



# Meeting Minutes

*Tuesday, September 19, 2023, 7:00 PM CDT*

*at Esto Town Hall, 3312 2nd Ave South, Esto, FL 32425*

*The data reflected in these proceedings constitute an extrapolation of information elicited from notes, observations, recording tapes, photographs, and/or videotape. Comments reflected herein are sometimes paraphrased, condensed, and/or have been edited to reflect essential subject matter addressed during the meeting. Parties interested in receiving a verbatim account of the proceedings are responsible for coordinating with the Esto Town Clerk and providing their own representative and equipment pursuant to Chapters 119 and 283, Florida Statutes.*

## **Town Council Members in Attendance**

Teresa Harrison (TH), Council President  
Josh Davenport (JD), Council Vice President  
Garet Skipper (GS)  
Greg Wells (GW)

## **Town Council Members Absent**

## **Others Present**

Ben Tew (KB), Town Clerk  
Billy Martin (BM), Director Public Works / Water Works Director  
Michelle Blankenship Jordan (MBJ), Town Attorney  
Maxie Yates (MY)  
Andy Gonzalez (AG)  
Eric Worrell (EW)

## **Invocation and Pledge of Allegiance**

TH lead the opening prayer, Pledge of Allegiance, and called the meeting to order at 7:00 PM CDT.

## **Consent to agenda items, previous council minutes including special meetings, and bills to be paid**

JD - Motion.

GS - Second

TH - All in favor? Motion carried.

## **Public Comment**

MY asked to apply for the open seat on the council. JD explained that MY could fill out a candidate application and the town clerk would deliver the application to the Holmes County Supervisor of Elections office. [Later it was discovered that this was not in line with the town's charter and previous election resolutions. The election for the open council seat will be addressed during the October town council meeting.]

## Agenda Items

- **Insurance Proposals for 2023-2024 Fiscal Year**

The town council considered insurance proposals from two companies for the town for the 2023-24 fiscal year. The town's previous insurance with Florida Municipal Insurance Trust (FMIT) had increased premiums for the next year, and the town looked to get a competitive bid from another company. The town clerk had received a proposal from Preferred Governmental Insurance Trust (Preferred). Preferred quoted the town \$35,490 for a year of coverage. FMIT's quote was \$38,240. Preferred would require a 50% immediate payment of the premium, while FMIT premium was split into 4 equal payments throughout the year. Another consideration was that Preferred uses a shared disaster coverage limit meaning all covered municipalities share one pool of disaster recovery money and Esto could be left out with a large enough hurricane.

GW made the motion to continue the town's insurance coverage with FMIT as long as none of the town's coverage has been reduced. JD seconded. The motion carried unanimously.

The council decided to stay with FMIT for coverage in the 2023-2024 fiscal year.

- **Audit Update**

BT updated the council of the 2022 audit. Mark Smith from Ferguson, Sizemore and Assoc. CPA had completed the 2022 audit and it was in the firm's internal proofer. Smith said the town would receive paper copies of the audit next week. Smith after that would submit the town's AFR. The town received a bill of \$6,500 from Ferguson, Sizemore for the audit and it is included with the bills the council signed that evening. Carr, Riggs and Ingram also sent a bill for \$3,105 of audit services in July and August, which was also in the checks to be signed. Brunson, Wilkerson, Bowden and Assoc. also sent an invoice for \$240 where the spent time copying and providing records to help with the audit.

BT asked about moving forward did the town need a new contract with Carr, Riggs and Ingram since the audits were done and the town was now just receiving regular bookkeeping services. April Finedore with CRI would be down on Wednesday, September 20, and BT would get details on that then.

## Public Works Director Report

- **Park Building AC Repair**

P&P Heating and Cooling had evaluated the air conditioning system at the John Clark Park Community Center. The system had a leak and needed repair. The repairs were quoted at about \$1,330.

JD made the motion to repair the park building AC system. GS seconded. The motion carried unanimously.

- **Update on Community Garden**

Sheriff Tate says county inmates can do the work to enclose the gazebo to make a storage building for the community garden. The Health Department has already provided seeds and other materials for the garden. In the first of October, a load of dirt will be provided as well as a selection of fruit trees that can be planted in the garden.

- **Mosquito Spraying**

BT reported he had spoke with Lee Duke from Holmes County Mosquito Control about spraying service for the town in 2024. The costs would be between \$1,000-\$1,100. The company would spray once a week from April through October barring equipment malfunctions and severe weather.

JD asked for public comment on whether others saw a reduction when spraying is in effect. BM said he thinks the weather this year was making insect populations worse, and the town has struggled to keep up with wasp control. BT said he believed mosquito spraying kept numbers down around his home near the Dollar General. MY said he thinks mosquito spraying affects honey bees. GW said he was not in favor of spraying, and he couldn't tell a difference from last year to this when the town didn't have the service.

GS made the motion that the town not engage mosquito spraying services for the 2024 year. GW seconded. The motion carried unanimously.

### **Esto Volunteer Fire Department Report**

\*\* Chief Cliff Kimble was not present, and no one from the EVFD was at the meeting to give his report, paper report not submitted to Clerk at this time. Will attach paper report to minutes when they are received.

### **Town Clerk Report**

- **Financial Report**

BT had looked at the town's finances for the previous year, and reported that according to the bank statements the town had spent roughly \$20,000 more than was brought in in the 2022-23 fiscal year. (See attached) JD asked if the numbers accounted for the grant funds the town had received from COVID and ARPA relief. GS asked whether the numbers were across all accounts.

BT advised that the town council should carefully consider before taking on many new expenditures. There are two expenses for monthly bookkeeping services from Carr, Riggs and Ingram and the Two-Toed Tom Festival allocation, the town hasn't been paying that soon will start.

JD asked about the town's revenue plan, that was approved in 2021. BT is aware of the water rates that will be entered starting in January.

- **Approval of Computer Purchase**

In August the Town Clerk's computer was damaged by lightning and the purchase of a new computer was approved on an emergency basis. The full council needed to approve the purchase.

JD made the motion to approve the purchase. GW seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

- **Removing Previous Staff and Council Member from Bank Accounts**

The town council needed to sign a letter to the bank asking them to remove Casey Laycox a council member that left the town and the previous town clerk.

With the council members signatures on the letter to the bank BT would begin the process of getting new signature cards.

- **Policy Guidelines**

The council further details on previously discussed policy changes.

**Park Rental Fees** - The council had discussed changing the rental fees for the park community center for renters that wanted to get in a day early to decorate, as well as to help defray increasing costs for utilities and maintenance of the community center. Discussions covered adding a reservation fee, procedures regarding key turnover for the building and discounts for Town of Esto residents.

**Water Bill Late Dates** - BT asked for clarity on the town's procedures for water bill late fees and cutoff dates. He wanted previously discussed guidelines for water bills late fees and due dates to be approved by the full town council. JD noted that in cases where customers have an emergency, like a leak or pipe breakage on their side of the meter, the town clerk has the discretion to use the customer's estimated rate instead of the actual meter reading. JD also asked that something be added into the water department guidelines about not writing off customer balances more than 2 months in a row. His reasoning was that at some point customers have to be responsible and not allowed to waste the town's resources.

**Employee Benefits** - The current employee paid time off system isn't accurately tracking PTO. It had been discussed moving to an accrual system for PTO. Employees would gain hours of PTO every pay period. GW suggested starting January 1.

JD motioned the town transition to an accrual PTO system on January 1, 2024. GS seconded. The motion carried unanimously.

BT asked how the town council wanted the monthly insurance reimbursement for full-time employees should be paid? Once per month in the first paycheck, once per quarter, yearly, divided across all paychecks or otherwise? JD suggested the payment should be a separate monthly payment.

BT asked for detail about the town's 4% savings match for full time employees. Right now, when he runs payroll, the savings, benefit is just calculated as an extra 4% bonus to earnings. GW suggested calling Transamerica and asking what would be best for the town. GS preferred having the town and the employee contribute to a mutual fund or some other savings vehicle. JD pointed out a more structured retirement benefit would be less beneficial to short-term employees. BT was directed to investigate what retirement plans were available.

- **TDC Highlight Video**

BT told the town council about efforts by the Holmes County Tourism Development Council to grow the presence of the county. The council hired a marketing agency and build a new website for Holmes County. They are producing marketing videos about the different town in the county and will be coming to Esto in the future. JD spoke that soon the town would be getting help from Holmes County Jail inmates to do some of the work to dress up areas at the park.

## **Two-Toed Tom Festival Update**

- **August 21 Meeting Report** – The TTT meeting considered the idea of the lumberjack show BT had pitched to the town council in August. The TTT committee approved the initial reservation fee for the lumberjack show. The town clerk had subsequently cut a check since the town council had provisionally approved doing so at the August town council meeting. The check was mailed to DLW Timberworks.

After the meeting the committee members worked on upgrading the festival's mascot.

JD asked if the town would be able to have a Harvest Happening like they did in 2022. BT said he was unable to organize such an event, due to his newness in the town clerk role and his secondary job, that fills his Saturdays. JD asked BT to ask if anyone on the TTT festival committee would be willing to organize.

JD stressed the event would be very small and wouldn't have vendors. JD said he would be responsible for getting the table set up, if need be, to have an event. BT said he would make a social media post asking if anyone in the community wanted to organize the event.

- **September 11 Meeting Report** – The TTT group got together at John Clark Park where the festival will be held and discussed where things could be laid out. One Esto citizen at the meet Tyler Whitehurst, is a member of several local car clubs and volunteered to organize the festival car show. He said he thought there might be over 200 cars that might show up. One thing the committee felt was key is to open access to the land behind the park building. There's guardrails and a culvert that would prevent vendors from getting to the back of the park on that side of the pond to set up.

GS asked about parking, BT said he spoke with the Watkins family about renting or leasing some of the field adjacent to the park to have for parking. JD suggested removing some of the chain link around the Community Garden to expand parking.

- **Rodeo Parade Preps** – The TTT fest will to have in the Rodeo Parade in Bonifay on October 6th and 7th. The mascot for the festival has been restored and upgraded and was getting a paint job at a local mechanics shop. The town let the festival committee use their flatbed trailer. BT showed the council some banners to go on the float to promote the festival that after the parade could be hung at the park or in front of the town hall.

## Open Agenda Items

GW had nothing to discuss.

JD reiterated his desire to investigate ability to have Harvest Happening.

GS wanted the town to more seriously investigate getting the junkyard property developed into a solar farm.

TH welcome BT as the new Town Clerk.

## Final Call

AG a land owner in Esto asked to be recognized and wanted to present to the council a possible development. AG owns a parcel with frontage on Hwy 79. He is looking to create a farmers' market. He also spoke about the possibility of building a large upscale RV park. AG said he would come to the next town council meeting to hear further comments on his proposed developments.

EW asked to be recognized. He worked with Alday Howell Engineering. He spoke about possible grants for stormwater management planning that his firm was applying for the Town of Esto. He also spoke about other possible grants the town might could apply for. EW spoke about how having a good stormwater plan could encourage business development.

**Meeting Adjourned**

Meeting minutes typed and prepared by Ben Tew, Town Clerk.

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Teresa Harrison, Esto Town Council President

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Josh Davenport, Esto Town Council Vice President

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