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Williston City Council learns more about MFA proposal to develop WMS property



Pastor Johnnie Jones III shares his perspective with the Williston City Council.

Story and Photos

By Jeff M. Hardison © Feb. 9, 2018 at 12:08 p.m.

WILLISTON – The first meeting in the temporary (interim) Williston City Hall on Tuesday night (Feb. 6) resulted in progress toward a potential joining of forces by the city with the Ministerial Faith Alliance (MFA).

The MFA would like to take over the abandoned Williston Middle School campus, with all of its empty buildings – regardless of their level of dilapidation. Some building would be demolished of course.

Three of the four City Council members were present Tuesday night.

President Charles Goodman, Vice President Nancy Winger and City Councilwoman Marguerite Robinson were in attendance.

Williston Mayor R. Gerald Hethcoat was present as well, but the mayor in Williston has no power to vote – even to break a tie.

For instance, if Williston City Councilman Elihu Ross had been present Tuesday night, and if there had been a 2-2 vote on a matter, then motion and second leading to that vote would die as a result of that tie, because the mayor cannot vote to break a tie despite a previous belief that the city charter allows the mayor to vote to break a tie.

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Councilwoman Marguerite Robinson listens to her colleagues.



Mayor R. Gerald Hethcoat thinks about comments being made

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Williston City Council President Charles Goodman looks at a computer screen. Goodman has said he is not as adept at computers as some other people might be. He has also expressed what some people may think of as a disdain for the laws that require decisions made by government leaders, including the process leading to a recommendation of a vote, as being required to be open for all people in Florida. Despite his expressed opinion of feeling hamstrung by not being able to discuss matters upon which he may vote with other members of the City Council outside the public view, Goodman chooses to remain within the bounds of the law that govern his actions in that regard.



Williston Vice President Nancy Winger sits next to the empty chair where Councilman Elihu Ross would occupy if he attended the most recent Williston City Council meeting.

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Williston City Manager Scott Lippmann attends the first City Council meeting in the interim City Hall. The city is using the former multi-purpose building on the campus of the former Williston High School, located on Noble Avenue (U.S. Alt. 27), during the time until the new Williston City Hall is ready for use. The estimated time is nine months to a year before the construction on the future City Hall is completed.



Williston City Attorney Fred Koberlein is seen during the meeting.

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City Clerk Frances Taylor performs her duties during the meeting.



Mayor-elect Jerry Robinson asks about road resurfacing plans. Robinson learned the city has adopted a method to reduce the odds of paving or repaving a road, only to have to dig it up and pave again after installing or replacing underground pipes.

Joining Councilman Ross on the list of absentees that night were two students from the Levy County Public School System whose names had been put forward for recognition as Student of the Month.

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It may be best that Councilman Ross and the two children did not show up at the old WHS Band Room, because that parking lot was so dark that night that a person who was not equipped with a flashlight could have easily tripped and fallen after the meeting was over.

As for the potential of a partnership of the city and the MFA to secure the vacated WMS property in the unincorporated part of Levy County east of Williston, there probably is going to be more discussion at the Feb. 20 meeting.

As of that Feb. 6, though, any deal between the MFA and the School Board was as dim as the parking lot outside the temporary Williston City Hall that night.

The audience at the City Council meeting on Feb. 6 heard about unsuccessful attempts by Pastor Johnnie Jones III in reaching a closing deal with the Levy County School Board on that property.

Jones said the School Board was seeking between \$1.5 million and \$2 million from the MFA, even though the School Board may have seemed at one point like it would give the WMS property to the City of Williston for free. The essential difference here, however, appears to be that the city is a government entity and the MFA is a non-profit corporation.

The abandoned, vacant structures and land formerly known as Williston Middle School may be destined to join the ranks of some other acres marked in Williston as being stricken with blight and slum, despite the intent of the MFA.

Just so there is no confusion by zealots who are against religion, the MFA is a 501c3 organization that is a designated public charity – not a religious group.

The MFA helps non-religious groups as well as religious groups or anyone else. The MFA shows no favoritism to Christians or members of any other religion, or non-religion. The MFA helps all people without regard to race, religion, gender, sexual preference, handicap, age or anything else.

“We are an organization of religious people who practice under a non-religious IRS designation,” Pastor Jones said the day after the meeting when being interviewed by *HardisonInk.com* for clarification on how a group named Ministerial Faith Alliance could be non-religious. “We are in the world but not of the world. When it comes to our work, we will not deny anyone.”

Jones made it clear that the MFA has created a relatively significant plan for using the abandoned property as a center to help people of all ages and walks of life, from cradle to grave and from rich to poor. It may even be used as an offsite learning area for College of Central Florida students for some classes, if that part of the MFA plan reaches fruition. Jones has said there are many possible partners that can work together at that location.

The MFA, however, has seen obstacles and hurdles from Levy County Superintendent of Schools Jeff Edison, according to what Jones told the City Council as he approached those three people on Tuesday night.

City Manager Scott Lippmann said that if the city accepted or bought the property, an initial rough estimate of costs to demolish buildings the city sees as useless would be \$150,000 plus an undetermined amount of money for disposal (abatement and mitigation) of hazardous material such as asbestos insulation and lead pipes. The issue of liability by being the owner of the property is another consideration for the city leaders.

President Goodman does not want the city to pay for the property. The city is looking

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at a \$2.5 million cost for the construction of the new City Hall. Even as recent as that meeting, there was no firm plan for financing the new City Hall construction, even though the city knows it can fund that project.

Councilwoman Robinson said she and her husband Jerry Robinson, who is scheduled to take the oath of office as mayor in April, toured the property.

Councilwoman Robinson said she saw several computers, keyboards (some new and still in boxes) and monitors left inside the abandoned building. She questioned the School Board's wisdom in regard to leaving behind valuable equipment.

Council President Goodman added to Robinson's theme of wasteful use of resources by government groups by commenting "You should see what the federal government leaves behind."

Vice President Wininger said she noticed the same thing.

"I thought when they moved, they moved," Wininger said. "I did not know how much was left behind."

Pastor Jones, who is president of the MFA, shared his perspective with the City Council.

The MFA plan for the property includes several possible partners and will require memorandums of understanding with various entities, he said.

The MFA has worked for 18 months to secure the property.

The \$2 million price tag has been the primary obstacle to the MFA taking over with refurbishing the property to be a center for community services, Jones said.

As voters and taxpayers, Jones said, he believes all people in Levy County should wonder about the School Board building a new Williston Middle High School and then not have a plan for what the School Board would do with either the facilities on the Williston Middle School campus or the facilities on the Williston High School campus.

"Government does not need to be involved in a single other thing," Jones said, "except to be supportive of what its citizens are asking for – and need. And I think it's really our turn."

The plan by the MFA, Jones said, has never gone away but the School Board in approaching the city again to take over the WMS campus intimated that the MFA was no longer interested. The \$2 million price tag is the single block the School Board has put up to halt the MFA from fulfilling its plan.

It is a waste of the city's resources to "reinvent the wheel," Jones said, when the MFA has spent 18 months creating an excellent plan to utilize the WMS campus for the good of the residents and visitors of Williston.

The School Board sees the property as a nuisance that it wants to divest itself from, Jones said.

Jones said he asked if MFA could lease the former WMS property, he told the City Council.

"I was turned down," Jones said, "although there are other lease agreements at work with the School Board right now in the county.

"I was also informed," Jones continued, "that there was no lease agreement that could last longer than three months. That does not apply, because there are lease agreements in place and have been in place longer than three months."

Rather than the School Board seeking one or two million dollars from the MFA, Jones said the best use of money would be for the demolition of some parts and rehabilitation of other parts of the WMS so that the MFA could work with other agencies and groups to

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provide many programs and services to the people of Williston and the unincorporated area of Levy County in that vicinity.

After more discussion Tuesday night, City Manager Lippmann and City Attorney Frederick L. Koberlein Jr. agreed to meet with Pastor Jones to discuss more details about what sort of partnership may be formed to help persuade the Levy County School Board to work toward ridding itself of the property, and the MFA being able to continue with its plan to improve the property for the betterment of society.

Lippmann, Koberlein and Jones were planning as of Tuesday night to meet before the end of the day on Friday (Feb. 9).

Details from that meeting may be among the discussion and perhaps action matters set for the Feb. 20 meeting in the old WHS Band Room – on the campus of the former Williston High School – which property continues on the open market for a buyer.

The Williston City Council does not want to buy the WMS property, or to accept the property as free because then it would be the owner that has liability for that property.

The Levy County School Board cannot give the property to any non-government entity, because it was bought with tax dollars. Government entities that divest themselves of tax-purchased property are governed by laws to help preclude fraud and theft, as well as to protect the resources of the taxpaying public.

Audience members who plan to attend the Feb. 20 City Council meeting at the old WHS Band Room will want to bring their own drinking water. The water fountain in the hallway of that building dispensed bad-tasting water on Feb. 6.