

The Richlands Town Council held a "Public Hearing" on Wednesday, April 16, 2025, at 5:00pm in the Richlands Council Chambers with the following present:

Mayor: Rod. D. Cury
Interim Town Manager: Ron Holt
Town Attorney: Michael Thomas
Finance Manager: Ronnie Campbell
Office Manager: Susan Whitt
Town Clerk: Amanda Beheler
Council Members: Seth White, Gary Jackson, Rick Wood, Jordan Bales, Jan White, and Laura Mollo.

Mayor Cury opened the meeting.

The Invocation and Pledge was led by Mayor Cury.

Mayor Cury advised the Public Hearing is for the purpose of receiving public comments and regarding the Towns amendment to existing ordinances which will regulate the rate and amount charged for electricity, water, sewer, and garbage collection.

Mayor Cury advised the meeting was open to take public comment.

Shea Cook, 215 Washington Square-

- Mr. Cook began by expressing his love for the Town of Richlands.
- Stated that he did not understand why the Electrical Committee was not advised of the proposed rate increases so that they could hold a meeting to discuss them and be able to give their recommendation to the Council. Mr. Cook asked the Council not to vote until this could be done.
- Asked if AEP customers in Town will pay more or less and would like more clarity and clear answers.
- Stated it was a disservice to the taxpayers to not use the Electrical Committee.
- Inquired if there is a Water/Sewer Committee.
- Asked the Council to table any decisions until the Electrical Committee could hold a meeting.

Mayor Cury advised he would need to reappoint the Electrical Committee because it was not done at the beginning of the year.

Mr. White advised that AEP's rates have been higher in the past 2-3 years.

Mr. White advised Mr. Cook that the new generator would be online around June/July of next year if everything goes as planned.

Mr. White explained that the Town needs to raise it's rates until the generator goes online because they have been selling the power for less than that are purchasing it for, causing the Town to use 1 million a year of it's reserves.

Mr. White made a commitment to not charge more than AEP and will reevaluate the increases in 6 months.

Chief Holt advised they are having to transfer from the General Fund to cover the deficit and it was not sustainable.

Mr. Cook stated that he appreciates everything the Council is doing in a very difficult situation but would like to see the Council use the Electrical Committee going forward.

Mrs. Mollo advised that the Finance Manager talks to the Council about all of these issues monthly during his reports.

Mrs. Mollo advised that it is the transmission fees that are causing the bills to increase, not the rates.

Mrs. Mollo stated that the utilities must be self-sustainable, and the Electric is not.

Mrs. Mollo advised that she proposed the .01 cent decrease in Real Estate Taxes to try to offset the increase in electrical rates to help citizens.

Mrs. Mollo also advised that she has toured the Water and Wastewater Plants and stated that they are falling apart.

Mrs. Mollo spoke briefly about low interest loans and grants that will also help with the repairs to these plants.

Mr. Cook stated he knew there were no easy answers and that he appreciated the consideration to his comments.

Jeff Casey-

- Agreed with Mr. Cook and stated that he was only there for clarification.
- Stated that he was very familiar with both the Water and Wastewater Plants and understood their need for the upgrades.
- Asked when the rate increase would go into effect, Chief Holt advised it would be effective July 1 if the Council votes to approve the increases.
- Inquired about Tazewell County PSA and the Town of Cedar Bluff and their responsibility to help with the upgrades. Chief Holt advised the Town is responsible for 66% of the debt and the others will be billed for their portion and that he has already met with representatives from each.
- Mr. Wood advised that upgrading the plant will reduce operating costs.
- Chief Holt advised that Tazewell and Bluefield are both updating their plants also.

Virginia Hearl-

- Asked at what point did her sewer rate get higher than her water rate and stated that she didn't understand why the rates were going up. Chief Holt advised it was to pay for substantial upgrades to the plants. Mr. White advised the plants are 10-15 years over the life cycle of both plants.
- Chief Holt advised the project has been approved by the VRA for Wastewater and are in the process of the application for the Water.
- Inquired about money in the reserve accounts, Chief Holt advised the Town is operating in the red for the sewer at its current rate. Mr. White advised it is costing more to treat now than in the past, everything has increased in prices.
- Asked where all the money that has been collected so far gone. Mrs. Mollo explained that the Town has been running a deficit for more than five years and there have been no rate increases. Mrs. Mollo also advised the sewer had cost more than the water for about a year now. Chief Holt stated that her bill did seem high, and he would send someone to check for leaks.
- Mayor Cury showed Mrs. Hearl a piece of the water plant.
- Asked why improvements weren't done sooner, Mr. Wood advised this has been going on for many years and stated the costs skyrocketed so much the Town was able to do the upgrades.
- Mrs. Mollo advised the Town has won awards for excellence in the water quality recently despite the needed upgrades.
- Stated she understood the breakdown of the plants but felt like it shouldn't have got to this point.
- Asked if there was anywhere in the budget that could help, Mr. White explained that all these accounts have to stay separate, they can only pay electric from the electric and water from water.
- Stated she likes Mr. Cooks' idea about having committees. Mrs. Mollo advised that the Council has a monthly meeting, and no one ever shows up. Mrs. Mollo stated that the Council would love for citizens to be more involved and to show up and voice their concerns. Mrs. Mollo advised that every month the Agenda packets are posted online or a paper copy can be picked up at the town hall.

- Spoke to the Council about the REC Park and its importance to the Town, Mrs. Mollo agreed with its importance and stated the Town did not want to make any cuts that impact lives.

Mr. White stated the rate increases were not from any misuse of funds, it is state-mandated.

Mrs. Mollo advised the proposed budget and monthly financials are public documents and available for any citizen to review. Mrs. Mollo advised the Council is providing accountability to the citizens.

Mr. Casey stated the upgrades to the plants will cut the operating costs in the future.

Mr. Wood stated Richlands was the only place that had electricity after Hurricane Helene, when AEP customers did not.

Lynna Mitchell-

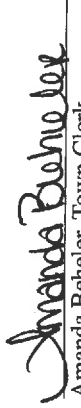
- Asked if she would need to come to Town Hall to get a copy of the Proposed Budget or if it was posted online. The Council advised they would get her a copy.

Mark Cordle-

- Asked what kind of savings will citizens get from the generator. Mr. White advised if they turned it on today, they could generate 5MW of power at .05 cents per Kilowatt, with no transmission fees.
- Inquired if the Generator is engine driven, Mr. White advised it was. Mr. White stated the engine would be rebuilt every 5 years, and the Town is planning for the long-term goal of Natural Gas.
- Asked if the Town would be purchasing gas through CNX, Mr. White advised they didn't know at this time.
- Mr. White advised the Town purchased the best generator package available.

Mr. Casey asked when the Wastewater renovations will begin, Chief Holt advised it would be sometime in the next Fiscal Year.

Mayor Cury closed the Public Hearing.


Amanda Beheler, Town Clerk


Rod D. Cury, Mayor