// A regular meeting of the Council of the City of Lynchburg was held on the 4th day of April, 2023, at 8:42 p.m., delayed from its normal meeting time of 7:30 p.m. due to a safety threat, in the Council Chamber, City Hall, Stephanie Reed, President, presiding. The following Members were present:

Present: Stephanie Reed, Chris Faraldi, Jeff Helgeson, Martin Misjuns, Larry Taylor, Sterling A. Wilder 6

Absent: MaryJane Dolan 1

// In the matter of Real Estate Tax Rate, Agenda Item #1, a public hearing was held and Council received citizen input regarding the Proposed Real Property Tax.

Wayne Cravey said that he was the owner of a small business and worked full-time. He understood that as citizens they had to pay taxes to receive services, but his recent assessment of his home indicated that his house had gone up 85% in value in two years, so he would have to leave the City of Lynchburg if the tax rates went through. He asked the Council to think about how the tax rates would impact senior citizens, and what changes they would make to help these residents as officials elected by the people.

Andrea Hart said that she was a resident of Ward II in Lynchburg. She said that "A new day, a new way," should be the new mantra for Lynchburg. She said that she had lived in the Washington D.C. area for a long time and was familiar with politics and bureaucracy. Lynchburg was a small city, and because of this its citizens had a more direct way of impacting the outcome for residents. She suggested reducing taxes and creating something more palatable with the help of the community to create solutions.

Sherriff Don Sloan, representing the Lynchburg County Sherriff's Office, said that he was appealing to the City Council and to all citizens of Lynchburg to fully fund all public safety, including the Departments of Police, Fire, Sheriffs, and 911 dispatchers, as originally submitted in the budget by City Manager Benda. He said that public safety services must be funded first, and whatever remained could be returned as property tax relief. He said that the Lynchburg Sherriff's Office supported the protection of the community and safety of their children.

Stacy Link stated that she was a resident of Ward IV. She said that she had appreciated and enjoyed hearing how her neighbors in the community were feeling. She said that four members of City Council had come up with a plan for how to set a tax rate that would acknowledge the higher assessment values on residents' homes and fully fund the public safety services. She said that they had to find a middle ground between the City Council and City Manager to make this work.

Marty Kirsch stated that he represented the Villas at Stone Mill. He said that he had not previously mentioned that there were 30 units occupied by single and widowed women, 7 by single men, and 27 units by couples, all of whom were ages 65 and older, many with fixed incomes. He said that all homeowners and businesses in the City would be affected by higher tax rates, as well as people buying food at restaurants or renting apartments. He said that businesses may be off put by the higher taxes of Lynchburg, so they had to find ways to bring major companies to the area and bring in tax revenues so that it was not all the responsibility of homeowners in the City.

Jack Whisler said that he was a homeowner in the Stone Mill Villas. He said that averaging four sample properties in the neighborhood, using the City's assessment data and the $1.11 tax rate per $100, the average tax increase was 38%, with an average additional tax dollar increase to the home of $74 per month, and even at $0.90 per $100, there was a 111.5% tax increase, translating to $23 per month. He requested the City Council to consider a tax rate that would bring the property taxes closer to what people currently paid, which would be most helpful to the citizens of Lynchburg.

Steve Troxel stated that he was a resident of Ward IV. He recommended the book "Economics in One Lesson" by Harry Hazelet. He read "the art of economics consists in looking not merely at the immediate, but at the longer effects of any act or policy. It consists in tracing the consequences of that policy not merely for one group, but for all groups." He said that the City needed to reduce the tax rate, they needed to fund public safety, and fund other initiatives through public-private partnerships.

CJ Jordan stated that she was a resident of Lynchburg. She said that she did not agree with what the City put forth as a tax cut, nor did she agree with what the fellow Republicans had put forth. She asked if they would be compassionate conservatives, or chaos conservatives who caused problems down the road. She said that the City should have an independent audit to look at each agency to identify where cuts could be made, where deregulations and cost reductions were possible, and at 2% cuts for each agency that would not impact public safety.

Joshua Pratt stated that the proposed 2024 budget was bloated with wasteful spending. He said that $0.89 cents was acceptable and $0.77 was preferable. He said that the City Council was supposed to create an efficient and accountable City government to provide services to the people without wasteful spending, so he proposed a City-wide hiring freeze except for sworn officers of Fire and Police Departments, and LynCom, to establish an Office of an Inspector General, and a complete forensic audit of every department by an auditor general to reduce spending.

Greg Lester stated that he was a resident of the City of Lynchburg. He stated that the real estate tax should be equalized, as the combination of all the other taxes collected by the City would allow the City to grow an extra 5.5% this year. He said that the City should set a budget based on a fair tax rate to its citizens and work within the budget, prioritizing its obligations to the City and citizens' needs. He proposed the City Council be proactive in how to grow its tax base so that they could lower the tax rate.

Curt Diemer stated that he was a resident of Ward III. He said that he was a strong proponent of their Police and Sherriff's Office, and if he thought that the proposed tax rate would impact them, he would not be speaking before the Council. He said that it was untrue that the public safety services would be cut in order to reduce the tax rate, and the Councilmembers were responsible for deciding how to cut other services in order to find savings in the budget and allocate the scarce resources wisely.

David Ream stated that he was a resident of Ward III. He said that Lynchburg was a great place to be a homeowner and live between the country and the City. He said that the tax rate of $1.11 or $1.05 was oppressive to all people in Lynchburg, depriving them of achieving homeownership. He said that City Council must first lower the tax rate to $0.89, which would not harm the City's revenue. He said that high property taxes drove away potential stakeholders in the community, and an external forensic audit would allow them to see the financial position clearly and they could use that data to plan efficient spending.

Dora Purvis stated that she had been a teacher for over 30 years and had lived and worked in many states. She said that the school budget composed over 50% of the City's budget, and there were many unnecessary programs. She said that she was informed by the schools that all children in the school district, regardless of financial need, received free breakfast and free lunch. She said that she proposed to audit both the school and City budgets to find unnecessary programs to be cut or modified, use the $60M surplus for law enforcement expansion, cut the taxes so the budget did not increase, and hold City Councilmembers accountable.

Peter Cefaratti said that he appreciated it when his property was valued more, but asked what the City government would do when another recession came and the values of the dollar went down and of property went down. He said that public safety and the school system should be high priorities, and many other things should be underneath that. He said that it was the City Council's job to maintain and expand those necessary services and their departments, while also seeing what could be cut out. He said that the City should not use the current fiscal year to base the budget on and should use the FY 2022 fiscal year.

Ryan Thomas said that in Jonah Goldberg's "Suicide of the West," it is noted that the prime directive of any government agency was to further its own existence, meaning that bureaucrats would go to extraordinary lengths to convince others that the services funded by taxpayer dollars were necessary. He said that he had not had a pay raise in two years at his private sector job, so he did not think it was fair that public servants were given raises, and they should be cut back. He said that public safety was important, but they had to create a culture that promoted responsibility among citizens to promote personal safety to make the jobs of public safety employees easier.

Benjamin Anderson stated that he was a resident of Wyndhurst. He said that he managed the rental properties that his parents owned in the City, and along with the proposed tax rate increase, other services were increasing this year and would be ultimately charged to tenants. He said that in Austin, Texas, a local legislator would not allow property tax increases higher than 10%, and he proposed that be implemented in Lynchburg City in order to create a cut-off point for real estate tax.

Veronica Bratton read a text from Mr. George Lauber, stating that he lived with his wife in Windsor Hills in Lynchburg, and was in strong opposition to any increase in City school, personal property, and real estate taxes. Retirees especially struggled with inflation and increasing prices, and if there was a surplus, they should consider giving back to the taxpayers, potentially by making senior citizens exempt from taxes on their residences. Ms. Braxton said that she supported public safety fully, and she hoped that with a rate reduction to at least $0.89, they could spend on necessities by duly prioritizing items.

Don Good stated that he was a resident of Ward 1. He said that no more discussion was needed, and with a $43M surplus in the 2022 fiscal year, they should lower the tax rate to $0.75. He said that when he ran for City Council 12 years ago, he was the first person to argue for the public safety salaries to be raised above those of the surrounding localities and cities. He stated that there as always waste in City government, and lowering the taxes would not endanger the City or its public safety.

Jim Whitaker stated that he served as Vice Mayor from 1992 to 1994 and Mayor of Lynchburg from 1994 to 1998. He said that while Mayor, his City Council developed and approved a long-range City Council vision and mission that was detailed in how they were going to accomplish the vision by the year 2020. He said that he requested from the Clerk's Office a copy of the current City Council vision and found there was no such document, but a motto, "A place to live, work, and play." He said that as the volunteer Chaplain for the Lynchburg City Police Department, he fully supported public safety, and they needed the City Council's direction on how to carry out the vision.

Tim Decker stated that he lived on Liggins Road and had lived in Lynchburg since 1995, where he had raised his four children with his wife. He said that their recent tax assessment was raised $60,000 on their property, or a 47% increase, or $56 per month. He said that it was unsustainable, and he was unable to continue living in Lynchburg with the current tax rates, so he had to consider leaving.

Sara Beck stated that she was a parent of students in Lynchburg City Schools and was a local professor. She requested City Council not reduce the property tax, as every cent of tax reduction resulted in a net budget decrease of $750,000. She said that with a rate of $0.89, they would have $16.5M less to spend on services City-wide. She said that as a Lynchburg homeowner, her priority was excellent public schools, so she asked that the tax rate be kept at $1.11 in order to invest aggressively in their public schools.

Gage McAngus stated that he had been both a classroom teacher and an administrator during his 13 years of teaching, He said that he knew that those who had not worked in public schools had limited perspectives on how they operated and what they needed for success. He said that schools could not be run like businesses, because the capital was human lives. He called on the City Councilmembers to serve as substitute teachers in the City public schools for a day to find appreciation for the transformation and learning that happened in the schools despite being underfunded.

Chris Quigg stated that he had moved to Lynchburg with his wife and five children 15 years ago from Connecticut. He said that he was thankful for Lynchburg for many reasons, and one of those had been their comparably lower real estate taxes, so he requested the City Council approve an $0.89 tax rate. He encouraged all followers of Christ to trust him when making the tax decision and rebate decision.

Karen Quigg said that she was a resident of Lynchburg City. She said that in her household, decisions were constantly made and reevaluated as they had to adjust to changing environments. She said that City Council had been elected by the people, and some of those Councilmembers had campaigned on lowering taxes. She asked the City Council to live within its means and do their job.

Gail Goldsmith requested City Council to set the tax rate as able to fund the City Manager's budget and its investments, because not doing so harmed her and City residents. She said that it was disappointing to see a budget plan come from members of Council that betrayed parks, schools, and safe and stable housing. She said that this plan also proposed turning public goods to be privatized to businesses and broadly discouraged industry. She said that the money proposed to be given back to citizens was not substantial, potentially $20 per month per property owner.

Zane Reynolds stated that he noticed when reading through the budget that there was a community development performance measure, in which the City Manager set the target to increase the average resident income by 5.5% for FY23 to FY24, but the top line of expenditures had the government increased by 11.2%, which was unsustainable. He said the public safety sector was not exempt from making cuts, because they all must shoulder the burden in that respect. He said that the potential tax cuts definitely affected people as the amount of increase may force people to decide whether to pay their property taxes or buy groceries each month.

Jennifer Williams stated that she was a resident of Ward IV. She said that her family chose to buy a home in Lynchburg compared to the surrounding counties because of the excellent services provided by the tax rates. She said that the proposed tax rate cut would decrease the funding for Lynchburg City Schools by $900,000. She said that Lynchburg City Schools students deserved all funding available, including teacher and staff salaries as well as funding for all supplies and services. She requested Council to keep the property tax rate at $1.11.

Jennifer Staton stated that she and her husband both were from Amherst County, but decided to raise their children in Lynchburg so that they would be able to attend public schools with great facilities and opportunities that were unavailable in surrounding localities. She said that the supportive services and advocates in the school system were essential to her children's success, and when the Council was talking about cutting stuff from the schools, they were talking about removing those life-changing programs.

Kim Wynn said that she assumed that when the newly-elected Republicans on City Council took office in November 2022, they would work together for much-needed reform to replace old Democratic values with more conservative values. She said that $1.05 would result in an increased tax burden instead of tax relief due to the higher real estate assessments, and citizens expected the Council to find more creative ways to fund the City budget.

Ben Blanks stated that he lived on the Langhorne Road in Lynchburg. He said that they definitely needed to fund their public safety sector in order to curb threats of violence. He said that as a renter, he was more concerned about the raising rent prices driving people to homelessness and crisis, but City services were important to fund. He said that the $1.05 rate may be acceptable, but there was possible middle ground between $0.89 and $1.05 without jeopardizing City services.

Michael Kalef stated that citizens did not need to be pitted against each other on the topic of funding public services and saving citizens money. He said that he understood that the Council was attempting to make the systems more efficient, and he knew that they would do as best they could because they cared about the City.

Sarah Kalef requested the City Council to give the money in their surplus back to the citizens of Lynchburg. She said that by doing so, citizens would reinvest in Lynchburg. She said that she supported $0.89 because she would like to see the rate equalized.

Charlie Hesse stated that he owned a rental property in town that was bought five years ago. He said that in July 2021, his new tax evaluation notice went up 82%, from $1600 per year to $3200 in real estate taxes. He said that he did not want to raise rents, but he had to in order to get that money. He said that he had no issue fundamentally with the reassessment made on the property he had purchased, but with a surplus and legitimate efforts to keep rents in line against competition, he was seeking relief. He said that he and his wife were considering moving out of the City after residing in Ward I for 30 years.

Teresa Spence stated that she supported the $0.89 tax rate. She said that the $1.11 rate would be a raise due to the raise in assessments. She said that the City had a slush fund not in the budget, so if their rates were lowered, it would not hurt the City. She said that specific waste in the budget that she could attest to was a City right-of-way space mowed weekly during this spring—even when the grass did not need it—and she assumed this was because the City felt compelled to use the funds in block grants, because they could not ask for more money next year unless they used all of the grant money during this year.

David Cooper stated that he was a Garland Hill resident and had been the homeowner of a historic home in Lynchburg since 2004. He said that in his business conversations with households managing finances, he saw that people were very aware of the tax rates between the City and the County, and he had had many friends move into the County to pay lower taxes. He said that equalizing the tax rate or lowering it was necessary. He said that he did not think that $15,000 per student was necessary in per-pupil expenditures because he had successfully homeschooled his seven children for less than that amount in total.

Sherone Simpson stated that she was raised and educated in Lynchburg, and moved back to Lynchburg in 2013 to take care of her mother and to help Lynchburg. She said that she disagreed with comments that suggested there should be less money given to the schools. She said that when classrooms had 20 to 30 children, the dynamic necessitated more funding for the schools. She asked the Council to respect the position of the Superintendent and prioritize the budget proposed, and asked that their decisions be based on some sort of metric that would benefit ultimately children and teachers.

Nate Rock stated that he supported a reduction of the tax rate to $0.89 per $100 of assessed value. He said that the greatest reason for lowering the rate was that it would benefit both the City and citizens. He said that his challenges from the past year had been very difficult, and the increases in costs of living would add to the challenges, even with a 5% reduction as the City Manager had proposed. He asked that the City Council trim the budget in order to lower the rate and allow himself, his family, and other citizens to be able to fight for themselves during these times of lean.

Jibri Poe stated that he used to be afraid to tell people he was from Lynchburg, and often thought of how his ancestors had been exploited in places like Point of Honor, not too far from the Virginia Baptist Hospital where he was born. He said that he was no longer afraid to tell people he was from Lynchburg; he had seen the processes of the City taking care of its citizens, and he was thankful for the City providing a place for children to be schooled and for parents to work. He said that the leadership of the City was diverse in their backgrounds, but without love and financial means given to public servants, they would not be able to give back to the community.

Dan Pense stated that he was a resident of Ward II. He said that the Republican Party ran with a campaign flyer that stated the top priorities were to support public safety, lower taxes, educational opportunities, and to make Lynchburg the best place to live, work, and play. He said that he believed that the Council had integrity and would do what they said, so he encouraged them to follow those printed promised. He stated that he supported an $0.89 or lower tax rate.

Sharon Ream stated that she was a resident of Ward III. She said that there were options from nonprofit entities that would allow the City to use services without utilizing City money. She said that they should encourage other types of involvement and community-building so that they did not have to use public funds for those initiatives. She said that while she had not been in Lynchburg City Schools, as a former teacher, she knew a common problem was the hiring of administrators with high salaries and giving teachers lower salaries. She said that teachers should also be able to limit or reduce the amounts that they were requesting.

David Musselman said that he was from Cleveland, Ohio. He said that he had been an Uber driver part-time, and noticed that no matter what part of the City he went to, the children were always incredibly polite and well-mannered. He said that the Council had recently been shifted to a more two-party, conservative makeup, and it was clear what the public wanted when those new members were elected. He said that the public would be very disappointed if they did not follow their campaign promises, one of which being to lower taxes.

Cindy Ferguson stated that she was a resident of Ward II and had lived in Lynchburg for 32 years. She said that through the years, she began to see how many people in the community continued to be in need of healthy food, safe and affordable housing, physical and mental health care, reliable transportation, education, and supportive spaces. She said that they needed to be fiscally responsible and good stewards of resources by meeting all the needs of their citizens. She said that they could not meet the needs of children or employees by cutting the school budget.

Cassandra Taylor stated that she had lived in a neighborhood where there were not many wants, and she did not understand why school buses delivered meals during the COVID-19 pandemic in her neighborhood because it was unnecessary. She said that the middle class needed a break, so she requested the City Council reduce taxes.

Molly McClenon stated that she was a resident of 1712 Riverside Drive. She stated that she and her husband were from Iowa and Illinois, and moved to Lynchburg in 1965 with their three daughters, who were all well-educated in the Lynchburg Public Schools. She thanked the previous City Councils for their vision, support, and funding, and she hoped the current City Council would continue. She said it was essential to fund their schools for their citizens and City, and she was proud of the City's commitment to improve and support neighborhoods. She requested the City Council adopt the City Manager's proposed tax rate.

Kimberly Dyke-Harsley stated that she was a resident of Ward II and was representing the Early Childhood Education Committee, part of the Bridges to Progress initiative. She said that the goal of the group was to provide universal, quality pre-K for all children in the City in order to help them attain success in school. She said that the proposed cut to real estate taxes would result in a significant drop in resources available to the City at a time when more was needed to make their teachers' salaries competitive in the region and to give opportunities for quality early childhood education. She requested the Council to consider this and invest in the future of their City and all of its citizens, especially the youngest ones.

Mayor Reed asked the Clerk of Council Ms. Alicia L. Finney if there were emails or phone calls from constituents. Ms. Finney replied yes, there were both.

Ms. Finney read Walter Daniels' email into the record. The email read that the City Manager's suggested $1.05/100 real estate tax was a responsible request that allowed the City to continue to move forward both fiscally and in the services provided to citizens, and the Councilmembers supporting a tax rate below the City Manager's suggestion were obligated to specify in detail the services and maintenance cuts they wanted and what future projects they wanted shelved.

Ms. Finney read Margaret Ladd's email. The email read that in thinking about Lynchburg 40 years ago, Lynchburg now, and what they wanted Lynchburg to look like going forward, she supported the proposed FY 2024 budget from the City Manager and encouraged City Council to approve and fund the budget so they would move beyond the status quo and appropriately fund City services. She expressed support for using debt to finance CIP projects.

Ms. Finney read Laurel Foot's email. The email read that she was concerned about the proposed decreases to the real estate tax because while it appeared on the surface to be of benefit to the taxpayers, there were details about the consequences that must be addressed. She noted that the reduction from $1.05 to $0.90 would be most beneficial to those with above-average means and that even without added projects, the costs of goods, services, and staff was increasing, thus making the status quo an actual reduction.

Ms. Finney read Anthony Parlato's email. The email read that their family currently owned two townhouse properties in Lynchburg, 201 Capstone Drive and 203 Capstone Drive, and they were shocked at the proposed increase in assessed valuation, which was in excess of $51,000 each, and without cash flow or cap rate to speak of, would not incentivize investors enough to purchase the properties at the assessed values. The increase in assessed values would cause the housing market in the area to crash or cause significant rises in rent and resale values.

Ms. Finney read Bill Burruss' email. The email read that as a realtor and business owner, he was against the extreme lowering of real estate taxes planned by four members of City Council before discussion. He said that in his experience as a realtor and committee member of the National Association of Realtors, he had learned that Lynchburg had a documented history of neglect and passing the buck in terms of maintaining infrastructure.

Ms. Finney read William Cook's email. The email read that as a lifelong resident, local business owner, property owner, and member of the LRBA Board, he had been following the FY 2024 budget process. He explained that a 19.8% real estate tax reduction was not in the best interest of the City because the costs of services were rising, and the City as a business must be preparing and focusing on long-term sustainability. The reduction did not help those in the most need in the City, but would mostly benefit real estate investors, corporations, and high-value property owners. If a reduction were considered by Council, it should not be drastic as the real estate market would correct itself.

Ms. Finney read Kevin Hooper's email. The email read that he supported all of the points made by William Cook's submitted email. He suggested to take the money raised by taxes be put to use by the right people to keep their City financially strong.

Ms. Finney read Rick Comar's email. The email read that as a mortgage broker for 24 years, he had experience with the real estate market and was an independent voter. He said that with what the community and nation had been through over the last few years from Covid-19, gas prices, and 401Ks, now was not the time to pick up extra tax dollars by lowering the tax rate to be equal to the new home values. He noted that taxes were paid on most services required to live and these had a large impact on citizens' finances.

Ms. Finney read Joan McAfee's email. The email read that as senior citizens on a fixed income, she and her husband were very concerned about the recent appraisal on their home and the estimated increase on their taxes by $700. They requested the tax rate be reduced to $0.85 to bring tax relief to them and all residents of Lynchburg.

Ms. Finney read Esther Brisson's email. The email read that she had heard that Lynchburg was one of the highest taxes counties. She expressed interest in implementing her vote for a refund for the homeowners for some of the high taxes that were not needed in the City.

Ms. Finney read Margi Murphy's email. The email read that she had received a 19.5% increase in assessment this year after just getting a 32.5% increase in 2021, and they had just bought the house in 2020 at an already-inflated rate, so it was a 50% increase in three years. If the tax rate did not come down considerably, they would be taking another big hit this year and people would leave the City for the counties even without the City services.

Ms. Finney read Sarah Wynn's email. The email read that she was greatly concerned about the high real estate taxes in Lynchburg City. So many voted for a conservative City Council in the hopes of getting tax relief and she felt betrayed especially since they had a surplus of $43M.

Ms. Finney read Crystal Billa's email. The email read that as a concerned and retired citizen, it perturbed her that the City was considering raising taxes. She would appreciate if the City understood that the cost of living had gone up tremendously for the consumer and by raising taxes, they were placing an undue burden on the citizens of Lynchburg.

Ms. Finney read Will Andrews' email. The email read that as a Lynchburg native, vice president of Scott Insurance, and active real estate investor and developer, he appreciated City Council's commitment to fiscal responsibility. He stated that tax efficiency was a noble goal and something to strive for as a community, but the proposed tax cuts disproportionately affected citizens with large real estate holdings and could cause issues if the housing market corrected itself, and the personal property and BPOL tax cuts offered a far more effective mechanism for reducing the tax burden for a large range of citizens.

Ms. Finney read David and Michelle Humphreys' email. The email read that they had been advised that the City of Lynchburg was proposing a $10M tax burden increase on the citizens of Lynchburg. They just had a real estate tax increase and another increase so soon was not a fiscally responsible way to operate the City. They requested such an increase be postponed for the foreseeable future and that planned expenditures for needs be funded through the City's existing General Fund or increased revenue generated by the recent real estate tax increase.

Ms. Finney read Sarah Smyczynski's email. The email read that she requested the Council to not drop the tax rate below equalization or cut the City's budget so substantially. She understood that so many citizens were hurting with inflation levels, but cutting the City's budget would negatively impact the City in the long run. They needed strong infrastructure and services like the library for their community.

Ms. Finney read Rick Hughes' email. The email read that he had received a notice that his property tax assessment was raised 30% this year. He said that when taxes were raised, the taxes were passed on to renters, causing housing anxiety and those who had close to no discretionary income had to cut costs even more, resulting in more dependence on City, state, and federal services. When property taxes were raised, there was less incentive to rent and reducing the number of affordable houses. He said that if Lynchburg loved them, it would want people to keep as much money as they could.

Ms. Finney read Jeff Rosner's email. The email read that this hearing was not about setting the real estate tax rate, and proposals from City Councilmembers would roll back years of progress and severely damage Lynchburg City Schools.

Ms. Finney read Peggy Andrews' email. The email read that as a lifelong resident of Lynchburg and residential property owner for the last 37 years, she was proud of the quality of life they enjoyed in Lynchburg, which was distinguished from the surrounding counties by the level of services the City offered. A reduction in real estate property tax from $1.11 to $0.89 would negatively impact their ability to maintain the level of services, including the City schools, and would also impede the City's ability to handle inevitable rising costs while only benefitting those who needed the tax cuts the least.

Ms. Finney read Michael Bauman's email. The email read that as a City resident, he did not mind paying taxes or paying an increased rate because paying taxes kept their City operating their schools, roads, parks, and a wide array of resources and services that benefited him as a City resident. He noted that a vast majority of real estate owners in Lynchburg could absorb any increase, and rather than lower the tax rate for all City residents, there could be a process by which citizens who demonstrated hardship due to their tax burden could receive an exemption, reduced rate, or deferred payment.

Ms. Finney read Gayle Daly's email. The email read that as a homeowner in Lynchburg for 44 years and whose children graduated from Lynchburg City Schools, the budget submitted by Mr. Benda for their review was an appropriate reduction in the tax rate, and any rate lower than the $1.05 would be irresponsible. For Lynchburg to thrive, it was essential to provide appropriate funding to the school system to pay teachers and staff wages that would encourage strong, well-qualified candidates to apply and stay once hired, as well as economic development, public safety, and parks.

Ms. Finney read Kimberly Wynn's email. The email read that when the public elected a Republican majority to Council, she assumed they would bring much-needed conservative reform, which included a reduction in real estate taxes. She heard Mayor Reed say repeatedly that people were more concerned with rising crime than with lowering real estate taxes, but that was untrue as inflation was skyrocketing. With higher appraisals, this would result in an increased tax burden instead of needed relief, and with a surplus of $43M, it was completely unacceptable.

Ms. Finney read Gary Nero's email. The email read that he was dismayed to hear that the new City Council majority was diving headlong into a tax cut agenda. The apparent plans to reduce property taxes would primarily benefit the residents of their City who could most afford to pay taxes and would inevitably result in a reduction of services to the community as a whole, but especially to those who needed the services the most. He asked the City Councilmembers to consider the entire Lynchburg community when making this decision about taxes, as well as all future decisions.

Ms. Finney read Brian Delano's email. The email read that he could support a reduction in real estate tax rate from the current $1.11 of assessed value to 1% of assessed value. A rate of 1% assessed value was a reasonable compromise between affording homeowners meaningful tax relief and maintaining a City budget that addressed current and future foreseen needs. He cautioned against too large of a reduction due to its effects on public safety, infrastructure, and economic development.

Ms. Finney read Gary Taylor's email. The email read that he gave thanks for the transparency regarding the current budget process and discussions, and said that there was a Bedford County real estate tax article in the News & Advance from March 22 that outlined the process and the proposed advertising a reduced rate and why they were not advertising at full equalization. The letter from the four Councilmembers would be forcing a vote to adopt $0.89 before the budget was properly vetted and before the process was complete and before public input.

Ms. Finney read Melanie Thompson's email. The email read that as a City resident from 2000 to 2022 and as City business owner from 2014 to 2022 and with real estate still owned in the City, she was purposefully moving her family and business out of the City out of 22 years. State Code 58.1-3321 required every jurisdiction in Virginia in a real assessment year to equalize the tax rate to 1.01% of the prior year's real estate tax revenue or hold a public hearing on the tax rate in order to exceed the equalized rate, which in 2023 was $0.92/$100 and the City Manager was proposing $1.05/$100.

Ms. Finney read Timothy Barrett's email. The email read that while they were a lower-income family that had to live on a budget, they understood the importance of their City services, and they wanted to live in a City with affordable taxes, but one that provided adequate safety and services, as well as a City that was growing, improving, and addressed all of the factors that sustained their City. Slashing the real estate tax rate and greatly reducing their budget was the wrong thing to do and they were strongly against it.

Ms. Finney read Robert David Jones' email. The email read that in 2021, the area in which he lived, Ward IV, was given the bulk of property tax increase assessed on the people of Lynchburg and his real estate taxes increased by 16.98% for that one year alone. He said that the two-year inflation rate in the US had been 13% and the City Council wanted to add another financial burden upon the people of

Lynchburg with the new assessment of real estate property, which working-class and fixed income individuals could not afford.

Ms. Finney read Randall Hurst's email. The email read that he was strongly in favor of lowering the real estate tax rate to at a minimum to equalize the taxes collected since the new assessments had been calculated. He encouraged them to pursue this as well as returning any surplus taxes collected previously. With the ongoing inflation, a hike in real estate property taxes they paid would be a tremendous burden on the household budget.

Ms. Finney read Randy Nelson's email. The email read that he was a resident of the City of Lynchburg and at-large member of the Lynchburg City Council from January 2010 to November 2022. The budget performance expectations message to the City Manager ignored the reasoned approach of allowing the City Council to thoroughly examine the information provided by the City Manager and instead arbitrarily chose to immediately set a real estate tax rate at $0.89 without regard to actual cost of producing and delivering the City's products and services in 2024. Such a hasty approach violated basic and accepted economic principles and rational budgeting practices.

Ms. Finney read Joe Dekreon's email. The email read that he was a property owner in Lynchburg and his assessment in 2023 shot up 28%. He requested to please lower the tax rate by more than a few percentage points, and noted that lowering the rate to $0.89 still enabled the General Fund to grow by 5.5%.

Ms. Finney read Roland Achtau's email. The email read that he was a property owner in Lynchburg and his assessments for all of his properties went up significantly in 2023. He requested to please lower the tax rate and lower the rate to $0.89/$100, which would allow the City's General Fund to grow by 5.5%. He asked the Council to not ignore the issue because it not only affected landlords but also tenants and escalated the inflation of prices they currently were in.

Ms. Finney played the voicemail message of Andrew Glover for Conservative Parents for Lynchburg into the record. He stated that he had identified 22 projects in the CIP that had already been identified as not providing essential services, totaling $3.3M in 2024 and $26.9M in the next five years. He encouraged them to reduce operational expenses by selling off unused or unneeded real estate and capital equipment assets because they cost money in maintenance while providing no services to the City. He encouraged the Council to lower taxes for citizens and stop making excuses.

Ms. Finney played the voicemail message of Geoffrey Kershner into the record. He said he was not callous to the problems people felt around inflation and the increased assessed value of their homes, but some of the changes were bigger than their City and as a community they would have to stand together to face them. He asked for the City Council to consider a measured compromise, because he and his peers feared that a reduced City investment would impact town attraction and retention to their seven hills, and if they cut the City budget as drastically as proposed to $0.89/$100, the departure of a lot of talent would not create an exodus to surrounding counties but to other mid-size cities that invested in their urban infrastructure.

Ms. Finney played the voicemail message of Margaret May into the record. She said that she wished to protest the newest assessment on her home. She said that she did not know what other information they needed, but she had one of the smallest houses on the street and had moved there because it was so small. She asked City Council to please contact her in regards to the newly assessed value of her home.

Ms. Finney played the voicemail message of Michael and Susan Morcom into the record. Mr. Morcom stated that they were calling about the raising of the taxes. He said that their assessment had gone up at least $50,000 or more, and people were on social security, and taxes were already over $2,000 per year. He said that they were hoping that they would lower the tax rate, because in this economy it would be difficult for people to face raised real estate taxes.

Ms. Finney played the voicemail message of Patricia Richardson into the record. She said that she got her real estate valuation notice and it was raised from $115,700 to $163,700, which was almost a $50,000 increase and was not accurate based on her home. She said that an accurate assessment would probably be $135,000 to $140,000, but $163,500 was not in line with the property on the street. She said that she would appreciate input on this, as she believed it was too high.

Ms. Finney played the voicemail message of Samantha Citty into the record. She stated that in 2022, her house was evaluated at $147,500, and with a tax rate of $1.11, they paid $1,637.25, or $106 per month. She said that their most recent evaluation on their house was $185,700, and keeping the tax rate at $1.11, their taxes would increase to $2,061, or $424 for the year or an additional $35 for the month. With Mr. Benda's proposed plan, they would only pay an additional $26 per month, and if the tax rate were to be reduced to $0.88, they would pay $1,634 for the year, saving a total of $3.

Mayor Reed closed the public hearing.

Councilmember Helgeson made a motion, seconded by Councilmember Taylor, to set the Real Estate Tax rate at $0.89.

Mayor Reed clarified that the motion was out of order because the agenda tonight was a public hearing only and because they were missing a Councilmember. Councilmember Helgeson stated that the motion was in order because the matter rested with Council.

Mayor Reed asked City Attorney Mr. Matthew C. Freedman if the motion was out of order. Mr. Freedman answered that Mayor Reed was correct that she had the ability to determine whether a motion was in order or out of order. He noted that real estate taxes were set by ordinance, and there was no ordinance before Council, so it was inappropriate to vote on a real estate tax rate without an ordinance to vote on. Councilmember Helgeson said that it was appropriate for Council to act upon information received by the public during the public hearing, and he appealed the motion. Mayor Reed stated that the motion was still ruled out of order. Mr. Freedman said that if it were being challenged, Councilmembers could not individually challenge it, but if it were subject to appeal, and it won the appeal and was considered as a motion, per state code and local code, an action such as this required an amendment to that ordinance be by ordinance, so a motion if adopted would be void. Councilmember Misjuns asked if it was correct that nothing invalidated a previous action of Council. Mr. Freedman said that with a majority action by ordinance, there had to be a majority action by ordinance to change it, so the question was too broad to answer with regard to the motion made by Councilmember Helgeson. Vice Mayor Faraldi asked if it was correct that there could not be debate on the validity of a ruling by the Chair of Council. Mr. Freedman said that was correct, but there could be an appeal. Vice Mayor Faraldi asked if it was correct that there could be no debate on an appeal. Mr. Freedman said that was correct. Vice Mayor Faraldi asked if it was correct that the Council should refrain from discussion and vote on the appeal.

Mayor Reed called the vote on the appeal for Mr. Helgeson's motion being out of order. With no further discussion from Council, the following vote was recorded:

Ayes: Helgeson, Faraldi, Taylor, Misjuns	4
Noes: Wilder, Reed	2
Absent: Dolan	1

Mr. Freedman said that with the motion in order, it still meant that if the motion passed, it was not lawful. Councilmember Helgeson said that City staff would write the resolutions. He said that he was voting for this motion because Lynchburg had many sources of revenue other than real estate taxes, and a 5.5% increase in the general fund would be a $12.5M increase from the previous year. Both homeowners and tenants suffered when taxes were raised. The Councilmembers were meant to represent the citizens and not the bureaucracy. He said that the last two years had record-setting budget surpluses originating from the increases in tax rates. Many people were thinking of leaving Lynchburg for the surrounding counties because they could pay a lot less for services there, so they had to be competitive and keep individuals in Lynchburg.

Mayor Reed stated that the motion was out of order. She stated that according to §15.2-1427(B) and (E) of the Virginia Code §§2-4(1), 2-6(1), and 2-6(3) of the City Code, City ordinances must be amended by way of an ordinance, not simply a voice vote. Even the real estate tax was set by ordinance; an ordinance reviewed by the City Attorney must be adopted by City Council to change their real estate tax. She stated that if voted on tonight, the vote would be invalid. She said that it was possible for facts and information to be brought back to the City Council at another time to discuss a rate, but tonight's public hearing was for information only, with no agenda set to do any type of vote.

Vice Mayor Faraldi asked when Mr. Freedman began working for Lynchburg. Mr. Freedman answered that it was July 1, 2021. Vice Mayor Faraldi said that a similar issue with similar motions for tax rates happened at a Council meeting before Mr. Freedman had been their attorney, but the attorney at the time had not raised the issue of those motions being out of order. He asked what had changed in that time. Mr. Freedman stated that he could not know what the attorney's mindset was at the time, but his own reading of the state code, which stated the law as far as the changing of ordinances needing to be done by ordinance, meant that that was the way it must be done. He said that special language must be included in ordinances, and because their tax rate was set by ordinance, that was the requirement, and deviating from that would render it invalid. Vice Mayor Faraldi asked if the previous Council's motion would have been invalid in this manner. Mr. Freedman stated that it likely was more of a position, and if it had passed, it would have directed the City Manager to bring it back as part of the budget and been adopted as part of that ordinance. Mayor Reed stated that a budget calendar was set and they move forward with that calendar. Councilmember Helgeson requested that the Councilmember who seconded the motion be able to speak. Councilmember Taylor declined to speak.

Councilmember Wilder made a substitute motion, seconded by Mayor Reed, that the matter be brought back at another meeting when more time was available to discuss the information. He noted that Councilmember Dolan was not present, and he knew that she would object to this discussion taking place in this manner. Mayor Reed said that she agreed and reiterated that this item was not on the agenda for tonight. Vice Mayor Faraldi said that Councilmember Dolan had made decisions in the past to take votes with other members absent. He said that he would support an $0.89 rate whenever the vote took place because he had determined it as the appropriate rate after reviewing all of the City's budget information. He said that a citizen had raised the issue that the City Council did not have a strategic vision, but there once was one called the ballot box. He said that he knew that they could meet the needs of the Fire and Rescue and Police departments with $0.89, and they could shift the needs of governmental departments to meet those needs. He said that the substitute motion would fail if he voted for it, and if the $0.89 rate passed, they would have to vote on it again anyway to make it appropriate, so it made no difference as to whether he voted on the substitute motion or not. Councilmember Misjuns said that there were many ways that the Council could support public safety and the schools with a reduced rate, and that was what many of them had campaigned on. He said that it was important that the Councilmembers take care of their citizens, and the people had clearly voiced that things were too expensive for everyone, and their priorities came first. He stated that he would not be supporting the substitute motion and would be supporting an $0.89 rate. Councilmember Taylor stated that Lynchburg was a prosperous City, and they could adequately fund the public safety departments and schools with the funds already available to the City. Councilmember Helgeson clarified that his motion included the instruction to the City Manager and staff to draft the appropriate language of an appropriate ordinance for $0.89.

Mayor Reed said that there should be a budget process associated with the public hearing tonight in order for the public to witness how these decisions were made. She said that she did not disagree with a lowered tax rate, but in addition to lowering taxes, her other priorities were public safety and schools, which must be weighed equally when looking at the budget. She said that a vote was not required at this meeting because they lacked an ordinance to vote on. She stated that she wanted to ensure the promises made to the public safety departments were fulfilled, because the City Manager's original presentation included a much-needed package that she had advocated for with public safety officials, with the intent of being able to avert future tragedies in their City.

Vice Mayor Faraldi said that he was prepared to vote, and if they had to direct the City Manager to create an ordinance for $0.89, he was set.

Mayor Reed called the vote on tabling discussion until the next meeting. With no further discussion from Council, the following vote was recorded:

Ayes: Wilder, Reed	2
Noes: Helgeson, Faraldi, Taylor, Misjuns	4
Absent: Dolan	1

Mayor Reed said that the original motion was on the floor. Councilmember Helgeson clarified that the original motion was for a real estate tax rate of $0.89, with direction to City Manager and staff to create language for an ordinance. Councilmember Wilder stated that he did not support the motion because Councilmember Dolan was absent, and because the City Manager had shared information recently about the effects of a lowered tax rate to $0.89, which would mean that in FY 2024, the City would be unable to fund any new initiatives and would have to reduce services it currently provided to residents, including no additional local funding for Lynchburg City Schools, no pay increases, pay progressions, nor salary adjustments, and additional fiscal reductions. He stated that they needed better information from the City Manager and Chief Financial Officer to see what the implications of such a reduction were before voting on the rate. He said that he supported the recommendations of the City Manager and the staff who prepared the budget. Councilmember Misjuns stated that there was proposed pay rates for firefighter-3 positions that were compressed for a decade of time, but he did not know whether it was a formula error or intentionally proposed by staff, and there was more work to be done to more adequately pay their public safety employees. Vice Mayor Faraldi said that it was up to City Council to decide how to fund things with certain tax rates, and they would continue to fund those necessary items in public safety and education. Mayor Reed stated that the budget process was essential to working through how to find the money to fund initiatives, and it was up to Council to decide what was good for the people they represented. She said that more discussion was owed to their citizens that was being bypassed currently, and she asked for the fair opportunity to have all seven members participate in all budget meetings to form a collective agreement.

Mayor Reed called the vote for the $0.89 real estate tax rate. With no further discussion from Council, the following vote was recorded:

Ayes: Helgeson, Faraldi, Taylor, Misjuns	4
Noes: Wilder, Reed	2
Absent: Dolan	1

// In the matter of Water Resources, Agenda Item #2, a public hearing was held and Council received citizen input regarding the FY 2024 Water and Sewer Rates, Sewer Only Rate, and Stormwater Fee.

Vice Mayor Faraldi asked if there was an issue with the legality of the public hearings because the start times were not taking place as advertised. City Attorney Mr. Matthew C. Freedman said that it was a potential issue that he was unsure of the answer to at this time, and he would have to further review it with the City Manager's Office. He said that even if additional public hearings needed to be held, they could do so in order to hear from the public.

Peter Cefaratti stated that he was a resident of the City of Lynchburg. He said that he did not agree with the usage of bible verses on City Council, because Jesus would not ask people to pay more taxes to the Roman government so that people would be fed and clothed, but asked people to do it themselves. He said that it was up to citizens to help each other, and nonprofits would give more money to those in need than the government would.

Mayor Reed closed the public hearing.

Councilmember Helgeson said that he hoped to increase volume rates and lower account fees that had been seen when they worked through this rate in their budget process.

// In the matter of Budget, Agenda Item #3, a public hearing was held and City Council received citizen input regarding the proposed FY24 Operating Budget and the FY24-28 Capital Improvement Program.

Eugene Wingfield, President of the Lynchburg Police Foundation, stated that Chief Zuidema had submitted a budget proposal that moved forward the long-term plans of the LPD and kept the department in a competitive position to recruit and retain the best police officers, including additional staffing and new programs. He stated that it was crucial to not allow the important step forward with pay increases and infrastructure funding to go back to where they had been.

Bethany Harrison, Commonwealth Attorney for the City of Lynchburg, representing the Commonwealth Attorney's Office, stated that she requested the City Council to approve and fund the department's budget requests for FY 2024, which included additional positions and additional assistance for retention of current employees. She said that the General Assembly in 2020 had pushed through radical changes to the criminal justice procedure and laws that had exponentially increased their workload, as well as more defendants requesting plea agreements that required trial in court by their department, which required staff to process efficiently.

Michael Pflieger, Chief Deputy Commonwealth's Attorney, stated that he had seen a systemic change in the past three years that extended beyond normal processes. There was an exponential increase in jury trials, and an inordinate amount of time was required from attorneys to prepare for each of these cases, leading to neglect of other administrative duties, community outreach, and victim and witness case preparations. He stated his appreciation for the support of the Board in giving assistance to the department to alleviate their concerns.

Andrew Childress, Deputy Commonwealth Attorney, stated that the changes made in the justice system had impacted the retention of the Commonwealth Attorney's Office. In the last five years, they had lost ten attorneys total, five being in this current year. There were currently only two attorneys in the office, and this was because the stress of being able to adequately do the job with not enough time and resources was bad for their health, and they left. He stated that the amount of jury cases necessitated almost twice as many resources to handle the workload, because the stakes were high for those prosecuting these cases.

Mary Booker, Director of the Victim Witness Program in the Lynchburg Commonwealth Attorney's Office. The Victim Witness Program had been in existence since 1986, and this was the first year they had been included in the City budget, and thanked City Manager Benda for the inclusion. She said that they had previously operated with a self-sustaining grant, and this year requested the City to give their grant 5% to give a pay increase to their staff. She stated that if they could not retain well-trained staff, services for victims would suffer, and if victims did not cooperate with the criminal justice system, it affected the entire system. She requested the City Council approve the City Manager's recommendation for funding.

Emma Moulder stated that she was a resident and employee of the City of Lynchburg as an advocate for victims of crime at the Victim Witness Program and Commonwealth Attorney's Office. She requested the City Council to adopt the Commonwealth Attorney's requested budget giving a 5% pay increase to the Victim Witness Program to help with retention of advocates for victims. They struggled with victims participating in the trial process for some of the most serious cases, and retaining advocates was necessary to build these relationships.

CJ Jordan asked if the Council was going to deny assistance to the public safety services. She stated that the City could allocate funds to rehabilitate housing instead of demolishing it to build new affordable housing, and could give funds to the Commonwealth Attorney's Office to establish mental health services. She said that leadership included making difficult decisions, and the question now was who the Council was going to deny. She stated that a forensic audit was necessary to understand exactly what the costs of the City were so that they could establish how to adequately support the community.

Joshua Pratt stated that according to the News & Advance, the proposed budget was $547.7M for FY 2024. He said that there were proposed increases for discretionary funds that were unnecessary and could be reduced in order to lower the tax rate and still adequately fund public safety. A true forensic audit of each department would highlight areas of waste and allow them to be more efficient and save taxpayers money.

Amanda Linehan stated she was a 7th grade teacher at Dunbar Middle School. She stated that she supported the proposed 15/50 education budget for the support that it extended to teachers who not only taught life skills and helped students connect with others, but also helped students deal with grief when tragic events struck them. She stated that if better compensation was possible for teachers it should be provided.

Tracie Gallahan, Chief Revenue Officer and Senior Vice President at First National Bank, stated that she was representing the Lynchburg Housing Collaborative. The Lynchburg Housing Collaborative presented suggestions to the City, which were to develop a local housing trust fund, adopt inclusionary zoning policies to create mixed-income housing, and for the City to develop infrastructure such as water and sewer for housing in areas where it was lacking. She stated that the Housing Collaborative supported the budget line item identifying $250,000 as seed money to launch a local housing trust fund by leveraging state and federal funds, demonstrating a commitment to further housing attainment in the City.

Kimberly Dyke-Harsley, representing the ECC, B to P, stated that she wanted the Police and Sherriff's departments to have enough money to form prevention teams, because there were many unsolved crimes. She stated that the reason police were dispatched was because the community called them, so the community needed tools as well.

Nathan Hendrix, President of the Blue Ridge Chapter of the Virginia Division of the Police Benevolent Association, gave his thanks to the Councilmembers for their commitments to public safety, and all members of the PBA organization appreciated being able to count on their continued dedication to support public safety.

Jennifer Woofter, Co-President of the League of Women Voters of Lynchburg and speaking on behalf of the organization, stated that the League was voicing support of the tax rate and budget that continued to invest in public schools, parks and recreation, public transportation options, and natural resources, and was strongly opposed to any decisions that would result in limited or cut services, or failure to keep pace with inflation. She stated the League requested City Council to amend the City Manager's proposed budget to include a Cost of Living Adjustment pay increase to keep up with the rate of inflation.

Kathleen Davis stated that she was disappointed that there was an already-decided upon amount to set the rate at without waiting to hear from all citizens. As a Lynchburg resident and business owner, she felt that privatizing City services rather than funding what they already had echoed a sentiment of the past, allowing outsiders to come to Lynchburg and get citizens to give away valuable things for cheap. She said they could not stop hate with hate and get more done with less resources, and there was question as to why they were doing this if it did not help those who needed help the most.

April Watson stated that she was a resident of Ward IV. She said that protecting Lynchburg's progress and moving the City forward required an ongoing investment to achieve that significant work. She requested City Council to approve the City Manager's budget, and to include a meaningful plan for human services, specifically family services specialist positions. She stated that the City had one prevention worker with a caseload on average of 50 or 60. It was essential that they pay staff fairly and meet caseload standards and state-recommended staffing ratios.

Ben Blanks stated his main concern with this year's budget was making sure they continued to fund GLTC, whose services he required for transportation to work. He requested the City Council to fully fund the GLTC request in the City Manager's budget.

Christy Horsley stated that she was a resident of Ward IV and had worked in the child welfare-adjacent field for ten years. She stated that there were approximately 188 children in foster care in Lynchburg City, and to get children out of foster care, it was critical to stabilize the foster care workforce, which included not only foster care workers but schoolteachers and staff who helped document cases and provide supportive services to children. She noted that raising pay to match the skills and education required for foster care work, teachers, and school personnel would drive wealth creation in the City far more than refunding citizens.

James Coleman, Chair of the Lynchburg City School Board, stated that he was representing not only the schools and the School Board but also his mother, Dr. Lauretta Atkinson Coleman, who was also an educator and asked him to advocate for the children and the importance of their education. Education must be funded to the amount requested by LCS to include the 15/50 plan. He thanked the Council for their support of public education, and asked that they work together to ensure that everything needed for those on the front lines for their children was funded.

Beth White stated that there were immediate requests for tax relief when new Councilmembers were elected, and while they all wanted lower taxes, they had to question what the cost was that they were willing to have them. She stated that during the four "Budget and Brews" sessions, three Councilmembers did not attend any sessions and therefore were unaware that citizens at those meetings expressed more interest in retaining services and supporting first responders. With the waivers proposed by the $1.05 rate, she would save $83.66, and with the $0.89 rate, she would save $39.40. 52% of the City did not own homes and would not see the tax relief.

Cindy Ferguson stated that it was important or the City Council to not compare public and private schools, because the City Council's responsibility was to the public schools and ensuring that they were the best that they could be for their children and the future of their City. She stated that she would like her real estate and property taxes to go toward housing inspectors to ensure that rental properties were affordable for tenants, to pay bus drivers, custodians, and other employees living wages, and to pay emergency services officers fully for their services. She requested the Council to be fiscally and socially responsible when determining the budget.

Karl Loos, President of the Lynchburg Education Association, stated that there was an earlier comparison of the per-pupil expenditures between Lynchburg and Bedford counties, and clarified that Lynchburg spent about $13,000 per pupil and Bedford spent about $12,000 per pupil. Complaints earlier about free school lunches did not pertain to the City Council, because that was a federal government program which local taxes did not support. He stated that there was a pay plan from LCS that would retain and bring in the best employees in order to reach the goals that Council had determined, and not doing so would result in future cross-departmental increases.

Dani Rule stated that today's educator plans were to afford, create, and teacs the required State of Virginia Standards of Learning for all children in their classrooms. This responsibility was joined by many others that was not well-known or compensated for, and many educators worked a second job just to afford to live in their community. Lynchburg had specific needs, and he requested the Council meet them in the budget.

Jennifer Williams stated that the reference to services such as parks, sidewalks, and raises for teachers and public safety were wanted and not needed was a short-sighted statement. Parents did not first look at tax rates when choosing where to move to, but first looked at the school system and amenities. She stated that she appreciated the "Budgets and Brews" meetings, which allowed her to better understand the consequences of lowering the tax rate below $1.05, and was sorry so many chose not to read it or understand it. She stated that it was disgraceful for Councilmember Misjuns to not recuse himself from the votes on the budget while he was currently suing the City for money.

Mayor Reed asked Clerk of Council Alicia L. Finney if there were emails or phone calls from constituents. Ms. Finney replied yes, there were 17 emails and 2 voicemails to be read into the record.

Ms. Finney read Joann Martin's email. The email read that as a lifelong resident of the City of Lynchburg, a taxpayer, and a City retiree with 40 years of service, she wrote to express thanks for the ongoing support of public safety, and asked that in their budget deliberations they recognize the criticality of the work performed by the Emergency Communications Department by granting the department's request for additional funding, which was an investment in the safety and wellbeing of the City.

Ms. Finney read Eugene Winfield's email. The email read that as a retired Lynchburg police captain serving over 31 years and as a lifetime resident of the City, he knew they required only the best people guiding public safety personnel in emergencies. 911 communicators often were required to be extremely attentive and proactive in many life-threatening situations. He expressed support for additional funding to stabilize the 911 Emergency Communications Center, which were essential to the function of the police and fire departments.

Ms. Finney read Jim Weigand's email. The email read that Lynchburg's taxes and fees had caused the City to be one of the highest fiscally stressed localities in the state, as the 16th highest of 133. He expressed concern over the public school operational expenditure proposed for next year and the required match from local taxpayers to provide the mandated standards of quality in nonmandated, voluntary programs provided by LCS. He expressed concern over the School Board's and the City Manager's requests that would raise their fiscal stress, which was what the composite index and RLE and RLM were designed to do.

Ms. Finney read Anne Berry's email. The email read that she had been a resident of Lynchburg since 1982, she and her husband had worked for LCS for over 30 years, and they raised two sons who attended E.C. Glass High School. Many of the school programs gave their children the experience of being part of a team, multi-tasking, problem-solving, goal-setting, and making sacrifices that could not be measured in a test score. She implored the City Councilmembers to create and pass a budget that was not focused on reaching a number in terms of achievement of SOL scores or letter grades.

Ms. Finney read Peggy Whitaker's email. The email read that as a homeowner in Lynchburg, she was pleased to see the recent jump in real estate assessment values, because for many homeowners the value of one’s home was the largest portion of their net worth. She expressed support for City Manager Benda’s proposal to lower the tax rate to a reasonable level while allowing for Lynchburg’s excellent City services to remained unchanged, and did not support a drastic reduction due to its reduction of funds available for City services in order to support the future quality of life for residents.

Ms. Finney read Parks Snead’s email. The email read that as a resident of Lynchburg and retired Lynchburg Chief of Police, he urged the City Councilmembers to maintain a safe community environment as a primary planning objective and action item in their budgeting. The public safety employees were greatly responsible for the City’s long-term success and reputation, and to pay top dollar to retain employees with caliber in an extremely competitive job market was not a burden but a necessary investment in their City’s future.

Ms. Finney read Jennifer Gauthier’s email. The email read that as a mother of a child in public schools and someone who frequently enjoyed the recreational and cultural events offered by the City, she was strongly against a tax rate that was set below equalization because of the reduction’s direct effect on the community. She requested the City Council to adopt the City Manager’s budget, which offered a reasonable plan for reducing taxes as well as pay increases for teachers, City employees, and the Emergency Communications Center, a strengthened economic development strategy, and improvements to affordable housing options.

Ms. Finney read the email of the Operational and Medical Director of Lynchburg Department of Emergency Services, Dr. Wendy Wilcoxson. She had served as the Director for both the Department of Emergency Services and the Fire Department since 2018 and had seen firsthand the great impact of the City’s investment in the departments, which had an outsized impact on the lives of Lynchburg residents. She asked the City Council to support the FY24 projected budget funds requested by the departments to provide competitive starting salaries for recruitment of high-quality employees and to address compression pay issues.

Ms. Finney read Rick Troshak’s email into the record. The email read that he currently served as the Director of Geospatial Services (NGS) Outreach Division for the Virginia Department of Emergency Management (VDEM) and was writing in support of the proposed increase in starting pay for the 911 staff. 911 Centers or Public Safety Answering Points (PSAP) throughout Virginia were experiencing significant staffing, recruiting, and retention issues, so qualified candidates must be recruited, trained, and retained for a PSAP to maintain a high level of performance. His direct experience with raising staff pay and correcting compression issues for existing employees resulted in a decrease of turnover and an increase in more qualified candidates applying for vacant positions.

Ms. Finney read Travis Sandvig's email into the record. The email read that as the current LEA Vice President representing the educators of their community, he wrote to encourage the City Council to vote in favor of the plan proposed that would help make LCS more competitive with other districts in Virginia, as the lack of salary increases for teachers had made the City a last option for many educators. He requested the City Council to support the plan that would help alleviate the financial stresses associated with being an educator by being compensated fairly for the degree of commitment required for the job.

Ms. Finney read Patrick Earl's email into the record. The email read that he gave thanks to the City Council for listening, and was writing today as a concerned citizen. He expressed support for the budget that City Manager Benda had presented, as it was a truly bipartisan budget agenda that kept Lynchburg moving in the right direction. It reduced property taxes while also leaving room for healthy investment in their teachers, City employees, and law enforcement. An equalization of the rate would ignore inflation, the wellbeing of their schools, fair pay for City employees, and overall quality of life for resident.

Ms. Finney read Amy Clemons' email into the record. The email read that she was writing in opposition to reducing the City's budget which had been proposed by some of the City Councilmembers. She expressed concern specifically about reducing funds for their public school system, which provided essential services to children who lived in poverty in addition to education. She expressed gratitude for those in the past who had financially supported the City's assets and requested City Council to continue Lynchburg's positive momentum into the future.

Ms. Finney read Chris Rhoades' email into the record. The email read that he was concerned that the largest percentage of the budget was for the City schools, which was used to serve a small amount of citizens in the City, as census numbers suggested that only half of the children in Lynchburg attended the public schools, and despite being publicly funded, school facilities were not accessible or extremely limited to public access. He explained that it was not a critique of the LCS administration but was a critique of how they as a City understood education broadly and public education specifically.

Ms. Finney read Bill Adams' email into the record. The email read that high investment in public schools did not necessarily equal better results, and schools and teachers must be held accountable for what they produced with the money given to them. He asked if the schools and students' performance had improved in order to necessitate greater funding. The schools should not get more funding until they could guarantee delivering the results they wanted, and they should only be paid after they provided what they said they would with proof of their results. Schools did not need more money but less overhead costs, as needless taxing made living in Lynchburg more difficult.

Ms. Finney read Veda Brown's email into the record. The email read that it was written in support of the current level of services they received in the City and in support of the school system. If taxes were lowered, they needed to enhance and not reduce the school system. They had good services and a beautiful City, and hidden agendas should not ruin what many people had worked so hard to achieve.

Ms. Finney read Sharon Brown's email into the record. The email read that as decisions were being made about their City budget, it was important to all citizens to fund the Lynchburg City Schools' request, because all their children mattered and would be affected by their decisions that would have negative impact on their future. She said it was also important to fully fund emergency services because everyone would be affected by any lack in response if an emergency arose, and it was important to keep the real estate tax at $1.08, because citizens would certainly be upset with cuts in services.

Ms. Finney read Jane Gerdy's email into the record. The email read that it was written on behalf of the Early Childhood Education Committee, which was part of the Lynchburg City initiative Bridges to Progress. Quality Pre-K programs prepared their children for entry into kindergarten and significantly improved their performance in elementary school and their opportunities to graduate, and an excellent public school system was an economic driving force for the City. The proposed cut to real estate taxes would result in a significant drop in resources available to the City, including their schools. She requested the City Council to consider this and to commit in investing in the future of all the City's citizens, including their youngest citizens who needed their support.

Ms. Finney played Marge Brown's voicemail into the record. She stated that as sung by Joni Mitchell, they did not know what they had till it was gone. She stated that she had seen hundreds of acres of trees clear cut in the last year and a half with ill regard to road planning, lack of foresight, and showing no concern to nature or the Earth. She said that this was not why people had moved and stayed in Lynchburg.

Ms. Finney played Niro Rasanayagam's voicemail into the record. She stated she had lived in Lynchburg for 20 years and urged City Council to support the City Manager's proposed budget, which provided property tax relief while being fiscally conservative in terms of protecting key services and future revenues in case of recession. Lowering the property tax rate below the $1.05 per $100 of assessed value or any moves to equalize it would be irresponsible due to the volatile real estate market, the growth of the City, and the impacts of inflation. She requested that Councilmember Misjuns immediately recuse himself from budget-related votes as long as his lawsuit against the City was active.

Mayor Reed closed the public hearing.

// The meeting adjourned at 2:29 a.m.

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Clerk of Council