



Richland County Council

DEVELOPMENT AND SERVICES COMMITTEE

April 28, 2020 – 2:30 PM

Zoom Video Conference

2020 Hampton Street, Columbia, SC 29204

COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT: Allison Terracio, Chair; Gwen Kennedy, Jim Manning, Calvin Jackson and Chakisse Newton

OTHERS PRESENT: Paul Livingston, Bill Malinowski, Dalhi Myers, Michelle Onley, Larry Smith, Clayton Voignier, John Thompson, Ashiya Myers, Leonardo Brown, Angela Weathersby, Tariq Hussain, Stephen Staley, Dale Welch, Stacey Hamm, Kimberly Williams-Roberts, Michael Maloney, Brad Farrar, Dante Roberts, Jennifer Wladischkin and Ashley Powell

1. **CALL TO ORDER** – Ms. Terracio called the meeting to order at approximately 2:34 PM.
2. **APPROVAL OF MINUTES**
 - a. **February 25, 2020** – Mr. Malinowski requested that his name be added to the minutes as being in attendance.

Mr. Manning stated, with regard to the Election of the Chair, it was suggested the nomination be accepted by acclamation. Two of the five members were not present; therefore, he did not vote in favor of acclamation. The minutes do not reflect that, and he would like for them to.

Ms. Kennedy moved, seconded by Mr. Manning, to approve the minutes as corrected.

In Favor: Terracio, Kennedy and Jackson

The vote in favor was unanimous.

3. **ADOPTION OF AGENDA** – Mr. Manning moved, seconded by Ms. Kennedy, to adopt the agenda as published.

Ms. Terracio moved, seconded by Mr. Jackson, to add a sewer service update to the end of the meeting.

Mr. Livingston inquired if the item regarding Affordable Housing was on tonight's agenda.

Ms. Terracio stated the agenda for tonight's meeting had already been set prior to her making the motion.

Mr. Malinowski requested additional information regarding the item Ms. Terracio suggested adding to the agenda.

Ms. Terracio stated Ms. Myers wanted to briefly address the committee.

Ms. Myers stated it was to give an update on the Southeast Sewer Project. The project is rapidly underway to repair the schools.

Mr. Malinowski suggested placing this under the Chair's report at the next Council meeting.

Ms. Terracio withdrew her motion.

In Favor: Terracio, Kennedy, Jackson and Newton

The vote in favor was unanimous.

4. **ITEMS FOR ACTION**

- a. Fiber Joint Trench during Southeast Sewer Project – Ms. Terracio stated staff originally recommended to deny this item. However, we do have an updated recommendation from staff.

Dr. Thompson stated, on this particular item, the briefing document only points you to the date of February 19th. Since February 19, we have faced COVID-19, which has changed the way we do business. It has altered our activities of daily living. With some information we received from the State Superintendent of Education, we understand there is a digital...

Mr. Manning stated the original briefing document was reviewed by Finance, Budget and Legal. He does not believe the updated recommendation has been reviewed by these departments.

Dr. Thompson responded the financials in the briefing document do not change. We were trying to make a business case for burying conduits and fiber optic lines in the Southeast portion of the County. As he mentioned, based on information that was received from the State Superintendent of Education about the digital divide in South Carolina, and the conversation he had with Richland School District One's Executive Director for Information Technology, who informed him that many families in the Southeast portion of the County receives hotspots from the local cellphone providers. However, those students were not able to use those hotspots because of the poor cellphone signals in that area. Moreover, as we understand, many people in the area are battling chronic diseases, and they have different doctor appointments. Now, more than ever, telemedicine has become so important. If they are not able to have a reliable signal they are not able to utilize telemedicine; therefore, their exposure increases if they have to go to a doctor's appointment or hospital to receive services. If we were to only bury the conduit it would cost \$1.7M. If we were to bury the conduit and fiber optic lines, it would increase the cost to \$2.8M.

Ms. Newton stated, it is her understanding, this matter is time sensitive. If it is an action Council is going to take, it only makes sense to do it once the ground is open, and the ground is currently open. One of the other things that has changed, since the original document was prepared, is that up to 75% of the cost is reimbursable through the CARES Act, and that information was not available before.

Dr. Thompson stated, for clarification, staff has not confirmed reimbursement through the CARES Act; however, staff is awaiting information from our contractor regarding that matter.

Ms. Newton inquired if that information would be available prior to next week's Council meeting.

Dr. Thompson responded they anticipate receipt of that information, and will share with Council members upon its receipt.

Mr. Malinowski stated he tends to disagree that the financials do not change. The financials, which were provided for this item, do not include \$1.7M. Therefore, he believes we need additional information on where the funds are coming from, since it could affect the monthly sewer rates. He would think there would need to be a budget and legal review to address anything we may open the County up to by putting the fiber in the ground. In addition, who will be responsible for maintaining the conduit? We were told in the briefing that the fiber companies are not interested in it, or already have something.

Mr. Smith responded, if there is not any information on how this is going to be maintained, those are questions we need to make sure we know the answer to before Council makes a policy decision.

Mr. Jackson stated, in Districts 8 and 9, we are going through a process where there are proposed rate hike for sewer services. It has a number of people alarmed because some of the questions being raised today were not raised then, and were not answered. As a result of that, residents' sewer bills are going to jump 60 – 70%, if the requested rate hike is approved by PFC. He suggested proceeding with caution to get those questions answered, before we move forward to prevent the citizens from receiving an unexpected rate hike in the future.

Ms. Kennedy agreed that we need additional information.

Ms. Newton also agreed that we need additional information. She requested that we hear from our expert, and forward this to Council without a recommendation. The situation with this project is that economy of scale you get you only get because the ground is open now. Therefore, it is a time sensitive issue.

Mr. Jim Stritzinger, Revolution D, Inc., specializes in the analysis of broadband deployment in the United States. He is studying the Federal Communications Commission data. He also partners with a company called Ookla in Seattle to do internet speed testing. He has mapped all 46 counties in South Carolina for the SC Hospital Association, as well as Palmetto Care Connections, and was recently engaged by the SC Telecommunications and Broadband Association to remap the State and document it, as of December 31, 2019.

Mr. Stritzinger stated, as a resident of Richland County, and an advocate of connecting everybody on the planet, it has never been more apparent, in light of COVID-29, of how important it is to connect our residents to the internet. It has become obvious that internet service is the platform, and foundation, for economic development, healthcare, K-12 education, and overall quality of life. Nationally, there is best practice that has become known as a “dig once policy”. It is something easily googled and find a lot of information on. It has become public policy in a lot of community where they have adopted the best practice that if you are going to dig up the road for water and sewer projects you might as well achieve some uplift in other areas of economic development, at the same time. In this case, Dr. Thompson made him aware of the water and sewer project in Lower Richland. Also, from his previous research and work with Councilwoman Dickerson over the years they have been studying the number of disconnected residents in Richland County. There is approximately 12,000 residents of the County that do not have access to the internet at home. Those people live in predominantly two areas: the Monticello Road Corridor and Lower Richland. When he refers to access, it has nothing to do with affordability. Access means having access to physical infrastructure. If you do not have access you never the choice to adopt technology into your family home. Fiber is the way of the future. If we want to connect these residents, we have to have fiber in the main traffic corridors. The best, and cheapest, time to do that is while the road are open. It can be done efficiently, and in partnership with others, inexpensively. There are two things that can be done: (1) Installation of conduit, which is like a straw in the ground. The conduit facilitates inexpensive delivery of fiber later. It does not have to be done at the same time. (2) Installation

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of conduit and fiber at the same time. It is a best practice to open the road one time and put conduit in. Of course, time is of the essence with the Lower Richland project because the ground is currently open. If you can get fiber into the right places it will allow you to provide for residential connectivity and provide the platform for improving cellular service. Cellular service is delivered in a network of towers. At the base of every tower, you have to have fiber optic cable going to the tower or it does not work. As a County resident, he would love to help the Lower Richland residents get connected.

Ms. Dickerson stated that Congressman Clyburn has also gotten engaged in these projects to make sure we expand it.

Mr. Stritzinger stated that he has presented his work to members of Congress in October. This has been a passion of his, and he is rooting hard for the local residents.

Mr. Manning stated, since we have been working on this for years, he assumes the funds have been allocated in the budget.

Dr. Thompson responded that no funds have been allocated. This item was brought forth by Councilwoman Myers.

Ms. Myers stated, for clarification, she brought this forward in the beginning and staff recommended not to proceed. The COVID-19 pandemic shifted the narrative, and rather than it being something nice to do, because of the disconnected students and seniors, the fact the road is currently open, and we might be able to get COVID-19 funding through the CARES Act, it came back around. This is not her sidestepping the process. Mr. Stritzinger has been working on this matter for years, even before she was a Councilmember.

Ms. Newton stated we have all been seeing the digital divide exacerbated by COVID-19, and students who are trying to be educated, etc. One of the things we are looking at is the increased cost for the project. As Mr. Stritzinger has looked at other municipalities, who have borne the cost of putting fiber in the line, how has he seen it "shake-out", in terms of recouping the investment?

Mr. Stritzinger responded he believes financially each project comes together in different ways, with the cost-sharing done differently. He worked most recently with Kershaw and Fairfield Counties to go after USDA grants. The USDA is one of the primary providers of rural broadband subsidy around the United States. There are different ways to create the financial synergy to make projects come to life. In this particular case, the first cost element that needs to be looked at is the cost of the conduit itself, and getting that in the ground. If that cost could be overcome and satisfied quickly, it is probably the cheapest possible opportunity to get the conduit in the ground, and will certainly hasten the delivery of fiber into Lower Richland.

Ms. Newton inquired, if Mr. Stritzinger had seen an example of a county/municipality that has installed the conduit first, and then sold the fiber, or how has that worked. The USDA financing is something that would tend to happen on the first end, and we are now at the crux of the moment.

Mr. Stritzinger responded that he did not have a particular project in mind, but he could do some research. The "Dig Once" strategy is a national strategy, so using those two words you can easily document other case studies around the United States.

Mr. Malinowski stated that Mr. Stritzinger referenced working with Kershaw and Fairfield Counties recently. He inquired if some type of monetary remuneration was received by Mr. Stritzinger for working with them.

Mr. Stritzinger responded in the affirmative.

Mr. Malinowski inquired if Mr. Stritzinger could stand to benefit monetarily if you were to assist Richland County, as well.

Mr. Stritzinger responded in the affirmative.

Mr. Malinowski stated the briefing document says, when carriers and internet service providers were asked for feedback, they responded with no interest, one did not respond, and two companies stated they already have their fiber lines where the project is planned to go. So, why would we want to add conduit, if two companies already have their fiber there.

Mr. Stritzinger responded that he is not familiar with those discussions.

Dr. Thompson stated staff conducted the research, and these were the responses received in February. He had an opportunity to connect with Mr. Stritzinger and the School District's Information Technology Executive Director last week. Everything that he has learned has become a new development, as of last week.

Mr. Malinowski stated Spectrum and AT&T already have their fiber lines where the project is planned.

Ms. Dickerson responded those two entities have been the obstacles preventing broadband being brought to South Carolina. We have been trying to figure out a way to get around that to allow other people to come in, whereby we could lower the costs of providing broadband to these areas.

Ms. Myers knows staff was told those companies had fiber deployed in those areas. She can guarantee that if they had fiber deployed the children and seniors who need high speed internet access would have it. There is stranded fiber deployed in some places, but it is not anything approaching what you would need to have a real network. The reason she feels this is urgent, at this time, for all of Richland County, given that our students are working from home, many of them taking home packets of paper to do their work, and not having Zoom classes because they cannot have them. In February, when we first talked about this, she agreed the financial constraints were different, and it was a nice to do thing. At this point, we are at a different moment, and we know that in September COVID-19 will be back. We have the opportunity to shave off \$10,000, from opening up the road, to put in a \$1M white tube that companies will come along and blow fiber into. She knows that Dr. Thompson said that he had conversations with companies who said they were not interested. She has forwarded to Dr. Thompson information from companies that are interested, and would be interested in buying it, so the only cost would be in opening the road, which we have already done. She read the CARES Act and it is her understanding is that broadband is one of the things that we can get reimbursed for. She would like for us to think critically about all of Richland County, and making internet access ubiquitous on high speed, and not just satellite that drops off when it rains. She agrees with Ms. Dickerson that AT&T and Sprint have been barriers to getting this service because they want to have a monopoly on the hijacked pricing services they provide that they call high speed internet that costs residents \$150/month, and the service is not available when it rains because it is satellite-based. This is an opportunity, not an obstacle. The ground is open. We have already spent that money. She would suggest wherever we are opening the ground across Richland County to put the conduit in, so that someone else can come along and pay us to blow fiber.

Mr. Manning moved, seconded by Mr. Jackson, to send this item to Council without a recommendation through the Coronavirus Ad Hoc Committee.

Ms. Terracio stated, for clarification, is the motion to send this item to another committee.

Mr. Manning responded in the affirmative. Any time before the appropriate motion would be to hold this in committee for additional information; however, he is aware of the sensitivity of the time to this. His understanding for why this is unique is because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the possibility of reimbursement through the CARES Act. It seemed to him it would be appropriate to send it through the Coronavirus Ad Hoc because we do not have the funding. When this originally went to Finance, staff's recommendation was not to proceed with this, so their recommendation was easy. Now, the recommendation has changed, but it has not been rerouted to Finance for their thoughts on the matter. If this motion is not approved, he would be glad to hold it in committee so that it can be rerouted, with the updated recommendation.

Mr. Livingston stated he needs to know what Spectrum and AT&T specifically mean, when they say they have fiber lines in the ground where the sewer system is being built, and why the residents are not connected to it. He inquired if the \$1.7M is only for the conduit.

Dr. Thompson responded in the affirmative.

Mr. Livingston stated so we have no commitment, or what would happen, at this point.

Dr. Thompson stated, at this time, staff cannot give an assessment because we have no commitment.

Ms. Terracio inquired, if this item would go to full Council next week, if the motion on the floor were to be approved.

Mr. Livingston responded in the affirmative.

Mr. Stritzinger stated he has completed maps of Richland County to notate where residents live that do not have internet connectivity at home. Lower Richland is very behind, in terms of internet capability. He would be happy to provide those maps to Council members, so they can have a reference point.

Mr. Livingston stated there may have been a time when a committee transferred something to another committee, but he would like a legal opinion on that matter.

Ms. Newton moved, seconded by Mr. Jackson, to forward to Council without a recommendation, and request staff to provide the additional information requested.

In Favor: Terracio, Jackson and Newton

Opposed: Manning

The vote was in favor of the substitute motion.

- b. Approval to Request Funding for a Proposed Turn Lane on Highway 378 – Ms. Terracio stated staff's recommendation is to proceed with requesting funds for the Highway 378 turn lane portion of the SCDOT's upcoming Highway 378 Widening Project.

Mr. Manning inquired if there was any changes to staff's recommendation.

Mr. Staley responded the only update is that this item was projected to be placed on the April 28th Transportation Ad Hoc Committee agenda, but due to current situation with COVID-19, it

did not make that deadline. They will attempt to get this on the June CTC Committee, and request the funds.

Ms. Newton moved, seconded by Ms. Kennedy, to forward to Council with a recommendation to approve staff's recommendation.

Mr. Malinowski inquired if we have had any crash data provided.

Mr. Staley responded this was something that came about through the Risk Management Office's safety audit. Getting in and out of the drop-off center is dangerous.

Mr. Malinowski requested Mr. Staley obtain the crash data. Additionally, he inquired if we have advertised this project.

Mr. Staley responded that they are requesting funding from CTC first.

Mr. Malinowski stated he understands we are requesting funding from the CTC, but we have figures in front of us about what the cost will be. He inquired if that means when the project is advertised we say they cannot go over the stated dollar amount.

Mr. Staley responded, in the past, they have gone back to the CTC, if the cost went over, and they have provided additional funding.

Mr. Manning made a substitute motion, seconded by Ms. Kennedy, to forward this item, and the following item, to Council without a recommendation.

In Favor: Terracio, Kennedy, Manning, Jackson and Newton.

The vote in favor of the substitute motion was unanimous.

- c. Petition for Abandonment and Closure of Hamrick Avenue (TMS # R11204-02-06) and Seabrook Street (TMS # R11204-02-06) in Columbia, South Carolina - This item was taken in the previous motion.

5. **ITEMS PENDING ANALYSIS: NO ACTION REQUIRED**

- a. I move to direct the County Attorney to work with the County Administrator to research and draft an absentee landlord ordinance. The ordinance should provide potential remedies for individuals who violate county ordinances and provide, via supplemental documentation a comprehensive review of the legal impacts [potentially] associated with the adoption of such an ordinance [NEWTON and DICKERSON] - No action was taken on this item.

6. **ADJOURNMENT** - The meeting adjourned at approximately 3:29 PM.