

**River Bend Town Council
Work Session Minutes
August 14, 2025
Town Hall
5:00 p.m.**

Present Council Members: Mayor Mark Bledsoe
Lisa Benton
Brian Leonard
Kathy Noonan
Jeff Weaver

Absent Council Member: Buddy Sheffield

Town Manager: Delane Jackson
Town Attorney: Trey Ferguson
Town Clerk: Kristie Nobles
Police Chief: Sean Joll
Finance Director: Mandy Gilbert

Members of the Public Present: 5

CALL TO ORDER

Mayor Bledsoe called the meeting to order at 5:00 p.m. on Thursday, August 14, 2025, at the River Bend Town Hall with a quorum present.

VOTE – Deletion to the Agenda

Councilman Leonard motioned to amend the agenda by removing item 2 and 4 from the agenda. The motion carried unanimously.

VOTE – Approval of Agenda

Councilwoman Benton motioned to accept the agenda as amended. The motion carried unanimously.

Discussion – Internet Policy for Advisory Board Site

Councilman Leonard stated that he recommends amending the town's Internet Policy as it is proposed and it is included in the agenda packet. He stated that the changes would include other social media platforms and would not just pertain to the town's webpage.

**Discussion – Accept Gift Parcel of Land on Pirates Road described as Craven County
PIN 8-206-00B**

The Town Manager stated that the Council had previously agreed to accept this donated land on Pirates Road. He stated that the Town Attorney recommended that the Town Council officially accept the donated land. Councilman Leonard stated that this parcel could be used for parking for flooding events and the Town Manager agreed.

VOTE – Accept Gift Parcel of Land on Pirates Road described as Craven County PIN 8-206-00B

Councilman Leonard motioned to accept the parcel of land on Pirates Road described as Craven County PIN – 8-206-00B as presented. The motion carried unanimously.

Discussion–Town Resolution on Social Media

Councilman Weaver read the attached statement. (see attached).

Councilman Leonard asked the Town Attorney for his opinion on what Councilman Weaver read and stated that he does not want the Council to be exposed. Councilman Leonard further stated that from what he understands that Councilman Weaver is asking, is for the Council to distance themselves from the River Bend Community Facebook page and say this is not an official town site and do not conduct it as a town site. Councilman Weaver stated that the Council does not have the legal authority to monitor someone's social media page, but the Council can get thrown into the legal ramification, if a first amendment case is brought and the Council doesn't at least publish this resolution. Councilman Leonard asked the Town Attorney what exposure does the Council, a governing body, have when there is a situation as described. The Town Attorney stated that a legal opinion has been shared privately, and he asked the Council if they would like the opinion stated in open session or in closed session to preserve the attorney-client privilege. Councilman Leonard stated that he would like it to be discussed in closed session. The Town Attorney stated that he would advise to discuss it in closed session to preserve the attorney-client privilege, but he would be happy to provide that opinion in closed or open session. He warned the Council that discussing it in open session runs the risk of waiving the right of attorney-client privilege on that matter.

Councilman Leonard stated that he agrees with the Attorney and that his feelings on this matter are well known. He stated that he thinks it is more of a detriment than a benefit. He stated that the town does have policies in place and he understands that the Council, as elected officials, have different responsibilities than a private citizen. He stated that it is a balancing act, and he wishes that the Council could figure this out and put it to rest as the Council has been down this road before. The Town Attorney stated that as elected officials, you do not lose your first amendment rights. He stated that the Council still has rights. However, especially with social media context, when you begin to utilize social media platforms, either an account or a page that you administer, whether it is public opinion or giving out information about government decisions and engaging with the public in that manner, it starts to blur the lines between personal first amendment rights and acting in an official capacity as a town elected official. He stated when you are acting as a town official, Councilman Weaver's point is correct, you can not censor viewpoints, specifically deleting comments or blocking comments based on what is said. That type activity is viewpoint discrimination. The Supreme Court, in a previous case, did make a clear distinction between personal and public platforms, which could be identified with a disclaimer on that platform to say, "This is my personal page and the views expressed are my own". That preserves the individual's rights, so it's not confused as a government page.

The Town Attorney stated that the Supreme Court, is in a budding area in first amendment law, but, in the court case referenced, the court stated that this is fact-intense-analysis. He said there is not a real clear line test for when a government official's Facebook page is blurring the line from personal opinions to acting as a government. Councilman Weaver stated that elected officials could have a private page or government page, but he does not think they can have both pages. The Town Attorney stated that he feels they can have both, but it cannot be the same page. Councilman Leonard asked if someone violates the rules of a page and the administrators of those pages, remove those comments or people, and it has nothing to do with censorship, is that legitimate. The Town Attorney stated that the court would look at specific facts, as to who is administering a page, how is it being administered, what activity is going on, and if it is a nonelected official deleting these items. The question is when it's an elected official who is deleting information, comments, and people from the groups. The courts have not made it clear when its government action or not.

REVIEW – Agenda for the August 21, 2025, Council Meeting

The Council reviewed the agenda for the August 21, 2025, Council Meeting.

CLOSED SESSION

Councilman Weaver motioned to go into Closed Session under NCSG §143-318.11(a)(3)(6). The Council entered Closed Session at 5:19 p.m.

During Closed Session, Councilwoman Benton left the meeting at 5:50 p.m., unexcused, and left the building at 5:54 p.m.

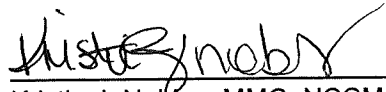
OPEN SESSION

Councilman Weaver motioned to return to Open Session at 6:16 p.m. The motion carried unanimously.

The Mayor stated that no action was taken in Closed Session.

ADJOURNMENT/RECESS

There being no further business, *Councilwoman Noonan moved to adjourn. The motion carried unanimously.* The meeting was adjourned at 6:17 p.m.



Kristie J. Nobles, MMC, NCCMC
Town Clerk

Council Statement – “River Bend Community” Facebook Page

I’ve received ongoing concerns regarding the “River Bend Community” Facebook page and how it is being used by Ms. Lisa Benton, with a pattern of activity that has included periods of controversy interspersed with quieter times. This is not a personal dispute and it is not about controlling anyone’s speech. It is about a clear and ongoing pattern where a page that appears to represent our community is being used to solicit input on council business, present information in a way that suggests official standing, and then remove or block residents based on their viewpoints.

The most recent incident that sparked controversy was a post by Ms. Benton regarding brown water and the pickleball courts. The legal and ethical implications of this are significant. When an elected official uses a platform to conduct public business, that platform is no longer just “private” — it becomes a public forum subject to constitutional protections. Simply put, you can have a governmental page, and if you do, you cannot censor based on viewpoint. Or you can have a private page, but you cannot operate as both at the same time.

It’s also important to note that this concern is not new. During her campaign for this seat, Ms. Benton acknowledged the potential conflict of interest and stated she would remove herself as administrator of the page to avoid even the perception of impropriety. However, it was later discovered that she continued running the page under an assumed profile, effectively bypassing the very safeguard she had committed to. Then, after receiving criticism for it, she came out and publicly administered the page once again.

The issues with this page are not hypothetical; they are documented:

1. **Polls on Council Business** – Conducted on the page with the stated intent to use responses to guide official decision-making. The most recent example is a poll about whether to fund the pickleball courts, which Ms. Benton then used to justify her decision.
2. **Soliciting Feedback on Pending Issues** – Done while serving in an elected capacity, despite claims of acting as a private citizen.
3. **Content Removal** – Deleted comments from residents expressing opposing views on town issues.
4. **Blocking Residents** – Removed members from the group for dissenting opinions, sometimes with written admission that it was due to viewpoint disagreement.
5. **Statements of Control** – Publicly stated the page is personally owned and will be moderated at will.
6. **Threats of Legal Action** – Used as a response to concerns rather than addressing the core issue.

Why this matters is simple:

- The page functions as a **tool of governance** by soliciting official input and engaging the public on council matters.
- Viewpoint-based moderation on such a platform raises **First Amendment and ethical risks**.
- It creates legal exposure for the Town and misleads residents into believing they are participating in an open public forum, when in fact it is selectively controlled.
- This undermines public trust and transparency in our local government.

Given that prior attempts to address this privately have gone unanswered, I believe the Council should act to protect both the Town and our credibility.

My recommendation is this:

- The Council should **formally and publicly distance itself** from the “River Bend Community” Facebook page.
- We should reaffirm our Social Media Resolution and clearly state that the page is not an official Town platform.
- We should make it clear to residents that any views, polls, or moderation practices on that page are solely the responsibility of the administrator, not the Town of River Bend or this Council.

This is not about restricting anyone’s personal speech. It is about ensuring a clear separation between personal activity and official governance, avoiding legal exposure, and protecting the integrity of public discourse in River Bend. I will continue to bring this forward until the matter is resolved.