

Corolla Civic Association Minutes
April 26, 2018
Corolla Library

President Barbara Marzetti called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m. Board members Gary McGee, Bill Collins, Hadley Twiddy and Gerri Adams were also present. A total of 30 members were in attendance, and the Pledge of Allegiance was recited. A moment of silence was observed in honor of Bert Fillmore, who passed away recently.

Approval of Minutes. A motion to approve the minutes of both the January 25 and the February 22 Members' meetings was made, seconded and unanimously approved.

Old Business:

North Beach Parking. Barb noted that the proposed parking ordinance was adopted by the Board of Commissioners. The ordinance requires permits for parking on the North Beaches, while merely driving there will not require a permit. Local property owners will not be required to pay for a permit.

Primary Elections. The primaries for State and Federal offices will be held on May 8, and all citizens are urged to vote.

New Business:

Occupancy Tax Update. Barb reported that CCA's Ten Year Budget Proposal for Use of Occupancy Tax (OT) Proceeds has been sent to the County, which has not yet responded to the proposals. Some Commissioners had a counter-proposal at a recent BOC meeting. They have a very broad construction of the OT statute, based on the old statute that was superseded in 2004. The new statute is narrower, and CCA's counsel agrees with us. The Chairperson of the NC Travel and Tourism Coalition has contacted us; they said they have been looking for several years at the County's expenditures of OT proceeds, but they had no legal "standing" to object and were pleased to hear that CCA is now objecting to the County's practices. They said they will support us in our efforts, and we are waiting to hear what form that support will take.

Guest Speaker. The guest speaker was Robbie Fearn, Pine Island Audubon Center His presentation included a description of the Sanctuary that they are developing in their property in Corolla, that consists of 3 miles (2,600 acres) to the West of Rt. 12 as one enters Corolla. The property already has docks and a boathouse that services 2,000 visitors annually. They are conducting fundraising activities and are proposing in Phase 1 the construction of a Community Pavilion that will be available for rentals for gatherings, such as family reunions, weddings, student classes, with an internal capacity for 50 persons. They are also building 3 cottages for student researchers.

Phase 2 of their development will be a "great hall" that will seat 120 visitors and will include a catering kitchen that will allow local restaurants to serve visitors. They also plan to renovate the old "guide quarters" on the property, to be used temporarily for office space and eventually for guest rooms. Phase 3 will involve renovation of an existing hunting lodge that will sleep 7. It is the oldest historic lodge in Corolla. It will be used temporarily for office space and will eventually host dozens

of visitors, including students, biologists, ecologists, researchers and the like. The Sanctuary also includes nature trails, an estuarian forest and parking facilities. They are creating a new access to the parking area, that will have a lookout point to the Sound. They expect to promote active tourist programs, starting this Summer.

Further OT Update. Ed Cornet was asked to provide additional information about his examination of the County's OT proceeds expenditure practices. He presented several charts, including one that demonstrated that from 2005 through the 2018 fiscal year the County spent 18% of total OT proceeds for Sheriff and EMS services, 33% for tourism promotion, 23.2% for Mainland Tourism Related Expenditures (TRE), and 24.7% for COBX TRE. He discussed the CCA Ten-Year OT Budget proposal, which is an alternative that is designed to be compliant with the current OT statute and that CCA has asked the County to consider. CCA's proposal would require the County to spend OT proceeds proportionately to areas that attract tourists. A lively discussion followed.

Fire Service in Corolla. Barb opened a discussion of a proposed new Corolla Fire Service District (FSD) that would provide for a "supplemental" professional service to work with the CFR volunteers. She said that the County has proposed a plan that would add a large number of professionals that we don't need. She said the plan is also unclear as to how the SAFR grant would be used. She noted that the BOC has already approved the use of \$485,000 of OT proceeds for startup costs for the FSD, an appropriation that a Corolla resident strongly opposed at the April 2 BOC meeting. She said the County has said that the Commissioners would be willing to treat this as a loan by the County to the FSD.

Al Marzetti took the floor, and said he was speaking as a private citizen and not as a CFR Board member. He said that CFR has approximately 40 members who are current on NC firefighter training requirements with an average age of 63. There are currently 7 new recruits, 6 of whom are under the age of 37. CFR has about 400 calls per year. Of these, 40% are rescue situations (e.g., elevator rescue, securing medivac landing zone, burst pipes, etc.). Of the other 60%, 30% are false alarms, typically dispatched as smoke alarms. For at least the last 6 years, there has never been a smoke alarm call that has turned out to be a potential fire situation. This is because, if it is someone thinks they smell smoke, it is called out as a structure fire. CFR's Insurance Offices Rating (ISO) was recently improved to a 5, narrowing missing a 4 rating. ISO ratings are used in calculating premium costs. CFR asked for something different from the County's plan, which is not a good deal for our tax rates or the volunteer fire department. He said CFR requested 2 paid firefighters (FF) at each firehouse acting under the direction of the CFR Fire Chief and the County is more than doubling this staffing level. CFR believes the department should have the right to determine its appropriate staffing rather than having an excessive structure forced upon it, which structure will surely result in snowballing taxes down the road. Two-thirds of Corolla fires start outside of the house. With typical Corolla lightweight Class A construction on wood pilings, the house is engulfed in flames within 8 to 10 minutes. This means that CFR is not sending firefighters inside the house as you would never trade a life to save a life. CFR is in a defensive posture trying to save adjacent structures and making sure those adjacent houses are evacuated. The FAQ's circulated with the initial 2017 survey, indicated that the tax cost was expected to be \$.04 per hundred dollars of appraised value but would be lower in the early years if FEMA approved a request for a SAFER grant. The County's plan is overkill as it is designed to allow for "transitional attack", that is, fighting a fire from both inside and outside of the house at the same time.

In Corolla's history, which averages 1 major structure fire a year, there has never been a situation where an Incident Commander would have utilized transitional attack capability due to invariably being in a defensive posture. To make the County's plan work, 56-hour work weeks with 48-hour shifts must be implemented. This means that those on EMS duty might have to deal with a heart attack or overdose, say, 45 hours into a shift. This strikes us as extremely unsafe, especially in high season when there is little opportunity for sleep in a 48-hour shift. Three captains are proposed (with a pay range going up to approximately \$75k annual salary), and 4 lieutenants. The County model assumes that Corolla is an urban fire district by looking at NFPA guidelines, which are based solely on population density. Solely because of summer population density, the County says we need an urban force. NFPA is a trade association designed to advance the cause of career firefighters and its recommendations do not have the force of law. On the other hand, ISO classifies us as rural. ISO looks at a number of criteria in making this determination. ISO classifications are used for purposes of setting insurance rates, and we all understand how good the insurance industry is on actuarial matters. If Corolla were, in fact, urban (or even suburban), CFR would not be able to obtain any ISO rating (due to insufficient apparatus and County water supply, even if it had 100 volunteers augmented by paid staff). In such event, our fire insurance premiums might rival our wind insurance premiums. Our concern is that the County's approach is overkill and not needed in Corolla. Corolla has only 15 calls monthly in the off-season on average. For 6 months out of the year, CFR is out on calls less than 1% of the time. In other words, for half the year, we're responding to calls an average of 15 minutes a day. That leaves 23 hours and 45 minutes each day where the paid firefighters are sitting around getting bored or doing extra training which puts additional wear & tear on our already old trucks, as the County has failed to provide the economic support necessary to replace apparatus, not only in Corolla, but throughout the County. So, without making sure the tools are there, more firefighters are added, on the Corolla taxpayer's dime, so that perhaps career Fire & EMS staff can build an empire, boost their pay, which boosts their pension. Bored, 25-year olds likely take the first better paying job in Tidewater after they get their ticket punched in Corolla. So, more training costs, more gear, more wear & tear on CFR's trucks. Historically, structures like the County Plan result in the complete takeover of the fire department as the volunteer base dwindles because there's nothing meaningful for the volunteers to do. If there's so little action, and the paid are already sitting at the station, who do you think is going to hog the action. As the volunteers dwindle there are requests for more paid staff – a “truck company” to man the ladder truck, administrative staff, ad infinitum. Duck VFD is now requesting additional paid firefighters because their volunteer base is down to about 10.

Al said there is a May 21 BOC hearing, and the local residents have to approve the new tax service district. We don't exactly know how the original CFR proposal morphed into the County's plan as much of CFR was kept in the dark about ongoing discussions/negotiations. Ron Gornstein said that under the County plan there will be a huge turnover of the new personnel, who will use Corolla as just a training ground for the rest of the County. It is also feared that our current paid county Medics/Firefighters will quit because of the effective 25% pay cut they will take by having to work an extra 13 hours per week without paid overtime or for a variety of other reasons. What is happening is that County Fire/EMS is moving CFR members off the beach who are our most experienced firefighters and who understand Corolla fire behavior and, on the EMS side, know our community and the lay of the land the best due to years of experience on the beach. This appears to be part of the planning for the “takeover” CFR by the County. Al stated that our objective at the meeting will be to try to get the Commissioners to scale back the staffing to the original CFR proposal. Our concern is that tax rates

will be raised, for unneeded services, and that the undermining of the volunteer base will exacerbate the requirements for paid staff. He urged people to attend the May 21 hearing at the Courthouse. He said the BOC needs the support of the community, because the County must find that “There is a demonstrable demand for the proposed services by persons residing in the district.” We are hopeful that the Commissioners will be open to hearing our side of the story. The current Chief and Assistant Chief have said they need to remain publically neutral for a variety of reasons. A community meeting before the May 21 hearing to determine how we should proceed and who will address our concerns at the hearing should be considered.

Upon a motion duly made and seconded, the meeting was adjourned at 8:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Bill Collins, Secretary