

# Town Hall - April 28

## Resident Questions and Responses

### Economic Development

- As business owners who have invested in renovating four older buildings in the downtown area, we are deeply concerned about the state of local infrastructure and traffic. Would you please let us know what the plan is for remedying these issues? Our specific concerns include:
  - Deteriorating sewer infrastructure: Aging pipes are leaking wastewater into the ground, posing environmental and structural risks. Despite raising this issue with the town, we've been redirected to the City of Raleigh with no further assistance from the town.
    - ***We have a project line item to address this and there will be a contractor who completes an assessment so that we can move forward with any necessary improvements.***
  - Excessive traffic and large trucks: The volume of through traffic, particularly heavy trucks, raises serious safety concerns and contributes to ongoing wear and tear on our roads.
    - ***There was a referendum last year to address traffic that did not pass, but we still recognize the safety and noise issues posed and are working closely with the state to work toward improvement in those areas.***
  - Limited parking availability: A lack of accessible parking discourages potential visitors and negatively impacts downtown foot traffic and business.
    - ***We know this is critical for the development of the downtown area. As we grow as a town, we look at everything in a comprehensive way to produce creative solutions to address problems.***
- Given the large number of subdivisions currently planned or under construction, how are the developers vetted to assure that they are going to be a good fit for the community and will build quality homes and not have lawsuits from all over about shoddy work?
  - ***There is a series of standards that developers must meet before they advance to the next stage. The initial standards come from a robust public process with review of the plans to see how it lines up with the Town's***

**plans. There is also an implementation and development inspection program.**

- What's the upcoming retail/commercial coming to the town?
  - ***There are several buildings under contract with a few businesses coming in, one being Align Pilates. Outside of downtown, we have mixed-use developments that have been proposed, including shopping centers, restaurants, and hotels. Some have already been approved.***
- What are the plans to address and maintain the streets and shopping centers. There is trash everywhere and the current shopping centers are run down. How can we address this as it is an eyesore?
  - ***We are working with the planning department to ensure that our subdivisions and shopping centers are aesthetically pleasing. If you see something that is an eyesore, please contact the Planning Office at 919-823-1810. It takes the efforts of everyone as a community to help maintain cleanliness. As we grow as a town, more people will mean more trash. We need to work together to keep our town clean.***

## Staffing & Hiring

- Why have we lost so many town employees lately, what happened?
  - ***We recently experienced a wave of transitions, with several employees choosing to retire and a few others resigning for various personal reasons. Each decision was made individually, and out of respect for personnel privacy laws, we are unable to share specific details. While the timing of these departures is unfortunate, we view this moment as an opportunity to reset, strengthen our organization, and move forward with fresh energy and focus.***
- Why does the Town continue to have a Commissioner with trespasser issues against them?
  - ***While we hold our elected officials to high standards, this is a question that should be directed to the commissioner(s) in question. However, this violation does not disqualify the Commissioner from holding office.***
- Is it the policy of our town to have a commissioner state that they will never vote for any items that involve particular people?

- *If this question is being raised as part of a pending litigation, we are not in a position to respond to it.*
- How much is the communications firm NP Strategy getting paid? How were they selected?
  - *NPS Strategy fee is \$12,000 with a monthly retainer of \$8,500. The contract is a matter of public records. When the Interim Town Manager was contacted on the evening of April 17 after the resignation of the Town Manager, one of his first tasks was to retain the services of a crisis management and communications firm to address the time-sensitive situation. This was especially necessary since the Town does not yet have a Communications Manager. Two existing, large contracts for Budget Analysts and HR Generalist, which are no longer needed were terminated and the balance of those terminated contracts are being used to pay NPS. Due to this budget savings, no new money is being used to retain the services of the communications firm. NPS will work with the Town through the end of June and will serve as the Town's communications department while we are recruiting for a Communications Manager.*
- How much is the rehired Planning Director making?
  - *When the Planning Director was hired in September 2024, his job offer committed the Town to a salary that increases as key milestones are accomplished. He took a significant pay cut when he was hired, hence the reason for these milestone increases. The salary for that position is now \$141,750. This is within the current salary range for the Planning Director position.*
- Why has it taken over two years to hire a clerk? / Why has it taken so long to hire a Town Clerk that records all of the minutes from the Town meetings?
  - *This process to hire a new Clerk started in 2024. Offers were made to potential candidates. These candidates used our offer to negotiate with their former employers for higher salaries. We are unable to control these strategies. However, the Town of Zebulon is pleased to announce the return of our former Clerk, Ms. Lisa Markland, as a part-time employee through the end of June - giving us some time to hire a permanent Clerk. Ms. Markland is resuming her position as a part-time Town Clerk. Over the next two months (through June 30), she will be working closely on the Town agenda, especially as we work through FY25-26 budget presentations, address outstanding meeting minutes, and interview candidates for Town Manager and Town Clerk. Ms. Markland will be working strictly on Clerk-Board matters.*

- ***To address the outstanding minutes of meetings, the Town is looking into purchasing a program that will produce meeting minutes from audio recordings. This will accelerate the process.***
- What qualifies an individual for Town Manager, leadership experience, administrative experience, etc.?
  - ***The Board of Commissioners is looking for someone who can lead the departments within the town, bring about cohesiveness among the employees, and someone who makes employees feel like they are representative and part of a growing town. It's necessary to have strong organizational skills, listen to your employees and make them feel heard as well as develop plans to move forward with those employees.***
- With Zebulon being a small but growing town, is it financially fit to have an assistant Town Manager right now?
  - ***The growth of Zebulon made it important to consider adding an assistant manager, but it is something that will have to be approved in the new budget before any decisions are made.***
- Do we have to hire a firm @ \$30,000 to hire a town manager?
  - ***The Town Board has used different agencies in the past to hire for different positions. That's a normal practice and they have the expertise on recruiting and finding the best candidates that will fit our needs. We don't have the bandwidth to conduct that search, so we rely on outside agencies that we contract with. The final decision is made by the Commissioners.***
- Can you clarify which positions the Board can hire for?
  - ***Town Manager, Clerk, Attorney***
- Are there any positions that the board can fire on their own?
  - ***Town Manager, Clerk, Attorney***
- Who went after Mr. Todd to hire him as manager? And why did you hire him so quickly? Why have you thrown Mr. Todd under the bus tonight?
  - ***We had an extensive search for the town manager position, following which the board decided to hire him. Primarily, the board felt that Mr. Todd's deep Zebulon roots would assure some longevity in the position.***

- ***During the Town Hall, the board and staff answered questions to the best of their ability and relied on facts in their responses.***
- You spoke of Town leadership and resource use. There has been a history of “hiring” experts. Can more direction be focused upon seeking citizen contribution vs “hiring”?
  - ***Seeking the service of experts to leadership positions is not unique to Zebulon. Every municipality seeks the skills and expertise of individuals to whom have the experience in the positions they apply. Sometimes we are lucky that these talents are right in our own backyard. Otherwise, we have to conduct extensive searches outside our immediate geography for the right talents. The citizens of Zebulon deserve the best that we can find. For some key positions such as Town Manager, Police Chief, etc. the board could adopt an open hiring process where finalist candidates are made available for community engagement. However, this could be challenging because talented candidates seeking these positions are currently employed and would withdraw their applications if they do not want their names and candidacy to be made public.***
- How many (Not Tai) “interim” positions are we currently funding? What rate is an interim paid?
  - ***Currently, the Town of Zebulon has hired interim department heads for public works, town clerk, and police departments. With the exception of one Interim, Public Works, these interim directors are already employees promoted into these positions while a search is ongoing. The salaries of interims depend on the respective positions and negotiations and is a matter of public record.***
- In the course of 3 years there has been a high turnover rate of key positions. During this time, we are being encouraged to be excited by the growth of the town, but this is difficult when key positions go vacant. Are there any internal reviews to ensure operations are appropriate and ethical?
  - ***The Town is being operated effectively by a staff of nearly 100 employees and is fiscally sound. Last year, the Town of Zebulon was awarded the Certificate of Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting by the Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) for its comprehensive financial report for 31 consecutive years. This is due to sound financial policies and procedures in place, regardless of who is in elected office or on staff. The Town’s fund balance (reserves) is very sound, and the board has constantly sought ways to keep it healthy. The Town has a balanced budget annually as required by the State.***

- ***We have excellent staff who deliver great services in the community daily. In many instances, some have been delivering these services for several decades and choose to retire. Similarly, in any organization, employees come and go - even excellent ones retire or resign for various reasons. However, it is more noticeable in smaller organizations like ours than in larger entities. Our ultimate vision is to continue to make the Town an employer of choice.***

## Council Policies and Procedures

- You said last night at the Town Hall meeting that Commissioners don't have any say on who is fired, but you also said they requested the Town Manager Assistant to be suspended, so they have that right? How is that?
  - ***The Zebulon Board of Commissioners is only responsible for hiring the Town Manager, Town Clerk and the Town Attorney. By NC Statute, the manager is responsible for the hiring, disciplining, and removal of all administrative personnel. There are a few exceptions to this authority: (1) some city charters require the council (not the manager) to appoint certain offices such as chief of police or tax collector; (2) the clerk performs duties for the council but some clerks report to the manager and some to the council; (3) the council appoints the attorney; and (4) the manager serves at the pleasure of the board.***
  - ***Zebulon's Town Manager serves at the pleasure of the Board of Commissioners. He is thus accountable to the Board and has disciplinary and firing authority. The Board is within their rights to raise personnel concerns and expect that the Manager would have a plan of action to address those personnel concerns. However, the manager, as chief administrator, makes the final decision in accordance with "general personnel rules, regulations, policies, or ordinances as the council may adopt." The Zebulon Board of Commissioners has established personnel policies and rules (August 2019), and the responsibility of the Manager is to implement those policies and rules. Part of the Manager's responsibilities according to Personnel Policy is to appoint, suspend and remove town employees except those elected by the people.***
- For clarification: is the mayor or board saying that the town manager was NOT given a directive to fire, let go, suspend or release the assistant town manager? Are we saying the town manager was lying about a directive?
  - ***The former Town Manager was asked to suspend (with pay), not fire, the Assistant Town Manager due to some concerns which cannot be shared because of personnel privacy laws. The Board is within their rights to raise***

***personnel concerns and expect that the Manager would have a plan of action to address those personnel concerns.***

- Did commissioners tell the town manager to fire or suspend the assistant town manager? Yes or no?
  - ***While he has since made claims regarding being asked to perform unethical duties, we want to be clear: Mr. Todd was not asked to do anything outside the bounds of his professional responsibilities. He was not directed to fire the Assistant Town Manager.***
- If the town manager is responsible for addressing issues with the assistant manager, why has Mr. Todd given the directive to terminate her?
  - ***The former Town Manager was not asked to “terminate” the Assistant Town Manager at any point. However, the Board may express concerns about a particular employee and in that effort, requested the Town Manager suspend the Assistant Town Manager with pay.***
- What efforts are in progress to develop & enforce a Town Code of Ethics for town staff and the elected to promote accountability & confidence?
  - ***We are working to update our personnel policy, which will be completed once we have a permanent Town Manager in place. Our Board also goes through an ethics class with the UNC School of Government, which happens yearly.***
- Tonight, is a good step but how can better relations between the town's population & staff be encouraged through better access & operational transparency?
  - ***Once we have a permanent Town Manager in place, we will work out avenues to continuously engage with the public with more information and more opportunities to speak with staff. Staff emails and phone numbers are all available on the Town website and they are willing to speak with you.***

## Planning

- Is there anything in the future to give downtown a face lift?
  - ***There is a downtown master plan which includes the design elements of the streetscape, including everything from street signs, flowerpots, curbs, and more. We also have a grant that businesses use to replace their awnings, and we plan to have a building upfit grant next year.***
- Zebulon has the 2030 strategic plan which was created over 5 years ago. Is this plan used to guide decision making for the town? If so, how? Some cities/towns require that

strategic plans be consulted to make sure decisions conform to the plans + goals. Is this something Zebulon could consider?

- ***Absolutely. We are always interested in what the citizens want. That's why we're doing what we're doing. Our hope is that as we move our vision forward, we will get as much input from the citizens as possible. We want to ensure that our decisions for the community are representative of the community.***
- What is the vision for Zebulon? What is the 5yr plan?
  - ***You can see our vision in the [2030 plan](#), although that's not to say we aren't actively updating our plan. That vision needs to be updated at least once every two years to keep up with the fast-growing community. We know that there will be changes as we go along, so we want public input to formulate the vision and keep the public included in that vision.***
- In November the Town residence voted No to the transportation bond. Is there going to be an increase to our tax base without citizens' knowledge because of the No vote?
  - ***We can't say one way or the other, but we do have a survey out now asking people of Zebulon what they would like to see in this coming fiscal year. It is on the website and the Facebook page.***

## Public Safety

- What steps are going to take place to ensure the neighborhoods surrounding the trails will remain safe? More police presence? Cameras installed?
  - ***We now have police officers patrolling on bikes, but our police department is also looking to get an ATV to further that effort, if the budget allows. There are four new officers who are soon to be released from training. Also, please remember that we have a non-emergency phone number, 919-829-1911 for use when you need to speak to our department, but it is not an emergency.***
- Will the current budget issues affect the building of a new fire station + EMS services?
  - ***This expense has been foreseen for a long time now and will be incorporated into the new budget. Partial funding also exists from the state.***
- Why has there been an increase in police presence since the new lounges have opened?



- ***As more businesses, bars, lounges, and more open up, we increase local police presence to enforce DWIs. We want to be seen out in the area to prevent that, so we're focused on maintaining the safety of our roads.***

## Legal

- If a resident is in the (Extraterritorial Jurisdiction) ETJ, why can't he or she vote? Is this a state thing or a Town of Zebulon issue?
  - ***ETJ residents cannot vote due to frameworks built in at a state-controlled level. We recommend reaching out to your state representative to express these concerns.***
- Regarding the lawsuit, we hear the town may "settle" with the developer. How much will this cost the town? Are we pulling to keep the commissioner from having to answer to the court?
  - ***We cannot talk about any pending litigation. There will be an opportunity to talk about it once it is over, but it's not something we're allowed to comment on while it is ongoing.***
- Can the town amend their charter to include provisions for impeachment of elected officials?
  - ***The charter is a law passed by the state legislature, so it would have to be handled at the state level.***
- With regard to the pending litigation, if the result is a judgement or settlement adverse to the town, will it be the town insurers on the hook or will it be the town taxpayers on the hook?
  - ***We cannot talk about any pending litigation. There will be an opportunity to talk about it once it is over, but it's not something we're allowed to comment on while it is ongoing.***

## Miscellaneous

- Why are the minutes of the meetings not being posted anymore? The citizens need to know what's in those minutes.

- ***We have six months of outstanding meeting minutes. Over the next few weeks, the primary responsibility of the interim Town Clerk is to take care of those outstanding minutes.***
- Why would Gilbert Todd lie? What would be his motive?
  - ***This is a question that should be addressed by Mr. Todd. However, as the Mayor has stated unequivocally, the Board did not ask Mr. Todd to do anything contrary to his professional responsibilities or carry out an unethical or inappropriate action.***
- Mayor/Mayor Pro Tem - Can you speak to the divisiveness among the board and lack of respect in meetings?
  - ***As six individual people, we have different ideas and different things close to our hearts that we want to see within the community. We have been working hard to continue moving the town forward with a shared vision that speaks to our constituents in the town of Zebulon. While we do have differing opinions on topics, at the end of the day Zebulon is most important and we all want the best for our town.***
- Regarding communication, what is the best practice of the Board to respond to emails from town citizens?
  - ***As a board, everyone's email is publicly available. We just ask for an appropriate amount of time to get back to any messages. It is every member's intention to reply to citizens within a timely manner.***
- Is the "Drain the Zebulon Swamp Sign" at the intersection of Proctor + Pearce a legal sign? Is it a permanent sign? Will it be taken down?
  - ***We are evaluating a long list of complaints, more than just the sign-related issues. There is a process to go through all of them, but we are aware of the complaints regarding the sign. We have reached out to the owner and requested a meeting.***
- How does the town plan to address the huge concern of citizens who feel the town's operations lack transparency?
  - ***We will continue to work with our interim town clerk to get minutes updated and posted on the website, we will continue to have town hall meetings to address questions citizens may have, and we are working together as a commission to answer more questions for citizens outside of meetings.***

- Is the Town considering offering LIVE interpretation services for other languages - such as Spanish, especially given that Latinos represent at least 17% of Zebulon's population? The nonprofit C3: Community, Culture, Celebrations, which aims to serve as a bridge for historically marginalized voices, would be happy to collaborate on this initiative to help ensure meetings are more accessible for all residents. Thank you!

- ***This is a very good point, and we will be looking into this. Thank you.***

- Over the past week or so, (since the town manager resigned) there has been a divide in Zebulon and mistrust of the Board. What steps will be taken to "heal" Zebulon and also gain citizens' trust in the Board?

- ***The Board is taking the matter very seriously and is doing the best to find a permanent town manager who they all feel will be the best person to lead our town. We will also continue to work across the board to provide as much communication with the public as possible.***

- How do you deal with the problem/issue of town commissioners going outside their lane?

- ***The staff understands that commissioners are trying to respond to constituents' needs as best and as promptly as they can, and they may try to do it themselves rather than going through the proper staff person. So, it is more an issue of making sure everyone is interacting and working together, instead of blaming someone.***

- Where is the current town budget located?

- ***The 2024-2025 budget can be viewed [here](#) to understand where town dollars are spent.***