

NEW BOARD TAKES OFFICE

Shallotte's Annual Audit Shows Tax Collections Up

BY DOUG RUTTER

Shallotte officials received good news in the annual financial audit report presented last week.

The town collected a higher percentage of its taxes than it has in several years, and managed to bring in a good chunk of the taxes that had gone unpaid for the last 10 years.

Steve Johnson of Brock, Padgett and Chandler presented the audit last Wednesday, after Town Clerk Mary Etta Hewett swore in to office Mayor Sarah Tripp and the four board members elected last month.

Aldermen taking the oath of office were David Gause and Wilton Harrelson, who have both served on the board since 1983; political newcomer Morris Hall; and Roney Cheers.

"I feel like I'm back at the old stomping grounds again," said Cheers, who served 10 years on the town board and 12 years as mayor. The retired magistrate had been out of the local political scene since 1968.

Mayor Pro Tem Paul Wayne Reeves was unable to attend last week's meeting because he had the flu, his wife Marilyn said.

The town collected 96 percent of its taxes last fiscal year, which was an improvement of 2.8 percent over the previous year, the audit report indicated.

Johnson said the tax collection rate has improved by about 5 percent over the last two years, thanks to the efforts of the town's staff and attorney.

Shallotte received \$340,543 in taxes last year, based on a valuation of \$68.3 million and a 47-cent tax rate.

The town has also collected most of the taxes that have gone unpaid since fiscal year 1980-81. About \$30,000 was still due the town as of June 30.

Shallotte collected \$24,378 in late taxes and \$8,094 in penalties and interest last year. Over the past two fiscal years, the town has collected nearly \$95,000 in overdue taxes and interest.

The town had general fund revenues of \$713,996 last year and spent \$670,687. That increased the town's fund balance to \$302,265, according to the audit report.

In the water and sewer fund, revenues total \$427,552 and expenses were \$411,068, for a surplus of \$16,484.

However, auditors indicated in their management letter to the town that the water fund is consistently below the balance of the accounts payable.

Town officials have relied on ABC and sales tax revenue to help fund the water fund in the past, but Johnson



SHALLOTTE ALDERMEN Wilton Harrelson (center) and Roney Cheers (right) take the oath of office last Wednesday from Town Clerk Mary Etta Hewett. Also sworn in last week were Mayor Sarah Tripp and Aldermen David Gause and Morris Hall.

said the fund should be self-sufficient.

"The rates may need to be looked at once again, realizing they were just changed a year ago," he said.

In the only action taken last week relating to the audit, board members voted to apply water and sewer deposits received by the town to account balances that

haven't been paid.

Planner Hired

The board hired Howard Capps of Wilmington last week as the consulting planner for the town's five-year land use plan update.

Work on the plan is expected to continue through

early 1993, according to Haskell Rhett, field representative of the N.C. Division of Coastal Management in Wilmington.

Land use plans are used by local officials in coastal counties to balance environmental protection with economic development, Rhett said.

A preliminary plan should be completed by September 1992, at which time it will be reviewed by state officials and approved by the town board before it receives final certification from the N.C. Coastal Resources Commission.

The cost of the plan will be primarily funded through a state grant. The Division of Coastal Management will pay \$6,000, and the town's share is \$750.

The Shallotte Planning Board will do most of the preliminary work, along with the consulting planner.

Aldermen are expected to make three appointments to the planning board in January, when the terms of H.A. Stanaland Jr., Conrad Pigott and Davis Milligan expire.

"As you heard tonight, it's going to be an involved thing," Mayor Sarah Tripp said of the plan. "We need somebody that's going to work and put the shoulder to the wheel."

Other Business

In other business last week, aldermen:

- Voted to change the board's regular meeting schedule. Aldermen will meet the first and third Tuesday of each month at 7 p.m., instead of the first and third Wednesday. The board won't formally meet Dec. 18, which is the night of the town Christmas party. The next meeting will be Jan. 7.

- Took no action following a 45-minute executive session requested by Town Attorney Mark Lewis.

- Tabled proposed changes in the privilege license fees. The board is considering increasing the annual fee for operating a dry cleaner, pressing club or hat blocking establishment in town from \$25 to \$50, in keeping with a new maximum fee allowed by the state. Other businesses are charged the maximums allowed.

- Appointed Harrelson as the town's representative on the Cape Fear Council of Governments' Water Quality Task Force.

- Approved the release of approximately \$750 in overdue taxes that were owed by seven different individuals or businesses. Mrs. Hewett said the releases were necessary to clear up town and county tax billing errors.

State To Keep Regional Juvenile Facility Open

BY TERRY POPE

Brunswick County can continue sending its juvenile offenders to a New Hanover County facility that had threatened to close after Jan. 1.

Had it not been for some late-hour maneuvering by state officials last week, Brunswick County would have been forced to transport its juvenile prisoners to a Gaston County facility, some four hours away.

"We have the situation worked out," State Rep. E. David Redwine said Friday.

Citing financial woes, New Hanover County officials said that county could not afford to keep the Juvenile Services Center in Castle Hayne open without state funds.

State officials went to work and found \$120,000 to help pay for the center's operating expenses until July 1, said Redwine.

"That will keep it open until we can get back up there," he added.

When it convenes in May, the North Carolina General Assembly expects it will be swamped with requests to take over operation of the state's 11 juvenile centers. Legislators voted this year to take over a Wake County juvenile center that had threatened to close its doors.

The New Hanover detention center accommodates several southeastern North Carolina counties, for by law juveniles cannot be jailed with adults. Brunswick County pays to house its juveniles in the 18-bed facility, with the state picking up part of the tab.

Two weeks ago, state officials said there was no money available to keep open the centers, which are becoming more crowded due to an apparent increase in crimes by young offenders, said Redwine.

"Other centers in the state are in the same situation," he said.

The New Hanover County facility has been operating in the red in-

cost of housing inmates is more than the amount collected from other counties and from the state.

Had New Hanover's facility closed, Brunswick County would have been forced to transport its juveniles to Gaston County while New Hanover County would have sent its juveniles to Wilkes County. Those sites were chosen at random, said Redwine.

"According to the state department, those facilities are pretty well full already," he said.

The scenario of what would happen if New Hanover's facility shut down had kept area officials concerned.

If Gaston County's center happened to be full, then the Brunswick County Sheriff's Department would have been forced to shop around for an empty bed in another facility.

"The only other option was to put them back out on the street," said Redwine.

By law, juveniles can request a court appearance every seven days to ask a judge if the offender needs to remain in the detention center, said Redwine.

Transportation costs to and from Gaston County and personnel costs for a deputy escort had Brunswick County officials concerned.

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