

SPECIAL MEETING CITY COUNCIL
February 9, 2021

The City Council of the City of Albemarle met in a special session focusing on strategic budget planning on Tuesday, February 9th at 4:00 p.m. in the Stanly County Senior Center. Mayor Ronnie Michael and the following Councilmembers were present, to-wit: Mayor Pro Tem Martha Sue Hall and Councilmembers Martha E. Hughes, Dexter Townsend, Christopher Whitley, Shirley D. Lowder, and Benton Dry. Absent: Councilmember Bill Aldridge

Also present were the following City of Albemarle staff:

- Michael J. Ferris – City Manager
- Nyki Hardy – Assistant City Manager
- Britt A. Burch – City Attorney
- Cindy Stone – Clerk/Assistant to the City Manager
- Keith Tunnell – Economic Development Director
- Chief T. Pierre Brewton – Fire Department
- Colleen Conroy – Finance Department Director
- Jacob Weavil – Assistant Director Finance Department
- Dana Chaney – Human Resources Department Director
- Owen Squires – Information Systems Department Director
- Lisa Kiser – Parks and Recreation Department Director
- Kevin Robinson – Planning and Development Services Director
- Chief David Dulin – Police Department
- Judy Redwine – Public Utilities Department Director
- Ross Holshouser – Public Works Department Director
- Lee Staton – Public Hosing Director

Facilitating the session or presenting were:

- Geraldine Gardner – Executive Director, Centralina Regional Council
- Emily Parker – Senior Planner, Centralina Regional Council

The Mayor called the meeting to order.

Introduction and Meeting Overview

City Manager Michael J. Ferris opened the session by welcoming everyone and briefly summarizing the intent of the meeting. He noted this is building upon years of changes and improvements to strengthen the budgeting and planning process. He noted several improvements have been named over the years to provide additional information to assist in decision-making. This year,

information from a community survey will be shared and utilized in the planning and budgeting process for enhanced outcomes.

Geraldine Gardner from Centralina Regional Council (CRC) began with an overview of the agenda and a summary of how the meeting would proceed, while Emily Parker went over ground rules review.

Survey Overview

Community Survey: Overview of Results

Ms. Gardner walked Council through the demographic breakout of residents who responded and then went through various layers of survey results, from overall statistics to in-depth analyses of areas where the City is viewed positively, as well as areas where the City needs to meet perceived needs better.

A total of 1,366 people responded to the survey. Of that total, 67% filled out the optional demographic questions. A high percentage of businesses and employees completed the survey. There was balanced age representation in the responses, with almost half under 50 and about half over 50 years of age (NOTE: anyone 18 years or older could complete the survey). Almost three-fourths of respondents (73%) identified themselves as white.

Overall, residents are looking to the City for: clear articulation of the direction in which the City will go in the future; quality employment and an increase in diversity of businesses to meet local needs; increase focus on schools and education quality even though the City is not directly involved in education issues; a desire for greater community building and more transparency from local government; and a desire for facilities, amenities and activities catering to multiple generations.

For the quality of life questions, people who responded said the Albemarle is a good place to live, with 24% saying it's a good place to recreate. Over half (53%) of respondents said Albemarle is an excellent to good place to live, while 38% said it's a good place to raise a family. The areas where the City needs improvement (opportunity areas) are being a good place to work and own a business.

Ms. Gardner prompted Council for any responses to the information conveyed thus far. Councilmember Dry remarked that although the City of Albemarle is not at the top of the business spectrum, there are plenty of opportunities here for entrepreneurs. The City is also attempting to better market Albemarle as a place to own a business, and so the response is more likely related to a collective attitude about the business climate here. Mayor Pro Tem Hall stated that she does not want the results of the survey to sit on a shelf.

The areas for the City to improve upon included:

- Employment opportunities
- Diversity of businesses and services
- Education (even though it is not an area that the City can impact directly)
- Safety
- Arts and culture activities

Ms. Gardner prompted the group again for responses to this information. The Mayor stated that he is not surprised at all with the results. Finance Director Colleen Conroy noted that although ALCOA went out of business a while back and there has been a steady loss of manufacturers, people here still think of them as drivers of employment. The City needs to develop the Albemarle Business Center and communicate that to the public as a way of saying “we hear you.”

Interactive Engagement on Vision, Mission and Values

Ms. Gardner led the group into a pivot from survey results to a larger discussion of furthering the group’s work on strategic framework building through developing the City’s mission, vision, and values by feeding the community’s and their needs into this larger strategic design.

She recapped the definitions of vision, mission, and values:

- Vision – what do we want to be in the future?
- Mission – why we exist
- Values – how we act/ behave in pursuing our mission

Ms. Gardner provided a few examples of three different municipalities’ vision, mission and values statements to show the group what their end product would look like. Two examples came from regional communities: Mooresville and Davidson.

Vision Discussion

Ms. Gardner led a discussion about developing a vision statement. That statement should be forward thinking, able to resonate with people, and tell people why the City makes and executes decisions.

She then reported how the community survey results could tie into the process of thinking about and building a vision for the City. There were 2 prompt questions on the survey which can provide information to Council and the Leadership Team about how the Albemarle community is seeing what the City could look like in the future. The first question asked people to select words from a list to describe Albemarle. Top responses included: friendly, quiet, small town, potential, outdoor, great, safe, nice, and park, among others.

The second pertinent question asked people to choose between a series of sets of two different words/phrases to describe the preferred characteristics of Albemarle in the future. The majority of respondents chose the following characteristics: bustling, known for outdoor recreation, known for retail services, known for the business park, and oriented to the future, among others.

Ms. Gardner opened up the floor to gauge reaction from the group on these results. Mayor Pro Tem Hall replied that she felt a little conflicted in that she recognizes the City has to protect its history, but it also has to be bustling.

The facilitators asked Council members to get into small groups and go through a brainstorming exercise to provide answers to the prompt question: "Albemarle will be..." The groups were provided with a list of answers that the Leadership Team developed when working through this exercise at their retreat.

In the report out, the following themes/responses were identified and discussed:

- An active downtown
- Healthy, wealthy, and vibrant
- Promotion as a regional center with many retail options to attract people to other services such as sit-down dining restaurants, which would drive a cycle of going into stores and eating and engaging in local attractions and activities
- Agreement with many of the concepts provided on the Leadership Team list
- Small, vibrant City
- A place which has extensive activities
- A place rich in history and with much open space
- Opening and welcoming with opportunities for all
- Inclusive
- Known as a place to support people furthering their education
- Building community based on pride
- Coming together in a cohesive manner
- Great place to live and raise a family
- Be inviting
- Opportunities for Millennials

Before dinner break, Council gathered in a separate group with the City Manager and the City Attorney to be apprised of a public records request that came in the day before related to the Albemarle Business Center, and to arrange the annual performance review of the City Attorney.

There was a brief break for dinner and then a working dinner session.

Mission Discussion

Ms. Gardner began this portion of the meeting by reviewing the three main components of a mission statement, which are: why; what (function); and how (the City's unique way to do business).

Ms. Gardner asked if Information Systems Department Director Owen Squires would share his understanding of developing a mission statement. Mr. Squires likened this task to the IT sector having to now show companies and other employers how to understand IT operations. Employers are asking IT departments not the "what" or "how" of what they are doing, but rather starting with asking "why" they are doing what they are doing. He suggested that if the City started with answering the "why?" question first, the "what" and "how" of the City's mission will automatically follow.

The group was given a handout of Leadership Team ideas about describing the City's mission, and were asked to divide into a few groups to come up with mission description ideas.

In the report out the following ideas were shared: a vibrant community with a good quality of life; a City providing resources and services for the citizens of Albemarle; a vibrant community dedicated to improving the quality of life of the residents of Albemarle; and a City which is efficient and transparent.

Values Discussion

Ms. Gardner reviewed the exercise that Council completed back in the November strategic planning sessions selecting words which describe important core values of elected officials.

She requested that Council members divide into groups again and go through the list of top characteristics based on the responses in November and refine them down to the top few which would summarize how they would describe a high-functioning, public service oriented team. In report out, the top values noted were: ethics, leadership, vision. Multiple Council members explained that within the word "ethics" they considered being trustworthy, transparent, and honest as rolled up into the definition of "ethics."

Ms. Gardner asked what behaviors would support ethics. The group responded with: transparent and trustworthy in actions and decisions.

The 3 top values of ethics, leadership, and vision will be moved forward in the next strategic planning session to assist Council in building a mission statement.

Roles Review: What Do Council and Staff Need to be Successful?

Ms. Gardner and Ms. Parker teamed up for this last part of the meeting. The facilitators distributed a wallet-sized card created by a former head of the Centralina Council on Governments (now Centralina Regional Council) identifying the levels and steps in a balanced decision process between elected officials and City staff.

The 3 levels of a balanced decision process are (from top down): process discussion; policy discussion; and decision discussion. The steps for each of these levels was explained in detail by the facilitators.

The facilitators then opened up discussion. The Mayor stated that this is how the City operates. Assistant City Manager Nyki Hardy stated that the Leadership Team is striving for this and that it makes perfect sense.

Councilmember Lowder used an element of the community survey, the desire for the City to provide quality and access to education, as a way to respond to this rubric. She stated that the City should change things earlier in the process to address aspects of City life that they can directly impact, and that something like education is not something the City can directly address. The Mayor replied that in fact the City can impact certain areas of life in Albemarle in varying degrees, even with something like education, and noted that the City agreed to partner with the County on providing the funds and resources for a school resource officer.

A Councilmember brought up a recent example of Council discussing utility billing and the mechanics of making the decision on whether or not it should be placed on the meeting agenda as a time when the process could have worked better. There was a discussion among staff and Council about that recent occurrence and possible ways it could have worked better for Council, staff, and the public. There was feedback on that suggestion that staff had worked through solutions, but did not know that Council was considering discussing the item that night, and so could have offered assistance during Council deliberations had they known. Some on Council felt that while they understand and agree with the comment about having good information to make decisions, the decision in question was time-sensitive and would not have changed and was the correct decision our citizens.

Wrap Up and Next Steps

The facilitators noted that in next week's session some budget-specific information will be provided to Council, Council will get to prioritize FY2021-22 investment opportunities, and sample mission statements will be drafted from tonight's work for Council to choose an option.

Other Business

The Mayor called for Council and the City Manager to group together for a brief discussion and decision on whether the City would host the next Stanly County Council on Governments quarterly meeting virtually on Tuesday, February 23rd. The Mayor noted that based on feedback received by Assistant to the City Manager Cindy Stone, there was not much interest in participation by other local governments. Council agreed to cancel the February 23rd meeting.

Upon a motion by Councilmember Whitley, seconded by Councilmember Hughes and unanimously carried, the meeting was adjourned until Monday, February 15, 2021 at 6:30 p.m. in Council Chambers of City Hall.