

Minutes of the Saltville Town Council's continued meeting from March 12, 2019 held on March 14, 2019 at 6:00 p.m. in the Town Hall

**Council:** Tom Holley, Hiram Robinson, Eugene Call, Bryan Morris, Steve Surber, and Ron Orr

**Mayor:** C. Todd Young

**Staff:** Brian Martin, Town Manager  
Trent Crewe, Town Attorney  
Erik Puckett, Police Chief  
Steve Johnson, Clerk/Treasurer

The Mayor updated the audience on the status of the Saltville Rescue Squad. As of now, the squad only has a couple of days left to operate due to their financial situation. Town Manager Brian Martin said the situation with the Rescue Squad's finances began to develop about a year ago when both the squad members and the county's EMS Director, Charlie Harrington, both approached the town with their concerns. Now, there isn't a long-term viable option for the squad to stay open in its current incarnation, and it will close in a couple of days.

Smyth County Administrator Michael Carter agreed with the sequence of events put forth by Mr. Martin. The last forty eight hours have been an eye opener, so he said he and some of the Board of Supervisors members were present at this meeting to continue the discussion. The Mayor said that the county is responsible for rescue squad services, and he believes they are trying to come up with a solution, but it probably does not involve the current Saltville Rescue Squad.

Saltville's representative on the Board of Supervisors, Roscoe Call, said he was also on the Board of the Saltville Rescue Squad and had been for four or five years. He stated that he could see this happening slowly and believed that the lack of volunteers is a main cause. It doesn't reflect on any of the current members, and he thinks they have lasted longer than originally anticipated. He hopes that tonight's meeting shows that everyone is working together and not trying to shut down anything. The town needs a rescue squad and will have one. The Mayor is correct in that the county is responsible for providing these services, and the county will come up with something. The county has put out the RFP for independent companies to apply to provide rescue squad services, and this will get set up, but what is needed now is for the Saltville Rescue Squad to stay operational as long as possible. The squad is eligible to start billing Medicare again in April so more money should start coming in.

Todd Dishner, the Chair of the Board of Supervisors, reiterated that the county is not trying to take away anything and is willing to pick up its responsibility. If the squad can stay operational as long as possible, then that would be ideal. The timeline has varied, i.e., the Board would

hear that the squad had several months and then would hear it had a week or two. Saltville will have coverage, but the consensus of the Board is to look for something that has a viable future in order for the service to continue instead of just putting more funding into the existing operation. When the Saltville Rescue Squad actually ceases, the Board hopes to have something in place to cover the citizens of Saltville.

Board of Supervisors member and Vice Chair Rick Blevins echoed what Mr. Dishner said and stated the intent of everyone on the Board was that Saltville would have rescue squad coverage. This matter is being taken seriously.

Councilman Call said that everyone had known for a while that this was going to happen, and it's bothersome that it's been at the last minute that something is now being done when it should have been done months ago. A plan should have been in place. Mr. Dishman said the Board had the same thought, and that is what prompted the county to do the RFP. This RFP could possibly be the biggest decision the Board makes during his tenure. This situation is life threatening, so the solution has to be accomplished. The timeline has shortened. Councilman Call agreed and said that everyone should have already been ready. The town will have to keep it open for that month or so even if the county cannot help. The town's citizens are owed that.

Councilman Morris asked what would immediately happen if the Saltville Rescue Squad were to shut down this weekend. Michael Carter said the other agencies would be then be utilized. Councilman Morris then said the order of response would be from Chilhowie first and the next one up would be from Marion. If Marion would have to respond they could be responsible for going all the way to Bluegrass Trail. This overall scenario is just a gross mismanagement of resources. Everyone knew this was coming a year ago, and the conversations should have been held then. The Council will need to fork over \$20,000 so the town's citizens and those from Bland County to Washington County will have access to rescue squad services, but the Council should not have to since the county should have already done this.

Councilman Morris continued and said that the county gives the Town of Marion around \$77,000. The Marion EMS has 2200 calls last year and around 45% of those were in the county. Marion's budget for EMS is almost \$900,000, so the bottom line is that county is not even funding 10% of that budget. This is the overriding issue of why Saltville is in the position it now is. The county is supposed to be responsible for rescue squad services and is not holding up their end of the bargain. They've put this on the towns in Smyth County, but Saltville will do the right moral thing and provide some money to make sure that the town's coverage area has a rescue squad. This conversation tonight never should have happened since it should have been planned for and anticipated a long time ago.

Councilman Call said that every minute counted when someone is having a heart attack or something similar, and that it is a big burden if someone has to come from Chilhowie all the way to Ceres. The town will provide the \$20,000 if that is what it takes. Councilman Morris stated he had done CPR on people and helped some of them, but some of them did not pull through. He's also been a first responder for the last seven years and has had to tell parents that their

kids have died. It is worth it to give the \$20,000 to make sure that, hopefully, stops happening. He concluded by saying he was disappointed that the county did not have the same viewpoint based on their voting on Tuesday night.

Councilman Surber said he was in the rescue squad for years, and the squad was full of volunteers and had help from Olin, but times have changed. It was his understanding that Chilhowie was going to pick up Saltville's calls, and he thanked all of those who set that up. Saltville's citizens deserve to have a squad in town, and whatever needs to be done should be done, but the county should still help. If the town needs to pay that \$20,000, then the town will do it to make sure Saltville has proper coverage.

Councilman Orr stated it was his understanding that what happened at the Board's meeting on Tuesday was that, after much discussion, the decision was made to not provide money to the Saltville Rescue Squad but to offer Chilhowie a revenue neutral operation to provide service to Saltville. This could include having people stationed in Saltville as well, but this really cannot happen by next week. The town's budget has money in a line item set aside for an issue such as this. Based on that fact, he said he would make a motion to provide that money so the rescue squad could access it. The town would oversee this money so that any bills that need to be paid would be brought to the Town Hall to be gone over by the Town Manager. This would enable the town to have control over the money and gives the town the power to see how the balance is going forward. The money will be ready when the squad needs it.

The Mayor thanked Councilman Call for having the insight to include that line item in the budget about which Councilman Orr mentioned. He said the town's citizens are looking at the county for providing twenty-four hour rescue squad coverage since the county is the responsible party for doing that, and the Council will work with the county any way it can.

Councilman Orr then made the aforementioned motion for the town to provide the \$20,000 with oversight to be provided by the Town Manager, Clerk/Treasurer, and a Council member. Councilman Morris recommended Councilman Orr be the Council representative. Councilman Call seconded this, and the motion carried 6-0.

Councilman Call, lastly, made the motion to adjourn, and Councilman Morris seconded. All were in favor.