. The town will pay \$125 per hour, billed in 15-minute increments, for more extensive legal work or attendance at specially called board meetings. The town will pay \$65 per hour if an extensive course of legal work requires attention from one or more legal assistants.

Travel or any other expenses incurred during the performance of the attorney's duties will be paid by the town. An attorney from the firm also must attend the National League of Cities Congressional City Conference in Washington, D.C.; National League of Cities City Summit; and the Municipal Attorney's Winter Conference and Fundamentals Workshop at UNC School of Government.

If Scott is not available, the town reserves the right to obtain counsel from other attorneys within the firm.

In other business, the board approved a \$2,055,487 fiscal year 2020-21 budget that includes no increases in taxes or fees. It does include a 2% cost-of-living increase for town town employees effective Jan. 1.

The budget is \$47,650 less than the current fiscal year's spending plan. The decrease reflects conservative revenue estimates prompted by the financial impacts of COVID-19.

The town also is anticipating a 4% decrease in sales tax collections, interim Town Manager Harris said.

The Public Safety Department was given \$904,936 and the Public Works \$614,180. Administration costs accounted for 16%, or \$327,922 of the budget, and recreation/other costs 10%, or \$208,449.

The police department also received a \$34,892 grant from the Governor's Crime Commission to pay for handguns, equipment and training.

Evans said the Public Works department should have received more money because it makes the town more money than the police department.

The town also set aside \$7,500 to remove abandoned homes, the owners of which owed nearly \$8,000 in back taxes in January.

Also on Tuesday, commissioners accepted a bid of \$2,500 to sell the property at 606 N. Main St.

Commissioners also decided to declare a 1990 Ford fire truck as surplus property and to advertise for sealed bids for its purchase.

An increase in ABC Board members' monthly pay from \$80 to \$125 was also was approved. The chairman also will receive a raise from \$105 to \$150 per month. The increases were approved on a 4-2 vote by the commissioners, with Mayor Pro Tem J.J. McCree and Commissioner Charles Kemp voting no.

The commissioners voted unanimously to hold regular monthly meetings in the Fairmont-South Robeson Heritage Center.

Commissioner McCallum requested Tuesday that policies be put in place to protect African Americans from police brutality.

"We need to address this," he said.

In response, Police Chief Jon Edwards reviewed policies concerning excessive force.

The town's police department follows "8 Can't Wait," which provides eight guidelines used by law enforcement agencies across the nation, he said. The guidelines include de-escalation techniques, warnings before shooting and shooting as a last resort, among others.

Edwards also addressed the use of body cams.

"Anytime you have any interaction with the public, your body cam should be on," he said.

The commissioners also heard from Tara Ivey, a resident who lives at 706 Church St. Ivey requested help in cleaning up a section of her street where trees were cut in March. Ivey said the debris left behind and the poor cleanup effort violate town ordinance.

"We shouldn't have to live this way," Ivey said. "Our neighborhood shouldn't have to be like this."

Townsend said the board would look at the property, and Kemp asked the interim town manager to use his resources to find a solution. (Robesonian, 6/16/20)

JUL 2020 Unknown Accusations Against Commissioners

Commissioners here are eagerly awaiting the results of a discussion concerning allegations that some board members are taking positions on issues in such a way as to achieve financial gain.

During Tuesday's Board of Commissioners meeting Commissioner Charles Kemp asked Town Attorney Jessica Scott, of Hunt & Brooks Attorneys at Law, to speak with former Town Attorney Rob Price about accusations made against board members.

Kemp was referring to an email Price sent to members of the Board of Commissioners and to Mayor Charles Townsend on June 18.

"Several of you have expressed concerns to me of irregularities in the town government this year," Price's email reads in part.

Kemp said he spoke with Price and was told the allegations involved commissioners.

Price said Wednesday that some members were accused of "taking positions" or approaches to issues for financial gain. But, the names of the accuser and people believed to be involved were not released.

Board members, including Kemp, said they were unaware of who is responsible for the allegations. Kemp wants answers.

"I consider this allegation to be very serious, and speaking for myself only, I want to know the details of this allegation, who it is being leveled against, and who the accuser is," Kemp said Tuesday.

He intends to find answers and defend his integrity if needed, Kemp said. If any findings bring defamation or slander his name, he is prepared to sue the person responsible.

"I am not going to rest until I find the answers to those three questions," he said.

Commissioner Monte McCallum said he was surprised by Kemp's statement Tuesday.

"I don't know where that came from," McCallum said. "I don't know the members that said anything."

Mayor Pro Tem J.J. McCree, Commissioners Felecia McLean-Kesler and Heather Seibles, Mayor Townsend and Interim Town Manager Ricky Harris did not wish to comment. But, Seibles did say she is interested in finding answers.

Commissioner Terry Evans is eager to see the outcome of the discussion.

"I want the town attorney to pursue that thing," Evans said.

The commissioner believes Price has information that will lead to answers.

"If anybody would know anything about any kickback or something done wrong, it's the town attorney," Evans said.

Price had not been contacted by Scott, as of Wednesday afternoon, he said.

"I was directed to follow up and that's what I'm going to do," Scott said. (Robesonian, 7/22/20)

OCT 2020 Tie-Breaking Vote For New Business; Brother Dies

The commissioners here voted Tuesday to give the interim town manager a pay raise.

The \$350-a-week raise was given to Ricky Harris so he would stay on the job while the Lumber River Council of Governments searches for a new manager. The town hopes to have a manager in place by Jan. 1.

Harris submitted his letter of resignation Sept. 21. The resignation was to be effective Oct. 30 because his earnings would affect his Social Security payments. The town will pay him \$1,350 per week, and \$100 each week for gas expenses. It originally paid him \$1,000 a week.

Mayor Charles Townsend had to cast a tie-breaking vote to allow a new business to occupy 104 S. Main St. The vote granted Dominique Brown a conditional, mixed-use permit for a used car dealership, retail or restaurant at the location, which consists of two buildings. One building is located inside the historic district, the zoning for which does not allow a car dealership.

Commissioners Felecia McLean-Kesler, Monte McCallum and Terry Evans voted in favor of the permit; Mayor Pro Tem J.J. McCree, and Commissioners Charles Kemp and Heather Seibles voted to deny the request. Seibles joined the meeting by telephone while recovering from COVID-19, which she contracted two weeks ago. Interim Town Manager Ricky Harris did not attend the meeting.

After the meeting, Kemp said the town has never had a car dealership in the historic district, and he didn't wish to "break that tradition." The lot beside Rawls Chevrolet-Oldsmobile, which has been the site of vehicle sales, was not located inside the district.

"That was not allowed in the historic district, so I voted against it," McCree said after the meeting.

Brown, a Fairmont resident and CEO of Whitted Service Group LLC, plans to buy the property and place cars near the building on South Main Street, the former site of Badcock Furniture and A.L. McDaniel Hardware.

She plans to have five to eight cars at the business, with three parked beside the brick building. The rest will be located in the rear parking lot near a metal building, which is in the neighborhood district zone.

"It's my first business, and I just want to bring something new to Fairmont," Brown said.

No mechanic work will be performed at the business, she said.

Brown hopes to provide "affordable, dependable cars for the citizens of Fairmont." She also plans to divide the building into about four sections to allow other businesses, like a restaurant, to operate at the location.

Terry Evans said he knows Brown, and has worked with her as a former manager at Smithfield's.

"I know her heart, I know her intent," he said.

And he plans to support any business that brings revenue into town, including hers, Evans said.

Also on Tuesday, commissioners heard of Kemp's plans to hold a Dec. 4 virtual Christmas tree lighting ceremony at the Fairmont Community Park and have musical entertainment at the Fairmont-South Robeson Heritage Center. The events will be livestreamed on the town's Facebook page.

The town's Twilight Christmas Parade has been canceled.

In other business, Town Attorney Jessica Scott told the commissioners that progress is being made on the foreclosure of two properties with delinquent taxes. One property is at 201 Pine St. The other on Mckoy Street had about \$170,000 in Medicaid liens, which have been closed.

"It's just going to take some time to move through this process," Scott said.

Rachelle Johnson asked commissioners what to do concerning the purchase of property at 606 S. Main St. She was hoping for a conditional use permit to place a double-wide mobile home on the property.

The R-10 district will not allow a conditional use for that, said Jenny Larson, town clerk and finance director. But, she will conduct research into what can be done, Larson said.

"I actually don't want to make the purchase if I can't use the property," Johnson said.

Commissioners also heard from town resident Nate Thompson, who commended them on their work to clean up the town.

Robeson County Arts Council President Vanessa Abernathy invited the commissioners and town residents to an event at the community park that is scheduled for 3 p.m. to 4 p.m. Nov. 8. The event will feature River Voices, a project that promotes local vocalists. The University of North Carolina at Pembroke's Jazz Ensemble will perform at the event. Masks must be worn and social distancing followed.

Many commissioners also expressed condolences to Mayor Charles Townsend and his family for the loss of his twin brother, Donald, who died Oct. 13. (Robesonian, 10/22/20)

DEC 2020 Tie-Breaking Vote to Investigate Properties

Commissioners here voted Tuesday to give town employees bonuses in mid-January.

The board voted unanimously during a regular board meeting to give part-time employees a bonus of \$175 and full-time employees \$350.

"We ought to at least give them something," Commissioner Terry Evans said before the vote.

Evans said employees of the Public Works and Fairmont Police departments have continued to work through COVID-19 and should be recognized for their efforts.

"I appreciate the board recognizing the employees of the town, not just the police department..." Police Chief Jon Edwards said.

Interim Town Manager Ricky Harris praised the town's department heads for the work they did during the pandemic.

"They really went above and beyond the call of duty for the citizens of the Town of Fairmont," Harris said.

Also approved Tuesday was the Asset Management Plan for the town's wastewater system.

The plan includes a list of priority projects, recommendations for future rate adjustments and mapping of the town's sewer system, according to the resolution adopted. Grants awarded from the State Reserve Fund made the plan possible.

"A tremendous amount of your sewer gravity collection system is concrete pipe," Jean Klein, Community Economic Services administrator with Lumber River Council of Governments, said during a 5 p.m. special meeting, one hour ahead of the regular meeting.

The concrete, which deteriorates over time and becomes sand, is "one major cause" for inflow and infiltration of the sewer system by water and debris, she said. To replace, rehabilitate and maintain infrastructure the town should consider "small incremental increases every year" to user fees, Klein said. Doing so will affect customers less.

"I strongly encourage you to use that strategy. Do a little bit every year," she said.

During the 6 p.m. meeting, commissioners approved spending at least \$17,015 to install a pump station at 710 Stafford St.

Also on Tuesday, commissioners heard an audit report from John Masters, of S. Preston Douglas and Associates, that revealed the town is doing well financially.

Masters commended former Town Manager Katrina Tatum for her efforts to help improve the town's finances.

The town has a property tax collection rate of 93%, he said. The town's structured debt continues to decrease, and its general fund balance has rebounded since 2014.

"Everyone is to be commended for doing such a fine job," he said.

Town Attorney Jessica Scott gave updates on nuisance abatement properties.

She has spoken with the heir of a home on Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, who said he would reimburse the town for cleaning up the property, Scott said.

Commissioners went into closed session after Mayor Charles Townsend cast a vote to break a 3-3 tie on a motion to petition an inspector to investigate property at 201 Pine St. to determine whether or not it is inhabitable.

The motion by Commissioner Charles Kemp garnered opposition from commissioners Felecia McLean-Kesler, Monte McCallum and Terry Evans. Mayor Pro Tem J.J. McCree and commissioners Heather Seibles and Kemp were in favor of the motion.

"Why are we singling out one piece of property?" Evans asked, referring to many other properties that need to be dealt with.

"I will appeal this decision with Robeson County Superior Court," he said.

After emerging from closed session, commissioners voted to give Public Works Director Ronnie Seals a \$3,000 per year salary increase effective Jan. 1. (Robesonian, 10/22/20)

2021

MAY 2021 **Votes to Block Sale of Youth Center**

— The path toward selling the town’s abandoned youth center was blocked again Tuesday, an action that sparked lively debate that ended with one Board of Commissioners member walking out the board’s meeting.

The debate began after Mayor Charles Townsend cast the tie-breaking vote in opposition of authorizing the advertisement of an offer by Darrell Govan to buy the youth center and operate a boxing center in the building. Also casting votes in opposition during the regular meeting in Town Hall were Mayor Pro Tem J.J. McCree, and commissioners Charles Kemp and Heather Seibles.

Commissioner Monte McCallum said the town has for three years failed to make a decision after hearing many proposals and turning down “two reputable youth programs.” And he couldn’t understand the decision not to sell the building for \$35,000, McCallum said.

After all, the building needs \$50,000 to \$60,000 worth of renovation work done before it is operational, and it is costing the town money as it continues to sit vacant, McCallum said.

There are 15 occupied buildings in the 35-building downtown area, he said.

”And you don’t want to bring anybody in,” McCallum said.

He will tell Govan to continue putting in the offer, so commissioners would have to explain the decision when they turn him down, McCallum said.

Commissioner Terry Evans said the town has a lot of unoccupied buildings and crumbling infrastructure.

”People come to the table with good, clean money and you turn ‘em down,” he said. “And you’re still stuck with this same mess. Instead of going forward, you’re going backwards.”

Evans expressed frustration over the decision and walked out after his closing comments.

”You want Hooterville, that’s what you want, you don’t want nothing nice,” he said.

Commissioner Heather Seibles said she voted no because she wants to see a youth center downtown to invest in children who will come back and make an impact on the town.

”I do believe the Town of Fairmont badly needs a youth center,” Seibles said.

Commissioner Charles Kemp did not comment during the meeting when McCallum asked for a reason behind his opposition. Kemp did tell The Robesonian after the meeting that he wanted to keep a promise he made to the person who donated the building to the town in 2017. The promise was the building would be used only as a youth center.

”I gave him my word that I would see to it,” Kemp said.

Town Manager Hank Raper said the building was “a mixed bag” that generated a lot of community interest and could be a source of revenue to help the town offset expenses.

”As you know we’re going through a budget process and we’re struggling to find the revenues to pay for what we know are just ongoing operating expenditures to keep — to keep the doors open and make sure we take care of the needs of our citizens and we look out for our employees as well,” Raper said during the meeting.

Also on Tuesday, the commissioners were told about an ongoing effort to train high school students across Robeson County to respond to disasters.

Linda Oxendine, Community Organized Relief Effort’s Community Emergency Response Team coordinator for Robeson County, and Audrey Hunt, CERT community leader, told Fairmont commissioners during their regular board meeting that efforts are underway in schools across the county to train students to join the Teen CERT program.

CERT team members undergo training to help their communities rebuild after a disaster, and Robeson County Emergency Management will dispatch members if needed in emergency situations, Oxendine said.

Each school and it’s community will have at least one community leader to serve as a contact person for the teams, but Purnell Swett High School will have four leaders to help manage teams in the area during an emergency situation, Oxendine said. Lumberton and Fairmont high schools and organizations like The University of North Carolina at Pembroke have CERT members.

”So, next time when a natural disaster hits, we’ll have CERT Teams everywhere,” Oxendine said.

She has spoken to the superintendent of the Public Schools of Robeson County, and “over the next four years,” a goal has been set for placing a Teen CERT Club at each school, which includes a minimum of 100 members, Oxendine said. Purnell Swett High is an exception to that goal and likely will have more. Students must be at least 16 years old and can serve up to age 24. The goal is to train 25 students per year.

Audrey Hunt said she is representing the Fairmont area as a community leader.

”I’m looking forward to working with you guys,” Hunt said.

Commissioners could contact her if they know someone who would be a good fit for the CERT Team, Hunt said.

”We want Fairmont to be represented like every other town,” she said.

Oxendine said Robeson County Sheriff Burnis Wilkins asked for a Narcan training event to combat the opioid epidemic in the county.

”We have an opioid crisis in Robeson County, that’s not a secret,” Oxendine said.

CERT Team members are too busy for now, she said. They continue to be involved in food box distributions in areas like Lumberton. But there are plans to hold a Narcan training event sometime during the summer.

In other business, commissioners unanimously gave Fairmont resident Lakeisha Jackson approval to use the town’s park for the Ajerris McRae Community Festival on Sept. 4. The festival will honor her late son, Ajerris McRae, who died Sept. 3.

”Ajerris lost his life to a tragic car accident,” Jackson said.

So, Jackson started A Better A.M. organization to honor his memory. Festival plans include family fun and entertainment, vehicle safety information, retail and food vendors, and, if possible, a booth where residents can get COVID-19 vaccinations.

Also approved by the commissioners was sending Mayor Charles Townsend to the distressed utility webinar. Commissioners also voted to reappoint Planning Board members Fitzhugh Sealey, Melvin Ellison and Brisco Stackhouse, the out-of-town member, to serve three more years on the board. Their current terms expire in May.

Also approved was the decision to close Main Street to traffic for the May 29 May Day Fun Festival, which will take place downtown at 10:30 a.m.

Commissioners also heard from Fairmont resident Bobby Walters, of South Griffin Street, about an abandoned home at 123 S. Griffin St., next to his house, that he said has been abandoned for 20 years. Walters said the owner won’t sell the property or clean it up. And he was turning to the town for help.

”It’s disturbing me and my family,” Walters said. “Like I said before, there’s a lot of rats and roaches coming out of there and I’m tired of killing them.”

Commissioner Evans said the issue should be looked into and asked the town manager to work with Walters to find ways the town could help.

Also on Tuesday, commissioners heard from Fairmont resident and former Fairmont High School educator Nila Chamberlain, who spoke on behalf of the Robeson County Community Art Guild.

Chamberlain, who is the Guild’s chairperson and executive director of Development, said arts can bring revenue into towns and the county.

For example, people who attend the events and eat out or get gas while in the county contribute to the economic impact of the arts, she said.

Chamberlain said the nonprofit arts and culture sector was shown to be a \$4 million industry in Robeson County and generated \$283,000 in local and state government revenue to support 124 full-time equivalent jobs, according to a 2017 Americans for the Arts survey by Robeson County Arts Council and Council President Vanessa Abernathy.

She told commissioners the art guild wants to provide opportunities for education in the arts across the county and is looking for the town’s support. Chamberlain asked the town to remember the organization as it crafts its budget for fiscal year 2021-22.

”Remember us and join hands with us and help us get started,” Chamberlain said.

Town Manager Raper told commissioners a budget workshop will be held Tuesday.

”Revenues are a trouble for Fairmont,” he said.

But the town is working internally to spend its funds in the best ways possible in spite of that, Raper said.

He also said the town must update its zoning ordinances to be compliant with state regulations. “Small, modest changes” must be done by the end of June, Raper said. Afterward the town must work with the Lumber River Council of Governments to amend zoning ordinances that reach back to the 1970s. (Robesonian, 5/19/21)

AUG 2021 Population Decline

Commissioners here learned Tuesday that preliminary 2020 census data shows a stark decrease in population when compared to 2010, which could mean less grant funding in the future.

The data is “concerning,” Town Manager Hank Raper said.

In 2010 Fairmont had 2,663 residents, but according to preliminary census data, it had a population of 2,191 in 2020, he said.

”That’s a significant drop in our population, a total of 17%,” Raper said.

A lot of the town’s state revenues are “attributed to the population,” which means that it can expect a decrease in revenue sources to the general fund like sales tax, beer and wine tax, and Powell Bill funding.

”So, that’s something we became aware of this week, and I thought you needed to be aware of that because that will affect our ability to budget and plan for future expenditures going forward,” the town manager said.

It is not known when a possible funding change might take effect, he said.

Commissioner Terry Evans said some people were displaced by hurricanes and some residents went to metropolitan areas and never returned.

Mayor Pro Tem J.J. McCree asked if COVID-19 played a role, and said he didn’t see door-to-door census gathering as in previous years.

The county also saw a decrease in population, and because of that other local municipalities might also be affected when it comes to state revenues, Raper said.

In other business, the commissioners approved closing Main Street for the Farmers Festival, which is scheduled for Oct. 16.

”I actually want to share with everybody that we’re gonna plan for the Farmer’s Festival, and we hope that things are good,” Mayor Charles Townsend said.

But the safety of the community comes first, he said.

”Whether we go ahead with it, whether we have it, I’m gonna consider the safety of the community,” Townsend said.

Also approved was allowing Woodmen of the World to buy a bench and place it in Fairmont Community Park as part of its town beautification project.

The project also includes beautifying downtown by adding flowers to flower pots, said Pat Freeman, of Woodmen of the World.

”Thank you for beautifying our park,” Commissioner Felecia McLean said.

McCree asked commissioners to observe the activities of Waste Management, with whom the town contracts for the collection of residential trash and lawn debris. He told The Robesonian after the meeting that the town isn’t getting the services it is paying for.

McCree spoke of an incident a couple of weeks ago when a truck broke down and the company didn't come until Friday and Saturday and "they still didn't get the whole town." The town's regular days for leaf and limb pickup are Mondays and Tuesdays. Household trash pickup takes place on Tuesdays.

"They just did it so they could hold the check down," McCree said.

Their services are "just below standards in my opinion," he said.

McCree asked to speak more about Waste Management during an upcoming Board of Commissioners retreat. He also asked the town manager to consider getting the town a truck to do its own leaf and limb pickup and to consider other companies' bids and options rather than Waste Management.

Commissioner Terry Evans agreed with McCree about Waste Management's services.

"I don't like to be played as a fool by anybody," Evans said.

Also on Tuesday, the town manager reminded residents of the special town board meeting on Aug. 31 to discuss strategic plans for the town's future. He asked residents to come at 5 p.m., if possible, to the meeting in the Fairmont South-Robeson Heritage Center.

Commissioners also spoke highly of the Stop the Violence Program Inc. back-to-school event on Saturday in which many town entities, like the police department, participated.

"It was good to see everyone unified," Commissioner McLean said.

"The kids really enjoyed it," she added.

About 75 people received a COVID-19 vaccine at the event.

"It was a tremendous success," Commissioner Charles Kemp said.

Kemp thanked South Robeson Rescue Unit for letting the organization use two of its tents for the event and the police department and Chief of Police Jon Edwards for cooking hot dogs and hamburgers.

"It was truly a great day for Fairmont in many ways," Kemp said.

Commissioners Terry Evans and Monte McCallum encouraged residents to take precautions against COVID-19. McCallum urged residents to consider being vaccinated.

"The most important part is taking care of ourselves," Evans said. "... If we're not fully protected, we can't protect anybody." (Robesonian, 8/18/21)

OCT 2021 Kemp Becomes Mayor Again (Townsend Didn't Run)

A not-so new face will take over the reins as Fairmont's mayor and the results from write-ins will determine who will become mayor to three other municipalities following Tuesday's election.

All results from voting are unofficial until certified by the Robeson County Board of Elections.

In Fairmont, Charles Kemp secured his bid for mayor, garnering 56.42% of the votes over Monte' McCallum's 37.16%.

"I'm elated to have been giving a chance of revival," Kemp said on Tuesday.

Kemp served as the mayor from 2005 to 2013 and he is not finished with the work he begun.

"I plan to pick up where I left off," Kemp said.

There's a list of needs that Kemp hopes to address in Fairmont that include jobs, the economy, revitalization of the downtown, beautification, and offering full and total transparency to residents.

Kemp again threw his hat in the ring for the role of mayor after losing his bid in 2017 to Mayor Charles Townsend by about 87 votes. He has served on the board for more than 30 years including his eight years as mayor.

Kemp said he is "humbled" by the trust Fairmont residents placed in him.

"I will never be able to repay the gratitude they've shown to me," Kemp said.

The Fairmont Board of Commissioners will also see two new faces with Melvin Ellison and Clarence McNeill securing two of the three available seats. The third winner is yet to be declared with Incumbent Terry Evans securing 246 votes and 248 votes being cast as write-ins. Write-in results are typically counted the day following the election. (Robesonian, 10/12/21)

OCT 2021 Tiebreaker Vote to Demolish Abandoned Residence

— Commissioners here unanimously approved moving forward with a partnership involving the Robeson County Public Library in efforts to relocate the Hector MacLean Library to the town's former youth center across the street.

Commissioners voted in support of the decision to work with the Robeson County Public Library, which seeks to relocate from 106 S. Main St. to the former youth center across the street. The youth center has been at the core of lively debates for years as the commissioner board grappled with the direction of the center's operations and its services to the youth in the community.

The building, at 105 S. Main St., operated as a Youth Opportunity Center from 2001-2005 where children were tutored and given job training. It also once housed a post office.

The commissioner board met Tuesday with Robeson County Public Library trustees and members of its board of directors in a special-called meeting ahead of its regular 6 p.m. meeting to discuss plans.

"We have entertained the opportunities of multiple organizations and individuals over the previous four years and we just haven't hit that gold mine yet, but this may be it," Commissioner Charles Kemp said during the special-called meeting.

"I am 100% in on this project," Kemp said.

During the regular meeting, commissioners gave full support for the relocation effort.

The next steps are securing additional funding sources in the effort, Town Manager Hank Raper said during the regular meeting. Plans to approach Robeson County Commissioners for help in funding were mentioned.

The youth center building needs \$50,000 to \$60,000 worth of renovation work done before it is operational, according to town officials.

Katie Fountain, director of Robeson County Public Library, and Raper led commissioners, RCPL board members and staff members, on a tour through the vacant youth center as commissioners and Robeson County Commissioner Pauline Campbell followed. Fountain said plans for the building include possible study rooms, a computer lab and creative rooms for children. The ideas of offering youth activities and programs for adults like resume building were discussed during the meeting.

One room could support 20 computers, which would make the Fairmont location the largest lab in the Robeson County Public Library system, Fountain said.

"There really are no limits to what can be done when we have the staffing and space to do so," Fountain said.

"This is a great thing that you're doing partnering with this library board," said Pauline Campbell, vice chair of the Robeson County Board of Commissioners and member of the library board. "You have my full support."

In other business, commissioners engaged in a passionate debate after Mayor Charles Townsend cast the tiebreaker vote to demolish an abandoned residence on 201 N. Pine St.

Voting in favor of the demolition were Mayor Pro Tem J.J. McCree and Commissioners Charles Kemp and Heather Seibles. Commissioners Terry Evans, Monte McCallum and Felecia McLean voted in opposition.

The home is uninhabitable according to Town Attorney Jessica Scott.

"It was significantly damaged as a result of fire," she said of the house.

Efforts were made to contact Stacey Oxendine, who owns the home, but Oxendine has not responded to the town or cleared the lot. The town has been working on the project since 2016, Scott said.

Commissioner Terry Evans said that the town shouldn't single out one house to demolish.

"So let's throw in all of them and let's be through with it," Evans said.

He also said the town should demolish more than one house with its Nuisance Abatement budget of \$6,840.

Kemp told commissioners he had received a quote for the home to be demolished at \$4,500 years ago. Scott told The Robesonian that the cost of the demolition project had not been determined at the time of its approval Tuesday.

McCallum accused commissioners of "singling out" the house since it is close to another commissioner's home.

Mayor Pro Tem J.J. McCree said the home is near his, but the area experiences heavy foot traffic from town residents. McCree said the decision was made to benefit residents and the home did not pose an issue to him, it actually lowered his property taxes.

McCallum then asked about houses in other traveled areas of town like the Old Field section. He also reminded commissioners of residents in that area which experience sewage backup in their homes when it rains.

"You need to understand and see what you're doing," McCallum said.

Justin Elk, assistant fire chief at Fairmont City Fire Department, offered to help commissioners with disposing of abandoned homes. Elk said the department could burn homes for training exercises, clearing the land for a fraction of the cost to hire an outside company.

Commissioner Felecia McLean said the idea had been brought up before, but not acted on.

Scott and Jenny Larson, the town's finance director and clerk, told The Robesonian after the meeting that obstacles that can prevent the fire department from stepping in include heirs to the properties who are unreachable and the presence of asbestos in the houses that pose health risks. (Robesonian, 10/20/21)

OCT 2021 Leadership Award

L.E. McLaughlin, Jr. and Bob Gentry Regional Leadership Award

In September 2004, this prestigious award was renamed to honor the leadership of two dedicated former members of the LRCOG Board of Directors, Mr. L.E. McLaughlin, Jr. and Mr. Bob Gentry. While both members served with honor, they also served as friends, putting aside the often strained relationships between jurisdictions. Both men, while dedicated to their respective local governments, realized that

successful endeavors often cross geographic boundaries. Their friendship became indicative of relationships made and strengthened at the LRCOG table and still serves as a wonderful example of regional leadership.

This year's Regional Leadership Award recognizes an individual who has been a strong supporter of regionalism and an advocate for the Lumber River Council of Governments (LRCOG) for many years. He truly believes in the work of the LRCOG and the value of its regional solutions that have provided long-term health and economic prosperity for his local community. He is not only an advocate for the LRCOG but for other organizations working on the regional level as well. He strives to ensure that the greater good is achieved and that the rural voice is always heard in the halls of Jones Street. This year's winner is Mayor Charles Townsend of Fairmont.

Mr. Townsend started his service on the Lumber River Council of Governments' Board of Directors in 2007 and has tirelessly advocated for the work and programs of the LRCOG throughout his tenure. Mr. Townsend has also served the LRCOG as a delegate to the North Carolina Association of Regional Councils' (NCARCOG) Forum. In this role, Mr. Townsend passionately advocated for the work of the LRCOG each year during the NCARCOG's Legislative Advocacy Day, imploring members of the NC General Assembly to better utilize and support the work of the LRCOG and the other councils of government across North Carolina. In addition, Mr. Townsend has successfully kept the LRCOG Board of Directors informed of the work that the NCARCOG is taking to support the LRCOG and our region at the state level.

In addition to his service to the LRCOG, and as the Mayor of Fairmont, Mr. Townsend also gives countless hours each year to support the work of other organizations working to improve the health and welfare of the citizens of the Lumber River region. He serves as a member of the Robeson Health Care Corporation Board of Directors and Helping Hands Ministry, he is a Guardian Ad Litem volunteer and an active member of his church. (Richmond County Daily Journal, 10/26/21)

NOV 2021 Final Meeting

Commissioners heard Tuesday that if the proposed state budget is signed into law, the project to relocate the library in town could get a financial boost forward.

Fairmont Town Manager Hank Raper told commissioners during a regular meeting Tuesday that the budget approved Tuesday by the state Senate included a \$50,000 appropriation for the project that seeks to move the Hector MacLean Public Library to the vacant youth center across the street.

Raper told The Robesonian the project's cost is not certain, but the funding in the state budget, if approved by the House and signed by the governor, could help.

Gov. Cooper stated Tuesday that he intends to sign the budget. In a prepared statement issued by the governor's office, Cooper said he would sign the budget "because, on balance, the good outweighs the bad" and it can advance the state in ways that are "critical to our state's progress as we are emerging from this pandemic."

"We're excited about being one step closer to having a library and youth center in Fairmont," Raper said.

During the meeting, commissioners approved a Duke Energy Franchise Ordinance that states the company will continue to provide electric services to Fairmont over a 60-year period. The town previously signed a 40-year contract, which ran out, Raper said.

"This doesn't have any bearing on rates in the town," Raper said Tuesday.

An argument erupted Tuesday after Fairmont resident Nathaniel Thompson asked the board of commissioners if one of its members lived outside of the town and whether or not it was allowed. Thompson addressed the commissioners during the public comment session of the meeting.

Thompson also asked if any commissioners knew about a board member residing outside of the town.

Commissioner Terry Evans responded to the query despite pushback from the mayor and a commissioner.

"We don't respond to questions openly in public comments, Terry," said Mayor Charles Townsend.

Townsend asked Terry why he was responding.

"We gotta play by the rules Terry," he said.

"...Well I'm playing by the rules..." Evans said.

"Your rules or the rules of the town?" Townsend asked.

"I'm in opposition to Mr. Evans' responding to the citizen. We've never allowed that. It's never been allowed... it's been broken time and time again," said Commissioner Charles Kemp.

"...Why fix it now?" Terry asked.

"You're out of order," Kemp said.

Evans said he received a call from a commissioner in Cumberland County that alleged a Fairmont commissioner was living outside of the city limits. He did not name the Fairmont commissioner accused in the allegation.

"I told him I was unaware of it," Evans said.

"Now, if it's anybody who held anything from the board you could say it was me, but it was information that he shared with me because he was outraged," he said.

Thompson stood up in the audience before the meeting was adjourned and again asked the commissioner board for answers and when he would receive them.

"Somebody will get back with you later," Townsend said. "... We just want to cover ourself legally so we don't say anything that we don't need to say so that's why it needs to be taken care of by a professional."

In other matters, Kemp asked the town manager to reach out to Joe Stanley and another individual about prospects of addressing housing needs and rehabilitating homes in the town. He asked that Raper report back to the board with his findings, of which he agreed to do.

Kemp also requested that Town Attorney Jessica Scott prepare an evaluative instrument for the purposes of evaluating the town manager. He requested that she develop the document and deliver it to the board of commissioners at the Dec. 21 meeting.

After the commissioners receive the document, they may review it before it is discussed in January, Kemp said.

Commissioner Kemp, who is the mayor-elect, and Mayor Pro Tem J.J. McCree thanked Mayor Townsend for his service to the town.

"Mayor, I just want to say it's been an honor and a privilege serving with you," McCree said. "... I want to say I really enjoyed serving with you and I hate to see you go."

"This town owes you a debt of gratitude," Kemp said. (Robesonian, 11/17/21)

DEC 2021 Tiebreaker Vote on New Commissioner

In a special-called meeting Tuesday that lasted less than 10 minutes, a sitting commissioner both resigned and nominated someone to fill his seat when he becomes mayor in December.

Fairmont Commissioner and Mayor-Elect Charles Kemp tendered his resignation effective Dec. 21 when he will be sworn in as mayor. He then nominated the appointment of Jan Tedder-Rogers to replace him on the same day he and others are sworn in. She is a "lifelong resident of Fairmont" and serves as general manager of Lumberton ABC store, according to information from Kemp. She will finish the remainder of his term which ends in 2023.

The nomination was made official through a tiebreaker vote cast by Mayor Charles Townsend. Commissioners voting in favor of the nomination were Heather Seibles, Charles Kemp and Mayor Pro Tem J.J. McCree. Commissioners in opposition were Felecia McLean, Monte McCallum and Terry Evans.

"As I stated, I reject that motion," Commissioner Terry Evans said.

"We are putting the cart before the horse," he added. "If he's gonna resign, he needs to resign right now, not the 21st."

Evans said a gentleman's agreement existed in which board members agreed to wait for new members to take their seats on the board and take part in the decision making process of appointing a new commissioner. Commissioner Monte McCallum agreed.

Fairmont attorney Jessica Scott said the commissioners could choose to honor a gentlemen's agreement or vote on the nomination.

"However the board wants to move forward, it's up to the board," Scott said.

McCallum called the action of moving the nomination up ahead of the December swearing-in date "unethical and almost downright crooked."

"You've got here board members that don't have a say in this," McCallum said, referring to commissioners-elect Melvin Ellison and Clarence McNeill, who sat in the audience.

"It will come back to bite you though," McCallum added.

After the meeting, Commissioner-Elect Clarence McNeill described the meeting as "interesting."

"I think it's unethical myself," Commissioner-Elect Melvin Ellison told The Robesonian following the meeting.

According to Section 3.3 of the town's charter, "In the event a vacancy occurs in the office of mayor or commissioner, the board of commissioners shall by majority vote appoint some qualified person to fill the same for the remainder of the unexpired term."

Town officials including Kemp said that material from the UNC School of Government was consulted before the motion was made.

Kemp told The Robesonian after the meeting that he consulted an article written by David Lawrence, a professor at UNC SOG, that covered open meetings laws and appointing members ahead of time before making his decision.

Kemp planned to tender a resignation at the Nov. 16 meeting, but waited until the election was certified by the N.C. State Board of Elections, he said.

The commissioner said he wanted to get the action over with during the meeting.

"I wanted to have a say so in who replaced me in my seat," he told The Robesonian after the meeting.

Kemp said he was satisfied with his decision and "prepared to move on." (Robesonian, 12/1/21)

2022

MAR 2022 Running For State House

N.C. House of Representative District 47

Charles Townsend

Three people are now seeking the District 47 seat on the N.C House of Representatives after Charles Townsend placed his name in the running on Thursday.

Townsend told The Robesonian he is running to “continue to help rural North Carolina meet the needs of the citizens.” He said he hopes to better the future economy, and healthcare and education system.

Townsend has some experience in public service. He served as the mayor of Fairmont for two terms, and on the Board of Commissioners for 12 years.

He is a self-employed independent insurance agent and owns a carwash in Fairmont, sales storage building and rents U-Hauls. He also serves an associate pastor at the First Baptist Church, located at 301 N. Main St. in Fairmont.

Townsend is the son of W.J. and Willie Mae Townsend. (Robesonian, 3/5/22)

MAY 2022 Wins Nomination

N.C. House District 47

Charles Townsend and Jarrod Lowery will face off in the Nov. 8 general election after Tuesday night's results.

The results in this race are with 38 out of 39 precincts reporting, as of 11:21 p.m.

Lowery secured 70.15% of the vote topping candidate Mickey Biggs' 29.85% in a landslide victory, thus advancing him to the Republican candidate spot.

"I really do appreciate the votes in Robeson County putting their confidence in me," Lowery told The Robesonian.

Lowery said he's "excited" about what the future holds.

"I will continue to work as hard as I can to earn the respect of every voter in Robeson County," Lowery said.

Former Fairmont mayor Charles Townsend also handily secured a victory over political newcomer Aminah Ghaffar, and will advance as the Democratic candidate for District 47 House Seat in the Nov. 8 General Election. He won 63.90% of the vote.

"I want to tell all the people thanks," Townsend said. "I'm really humbled that they chose me to be their Democratic nominee." (Robesonian, 5/18/22)

MAY 2022 Slight Democrat District

NC House 47— With incumbent Rep. Charles Graham (D-Robeson) seeking election to one of North Carolina's U.S. House seats, former Fairmont Mayor Charles Townsend will be the Democratic nominee in this slightly Democratic leaning district. However, Republican Jarrod Lowery, brother of the Lumbee Tribe's Chairman, is expected to outperform expectations. (JD Supra Blog, 5/23/22)