

First meeting of new council not lacking drama despite best intentions

By Helen Wale Turner

The first meeting of 2012 with the newly-elected council members started off on a harmonious note, with the council unanimously approving every motion that was made, from naming Cindy Wale as their chairwoman, to removing previously approved roads from the road overlay list, to opposing all proposed routes for the Baton Rouge bypass loop, and naming various board appointments.

The council was also able to negotiate a compromise on choosing the inspector for the Eden Church Road project and thanked new parish president Layton Ricks' for his role in brokering an agreement. After working out the details with their attorneys during a quick side-room meeting, Alvin Fairburn and Associates and Quality Engineering agreed to share the Eden inspector's role, avoiding litigation and allowing the project to proceed.

The first tense exchange came when Ricks addressed the council and stated that he had signed a check on the afternoon of his first day in office for \$453,000 to Alvin Fairburn and Associates for engineering work done in 2010. Ricks acknowledged that he signed the check despite knowing the council had an item on the agenda to discuss rescinding the payment pending a review of the contract and bills and the outcome of pending litigation. He also stopped payment on a check for \$379,517 issued by outgoing president Mike Grimmer in his last days in office to debris consultant Corey Delahoussaye (C-Del), whom the previous council had fired. Ricks prefaced his remarks by saying he knew he would take a hit for signing the Fairburn check, but felt it was the right thing to do.

(Editor's note: the dispute involves the fact that Fairburn provided engineering work for and billed the council in 2010 for roads that were on the parish's overlay list. Then-President Grimmer held the position that since the parish had money enough to do only a portion roads, those were the only roads the firm should have done the engineering for, because if the parish paid for engineering on roads that won't be overlaid until a years later, the engineering would have to be redone and updated to be usable, thus making the parish pay for the same work twice. Further, Grimmer maintained that Fairburn did not follow procedure stipulated in the contract regarding obtaining authorization to proceed and thus was not authorized to perform the work. Grimmer believes that Fairburn was owed a lesser amount while Fairburn maintains that the entire amount was owed. The previous council directed Grimmer to pay the full bill, but Grimmer said the council was overstepping their bounds under the Home Rule Charter, and he refused to pay the check. The matter went to court where Judge Zoe Waguespack ruled that Grimmer must follow the council's directive. Grimmer appealed because he does not believe the parish is liable for the entire amount and because he believes it is setting a dangerous precedent for all parish governments operating under Home Rule Charter if the council is allowed to dictate to the president, and he has hired his own attorney to continue the appeal. Incidentally, the bill was previously reduced by \$100,000 when a billing error was discovered;

that is irrelevant to the appeal but was cited by some council members as one of the reasons they wanted to review the contracts and bills before paying them.)

Some citizens in the audience said they were angry with Ricks, contending he violated his pledges of transparency and cooperation. Several members of the council acknowledged Ricks' right as president to sign the check but expressed their disappointment at his doing so before they had the opportunity to discuss the matter. The exchange ended with Wale, Chance Parent, Jim Norred, Marshall Harris and Ricky Goff voting to stop payment on the Fairburn check, a move they acknowledged was probably a moot point since the check has likely been cashed. Ronnie Sharp, Sonya Collins, and Delos Blackwell abstained, saying they did not have enough information to make a decision.

At the beginning of the meeting Wale had outlined guidelines for proper decorum during meetings, stating that while she encourages the public to speak, each person should stay on subject, address their remarks to the council,

be respectful to everyone, limit their comments to three minutes and speak no more than twice on one issue. The council and audience followed those guidelines with only a couple minor lapses during the discussion of the Fairburn check, at which time Wale brought them back to order.

The council dissolved a dozen or so existing council committees and formed five new ones and approved Wale's appointments to those committees: Finance – Harris, chair; Wale, Parent and Norred; Courthouse – Parent, chair; Wale, Harris and Norred; Office of Emergency Preparedness - Goff chair; Collins, Landry and Norred; Procurement (evaluates consultants, contractors and their contracts) - Norred chair; Parent, Sharp and Landry; and Capital Outlay - Blackwell chair; Collins, Landry and Norred.

The Livingston Parish Council meets on the second and fourth Thursdays of every month at 6:00 p.m. in the Council Chambers of the Governmental Building, 20355 Government Blvd. in Livingston, LA. (Dates and times may be subject to change) Contact the council office by calling 225-686-3027 or emailing info@.

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"Too many distressed roads carrying high traffic loads have passed over while other roads have been given priority as a 'favor.' We have to stop that and prioritize roads by need. There are some dangerous roads in my district with no striping or signage that urgently need to be fixed," Blackwell said.

"Also, there is a steel manufacturer coming to Albany, and I will do what I can to help local people get jobs."

Blackwell believes the prospects for the future for Livingston Parish are great "if we will pull together and work together."

He has been an Albany area businessman for 31 years and the owner of Blackwell's Automotive in Albany and Hammond. Contact: 225-290-3566, delosblackwell@bellsouth.net.



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