Crossett City Council met in regular session September 21, 2015 at 6:00 p.m. in the Crossett Fire Station #1.

Roll call vote was taken as follows:

Present: Mayor Scott McCormick, City Attorney James Hamilton,

Councilmembers: Robert Freeman, Candace Jeffress, Eddie Rowe, James Knight, C.T. Foster, Lynn Rodgers

Absent: Clerk/Treasurer Jesse Walthall

Mayor McCormick called the meeting to order with prayer and Pledge of Allegiance.

Motion by Councilwoman Rodgers, seconded by Councilwoman Jeffress to approve the minutes of the regular meeting of August 17, 2015 and the special meeting of September 14, 2015. Roll call vote. All vote yes. Motion passed.

Motion by Councilwoman Rodgers, seconded by Councilman Foster to approve the financial reports for August, 2015. Roll call vote. All vote yes. Motion passed.

Mayor McCormick reminded the council that at a meeting earlier in the year, he had presented samples of nepotism policies for the council to review. He added that there are several good points in each of the policies and asked for permission to appoint a committee to finalize a proposal for the city. Motion by Councilwoman Jeffress, seconded by Councilman Freeman to allow the mayor to appoint a committee. Voice vote was taken. All in favor. None opposed. Motion passed.

In other old business, Councilwoman Rodgers asked to revisit the ambulance proposal. She stated that she had misunderstood the intentions of the Quorum Court as to how they would proceed. The Quorum Court had said that with the council’s approval, they would proceed with a business module to be proposed. She assumed that the module would be presented to the council before they citizens were asked to vote. The Quorum Court has already started procedures to call for the election. She asked that she be allowed to rescind her vote to proceed until a written agreement is delivered to the council. Mayor McCormick added that he too feels like the council was misled. He asked that City Attorney Hamilton be allowed to draft a letter to the Quorum Court asking them to make a proposal to the council. Councilwoman Rodgers added that she wants the proceedings stopped until an agreement is reached, and asked that the council revote on the matter. Motion by Councilwoman Rodgers, seconded by Councilwoman Jeffress to stop proceedings for a tax proposal until a memorandum of understanding is finalized. Roll call vote. Freeman, Jeffress, Knight, Foster and Rodgers vote yes. Rowe voted no. With a 5-1 vote, the motion passed.

Councilwoman Rodgers asked if the equipment list had been revised and if anyone had followed up the Crossett Housing Authority concerning vacant lots. Mayor McCormick stated that he has spoken to someone with CHA and they are interested in vacant lots, but that the equipment list has not been updated.

The 2013 audit was presented to the council for review. Not all councilmembers had copies of the audit, so Mayor tabled this until next meeting.

Mayor McCormick asked the council to approve leasing the city’s building at 807 Main (the old Smooty’s building) to the American Legion for $1.00 per year for 10 years. The Legion will maintain the building, pay all utilities and insurance costs. Mr. Jack Netherland, chapter president, added that there would be no alcohol or smoking allowed. He added that this will remain a family friendly environment. Motion by Councilman Freeman, seconded by Councilman Knight to lease the facility at the above mentioned terms. Roll call vote. All vote yes. Motion passed.

A Resolution to levy 5 mill property tax for general operations was presented. Motion by Councilwoman Jeffress, seconded by Councilman Foster to have City Attorney Hamilton read proposed Resolution R-2015-6. Roll call vote. All vote yes, motion passed and Hamilton read. Motion by Councilman Freeman, seconded by Councilman Rowe to adopt R-2015-6. Roll call vote. All vote yes. Motion passed and resolution is adopted.

A resolution to levy 2.4 mills property tax for library operations was presented. Motion by Councilwoman Rodgers, seconded by Councilwoman Jeffress to have City Attorney Hamilton read proposed Resolution R-2015-7. Roll call vote. All vote yes. Motion passed and Hamilton read proposed resolution. Motion by Councilwoman Jeffress, seconded by Councilman Knight to adopt R-2015-7. Roll call vote. All vote yes. Motion passed and R-2015-7 is adopted.

A resolution honoring Robyn Halliburton for her years of service to the Crossland Zoo and city of Crossett was presented. Motion by Councilwoman Jeffress, seconded by Councilman Rowe to have city attorney read the proposed resolution. Roll call vote. Motion passed and Hamilton read proposed Resolution R-2015-8. Motion by Councilwoman Rodgers, seconded by Councilman Foster to adopt R-2015-8. Roll call vote. All vote yes. Motion passed and R-2015-8 was adopted.

A resolution honoring Larry Cantley for his induction into the Southwest Region Baseball Hall of Fame was presented. Motion by Councilwoman Jeffress, seconded by Councilman Rowe to have city attorney Hamilton read the proposed resolution. Roll call vote. All vote yes. Motion passed and resolution was read. Motion by Councilman Freeman, seconded by Councilman Rowe to adopt Resolution R-2015-9. Roll call vote. All vote yes. Motion passed and R-2015-9 was adopted.

Mayor McCormick called for discussion on garbage bags. He stated that at some of the budget meetings, the council had said that because of financial hardships, giving bags each year may be something that should be discontinued. Councilwoman Rodgers added that this service is something the city can no longer afford. Councilman Freeman agreed and stated that cuts must begin somewhere. It is time to get bids for the bags and he feels that this expense is one that can be cut.

Mr. Bill Runyun, 704 Walnut, asked to address the council. He stated that the bags are not free to the customers, they are covered in monthly rates. City Attorney Hamilton added that this practice is one that is mandated in city ordinance and to discontinue, the ordinance will need to be revised. Councilwoman Rodgers stated that during the budgeting process, this should be discontinued. Motion by Councilwoman Rodgers, seconded by Councilman Freeman to rescind and revise the garbage collection ordinance. Roll call vote. All vote yes. Motion passed.

With no more business from the council or on the agenda, Mayor McCormick opened the floor to the audience.

Wayne Keeth, a county resident, stated that the city is in need for much prayer. He encouraged everyone to attend a function that his church is sponsoring to “Pray Across Crossett” on October 10.

Mr. Ben LaFoon, Little Rock resident, spoke concerning the closing of the Crossland Zoo. He expressed concern over tearing down things that are our heritage.

Willie Barker, 1521 Hancock, asked if there is anything that can be done to keep the zoo open. He feels that funds can be raised if the council will consider.

Councilwoman Rodgers explained that there are only 5 small zoos left in the United States. This is because of expense and regulations. The city can no longer afford to operate the zoo.

Zoo Director Robyn Halliburton addressed the issue. She stated that this is not just a financial issue. That zoo regulations have become such that small roadside zoos are a thing of the past. Even large zoos struggle to meet financial and physical obligations.

Mayor McCormick added that this is the toughest decision he and this council have been faced with. Due to declining population and declining revenues, some things must be cut.

Mr. Kevin Cosby, 2707 Main Street, added that the economy is tough everywhere. He feels that the council has made a “knee-jerk” reaction. The zoo is important to the tourism industry in Crossett.

Mrs. Ginger Pittman, 1004 Walnut and in the real estate business, added that the zoo and the Crossett Pool are selling points for potential city residents.

Mrs. Charlotte Johnson, 602 Maple, asked if the vote was taken in a public meeting. Mayor McCormick explained that it was a financial meeting which is a public meeting. The discussion began with the resignation of the zoo director. While the council is already figuring ways to make substantial cuts to the budget, felt that this was probably the best time to make the hard decision.

Councilman Freeman stated that the city has around 100 employees. These employees haven’t had raises in 5 years.

Mrs. Wanda Runyun, 704 Walnut, asked if a county tax or millage could be approved to support the zoo.

Ms. Jade Halliburton, 1507 Elm and former employee of the Crossland Zoo, stated that USDA, PETA, and AZA regulations have make it nearly impossible for small zoos to remain in existence. She added that this is not just a local problem, but a national one.

Mrs. Patricia Dodd, 335 Sheltons Loop, added that regardless of the outcome with the zoo, people should remain involved. There are other projects available that can bring revenue to the city and should be looked into.

Mrs. Jessica Hill, 3040 Ashley 7, stated that she has a degree in management and experience in this kind of crisis. She offered suggestions such as grants, fund raisers, concessions, gift shops and bricks to help raise money for the zoo. Zoo Director Halliburton explained that with the exception of the bricks, each of these have been tried.

Lynn Mills, not a resident of the city, asked the council to rescind the vote to close the zoo.

Mr. Tim Toler, Ashley 12 W, inquired as to a dollar amount it would take to bring the zoo up to current standards. Mrs. Halliburton explained that there is really no way to know. Because the exhibits are grandfathered in, as they come down, new structures have to be up to zoo standards.

Mr. Mike Chisholm, owner of Oakhurst Minit Shop, feels that the closing of the zoo is happening on short notice. He asked what it would take to keep the zoo open through the end of this year.

Mrs. Angie Hogan, East Pierce Street, asked if the park would be closing. Mayor McCormick stated the park will remain opened.

Motion by Councilman Freeman, seconded by Councilman Rowe to adjourn. All in favor. Meeting adjourned.

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Jesse Walthall, Clerk/Treasurer Marshall S. McCormick, Mayor