WORK SESSION—MARCH 17th, 2016

Minutes of the Huntsville Town Council Work Session, held at the Huntsville Town Hall at 6:15 p.m. March 17th, 2016.

Present: Mayor James Truett
Council Member Doug Allen
Council Member Bill Wangsgard
Council Member Mike Engstrom
Council Member Bill White
Clerk/Recorder Gail Ahlstrom

Commissioner Rex Harris
Commissioner Karen Klein
Commissioner Sandy Klein

Mayor Truett opened the meeting and welcomed everyone. He turned the time over to Rex Harris to conduct the public hearing training for the Planning Commissioners and the Town Council.

Rex used a power point presentation to go over the public hearing training. (See Attachment #1) Rex stated that learning how to hold public hearings will help the Town Government meetings run smoother. There are two types of public hearings that the Town would generally deal with, legislative and quasi-judicial. The purpose of a legislative public hearing is to obtain public input on legislative decisions. Quasi-judicial public hearings involve the legal rights of specific parties and the Council would act more like a judge; this would apply to the Appeals Authority and land use matters. There are two main reasons that the Town would hold a public hearing. One is to allow the citizens to voice their opinions and concerns about legislation that's being passed; the Council wants to receive new information that might have been overlooked in the process of writing the legislation. Two, this helps create transparency; it goes on public record and shows that the Town Government has heard and addressed the concerns of the people.

Public hearings are not and should not be debates, pep rallies for a cause, unofficial elections, open houses, information dispensers, or a venue for intimidation. The Town Government is gathering information and listening. The Town Government wants people to feel they can voice their concerns and that the Council will document them and address them.

There are 8 keys to a successful public hearing: being prepared, notifying the pubic, explaining the process, role of the chairman, respect & decorum, listening & keeping an open mind, receiving public comment and keeping to the agenda—stay on topic. Getting prepared; it's important to understand the issues before the public hearing. Help the public come to the public hearing prepared with questions and comments.

Allow access to all pertinent information well in advance of the public hearing. If applicable, have open houses, information presentations, and sent mailers done well before the public hearing.

It's good to conduct site visits prior to the public hearing and beware of the dangers of Ex Parte. Ex Parte is when someone is making a judgement they only listens to one party. Rex stated that it's a good idea to hold a public hearing on a different night then when action on the legislation will take place. This gives citizens time to think about the issue. CM Allen stressed that a public hearing is to gather information not allow a debate to take place. In a small Town it's almost impossible when getting prepared for a public hearing to not talk to people. Make sure you are not favoring one side or another, but just gathering information.

Notify the public and provide as much information as possible prior to the meeting so the public has time to review and make meaningful comments. Make documents available not just at the hearing but online. Don't assume that everyone has all the information needed to make a balanced decision. Explain the process, be welcoming and appreciative, and provide enough information as part of the intro that the item is clear to the public. Have adequate copies of the agenda, hands outs, and other materials, distribute written materials to all attending, and explain the rules of the hearing.

CM White said a lot of times the Town Council holds a public hearing and then makes a motion that same night, is that a problem. Rex replied that if there is something controversial it's wise to postpone and hold a public hearing on a different night. Rex said explaining the rules for a public hearing is really important. It's kinder to the citizens if the Town Government sticks to the rules.

The role of the chairperson is to keep the meeting on track, the chair should be the only public official to speak, clearly explain the rules before public comment is received and hold to those rules, and do not hold dialogue with the public. Address and answer their questions in the regular public meeting. Show respect & decorum: be kind and civil to all testifiers, treat people with respect when they testify, create a non-threatening atmosphere that encourages public comment, don't let bullies dominate or drawn out anyone, do not allow the crowd to clap or boo on controversial topics. Listen & keep an open mind. Listen more than you speak, listen carefully to those testifying, be patient and listen to the public, stay calm and keep an open mind, listen, listen, listen. Remember to allow everyone to express their opinion. Keep in mind that you represent the community and not your own personal views.

When receiving public comment: Make sure everyone has an opportunity to express their opinion, but ensure that the same points aren't being repeated over and over. Limit time for public speaking, keep a real time log of comments received on screen for all to see, collect all public comments and questions before responding to any of them, and avoid hurrying a meeting to get out of there. Consider allowing written input to be received during a window outside of public hearing. Address all comments outside of the public hearing.

Properly handling public comments is one of the most important things to running an effective meeting. No public comment is addressed until after the public hearing is closed. Everyone at the meeting is entitled to speak; it's not a bad idea to put a timer on the desk. If it is getting to the end of the meeting and there isn't enough time to get everyone in, don't rush, stay relaxed. Get to a point and ask how many people still would like to comment, ask if they are willing to give written comment, or re-convene at a later date to finish the public hearing and take more comments. Rex said when the public hearing is over, though it may take some time, review each issue and address it, and have a resolution for each of the issues. This provides a record that the Town Government discussed the issues and they were heard. As public officials this means you are doing your job of discussing, looking at, and documenting the issues. Take more time if needed. You don't want to make the wrong decision.

Keeping to the agenda/staying on topic: stay on agenda and on time, do not make anyone feel rushed but keep them to their time constraints. Keep the meeting on topic.

Meeting adjourned at 6:55 p.m.

Gail Ahlstrom, Clerk/Recorder	James A. Truett, Mayor