

Aiken City Council MinutesSPECIAL CALLED MEETING

July 2, 2020

Present: Mayor Osbon, Councilmembers Brohl, Diggs, Girardeau, Gregory, Price, and Woltz.

Councilwoman Price arrived at 2:36 p.m.

Others Present: Stuart Bedenbaugh, Gary Smith via telephone, Kim Abney, Susan Mimmie, Shiann Sivell, of the Aiken Standard, Wes Cooper, of Channel 6 TV and 6 citizens.

CALL TO ORDER

Mayor Osbon called the special meeting of July 2, 2020, to order at 2:03 P.M. Mayor Osbon led in prayer. The pledge of allegiance to the flag was led by Captain Marty Sawyer.

RESOLUTION 07022020CoronavirusMasksFace CoveringsCOVID-19

Mayor Osbon stated the purpose of the meeting was to consider a resolution to encourage individuals to wear face coverings in retail and foodservice establishments and matters related thereto.

Mayor Osbon read the title of the resolution.

A RESOLUTION ENCOURAGING INDIVIDUALS TO WEAR FACE COVERINGS IN RETAIL AND FOODSERVICE ESTABLISHMENTS, AND MATTERS RELATED THERETO.

Councilwoman Gregory moved, seconded by Councilwoman Brohl, that Council approve the resolution to encourage individuals to wear masks in public places.

Mr. Bedenbaugh stated a resolution had been prepared for Council's consideration to encourage individuals to wear face coverings. Mr. Bedenbaugh stated we had just received an update from DHEC that there are 39,587 cases of coronavirus in South Carolina, including an additional 29 reported in Aiken County today. To date we are not seeing the infection at the level of other parts of South Carolina, but Council has expressed a desire to be proactive and encourage citizens to wear face coverings and practice social distancing where appropriate. The proposed resolution would encourage face coverings and social distancing.

Mayor Osbon asked for comments from the audience. He reviewed the guidelines and noted that comments should be limited to five minutes.

Dr. Arnold Gellman, 126 Holley Ridge Road, stated he felt information about masks and the virus should be posted around town. He felt there is a false sense of security that people have and the seriousness of the matter needs to be emphasized and that masks can make a huge difference. He said he was in favor of requiring masks in public. He noted there had been concerns about enforcing the wearing of masks. He pointed out that we can tax people, and we have rules for all kinds of other things. He felt we should be able to have a rule that people must wear a mask until we have achieved a level where a mask is no longer necessary. He said the issues are the legality of enforcing wearing masks and why we do not have signs and other information about the seriousness of the virus.

Mayor Osbon pointed out that about 25% to 30% of the municipalities now have an ordinance for wearing masks in the public. He noted that the Governor had left the matter up to the individual municipalities to deal with the matter.

Ms. Ellen Gutteridge, 305 Huntington Court SW, stated she had been following the virus daily, recording the numbers, and noting the rise that had been happening, especially in the last month when the number of cases has doubled. She noted she always wears a mask when she goes, out; however, she sees many people who are not wearing masks and feels this is threatening to her. She noted that she had heard there is going to be some promotion about wearing a mask, and she felt that was very vital. She felt it was urgent that we do something before the cases keep going higher and higher. She was present in support of requiring the wearing of masks in public.

Ms. Fran Gellman, 126 Holley Ridge Road, stated she had been wondering what could be done to encourage the 20 to 30 year olds to wear masks. She felt if the city were to say they were going to consider closing bars in Aiken that would get the attention of the young people. She also pointed out that she is concerned about the schools being able to open in August or September. She noted that the children have been out of school for some time, and it is important that the children be able to go back to school to continue their education. She felt the community needs to come together and be involved in helping to get information out and helping stop this virus from spreading. She felt the information campaign should be out that if everybody in the city started wearing a mask it would be two to three weeks before the number of infections would go down. She suggested that the stores put signs up that persons entering the store must wear a mask and monitor that at the door. She noted that the stores did that back in March and April, but now the signs are not up any longer.

Councilman Woltz pointed out that Council at this time is talking about a resolution to encourage the use of masks; it is not a law to enforce at this time.

Mayor Osbon pointed out that he had been contacted by a lot of businesses, particularly small businesses, who are encouraging an ordinance which would be more than a resolution. However, at this time Council is discussing a resolution to encourage the use of masks.

Councilwoman Gregory stated she felt it was important that the resolution move forward and that she would encourage and challenge the citizens of Aiken to communicate to the stores that masks be required. That can be done as a community. She pointed out that she had received many calls regarding requiring masks to be worn in the public. She pointed out the citizens could be involved in the campaign the Chamber of Commerce is working on to encourage the use of masks.

Mr. Kelsey Dobson, 177 Ashepoo Drive, stated he was present to reiterate items from the CDC website, specifically which state that cloth face coverings recommended are not surgical masks or respirators which are considered critical supplies and have been reserved for health care workers and first responders, and that it is noted that cloth face coverings are not personal protective equipment (PPE). He said the cloth face coverings are not the same as the masks that are used by health workers. He pointed out that he understands what Council is considering is a resolution and not an ordinance, but that a lot of cities are moving towards ordinances which require wearing a mask in the public. He suggested that it might be better to inform the public and get more information out about what can be done and pushing the CDC guidelines of maintaining safe distances, washing hands and wearing whatever mask a person feels is appropriate for oneself. He also pointed out that the CDC has stated that numbers for weeks 24-25 of the pandemic, based on death certificate data, the percentage of deaths attributed to pneumonia, influenza, or COVID decreased from 9.5% during week 24 to 6.9% during week 25. He pointed out that this is the ninth straight week that deaths have gone down. He felt the CDC guidelines are working and that we have slowed the spread and less Americans are dying. He said if Council wishes to encourage the use of masks to do so with more advertisements, signs, hand sanitizer stations, free mask giveaways and many other options rather than stating something that could later be the building block for a mandatory ordinance which he feels is a violation of his rights. He asked that Council

not take away the option of consent. He said there are many other ways that do not require passing a law.

Mayor Osbon asked for comments from Council.

Councilwoman Diggs stated she felt that all are concerned about the economy. She pointed out that Goldman Sachs had an article that national mask mandates could save the US economy one trillion dollars. She pointed out that some of the local businesses are not open at full capacity and wonder how long they can go on like this. Some businesses have not opened at all yet. She noted if the businesses are not open, then all the people who were working for the businesses are furloughed or laid off which affects our economy. She pointed out that she sees the long lines for food pickup at Golden Harvest for people who are hungry because they don't have a source of income. She also pointed out that she is concerned about the children not being in school and when and how school will start again. She was concerned about the children getting behind in their education and not being able to participate in various events. She pointed out that health care systems are being overwhelmed. She was concerned if Aiken would be prepared for a large spike in the virus. She also expressed concern about people who have been in the hospital and leaving the hospital with bills over \$100,000. She pointed out that she had had five family members to die from the virus so she knows the severity of the virus. She also pointed out that she is concerned about the young people and their not being concerned about the virus. She said the Aiken community was opened, and we expected people to do the right thing, to take precautions and wear a mask. She said it is about respect and protect yourself and others. She pointed out that some, especially seniors, feel like they are a prisoner in their home. She noted that some young people are having COVID-19 parties just to see who will get it, and then they spread it to other family members. She pointed out that some people are saying that the virus will go away, but she felt it would not go away right now as there are too many willing hosts, with many people not wearing masks in the public and passing the virus on to others. She pointed out this is not a political issue, but a serious matter of life and death. She pointed out the resolution is to encourage people to wear masks, but that is what was done in the beginning and people are not wearing masks. She was concerned that encouraging people to wear masks was not strong enough. She pointed out that wearing a mask is the right thing to do.

Councilwoman Price entered the meeting at 2:36 p.m.

Councilman Woltz stated he agreed with Councilwoman Diggs. He felt we should pass the resolution now; however, he felt that we really need to pass an ordinance and put some teeth to it. Making just a suggestion to wear a mask is not working; it has not worked, and it is not going to work. People are not listening. There needs to be an ordinance so we can put more pressure on people. He pointed out the resolution is better than nothing and Council should pass it. He said Council should be approving an ordinance with some teeth in it.

Councilwoman Gregory stated she agreed with Councilwoman Diggs. She pointed out that we are all in the same boat. It is not just geared to one individual. All of us have had to sacrifice and been removed from many aspects of our daily lives in society. She noted that the resolution is a step in the right direction. She pointed out that she felt the City of Aiken had not encouraged, educated, and put out the material that needs to be put out in the proper manner; however, the resolution is a step in the right direction. There needs to be some leadership to encourage and strongly recommend and make sure people in our community understand the repercussions that can happen if we are not socially responsible. She pointed out that people need to wear a mask in the public, and it is not a political matter. She said Council is here to do what is right for the community, and the right step for the community is to wear a mask. She said there may be an ordinance in the future, but the resolution is the right thing at this time. She said earlier when Council met in March and April, they were not adamant about it, but following state orders. She said this is not about the state any more, but about the City of Aiken to make sure we take the right steps. The resolution is the first correct step. She said we need our businesses open, and if people are reckless that will not happen. She pointed out that our children should go back to school. We are all responsible for that. As leaders, Council needs to

resonate that message, needs to recommend it, and needs to encourage and take steps to try to limit the spread of the virus. We have to start somewhere and the resolution is a good starting point. We live in a community, and we trust our community to do the right thing. We need to trust each other and work with each other to move the needle in that direction. Life does need to come back to normal. Citizens need to wear their masks and support small businesses.

Councilwoman Brohl pointed out that someone had said we are very fortunate, and we are because Aiken County is one of the lowest counties of the 46 counties of the state. She felt we do need to do more to tell people to be respectful, to care for your fellowman. She felt the science that came out initially was confusing as to what to do and what works and that has confused people. She noted that she did not want us to think that a vaccine would be the end all, because we understand that viruses mutate and by the time the vaccine is ready the virus will have mutated. She pointed out that she had been doing some research, and one epidemiologist had said that we are using masks and giving some of us a false sense of security because some of the masks do not always stop the super fine aerosol particles which are what spreads COVID. He also says that it is not the chance of going by someone, but the time in an enclosed area. The longer in the enclosed area, the more the exposure. That is the main transmission. Wearing a mask isn't the be all and end all. It is all the other things that we have talked about—keeping your distance, washing your hands, being respectful. If laws took care of everything, there would be no people in jail. She said we need to call on our fellow citizens and friends to help us keep the virus from getting worse.

Councilwoman Price stated she cannot understand why we have to repeat something over and over about the safety concerns of being in close proximity to each other. She said she does believe that masks do provide some protection for us. She noted Council has a resolution for consideration at this meeting. However, she is prepared for an ordinance. She pointed out until a person sees family members and friends dying in a hospital, they don't take the virus seriously. She said she understands that with young people there is betting going on to see which one can contract the virus first to spread. She said the COVID-19 is a game to some and is not a serious matter. She noted there are all kinds of things being circulated as to why the disease started and who the main carriers of the disease are, but not reasons as to why this disease is spreading. She said she cannot understand why everybody could not isolate themselves for 15 to 20 days and get rid of the virus instead of month after month repeating. Obviously we don't want our economy to get to where it was because we have not taken this virus seriously. We want to debate the point too much. Debating is not getting us anywhere. While we are debating week after week, we could have been isolated and really had this virus under better control. This virus is no game, but serious business. People are dying, but there are people who do not believe the numbers. When a person knows they have come in contact with the disease, they should quarantine themselves out of respect for others. She wondered if an ordinance would do much, but it would mean that City Council is taking the matter seriously. We are not playing any games. We take living seriously.

Mayor Osbon stated with no further comments, he would take a vote on the motion by Councilwoman Gregory, seconded by Councilwoman Brohl, that Council approve the resolution to encourage individuals to wear masks in public places. The motion was unanimously approved.

Councilwoman Diggs stated Council has passed the resolution, but if next week the number of cases is still spiking, she wonders what Council is going to do. She wondered if Council would then consider an ordinance. She noted an ordinance is what she would like to see.

Councilwoman Price stated the numbers will still increase. The more testing we do, the more discoveries and the increase will continue to rise.

Councilwoman Diggs stated her concern was if we don't see people changing their behavior, and we are still seeing droves of people going around without masks.

Mayor Osbon stated at the next Council meeting anyone of Council could ask the City Manager to bring forth an ordinance to require masks. The Mayor can call a special meeting or four members of Council can call a special meeting. It was noted that Council could see how the resolution is working, and whether they see any improvement. If there is no improvement in a certain time period, then Council could consider an ordinance. Councilwoman Diggs pointed out that school should be starting soon, and she felt something needed to be done soon to help slow the virus so school could start. Councilman Woltz stated he supported considering an ordinance at the next meeting as he felt we do not have the luxury of time. There was a question as to whether city employees had to wear a mask and whether Mr. Bedenbaugh could instruct city employees to wear a mask. Mr. Bedenbaugh stated he had the ability to instruct city employees to wear a mask, and he was contemplating that as early as next week, given the spike in the number of cases. He noted with the resolution, the city could not compel anyone or any business to require their employees to wear a mask, but just encourage. He could instruct city employees to wear a mask.

Councilwoman Price stated she voted to approve the resolution, but she would like to see on the July 13, 2020, agenda an ordinance to require masks to be worn in the public. She noted with the increase in the number of cases of the virus she would like to see an ordinance considered at the next Council meeting.

Mr. Bedenbaugh stated he would work with the City Attorney and would have an ordinance on the next agenda for Council's consideration. He felt the ordinance could be an emergency ordinance with one reading and be effective for 61 days. It could be renewed by City Council for an additional time.

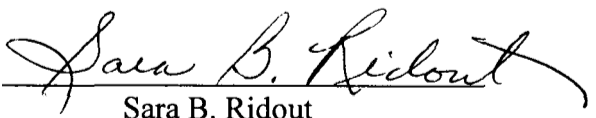
Mayor Osbon noted that while the meeting was going on two other cities had passed an ordinance making masks mandatory. Mr. Bedenbaugh stated on a list that he had prepared, there were 26 cities with an ordinance making wearing a mask mandatory. Councilwoman Gregory stated if an ordinance is considered Chief Barranco should be included for input. She said if we have an ordinance mandating wearing a mask, we need to figure out how we are going to control it, who is going to be in charge of taking the 911 calls.

Mayor Osbon stated a resolution is a positive step. He noted that we plan to start a program immediately with educating our citizens with CDC guidelines and other things. He felt social distancing and washing our hands can be emphasized more. He said he did not want to legislate out of fear, but out of concern for the health of our citizens and our economy. He said he had heard from many of the small businesses regarding masks.

Mayor Osbon asked that our citizens be safe and smart over the 4th of July weekend. He said Council encourages citizens to wear masks and follow the CDC guidelines for a healthy community and economy.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business, Councilwoman Price moved, seconded by Councilwoman Diggs, that the meeting adjourn. The motion was unanimously approved. The meeting adjourned at 2:59 p.m.


Sara B. Ridout
City Clerk