

MINUTES OF THE MAY 23, 2022
SEWANEE COMMUNITY COUNCIL MEETING

Community Council Meeting was held in person in May with an option to also participate online via Zoom.

Members present: Scott Wilson, Kate Reed, John Solomon, June Weber, Lynn Stubblefield, Marilyn Phelps, Phil White, Spike Hosch, Sean McEwen, and Sallie Green.

Members via Zoom: Pam Byerly, Sarah Hess, Eric Keen, and Bill Harper

Absent: Nancy Berner, Shirley Taylor, Bruce Manuel, Karen Singer, Anna Palmer, and Grace Storelli

Minutes taken by: Carey Fulmer

Meeting called to order at 7:00 p.m.

(1) Approval of the March Minutes

March minutes were approved as circulated.

(2) Introduction of New School of Theology Representative – Scott Wilson

Scott Wilson welcomed new School of Theology student representative, Sean McEwen who will serve on the Council until May 2024.

(3) Parks Committee Report from Stephen Burnett – Scott Wilson

Stephen Burnett provided the following Parks Committee report to the Council:

History /background:

*10-12 years ago. Dog park initiative
John Swallow contacted me thru SCA
In "Education Business"
Master plan developing
Elliott Park a mess (Old Fort)*

Elliott Park redo

*Committee of Burnett, Puckette, Goodson
Secured a vendor thru RFQ's
Selected Playcore out of Chattanooga
SCA raised \$65,000 for play elements
University contributed \$125,000 + for infrastructure*

Big hit initially. Faded a bit.

Next Chapter:

Parks moved to Sewanee CC about 5 years ago

Reasons were oversight, insurance etc.

Dixon Myers and I chaired the overall effort. Now me.

Current Situation:

Parks has jurisdiction over Elliott, Dog Park, Community Center () and ballfields*

Board consists of Whitmer, Hewitt, Marhevsky, Tate and Brewster. Sallie Green

Non-jurisdiction properties are Woodlands, Shakespeare gardens

Operational budget is approximately \$8,000 per year (mowing is biggest expense)

Some restricted monies available. No capital.

Responsibility for little league is facility readiness (not operations)

33 Sewanee ballplayers this year in 3 team categories.

Difficult transition for us this year. Major communication issues

Fields in great shape (including fences, dugouts, lighting and scoreboard)

Soccer is a runaway success. Multitude of players.

No major challenges ahead, except:

Replenishing the board perhaps

Finding homes for the soon to be disassembled playset at SOT

Securing capital reserve for surprise expenditures and the escrow

For triannual Elliott resurfacing

Stephen Burnett

Chair, Parks Committee

(4) Update on 41A Project Including Planned Beautification from David Shipps – John Solomon

William Shealy, Director, Economic Development Initiatives provided an update of the 41A narrowing project.

- drainage is complete
- curb anticipated to be completed within next three weeks
- final steps in project will be the resurfacing of lanes including striping/signage
- projected to be completed mid-August
- landscape architect will be utilized to develop parking, bike lanes, and connecting the Mountain Goat trail following all TDOT regulations

(5) Impressions of the ULI Presentation from David Shipps – John Solomon

David Shipps, VP for Economic Development & Community Relations presented the high points of the recent ULI (Urban Land Institute) visit to Sewanee. Part of the focus of preliminary ULI study is to increase the full time residency year around, make the plateau even more desirable location, and relieve the growing strain for rentals in the area. ULI recommends that Sewanee

Village Ventures (SVV) looks into more than just single family homes, such as townhomes, duplexes, and bungalows and to enhance the aesthetic connection between the University and the downtown village. David spoke in depth of the formation and role of Sewanee Village Ventures and the plans to explore the options of SVV hiring contractors to build homes for employees in order to meet the University's priorities to hire and retain employees. David answered a few questions from the audience of who would manage the newly built homes and he confirmed that SVV would be the owners of the built properties. Acting Provost Scott Wilson explained that the recent pause of the open lots for University employee should be reopened soon following the findings of the recent ULI study.

(6) University Rental Housing Situation – Scott Wilson

Scott Wilson, Acting Provost spoke about the recent formation of a housing committee tasked with addressing the shortage of rental options on campus. Currently, the University rental housing policy (created in 2016) allows for residents to reside in University housing for 3 years before locating other housing options. During the pandemic, remote work options meant that the need for rentals were less in demand. Now that more employees are back in office working, the rentals are needed and 18 current rental housing residents that have exceeded the three year contract have been asked to vacate the rentals in order to provide options for the incoming faculty, staff, and School of Theology students. Most have found new options for housing and the following steps have been taken to help facilitate these displaced renters:

- looked for other options on campus such as theme houses for possible rental (these have been made available to seminary students for renting)
- Edgeworth Inn in Monteagle that is for sale and the possibility of the University renting this space for employee housing
- Previous Vice Chancellor's Dr. McCardell and Dr. Cunningham reached out to non-primary leaseholders to ask if any were open to rent to employees for long-term

A question was posed to Scott Wilson from the audience on why the University has purchased several homes to turn into offices, therefore decreasing the number of available houses, and Scott confirmed that only half of the recent homes purchased had been converted to offices and the rest were designated for University student theme houses.

(7) Election Plans & Appointment of Election Officer- Scott Wilson

Scott Wilson requested a volunteer from the Council to serve as the election officer for the fall 2022 election cycle. The following Council members have terms that end December 2022:

Anna Palmer, Pam Byerly, Eric Keen, Marilyn Phelps, Kate Reed, and Spike Hosch.

There were no immediate volunteers and Sallie Green, Superintendent of Leases and Community Relations volunteered to recruit an election officer.

(8) Announcements and/or Questions

There was a question posed if an email (see appendix A) that was given to Council Member, Lynn Stubblefield could be submitted for inclusion of the meeting minutes and Sallie Green confirmed she would touch base with Tabatha to have the issue presented as an agenda item for the next meeting.

Meeting adjourned at 8:10 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Carey Fulmer

Appendix A

Dear members of the Board of Trustees,

What makes Sewanee special? Community – you could even say communion with this place and one another. Here, *Ecce Quam Bonum* is more than a slogan; living together in unity is a guiding principle for all who love the Mountain.

Remember what made Sewanee special for you? High-quality teaching in small classes. Transformative relationships. A shared commitment to critical thinking, personal integrity, and respect for the dignity and inclusion of all. A landscape that felt like home when we first passed through the gates. Students and faculty, staff and local families, retirees and alumni working and playing together in a college community like no other. That's why, despite time and distance, our love for the Mountain abides.

All that is ineffable and incomparable for all of us who love this place—Sewanee's soul—has captivated generation after generation. Today, Sewanee's soul is under threat. Decisions about the University's future have become increasingly dominated by special interests intent on monetizing Sewanee at the expense of its unique culture and mission as a liberal arts institution grounded in the Episcopal church. Faculty and staff, students and community members have become increasingly demoralized. We write to you as tenured faculty and alumnae whose positions are relatively secure. Many others on the Mountain share our concerns but fear that speaking out could jeopardize both their livelihoods and Sewanee's spirit of EQB as a way of life. Among our community's concerns:

A preventable housing crisis on the Domain.

Faculty and staff recently received short notice to prepare for eviction next month from University-owned rental housing. With inadequate housing stock on the Domain, seventeen soon-to-be evicted rental-housing residents and incoming faculty and staff have been forced to search for housing as far away as Murfreesboro and Chattanooga. University leadership has failed to address Sewanee's growing housing problem despite decades of warnings from faculty committees, staff, and outside experts. While other colleges and universities have invested in affordable rental housing for their faculty and staff, Sewanee has continued to sell off its rental housing stock and has deferred maintenance on the remaining rental units. At the same time, administrators have declined to leverage the institution's ownership and governance of the Domain to address the housing problem. Real estate on the Mountain has become an open market where prices are comparable to fast-growing nearby cities such as Huntsville, Murfreesboro, and Chattanooga. Even starter homes on the Mountain are beyond the means of many faculty and most staff.

Erosion of Sewanee's academic program.

Sewanee's academic program is founded on close, long-term relationships between faculty and students. Yet, from the fall of 2010 to the fall of 2021, the latest year for which figures are available, the number of tenured and tenure-track faculty has dropped, even as the student body has grown. The faculty recently won concessions from the administration to lift a 2020 tenure-track hiring freeze and add a limited number of tenure-track professors over the next two years.

But the new tenure-track hires won't be nearly enough to fill teaching vacancies and ease the University's chronic shortage of classes for students. The increasing number of temporary instructors who've been brought to the Mountain to fill classrooms in the last decade cannot fulfill essential academic duties required of their tenured colleagues: advising students, guiding their research and mentoring their intellectual development during their years on the Mountain. Temporary instructors struggle with low pay, lack of affordable housing, and the economic insecurity of year-to-year contracts. In short, Sewanee's academic program – the heart of its mission and student success – is being starved.

Soaring upper administrative salaries, even as faculty pay stagnates and operational staff pay remains below that of entry-level service jobs in the surrounding area.

Salaries of Sewanee's top seven administrators have risen more than 60% between 2010-11 and 2019-20, the last year for which public data is available. High-paying administrative jobs with little or no direct classroom relevance continue to be created and filled even as tenure-track faculty positions have been frozen. Between 2010-11 and 2019-20, average salaries of Sewanee faculty have also fallen 1.66 percent. In contrast, during that same period, salary data from publicly available records indicate, average faculty salaries at other liberal arts colleges ranked in the top 50 nationwide by *U.S. News and World Report* have risen more than fifteen percent.

Underfunded administrative endeavors have strained the University's operating budget at the expense of core academics; the latest costly proposal, a new business major, is being floated as part of the administration's draft strategic plan.

The faculty rejected a similar business-major proposal in 2018, concluding that such a move would cannibalize core academic programs and irreversibly weaken Sewanee's liberal arts identity and culture. Administrators presented a new business-major proposal to the faculty last month. There were vague assurances that some alumni might donate more to the University if Sewanee added a business major, but there has been no explanation of how such a multimillion-dollar program might be funded.

Sewanee's falling rank among national liberal arts colleges.

Sewanee's ranking has dropped from 32nd in 2011 to a tie for 50th among the top 50 national liberal arts college in 2021 rankings by *U.S. News*.

Declining faculty, staff, and student morale.

Students routinely complain about struggling to get the classes they want and need to fulfill requirements for their majors. Younger faculty and veteran staff alike are contemplating leaving Sewanee or have already left in frustration. Across the community, there is the growing sense that the University's leadership has become too focused on monetizing Sewanee at the expense of its 167-year tradition of liberal arts education within a caring community rooted in the inclusive ideals of the Episcopal Church.

A proposed strategic plan that the administration is pushing Sewanee's faculty and governing boards to approve before a new Vice-Chancellor is chosen.

During this transitional period, shouldn't the University's focus be on discernment and reflection about the kind of leadership that Sewanee needs next rather than on locking in old and economically questionable schemes such as an expensive and unproven new business major; a much-delayed, high-priced village retail plan; and monetization of Sewanee's incomparable 13,000-acre Domain? Business priorities appear to be outweighing sustainable stewardship. It is unclear how those priorities will advance Sewanee's nonprofit educational mission. Crucial decisions about Sewanee's future are being made behind closed doors, without clear communication or openness to input from each of Sewanee's constituencies.

We believe wholeheartedly that these challenges can be addressed. We are committed to saving Sewanee's soul. Each of us can advocate for Sewanee and support institutional priorities and actions that will ensure its long-term future. These include:

- Embracing recommendations recently offered by the Urban Land Institute— ideas echoing those of internal reports dating back decades – to invest immediately in affordable housing for faculty and staff, including livable rental housing such as apartments and townhomes.
- Rededicating the University to its longstanding mission: excellence in interdisciplinary, cutting-edge liberal arts programs led by outstanding faculty. Encourage Sewanee's leaders to ask how any new proposal will advance Sewanee's mission. Though change is inevitable, it must be guided by Sewanee's core educational ideals and EQB culture.
- Stepping away from untested and untenable money-making schemes such as building a few houses as profit-making investments or expending precious University resources on speculative downtown retail development beyond what our population can support.
- Focusing the institution's energies on a transparent search for an 18th Vice-Chancellor. Sewanee is at a turning point. Our future depends on leadership committed to reinvigorating Sewanee's traditional strengths; expanding the University's potential through diversity, equity, and inclusion; and ensuring its fiscal and environmental sustainability.
- Offering new generations what has drawn a never-failing succession of alumni and benefactors to the Mountain. Making good on the promise that we "sell" to students requires more than marketing slogans. Our EQB ideals require unwavering dedication to diversity, equity, and inclusion at every level of the University community.
- Ending resource extraction from operational staff and the academic program.
- A commitment to economic sustainability, including rigorous evaluation and focused fundraising before launching costly new initiatives such as tuition cuts, freezes, or promises to meet full need.

- Perhaps most important: a commitment from the University's highest levels to administrative transparency, clear communication, and accountability.

Each of us can help, and immediate actions *will* make a difference. Put your love of Sewanee into action. Together, we can make EQB a reality.

Sincerely,

Sid Brown
Professor of Religious Studies

Lucia K. Dale
Professor Emeritus of Computer Science

Aaron A. Elrod
Associate Professor of Economics
Chair, College Appointments Committee

William E. Engel
Nick B. Williams Professor of English

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Katherine K. Wilkinson C'2006
Visiting Assistant Professor, Rhodes Scholar

Sources:

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