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SEVENTY-SECOND YEAR NUMBER 28 WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 9, 2019 8 PAGES TODAY

'I want us to understand that integrity counts' - Andy Anderson

Andy Anderson in front of a packed audience before Columbus County Commissioners Monday (Deuce Niven, TLT)

Commissioners largely quiet as sheriff's issue swirls

By DEUCE NIVEN
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Columbus County Commissioners were largely silent Monday evening as they heard from supporters of Sheriff Jody Greene and former Sheriff Lewis Hatcher, who has sued to return to the post as appeals of the November 2018 election remain unresolved.

All of the 30-minutes allotted to public comment under the board's rules was devoted to the issues, some challenging the job Hatcher did for more than four years, others who said Greene should never have been sworn into office without a Certificate of Election, which has not yet been issued.

Another ten minutes was allocated to former sheriff's candidate Calvin Norton, who promised undefined legal action if commissioners did not take action, presumably to return Hatcher to office, by 10 a.m. Tuesday.

Chairman Trent Burroughs smiled and thanked every speaker, including Norton, and said after the meeting that the board would not comment on Norton's allegations and documents he presented.

Commissioners' chambers have a legal seating capacity set at 146, which Whiteville Fire Marshal Hal Lowder said was reached, but not exceeded.

Overflow crowd in the lobby reached its capacity of 23, and Lowder said some additional people were allowed to stand in the stairwell. No one was asked to leave.

Norton's place on the agenda was near the end of the meeting, public comment near the beginning. Many of those present who appeared to be in support of Greene left when Norton rose to speak.

Not counting Norton, eight men and women addressed commissioners, most in support of either Greene or Hatcher.

Some highlights:

For Greene

- George W. Smith said he was unhappy that Hatcher and his attorney Oscar Blanks referred to the potential of civil unrest after filing a lawsuit that seeks to return Hatcher to the sheriff's office pending the outcome of appeals to the NC Board of Elections.

"The people of Columbus County have shown they will not tolerate civil disobedience," Smith said.

- Kevin Harrelson said the issue has caused "a great divide" in the county, and that social media comments have centered on race. Greene is White, Hatcher African American.

"It's not about race," Harrelson said. "It's about a man not doing his job and wanting to do something different.

"That's why I'm supporting this sheriff. I want something different. Hatcher had his chance, and nothing's changed."

- Steve Creech, who owns an alarm company, said he voted for Hatcher in 2014, but said that since then the east end of

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Whiteville Fire Marshal counts those in the commissioners' chambers

Complaint seeks to return Hatcher to sheriff's post

By DEUCE NIVEN
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Jody Greene "is a Usurper of authority and is unlawfully holding the Office of Sheriff of Columbus County," a complaint filed by former Sheriff Lewis Hatcher on Friday says.

Hatcher, with attorneys Oscar Blanks and Heath Nance, filed the complaint, demanding a jury trial, in Columbus County Superior Court on Friday afternoon.

Blanks said he is asking for a hearing before a Superior Court judge "as soon as possible," that that Hatcher should be returned to office until a certificate of election is issued for the office.

Defendants named in the complaint include Greene, "Individually and in his disputed official capacity as sheriff," all seven Columbus County Commissioners, and County Manager Mike Stephens, the name misspelled "Stevens" on the complaint.

In the complaint Hatcher maintains that:

- Greene was sworn as Sheriff on Dec. 3, 2018 without a certificate of election
- Greene was sworn as Sheriff despite pending protest into the Nov. 6, 2018, the Columbus County Board of Elections informed that appeals in at least some of those protests would be filed prior to Dec. 3, 2018
- That Greene's "refusal to step aside" as sheriff "places Columbus County in legal jeopardy in that all arrests and searches are unlawful and illegal subjecting Columbus County to potential civil unrest and increasing civil liability."
- That Greene has not been appointed Sheriff "by any elected body or person with such authority and is awaiting the certification of that election."
- That Greene, in the sheriff's office, "is a Usurper of authority and unlawfully holding the Office of Sheriff of Columbus County, thus placing the citizens in grave risk.
- That currently sworn deputies "are operating without the cover" of law.
- That Greene has not met "all Constitutional and Statutory requirements for Office."
- That commissioners and the county

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City files shredded as audit delay costs mount

By JENN CAUSEY
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More than a ton of paperwork, much if it critical to a long-overdue audit of City of Loris finances, has been shredded, City Administrator Damon Kempski says.

He won't say who did the shredding, which took place several years ago while he was out of work with pneumonia.

Meanwhile the city continues to operate without $60,000 each year in state revenue it deserves, those funds withheld because the city has not completed an audit since 2013.

Those funds, withheld at a rate of $15,000 per quarter, the state treasurer's office says, represent a little more than one percent of the city's $5,095 million current operating budget. It's less than Kemski's current $73,000 salary, which came after a 9.8 percent increase approved the city council last May.

Every other municipality in Horry County is current with audits, state officials said, so none of them are having any state funds withheld.

Undone

Kempski this week said he was in the early stages of working on the audit effort when pneumonia forced him out of work for about two weeks, and that when he returned he learned 3,200 pounds of paperwork and documents, much if it important for the 2014 audit, had been shredded.

During council's January 2018 meeting Nichols said he was waiting on Kempski to secure a CPA to conduct the audits then two years past due, now three years in arrears.

Eight months later, last September, Nichols told council that a qualified accountant was needed to aid the city in getting back on track with its audits.

Forensic audits will be needed now because of the missing documents and paperwork, Kempski said.

TCFD Chief

Jeff Fowler took the oath of office as the new chief of the Tabor City Fire Department last Wednesday morning, with Columbus County Clerk of Court Jess Hill officiating. Fowler was flanked by stepdaughter Elizabeth Strickland and his wife Tonya, holding the Bible. (Deuce Niven, TLT)

Town Clerk sets retirement, partially

Tabor City's Town Clerk and Finance Officer, on the job at Town Hall since 1980, will be in semi-retirement soon, Town Manager Al Leonard said Tuesday night.

Diane Ward will remain on the job "for another month or so, full time, and then will retire," Leonard said.

Town Council members discussed the potential of a vacancy in the post during a closed session during Tuesday's monthly meeting, but took no formal action, Leonard said. Council's consensus, Leonard said, was that the manager re-structure Ward's duties to allow her to retire, while remaining at work part time.

Ward's will remain the town's finance officer, working an average of less than 20 hours per week to comply with state retirement rules that would not allow her to work more than 1,000 hours in a year, Leonard said.

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