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Mayor refuses to sign check after 4-1 City Council vote



(from left) Mayor Trip Lancaster, City Attorney David Delaney and City Clerk Sheila Watson are seen at the Tuesday night (Dec. 13) meeting.

Story, Photos and Video By Jeff M. Hardison © Dec. 14, 2016 at 2:37 p.m.

FANNING SPRINGS -- There was some drama at the regular monthly meeting of the Fanning Springs City Council on Tuesday evening (Dec. 13).

However, there were moments of peace and joy fanned by actions originating from love and kindness too.

The meeting included Mayor Howell "Trip" Lancaster III presenting plaques; the mayor talking about a successful Chamber of Commerce event; a review of the city's financial issues; the awarding of a retirement bonus to former Fire Chief Ron McQueen; and other matters.



City Clerk Sheila Watson (left) watches as outgoing City Council Chairman Paul Chase accepts a plaque from Mayor Trip Lancaster (right).

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Mayor Trip Lancaster gives outgoing City Councilwoman Jane Nogaki a plaque.



Mayor Trip Lancaster (left) gives retired Fire Chief Ron McQueen a plaque for the chief's 37 years of service.

Mayor Lancaster started the meeting by presenting plaques. He gave outgoing City Council Chairman Paul Chase a plaque in appreciation for Chase's 12-year career as an elected city

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leader.

Outgoing City Councilwoman Jane Nogaki accepted a plaque from Lancaster for her three years of service on the City Council.

Retired Fanning Springs Fire Chief Ron McQueen accepted a plaque from the mayor for McQueen's 37 years of service to the residents and visitors of Fanning Springs and the surrounding area.

Also during this meeting, the mayor said the Fanning Springs Chamber of Commerce held a successful day of fun events at Fort Fanning and there was a successful boat parade at night.

Lancaster said he appreciated help from the Levy County Sheriff's Office, Gilchrist County Sheriff's Office, Florida Highway Patrol and Florida Department of Transportation to close some lanes on the bridge over the Suwannee River to allow people on the bridge to watch the parade go under it.



Fanning Springs City Attorney David Delaney looks at material during the meeting.

One contentious point on Tuesday night was carried forward from the previous regular monthly meeting. That was when City Councilwoman Barbara Locke had made a motion, seconded then by City Councilman Ron Queen, to give retired Fanning Springs Fire Chief McQueen a bonus of \$200 for each of the 37 years he served the residents and visitors of Fanning Springs, as well as the people in the unincorporated areas of Levy and Gilchrist counties in the Fanning Springs Fire District.

At the monthly meeting in November, Fanning Springs City Attorney Jamie Lynn Shideler (who is also known as Jamie Lynn White) of the Dell Graham Gainesville Law Office, said that motion to award the chief \$7,400 as a parting gesture for his retirement should not be voted upon at the November meeting – because it was not on the agenda.

Shideler intimated that she felt the public may want an opportunity to provide input about this possible expense.

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City Councilwoman Jane Nogaki looks at material as City Councilman Tommy Darus looks out at the audience.



(from left) City Council Chairman Paul Chase, City Councilman Ron Queen and City Councilwoman Barbara Locke listen to a person speaking to the City Council.

Councilwoman Locke made the motion again on Dec. 13, and it was seconded again by Councilman Queen.

Fanning Springs City Attorney David Delaney of the Dell Graham Gainesville Law Office sat in the chair as the lawyer from that office representing the city for the December meeting.

“I’m not in favor (of the motion),” Councilman Tommy Darus said. “He (Chief McQueen) was paid a wage. He was given retirement as a government employee. Me being one (a government worker), I am well aware that I am not entitled to any parting gifts in monetary form from my position.”

Darus said he appreciates the decades of service McQueen gave. As for this action, Darus said he is of the opinion that it should be done by ordinance or resolution.

The city attorney explained to Darus that level of activity was not required for the City

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Council to do what it wanted.

Attorney Delaney explained that the City Council has the ability to move funds within the city budget for expenses that are covered within the various parts of the budget. In this instance, the funds would go from the fire department category in the budget.

Darus said some months ago, the City Council objected to paying for the interest on funds to seek a grant to improve Fort Fanning (city park) with a boat dock on the Suwannee River.

“Seventy-four hundred dollars would have more than covered that interest,” Darus said. “And yet Council balked at that because it didn’t want to spend that money.”

Darus went on to say it was his opinion that this sets a precedent for other employees who may retire – like City Clerk Sheila Watson or Public Works Director Wilmon Doyle Frierson Jr. – to be awarded a parting monetary benefit for service to the people.

“This \$7,400 is coming out of the fire department’s budget,” Locke said, “not the City Council’s budget.”

Councilman Queen said that anybody who works 37 years and dedicates their whole lives to the fire department, and does all of the other good things that McQueen did, including recruiting and training generations of new firefighters, deserves this parting gift.

After Queen said that any person who dedicates their whole life to the service of the city deserves this type of recognition, there was spontaneous applause from the audience.

Chief McQueen helped people understand more during the discussion. He said the stipend he received was only for the past four of the 37 years.

“The first 15 to 20 years,” he said, “we didn’t receive any compensation.”

McQueen said he is happy with however the City Council votes on this motion. He just wanted everyone to be clear on the facts.

Darus had made it sound like McQueen was an employee rather than a volunteer. However, that fact had been well established after a nine-month saga in Fanning Springs City Hall.

Councilwoman Jane Nogaki said that for the past five or so years, the fire chief was receiving some compensation toward health insurance and retirement, but prior to that he was not.

Nogaki said city employees now are given an annual \$500 Christmas bonus, but Chief McQueen was never given that bonus as an employee.

Despite Darus arguing that McQueen was an employee, as Darus’ justification for McQueen not to receive added compensation for a job well done (for 37 years), Mayor Lancaster said Chief McQueen did not receive the \$500-a-year Christmas bonus because he was a volunteer.

When Lancaster made that statement, there was a lot of relatively loud conversation in the audience by several people.

One woman began a loud set of statements from her seat, perhaps triggered by the mayor’s explanation of why the city did not ever give the fire chief a Christmas bonus.

She was asked to come to the podium and to say her name. She was limited to three minutes.

She continued to rail against the city’s employees, expressing her opinion that seemed to indicate that she felt they may not be very well-versed at being public servants who help people.

Two weeks ago, the woman said, her mother fell and was not quickly seen by a first responder. Fanning Springs Fire Rescue did not respond and the Chiefland Fire Rescue Department eventually sent only one first responder.

The woman said she was not happy with this level of service.

Levy County Department of Public Safety is the group that sends ambulances in Levy County.

There is an ambulance station next to the Fanning Springs Fire Department now, but there are times when there is no ambulance there due to the call volume throughout the county.

As for volunteer firefighters, they are volunteers. Although the volunteer fire department did not miss calls under Chief McQueen, with McQueen’s retirement and the Dec. 1 resignation of Deputy Chief Elania Spain, there has been some upheaval in scheduling.

Fanning Springs City Attorney Delaney, after Chairman Chase recessed the meeting to allow for the complaining woman to leave the podium, said what the City Council witnessed from the

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irate resident is similar to what occurs from the city charter being vague, and from the city lacking more structure.

“One of the things you want to consider is that when you are going forward without established procedures,” Delaney said, “or written policies in place, things can be very personality driven.

“You kind of make decisions on a case-by-case or ad hoc basis,” he continued. “And that’s one of the risks you face when you’re going forward without an established policy in place ahead of time.”

When Chairman Chase called the question on the Locke-Queen motion to give the retired chief a \$7,400 bonus for 37 years of service, the vote was 4-1. Darus was the lone dissenter.

Locke made a motion to recess the meeting to let City Clerk Watson make a check for \$7,400 to give to McQueen.

Attorney Delaney said there can be a ceremonial check presented in January for a photo opportunity -- for *HardisonInk.com* for instance -- but there is no reason to hold payment until January. The attorney just said the logistics of stopping a meeting for City Clerk Sheila Watson to go write a check did not seem like the most efficient use of time. The attorney said there was no legal reason to not write the check on Wednesday, and he presumed there was no procedural reason to not do that. Mayor Trip Lancaster said he would not sign the check. However, City Council Chairman Paul Chase has the authority to sign that check and he agreed to do it Wednesday.