

# Narrows Town Council Meeting

## March 9, 2026

Mayor Tom Spangler called the meeting to order. Council Members present were Sara Bowles, Jonathan Creger, John Mills, and Alicia Lane. Councilman John Hale was absent.

Staff members present were John Davis, Terry Nicholson, Benji Ratcliffe, Roger Shepherd, and Debbie Thomas.

Councilman Creger gave the invocation.

Council and audience recited the Pledge of Allegiance.

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### Approval of February 9th Meeting Minutes

Mayor Spangler called for a motion to approve the minutes from the February 9th meeting.

**Councilman Mills made a motion to approve the February 9th meeting minutes.**

**Councilmember Bowles seconded the motion.**

**Ayes: Bowles, Creger, Mills, and Lane**

**Nays: None**

**Motion Carried 4-0**

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### Joint-Public Hearing - Sign Ordinance (Section 17-706)

Mayor Spangler opened a public hearing with the Narrows Town Council and the Narrows Planning Commission concerning Section 17-706 of the Narrows Zoning Ordinance to repeal and replace the sign ordinance.

At the time of the hearing, the Planning Commission did not have a quorum present. Attorney Mike Bedsaul advised that the Planning Commission cannot take action without members being personally present and that a remote poll is not permissible. He outlined two options for council: defer the public hearing to a later date or time, or proceed with just the Town Council's hearing, which would require the Planning Commission to re-advertise and hold its own hearing before council could act on the amendment.

Council asked whether the public hearing could be deferred to later in the same meeting pending arrival of additional Planning Commission members. Attorney Bedsaul confirmed this was permissible.

Mayor Spangler deferred the public hearing to later in the meeting and directed council to proceed with the consent agenda.

During the deferral period, background on the sign ordinance was provided. The Planning Commission spent several months working on the new ordinance in response to a Supreme Court decision holding that sign ordinances may not regulate based on content for First Amendment reasons. The prior ordinance distinguished between yard sale signs, real estate signs, and political signs -- all content-based distinctions. The revised ordinance removes all content-related sign definitions, replacing them with categories of temporary and permanent signs with regulations based on placement, zoning district, and size. LED signs in residential areas are permitted for non-residential uses (churches, businesses, etc.) but must be automatically turned off by 10:00 p.m. and back on at 6:00 a.m. The revised ordinance also makes previously nonconforming signs conforming.

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## **Consent Agenda**

### **Library Report**

No comments were made regarding the library report.

### **Parks & Recreation Report**

Councilman Mills stated that Narrows has as good a recreation department as anywhere in the county and expressed appreciation for their continued efforts in the face of recent negative press. He stated the department has the council's full support.

### **Police Report**

Councilman Mills shared that he had the occasion to speak with residents who were effusive in their praise of Police Chief Benji Ratcliffe and Officer Melissa Cohen for their handling of a situation involving a resident's daughter. He also noted personally observing Officer Cohen professionally managing a difficult situation at a local business. He expressed gratitude for the department's daily service, especially given the current climate of disrespect toward law enforcement.

Council noted the police report reflected a fair amount of criminal activity during the past month, attributed in part to the warmer weather.

### **Financial Report**

Terry Nicholson reported that business license fees and real estate taxes are coming in, with the tax due date one week away. He noted measures have been taken to carry the town to the next budget cycle, including navigating the impact of 100-year flood events and pending FEMA reimbursements.

## **Town Manager's Report**

Terry Nicholson reported that the town received FEMA reimbursement for the concession stand building at Lurich Ball Fields and has elected to self-insure that structure going forward. The Town's insurer (VRSA) accepted the town's decision and issued a letter of understanding. The town still has four other FEMA reimbursement projects pending. An extension has been requested prior to the April deadline and is expected to be granted.

## **Public Works Report**

Councilman Mills praised the Public Works Department for their exceptional performance during recent ice, snow, and cold weather. He also credited the council's decision to invest in replacing water lines rather than repeatedly patching leaks, noting the significant reduction in water loss. He stated that sound infrastructure investment, while costly, is the only effective approach and praised the team's diligence.

Council discussed the ongoing streetlight replacement program. New LED fixtures are noted to be significantly brighter, with some concern about light sensitivity for certain drivers in areas with high light concentration. Staff noted that newer LED installations are designed to direct light downward rather than spreading it widely.

Staff confirmed that paint is on hand to address some deferred maintenance items at the pickleball court.

**Councilman Mills made a motion to approve the consent agenda. Councilman Creger seconded the motion.**

**Ayes: Bowles, Creger, Mills, and Lane**

**Nays: None**

**Motion Carried 4-0**

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## **Return to Public Hearing -- Sign Ordinance (Section 17-706)**

With a quorum of the Planning Commission now present, Attorney Bedsaul recommended that the Planning Commission open its meeting before the joint public hearing continued. John Mills, Chair of the Planning Commission opened its meeting for the March 9, 2026, public hearing.

Mayor Spangler reopened the joint public hearing. No members of the public offered comment.

Councilmember Lane asked whether the encasement requirement for changeable copy signs applied to signs such as those used by local businesses with dry-erase boards. Staff clarified the encasement requirement applies to monumental signs with push-in letter signs and does not apply to temporary signs such as dry-erase boards used outside businesses.

General discussion was held regarding the level of detail in the ordinance. Staff noted the ordinance is less restrictive than the prior version and that the Planning Commission spent

considerable time working through specific examples point by point. It was acknowledged that the ordinance also addresses previously nonconforming signs, making them conforming going forward.

Mayor Spangler closed the public hearing.

**Carolyn Kirby made a motion to approve the planning commission's recommendation to repeal and replace Section 17-706 of the Narrows Zoning Ordinance dealing with the sign ordinance. Greg Lee seconded the motion.**

**Ayes: Kirby, Lee, and Mills**

**Nays: None**

**Motion Carried 3-0**

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## **Communications, Concerns, and Requests from the Public**

### **Bill Ralph, Donna Ralph, and Morgan Ralph -- Four-Way Stop at Memorial Boulevard and Kimberling Street**

Donna Ralph, a 25-year resident of Memorial Boulevard and fifth-grade teacher at Narrows Elementary School, addressed council requesting installation of a four-way stop at the intersection of Memorial Boulevard and Kimberling Street. She stated this was not the first time the request had been brought before the council.

Donna Ralph described a serious accident that occurred the previous Saturday in which the at-fault driver admitted to traveling 45 miles per hour and failing to see the stop sign. Both vehicles were totaled and one ended up in their yard. She noted that over 25 years of residence at that location, approximately 15 to 20 accidents have occurred at or near the intersection, ranging from minor to very serious. She stated she regularly cautions her students about the dangers of the road, and that many parents prohibit their children from riding bikes on Kimberling Street due to safety concerns. She referenced a prior speed sign study that was conducted but expressed uncertainty as to whether any action followed.

Morgan Ralph, daughter of Donna Ralph and resident at 608 Memorial Boulevard, added concern about the danger to pets and children in the neighborhood, noting personal stress about the prospect of a speeding vehicle striking an animal or child. She expressed strong support for a four-way stop as a benefit to the broader community.

Donna Ralph further noted that Memorial Boulevard is a divided road with a median, which contributes to driver confusion. She also referenced the new stop sign installed at Williams and Wolf Street as a comparable situation and asked that the council consider a similar measure at Memorial Boulevard and Kimberling Street.

Mayor Spangler expressed agreement with the residents, noting that from his own observation, speeding is clearly a problem in the area. He asked how the process to consider a new stop sign would work.

Attorney Bedsaul confirmed these are town roads and council has authority to add stop signs by resolution. He recommended staff review historical crash data and consult with Public Works Director John Davis and Town Manager Terry Nicholson to bring a recommendation back to council.

Council thanked the residents for bringing the matter forward and acknowledged it had only come to their attention that day. Staff was directed to review historical accident data and return with a recommendation.

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## **Communications from the Mayor, Council, and Staff**

### **PSA Report**

Councilmember Mills reported on a discussion with PSA board members regarding the convenience/recycling center currently located on town land. Other PSA board members inquired whether the town would be open to relocating the facility. He expressed opposition to any move that would cost the town money, noting that the current location generates a small revenue stream, is well-known to residents, and that proposed relocation costs have been estimated in the range of \$300,000. He stated his position is that the facility should remain in place unless outside funding is secured to cover relocation costs.

Council members expressed agreement. It was noted the facility operates under a non-conforming use status, is managed by the PSA on town-leased land, and that attendants have been effective in keeping the area contained. Temporary fencing has helped with containment.

Councilmember Mills noted that he had suggested PSA attendants be permitted to use a PSA vehicle for warmth during extreme cold, which generated some public criticism. He stated the intent was simply to allow workers a place to warm up during bitter cold weather shifts, not to provide permanent shelter.

### **FEMA Reimbursements Update**

Terry Nicholson provided an update on FEMA reimbursements. The town received payment for the Lurich Ball Field concession stand building, the amount had been reduced by half, but FEMA did not require the town to obtain and maintain flood insurance as a condition. Terry Nicholson contacted the town's insurer (VRSA), confirmed the town's preference to self-insure, and received a letter of acceptance from VRSA. Four other reimbursement projects remain outstanding. An extension has been requested ahead of the April deadline and is expected to be approved. The town will continue pursuing those reimbursements.

### **Pre-Audit Engagement Letter -- Clear Point CPA**

Terry Nicholson presented a letter of engagement from Clear Point CPA for pre-audit services. The fee is unchanged from the prior year. Staff recommended approval.

**Councilman Creger made a motion to approve the engagement letter for pre-audit services with Clear Point CPA. Councilmember Bowles seconded the motion.**

**Ayes: Bowles, Creger, Mills, and Lane**

**Nays: None**

**Motion Carried 4-0**

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## **New Business**

### **Budget Preparation Update**

Terry Nicholson provided a status update on the FY2027 draft budget. Several line items remain unset, including:

- ❖ VDOT maintenance payments: Currently set at the prior year's amount. Governor Spanberger is operating under the prior governor's budget; the new rate will not be known until July 1. An increase is anticipated.
- ❖ Real estate tax assessments: County figures indicate an average assessment increase of 58%, higher than previously expected. This would allow the town to lower its tax rate from 51 cents per \$100 to approximately 46 cents per \$100 while still generating needed revenue.
- ❖ Personal property values: based on October 2025 figures.
- ❖ Meals tax: Currently 4%. State allows up to 6%. Each one-percent increase generates approximately \$20,000 in additional revenue. Staff recommended consideration of an increase to at least 5%.
- ❖ Water and sewer rates: A 10% increase is included in the draft budget, consistent with prior-year planning. The increase is necessary to meet the rate covenant for the Virginia Resources Authority loan for Main Street sewer improvements.
- ❖ Employee compensation: A cost-of-living adjustment of 2.8% (consistent with the federal rate) is included. Several employees will need wage adjustments due to minimum wage increases. Health insurance increased 10.6% for the coming year.

Additional items included in the draft budget: public transportation grant support for Giles Health and Family Center; part-time code enforcement officer; at least two new vehicles (to be financed); and public works budget items pending VDOT street maintenance information.

With current rough numbers, the budget is short, approximately \$86,000. Terry Nicholson expressed that this does not alarm him given conservative revenue projections and remaining items to be finalized.

Discussion was held regarding the property tax reassessment communication strategy. Councilman Mills noted that while tax bills will increase due to higher assessed values, property values are increasing significantly, which is a positive indicator for residents and the community. He emphasized the importance of proactively communicating this to constituents.

Fire truck refurbishment: Previously discussed as a capital project, Terry Nicholson confirmed this remains a priority item and will be discussed with financial advisor Davenport along with wastewater capital needs.

### **MOU with Town of Pearisburg**

Council was asked to defer consideration of a proposed MOU with the Town of Pearisburg until after the executive session, as Attorney Bedsaul wished to discuss the matter with council in that setting. The item was deferred accordingly.

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## **Unfinished Business**

None.

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## **Matters for Consideration by Council**

### **Approval of Sign Ordinance -- Repeal and Replacement of Section 17-706**

Following the Planning Commission's recommendation, council considered approval of the repeal and replacement of Sign Ordinance Section 17-706.

Attorney Bedsaul requested that the motion include a finding that the ordinance promotes public necessity, convenience, general welfare, and good zoning practice, consistent with the Code of Virginia requirements for zoning amendments. Councilman Mills agreed to include that finding as part of the motion.

**Councilman Mills made a motion to approve the repeal and replacement of Section 17-706 of the Narrows Zoning Ordinance (Sign Ordinance), with the finding that the ordinance promotes public necessity, convenience, general welfare, and good zoning practice.**

**Councilmember Bowles seconded the motion.**

**Ayes: Bowles, Creger, and Lane**

**Abstain: Mills**

**Nays: None**

### **Donation Request -- Brain Injury Solutions**

Council considered a donation request from Brain Injury Solutions, an organization based in Roanoke, Virginia. Council members expressed unfamiliarity with the organization and questioned whether Narrows residents use their services or whether the organization serves as the closest or only option for local residents.

Council consensus was not to participate in the donation request at this time. Council remained open to reconsidering the request if further information is provided.

## **Executive Session**

Mayor Spangler called for a motion to enter executive session.

**Councilman Mills made a motion to enter executive session for the purpose of discussing real property pursuant to Code of Virginia Section 2.2-3711.A.3 (discussion of bank building), personnel matters pursuant to Section 2.2-3711.A.1 (discussion of personnel), and consultation with legal counsel pursuant to Section 2.2-3711.A.8 (discussion of MOU with the Town of Pearisburg). Councilman Creger seconded the motion.**

**Ayes: Bowles, Creger, Mills, and Lane**

**Nays: None**

**Motion Carried 4-0**

Council entered executive session.

**Councilman Creger made a motion to return to open session. Councilmember Bowles seconded the motion.**

**Ayes: Bowles, Creger, Mills, and Lane**

**Nays: None**

**Motion Carried 4-0**

## **Certification**

WHEREAS, the Town of Narrows has convened an executive meeting on this date pursuant to an affirmative-recorded vote and in accordance with the provision of the Virginia Freedom of Information Act: and

WHEREAS, Section 2.2-3712 of the Code of Virginia requires a certification of the Town Council that such executive meeting was conducted in conformity with Virginia Law:

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED THAT THE Town of Narrows hereby certifies that, to the best of each member's knowledge, (1) only public business matters lawfully exempted from open meeting requirements by Virginia Law were discussed in the executive meeting to which this certification resolution applies: and (2) only such public business matters as were identified in the motion convening the executive meeting were heard, discussed or considered by the Town Council.

ATTEST: \_\_\_\_\_

**Councilman Creger made a motion to certify that what was discussed in closed session was real property, personnel matters, and consultation with legal counsel regarding Pearisburg, as declared. Councilmember Bowles seconded the motion.**

**Ayes: Bowles, Creger, Mills, and Lane**

**Nays: None**

**Motion Carried 4-0**

### **Purchase of Bank Building – Spid-E LLC**

Following executive session, council considered authorization for the Town Manager to execute the agreement for the purchase of the bank building by Spid-E LLC.

**Councilman Creger made a motion to authorize Terry Nicholson to approve the agreement for the purchase of the bank building by Spid-E LLC and to sign any related paperwork. Councilman Mills seconded the motion.**

**Ayes: Bowles, Creger, Mills, and Lane**

**Nays: None**

**Motion Carried 4-0**

The proposed MOU with the Town of Pearisburg was deferred to a later meeting pending additional information.

### **Adjournment**

**Councilmember Bowles made a motion to adjourn. Councilman Creger seconded the motion.**

**Ayes: Bowles, Creger, Mills, and Lane**

**Nays: None**

**Motion Carried 4-0**

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Clerk, Debbie Thomas

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Mayor, Tom Spangler