The Town of Laurel
Mayor & Council Workshop Minutes
November 2, 2026

A Mayor & Council Workshop was held at Laurel Town Hall in the Mayor & Council Chambers on Monday, November 2, 2026, beginning at 7:00 p.m. The following persons were in attendance Mayor Carlos Oliveras, President of Council Chris Calio, Doug Taylor, RogJenea Fisher, George Lodato, and Jonathan Kellam. Also, in attendance were Director of Code Enforcement Dan Hogg, Chief Robert Kracyla, Recording Secretary Alexis Oliphant, and Town Manager Jamie Smith. It was noted that Councilman Donald Holden was absent.

Mayor Oliveras presented the discussion of the Vacant Structure Ordinance. Town Manager Smith stated copies of the Town of Laurel, City of Salisbury, and the Town of Smyrna's ordinances were provided to Mayor & Council for their review. She advised this stems from the questions and concerns that were raised from Councilman Lodato had pertaining the vacant structure ordinance. She advised she, Councilman Lodato, and Director of Code Enforcement Hogg met to review and discuss possible amendments pertaining the ordinance. These amendments received are as follows:

- The discussion of removing or placing stipulations on receiving a building permit as an exemption. If Mayor & Council would like to keep the exemption a stipulation needs to be implemented on the permit that a certain percentage of work needs to be completed.
- A structure must be actively listed for five years and recommended two years for a property to be listed.
- The ordinance states it has to be no more than 25% than the market rate and recommends adjusting the rate.
- If a commercial property is under 5,000 square feet, they can be exempt. The concern is most of the properties in the downtown commercial area are under 5,000 square feet.

Director of Code Enforcement Hogg stated he met with Town Manager Smith briefly this afternoon to discuss building permits. He recommends that the if the town allows exemptions with building permits the town defines what a substantial renovation is, and have the lawyer define it, and list in code as it's not subject to interpretation. He recommends the definition to be monetary. He stated 87-87 Monitoring, Inspection, and Condition Standards the vacant structure shall be in reasonable condition, and then it says all utilities shall be function in which he agrees with. The code states a vacant building has to have electric and water if its going to be registered as a vacant building and recommended this be removed.

He recommended a year for a property to be listed on the market is five years.

Councilman Lodato stated 87-86, which is page 8737, the purpose of this ordinance isn't to harm the surrounding buildings and neighborhoods, and are more likely to burden the town resources. He believes the goal of this vacant property ordinance is aimed to promote their rehabilitation and occupancy, and not to not to harm the owners. He inquired under Section B, Applicability, why are government owned or controlled properties exempt from this article, He inquired if the property on Central Avenue owned by the Board of Education is exempt from the vacant property structure. Town Manager Smith stated the property is owned by the state.

Councilman Lodato stated he agrees with the activity for sale or lease to sale as defined under Definitions (D)(2). The activity of sale or lease for sale or lease at no cost of more than 25% over the market. He stated he agrees with Town Manager Smith stating the 25% rate is too high and the town needs to look into lowering the rate.

Mayor Oliveras inquired what rate would Councilman Lodato recommend.

Councilman Lodato recommended between the 10% to 15% range.

Councilman Lodato agrees with a property being listed on the market for one year as suggested earlier. He advised the ordinance does state the sale of property, that it has to be listed for sale through a realtor or through local newspapers and it has to be actively listed for sale.

Chief Kracyla stated talking about the purpose, in his opinion, he thinks one of the purposes should be to reduce crime. Under the broken windows theory, not only environmentally creates an increase in crime, and not only that we have vacants that would frequently take up residency inside those houses, and so normally that's a drug haven there. He doesn't know whether it should fit somewhere in the purpose, but he feels like that's an appropriate place to put it. Mayor Oliveras advised that is currently in the purpose of the ordinance.

Councilman Lodato reviewed 87-87, which is on page 8739, which talks about the monitoring inspection. He advised we have a good ordinance here but doesn't believe that the town enforces this ordinance, which is on us. That's on Mayor & Council, the town, and not including Director of Code Enforcement Hogg Dan as he's new. He advised this has been going on for many years, and we are not enforcing the ordinance over here. It says the code enforcement officer shall inspect any premises in the town for the purpose of enforcing and ensuring compliance with this article. That's supposed to be done once a once a year, annually for as long as the property remains vacant. The vacant structure should be in reasonable condition. Again, all utility according to our ordinance, vacant structures shall be in reasonable condition. All utilities shall be functional. There should be no trash debris inside or outside the structure, and it shall not be used for storage that is unrelated to its former use. He advised these are again the things that we are not enforcing under property management according to our ordinance. Any owner of a vacant structure residing outside Sussex County shall be required to have a licensed property manager residing or having an office located in the county or a family member. And it does, and it should not be somebody that, according to the ordinance, not managed by any real estate is for a fee. He stated, some of it he doesn't agree to. He stated if they have a maintenance place that's taking care of the vacant property, to him that's fine. He advised as long as they have somebody taking care of it.

Councilman Lodato reviewed the Registration Fees, which is 87-89, (2), which the code enforcement officer shall investigate any structure that may be subject to registration based on his findings, the code officer or his designate may register the vacant structure. The fees under BI, the annual registration fee shall be due on the anniversary date every year as long as the structure

remains empty. He inquired if the towns re-does it on the day they become registered, or does the town do it on an annual basis at the end of the fiscal year.

Town Manager Smith stated we do it on annual basis, as this year was later due to Director of Code Enforcement Hogg starting in March. The town usually sends the notices out in February to all the properties that are vacant that they need to register.

Councilman Lodato stated recommends that it needs to be rewritten in the ordinance that they are completed the same time.

Councilman Lodato reviewed Violations & Penalties, which is 87-91. He stated the line amount should be paid in full prior to the issuance of any building permits, rental licenses, for the subject vacant structure, or any other structure that is owned by an owner within the town. He advised according to the towns ordinance, if an individual has a vacant property that they're not taken care of they're not allowed to be issued a rental license or permits.

Town Manager Smith stated the town placed that ordinance several years ago that all your accounts must be current and up to date to receive any permits.

Councilman Lodato reviewed 87-92, Exemptions stated under a waiver upon application by the owner, it says the Board of Adjustment in appeals may grant a two-year waiver of registration fee if the owner meets the criteria of a nonprofit and it's given the power to the Board of Adjustments and to hear these appeals and to grant the waiver. He recommends that Mayor & Council should have final say when it comes to waivers.

Councilman Lodato reviewed 87-93, Duty to Maintain the Property, in no instance shall registration of a vacant property exonerate a responsible party for maintaining the vacant structure. He advised these vacant structures that are not being maintained should be compiling a lot of code violations to the point where we need to take them to court receive the money.

Councilman Lodato stated he reviewed the towns vacant fee rates to the municipalities ordinances that were provided which are quite low. Councilman Lodato made the following fee recommendations:

- Structures Vacant for 1 year or less $500.00, Proposed $700.00
- Structures Vacant for 1 year but less than 2 $700.00, Proposed $1,000.00
- Structures Vacant for 2 years but less than 3 $900.00, Proposed $1,300.00
- Structures Vacant for 3 years but less than 4 $1,1100.00, Proposed $1,600.00
- Structures Vacant for 4 years but less than 5 $1,300.00, Proposed $2,200.00
- Structures Vacant for 5 years or longer $1,500.00, Proposed $3,000.00

Director of Code Enforcement Hogg stated on Councilman Lodato's notes provided that all fines and fees should go back to the code enforcement budget.

Councilman Lodato stated if we're collecting fees and fines, that he feels that the money needs to go back into code enforcement's budget so that we can take care of these issues and that we're talking about.

Town Manager Smith stated she agrees with that.

Councilman Lodato stated Ordinance 62-1, Declaration of a Nuisance, maintaining a dilapidated building on any property located within the corporate limits of Laurel, which constitutes a serious health, serious hazard to life and property, shall be, and it is hereby declared to be a common and public nuisance. He stated 62-2 states a Hazard Inspection Committee shall be appointed by the Mayor of the Town of Laurel, consisting of not less than three members, at least two who shall be members of the town council to investigate information received by the Mayor and Council that any building within the corporate limits of Laurel is a serious hazard to health and property. He reviewed 62-3, whenever the Mayor and Council receive any information, that a building located within corporate limits is a serious hazard to life and property. The mayor shall direct the committee appointed pursuant 62 above to investigate and determine whether that is a hazard to life and property. The committee shall proceed to make its investigation and shall make the report no later than 30 days. He mentioned property 404 S. Central Avenue, which is a complete hazard to the town and inquired what the town has done in previous years.

Councilman Kellam inquired if there is anything in code stating that the property owner cannot tear the house down.

Director of Code Enforcement Hogg stated all they have to do is get a permit and then mitigate the asbestos if that's needed.

Councilman Lodato reviewed 87-94, Fee's & Fines it states says any person violating any provision of this chapter shall, upon conviction, be subject to a fine not less than $500, no more than $1,500, or imprisonment for 10 days, not more than 20, or both. For a second, for sequential offense, any person shall, upon conviction, be subject to a fine of not less than $700, more than $2,500 in prison, not less than 20 days, more than 30 days for each conviction. The purpose of this chapter, each day or part of the day that a violation of any of the provisions shall constitute and be deemed, or sorry, shall chapter continues shall be deemed and taken as separate and distinct violations. He's interpreting as if you're in violation, and you have an unsafe structure in which you were notified about and didn't correct you would be given the first fine and if you still don't comply you would be given the second fine, which you could get 20 days in jail, but then each day after that, it's a fine of between $700 and $2,500 dollars per day that you let that property deteriorate the way it's owned.

Town Manager Smith stated yes, he is correct and in that case we would have to utilize DELJIS and take them to court. They would have a trial and they would have the right to appeal, in which they can go to Court of Common Pleas.

Councilman Lodato presented on a Residential Property Rehabilitation Tax Incentive Program to offer an incentive to allow people to fix up their properties.

Councilman Lodato explained another concern regarding the pause to reset. To have a reset for somebody to come in and get a piece of property that's been on a vacant property list and they're paying $900.00 in fees, and they get a building permit, and it goes back to $500.00. He stated that's a reset and it should be a pause and it needs to be stipulated as it's not written neither way.

Town Manager Smith stated if Mayor & Council elect to move forward with a pause, then she recommended that the town doesn't make an exception for a building permit.

Mrs. Sharon Ardisana, inquired how many vacant homes do we have right now?

Town Manager Smith stated she can provide how many the town billed out as many of the vacant properties have permits for them.

Mrs. Ardisana inquired if they're not paying utilities or haven't paid utilities, they're considered a vacant house. Everyone of those houses should be receiving a letter saying that they haven't registered and the town will be registering for you.

Town Manager Smith stated we determine if a house is vacant by water usage. In 90 days, the town will get the list and code will review the list and ride around to determine if the property is for rent, for sale, or if they have received a building permit. If those properties meet the criteria mentioned above their property is removed from the list.

Mrs. Ardisana stated in August 2025, she was provided with a list of 50 vacant homes and then a few months later they decreased to 24 registered homes. She inquired if there should have been more properties on the list.

Town Manager Smith stated most of the properties on the list received a building permit making them exempt.

Town Manager Smith made a recommendation that a building permit should not be a reason for an exemption to register a vacant property.

Director of Code Enforcement Hogg stated he likes the recommendation of not allowing a building permit as an exemption and that Mayor & Council can disregard the substantial improvement definition earlier.

Town Manager Smith the next step is if Mayor & Council are in agreement with the recommendation the town can move forward with an ordinance amendment. If there are more comments an additional workshop can be held for Mayor & Council.

Mayor Oliveras presented the Discussion of the Communication Committee Recommendations pertaining to the website. Town Manager Smith stated the Communication Committee presented their report to Mayor & Council last month. She recommended that Mayor & Council need to look into whether they will be moving forward with GIC or continue to work with Delmarva Digital with the recommendations presented or go out to RFP.

Councilman Lodato advised the town can continue to pursue GIC and reach out to State Representative Dukes for assistance. He stated the committee met with Tim Smith from Delmarva Digital and he advised the town's website was old, and it was best not to piece together. He stated the committee has an RFP written up and it could be given to different web designers. He stated Delmarva Digital created the City of Georgetown's website in which Georgetown bought. He stated the town can reach out to Georgetown for their permission to share their website, so the town does not have to pay Delmarva Digital to build a new website.

Town Manager Smith inquired who would be responsible for making the changes and maintenance of the website.

Councilman Lodato stated Delmarva Digital would still be responsible for the maintenance.

After a brief discussion, Town Manager Smith stated if Mayor & Council elect she can reach out to GIC with a 30-day response window to see if they would be willing to create a website and reconvene regarding this matter after the first of the year. She advised she can reach out to State Representative Dukes in the next couple of weeks to see if he can assist the town on this.

Mr. Corey Wells, resident of Rehoboth Beach, stated one things he has seen across governments is municipalities own a lot more than sometimes they're aware. One of the critical questions for like Georgetown or the other neighboring towns is: Did you license your website from the contractor, or did you pay them to design it for you, where you own it, and it's called rights and data. So if he pays someone to design something, he's paying your time and materials to design it, and then when you're done, you own it, and I get to do whatever I want with it. So the question, critical question for Georgetown is: Did you license that website from the contractor, or did you pay for them to design it where you own it? That would be a critical question, because if Georgetown owns it, the general public concept is the taxpayer should not pay for something twice, even if it's across political or jurisdictional boundaries. That governments in the United States, are free to share what they already own and what the citizens of the United States already pay for. So, how would that work if Georgetown owned it and had rights and data and did not license the website, but they paid the contractor to build it? So, Georgetown has sole ownership of it. The

critical question would be: then, Georgetown, could we have it? Could we reuse it? And if they said yes, then they would give you the code and they would give you the content, and then of course you would put your content on the code. But if there was any underlying licenses like Windows Server or what you know, then you'd have to pay those minor costs. But there's like three tiers of things, but the bulk of it they would own and give to you. Now, once they give that to you, then you can go out to bid and say Georgetown's given us their website. We would like you to customize it for our content, and you would go out to bid, and you know, in a free market, people would say, "Yeah, sure, we'll take what Georgetown already bought and gave you, and then kind of revamp it, if you will, for the Town of Laurel." Then you're breaking it down into phases, and you're not trying to do it all at once. The last thing he mentioned is market research. Once you have a bona fide need, you go out for market research. You make a request for information, like apparently you already have done. But it's good to bring in competition. It's good to have three or four companies competing because then you're getting potentially a better value. Like most of the time, you're going to get a better value for the citizen. And we want businesses to be successful. We want them to be competitive, and we never want to be held hostage and he hopes this was helpful.

Councilwoman Fisher stated she respects everyone decisions and movements that were addressed tonight. She advised a meeting will be held at Mt. Zion in Ellendale on November 4, 2026, pertaining the shooting that occurred this past weekend.

President of Council Calio inquired if Town Manager Smith could reach out to the City of Georgetown.

Councilman Kellam stated Mr. David King was named the Track Coach of the Year in the state.

With there being no further business, Councilman Kellam made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Councilwoman Fisher second the motion. Vote was 6-0, with Councilman Holden absent.

Meeting Adjourned at 8:26 p.m.

Mayor

President of Council

Town Manager

Recording Secretary