

CITY OF TIFTON
Regular City Council Meeting Minutes
January 7, 2013
5:00 pm
Municipal Courtroom

ATTENDEES

J.G. "Jamie" Cater Jr., Mayor
Johnny Terrell, Vice Mayor
Marianna Keesee, Council Member
Chris Parrott, Council Member

Julie Smith, Council Member
Larry Riner, City Manager
Rob Wilmot, City Attorney
Rona Martin, City Clerk

PUBLIC HEARING TO DISCUSS THE REQUEST AMENDING CHAPTER 7 OF THE TIFTON LAND DEVELOPMENT CODE TO PROVIDE FOR THE REGULATION OF OUTDOOR ADVERTISING SIGNS ALONG THE I-75 CORRIDOR (TA12000-003)

Mr. Wilmot explained the procedures for public input for both of the public hearings. Mr. Wilmot then addressed the council to qualify the members and determine if they had any conflict or interest in the proposed properties. Mr. Wilmot asked the members of the council if they had any property interest, financial business interest, or if their family members had any interest in the areas along I-75 proposed for regulation. No members of the council had any conflicts and were qualified to vote on the matter. Mr. Wilmot opened the public hearing up for public discussion on the matter. No one spoke, public hearing was closed.

PUBLIC HEARING TO DISCUSS INCREASE TO EXCISE TAX ON ROOMS, LODGINGS, AND OTHER ACCOMMODATIONS

Mr. Wilmot mentioned one of the items of consideration on the agenda tonight is a resolution proposing to increase the hotel/motel tax which at this time is set at 5%. Mr. Wilmot read aloud the public notice which was published in the paper for the public hearing. The notice read as "The City of Tifton will hold a public hearing on Monday, January 7, 2013 at 5:00 p.m. in the Municipal Courtroom located at 130 E. 5th Street, for the purpose of taking citizen input regarding a possible increase in the rate of Hotel/Motel Tax visitors pay while staying in area hotels and other types of lodging. Local governments may levy and collect an excise tax upon the furnishing for value to the public of any room or rooms, lodgings, or accommodations furnished by any person or legal entity licensed by, or required to pay business or occupation taxes to the municipality for operating a hotel, motel, inn, lodge, tourist camp, tourist cabin, campground, or any other place in which rooms, lodgings or accommodations are regularly furnished for value. O.C.G.A. 48-13-51(a)(1)(A) The City of Tifton currently collects Hotel/Motel Tax at the rate of 5% and is considering raising the tax up to 8%. Hotel/Motel Tax dollars are used for: Promoting tourism, conventions, and trade shows through the planning, conducting or participating in programs of information and publicity designed to attract or advertise tourism, conventions, or trade shows. A certain amount of funds may be used for Tourism Product Development in the way of new or existing projects, and various other means of enhancing the visitors experience while in Tifton." Mr. Wilmot opened the hearing up for public discussion.

Harold Harper, owner of the Howard Johnson: Mr. Harper mentioned he owns a small hotel in town and he is also a member of the tourism association. He stated a 3% increase would hurt the rentals at all of our hotels. Mr. Harper mentioned with the current tax at 5% the hotels brought in around \$417,000.00 in taxes for the city last year. He stated the Tourism Association and TAHA have discussed the issue of the increase and concluded that they could possibly withstand a 1% increase but a 3% increase would hurt their business bad. Mr. Harper mentioned he knows the city needs money but they should not ask for the money from one small group it just isn't right.

Hayward Fowler, owner of The Fun Channel: Mr. Fowler mentioned that our hotels create a lot of jobs in our area and is one of our largest industries. He further mentioned that if the tax is increased to 3%, travelers will drive 30 additional minutes to either Valdosta or Cordele to get a cheaper night stay. Mr. Fowler expressed increasing the tax could price us out of the market. He suggested looking into what other cities around us are doing before we jump into something.

Greg Turton, owner of the Hampton Inn & Suites: Mr. Turton mentioned his hotel shut down about 10 months ago for an extensive remodel. Mr. Turton stated he has owned a hotel in Tifton for about 20 years and he stated it has been a great community to be in thus far. Mr. Turton mentioned at the meetings he attended in reference to the hotel/motel tax increase they city first asked for a 2% increase but now it has asked for the maximum increase of 3%. Mr. Turton mention that it seems to be easy to tax someone from outside the city because they do not vote, but asked are we really being the “friendly city”? Mr. Turton mentioned he believes that the tourism dollars are being spent on things not increasing tourism and heads on beds such as the airport. Mr. Turton mentioned when he first began on the tourism board the committee stated they were only going to promote tourism with the tax dollars and support activities that put heads in beds. Mr. Turton mentioned it was not fair to spend hotel/motel tax dollars on improvements to the city offices even though the city is short on money. He believed those dollars should be spent on things such as billboards, sports and recreation events, UGA Conference Center, and the Agrirama which promote tourism to Tifton.

Manju Kundra, owner of Microtel Inn & Suites: Ms. Kundra stated she had owned the Microtel for seven (7) years and during those years she has worked very hard to increase occupancy and revenue. Ms. Kundra mentioned her expenses keep going up. Ms. Kundra mentioned if the tax is increased the hotels will have to decrease their nightly rate in order to keep business. Ms. Kundra stated she has spent \$150,000 this year on improvements to her hotel to keep it looking new. She stated she does not have enough blood in her skin left and asked the council to help her business survive and not close down.

Rick Williams, part owner of the Days Inn, Tifton Inn & Suites, Comfort Inn & Suites, and the Country Inn & Suites: Mr. Williams mentioned his family has been in the lodging business for quite a number of years and has experience in the hotel industry and tourism. Mr. Williams mentioned he is concerned with what the 3% could do to his business. Mr. Williams mentioned because of the economy issues, everyone is now just beginning to turn around. Mr. Williams stated he believes this increase will close hotels which are now open. He further expressed the increase will also decrease values and could possibly set back the lodging industry for years. Mr. Williams stated many would prefer no tax increase but he could go along with a 1% increase provided; the increase would go toward tourism and the efforts would give the hotels a good return.

DeNean Stafford, owner of Hilton Garden Inn: Mr. Stafford expressed he was not in favor of raising the tax on account of the situation to the city is in. He expressed that it's not his cross to bear and he feels a 1% increase would be a gracious plenty.

Joe Turner, Tourism Board Member: Mr. Turner asked if a cost analysis has been completed on the proposed tax rate increase. Mr. Turner mentioned he thought the tax increase would actually decrease revenues because there would be less people staying in our hotels. He expressed now travelers can compare prices on their phones and go to another county around us to lodge where the hotel/motel tax is lower.

CALL TO ORDER – COUNCIL MEETING

Mayor Cater called the meeting to order.

PRAYER AND PLEDGE

Council Member Marianna Keesee led the prayer and pledge.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Mayor Cater asked for a motion to approve the minutes as presented from the November 15, 2012 Workshop and Called Meeting, the December 3, 2012 Council Meeting, and the December 13, 2012 Workshop and Called Meeting. Julie Smith made the first motion for approval of the minutes, seconded by Chris Parrott, and unanimously carried by all members present for approval.

CITIZEN INPUT

Keith Hickman, Food Carts: Mr. Hickman stated he was present for support of the hotels and to answer any questions about his food cart. Mr. Hickman stated he was currently working with the county getting all his permits and has begun setting up the cart in the industrial park. Mr. Hickman also mentioned that he brought his food cart so the council could take a look at it if they like. Mr. Hickman stated he only had a small cart and would be able to do hamburgers, hotdogs, chips, and drinks. Mr. Hickman stated presently this is only going to be a part-time business for himself after his shifts at work and on the weekends. The council asked Mr. Hickman to attend their next workshop which would be held January 17th and food carts would be one of the items being discussed.

RESOLUTION OF THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF TIFTON, GEORGIA AUTHORIZING AN INCREASE TO THE EXCISE TAX ON ROOMS, LODGINGS AND ACCOMMODATIONS: Julie Smith made the first motion to increase the hotel/motel tax by 1%, which would increase our total hotel/motel to 6%; with 50% of the 1% going to the Tourism Association and the other 50% going to tourism product development. Motion seconded by Chris Parrott and unanimously carried by all members.

Discussion of the item began with Ms. Julie Smith mentioning that she did not personally want to hurt any of the businesses by increasing the tax, but work with the tourism association to expand on tourism. Julie Smith wanted to move forward and continue to grow the tourism efforts toward having more conferences, festivals, and community functions to draw people into Tifton to enjoy every aspect of our community. Ms. Smith mentioned with raising the hotel/motel tax we can be more flexible with how we spend our tourism dollars and we will now have more of an opportunity to use the funds in new ways to promote tourism.

Ms. Marianna Keesee thanked everyone for coming and also thanked Tyrone Spearman and his staff for the great work they provide to promote tourism in Tifton. Ms. Keesee mentioned she was certainly not in favor of raising the hotel/motel tax any higher than 1%.

Mr. Chris Parrott also thanked the citizens for appearing, he mentioned as a small business owner himself he understands that every penny counts. He mentioned the city's goal is to do more tourism promotion, and get more people into Tifton.

RESOLUTION PROVIDING FOR ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGE LICENSE TO NEIGHBORHOOD RESTURANT PARTNERS FLORIDA TWO, LLC ALSO KNOWN AS APPLEBEE'S NEIGHBORHOOD GRILL & BAR #9396 LOCATED AT 808 W. 7TH STREET:

Marianna Keesee made the first motion for approval of the resolution providing for an alcoholic beverage license, seconded by Johnny Terrell, and unanimously carried by all members.

RESOLUTION PROVIDING FOR ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGE LICENSE TO SAIGON KITCHEN LOCATED AT 724 W. 2ND STREET: Marianna Keesee made the first motion for approval of the resolution providing for an alcoholic beverage license, seconded by Johnny Terrell and unanimously carried by all members.

RESOLUTION PROVIDING FOR ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGE LICENSE TO ANCHOR LOUNGE LOCATED AT 339 COMMERCE WAY: Marianna Keesee made the first motion for approval of the resolution providing for an alcoholic beverage license, seconded by Johnny Terrell and unanimously carried by all members.

RESOLUTION PROVIDING FOR ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGE LICENSE FOR WILLIS COUNTRY MEAT LOCATED AT 910 S. CENTRAL AVENUE: Marianna Keesee made the first motion for approval of the resolution providing for an alcoholic beverage license, seconded by Johnny Terrell and unanimously carried by all members.

RESOLUTION PROVIDING FOR ALCHOLIC BEVERAGE LICENSE FOR BIG JIM'S LOCATED AT 1310 S. MAIN STREET: Marianna Keesee made the first motion for approval of the resolution providing for an alcoholic beverage license, seconded by Johnny Terrell and unanimously carried by all members.

ORDINANCE AMENDING CHAPTER 7 OF THE CITY OF TIFTON LAND DEVELOPMENT CODE TO PROVIDE FOR THE REGULATION OF OUTDOOR ADVERTISING SIGNS ALONG THE I-75 CORRIDOR: Marianna Keesee made the first motion for approval of the ordinance as presented, seconded by Chris Parrott, and unanimously carried by all members.

DISCUSSION OF VARIOUS SOLID WASTE COLLECTION SITES

City Manager Larry Riner mentioned the council has had several discussions regarding the Solid Waste Collection Sites and the issue was also presented at the SDCC Meeting held about a month ago. Mr. Riner mentioned the recommendation from SDCC was to turn the existing collection sites into recycling only and close the Northside Fire Station Collection Site completely due to EPA concerns. Mr. Riner stated the recommendation was then presented and approved by both the Tifton City Council and Tift County Board of Commissioners. Mr. Riner stated since the recommendation was approved there have been many concerned citizens come forward and express that the closing of the sites would have a severe negative impact on the cleanliness of the community. Mr. Riner mentioned that council asked staff to go back and evaluate the cost to continue operating the sites and a spreadsheet has been provided to the council in their agenda packets for review. Mr. Riner closed by stating if the sites are not closed they will continue to operate with a loss. Mr. Riner mentioned the council could reverse their original decision which was voted on earlier if they chose to. He explained the Solid Waste Fund is an enterprise fund and is supported solely by user fees and not by general fund tax dollars. Mr. Riner mentioned there are three options: (1) Let the original decision stand which was approved by the SDCC, City Council, and County Commissioner, (2) Send out an RFP for management and operation of the solid waste services, (3) Find a source to fund the operation of the collection sites, which is an estimated \$70,000. Larry reminded the council that residents in the city will not be affected in any way because their yard waste will continue to be picked up curbside. Larry reviewed with the council the charges for collection stating city residents pay \$21.00 per month and those charges include household garbage, yard debris, and bad load pickups. Larry mentioned the county is being charged \$14.50 for household residential garbage pickup and they do not receive the services of yard debris and bad load pickups. Larry stated he would leave the decision up to the council, but if the council decides to not close the collection sites as proposed they will have to find some way to fund the \$70,000 expense. Julie Smith expressed she thought the city should sit down with the county and work something out so the residents of the county will still have the availability of the sites being open. Ms. Smith stated the trash is going to end up somewhere either in the collection site or

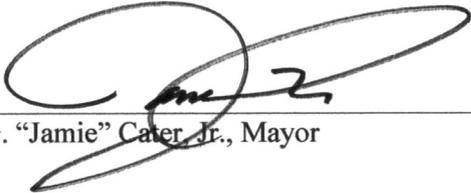
dumped onto an empty lot. Ms. Smith mentioned we need to take time and first discuss the issue with the county. None of us want our county to become trashy and ugly because that will impact all of us. Mr. Johnny Terrell agreed with Council Member Smith. Ms. Keesee stated as Larry said, logically the city residents are not using the collection sites since they have curbside pickup and it is not fair for the city residents to bear the burden of expense to keep the collection sites open. It was concluded to send out an RFP for the management and operation of the solid waste services and continue discussions with the county to work out the best solutions for both the city and county residents.

BOARD APPOINTMENTS

Keep Tift Beautiful Board: Chris Parrott made the first motion appointing Hayward Fowler to the Keep Tift Beautiful Board, seconded by Johnny Terrell, and unanimously carried by all members present.

Historic Preservation Commission: Chris Parrott made the first motion appointing Cindy Hall to the Historic Preservation Board, seconded by Johnny Terrell, and unanimously carried by all members present.

There being no further business to discuss, meeting adjourned.



J.G. "Jamie" Cater, Jr., Mayor



Jessica Jones, Deputy Clerk