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City declines to support public-notice bill

by Tom Joyce

Staff Reporter

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The Surry County chapter of the American Red Cross is honored during Thursday night's city commissioners meeting, with Commissioner Steve Yokeley, right, who also is mayor pro tem, reading a certificate of appreciation for the agency. Mount Airy officials have an ongoing program in which longtime local businesses and other entities are recognized. The Red Cross chapter has been part of the community since 1917. Set to receive the certificate are, from left, Jeff McPherson, chapter executive for Surry County, and Richard Seaver, who chairs the chapter's governing board.

If state legislators do end up adopting legislation to move public notices from newspapers to the Internet, they won't have the blessing of Mount Airy officials.

Support for maintaining the present arrangement with newspapers was indicated Thursday night by the city board of commissioners — not through a vote, but a non-vote on a proposed resolution endorsing N.C. Senate Bill 186.

After Commissioner Shirley Brinkley made a motion for the board to back that bill, aimed at ending a longstanding practice of requiring legal notices, such as public hearing announcements, to be published in newspapers, no one seconded that motion.

"If there's no second, we can't vote, so the resolution dies," said Commissioner Steve Yokeley, who led Thursday night's commissioners meeting in the absence of Mayor Deborah Cochran since he also is Mount Airy's mayor pro tem.

Brinkley had expressed her support at the board's April 4 meeting for Senate Bill 186, which would allow local governments across

the state to post public notices on their websites. After a vote on the issue was delayed during that session, it resurfaced on the agenda for the meeting Thursday night, when Brinkley reiterated her position.

The first-term board member said she was mainly concerned about the expense of newspaper notices, pointing out that the city government has spent \$30,500 for that purpose over the last 33 months.

"This is not a few pennies in a bucket," Brinkley said. "This is real cash that could be used in a wiser manner."

The South Ward commissioner also said she believes the city should have an option when it comes to legal notices. "Newspapers are a monopoly and every city government should have an option — not be forced to use only what is available."

At the April 4 meeting, Brinkley's position was opposed by fellow commissioners Dean Brown and Jon Cawley, who collectively pointed out that most people still depend on their local newspaper for community information, including public notices. That is particularly the case in Mount Airy, where a sizable segment of the population lacks access to computers.

Brown also emphasized that the city government should support local businesses such as The Mount Airy News.

With Cawley also absent from Thursday night's meeting, that left the opposition to Brinkley's push up to Brown, who maintained the same stance he took earlier this month.

"I'm still in favor of continuing the way we have traditionally," Brown said of publishing notices in the newspaper.

Conditions 50 years from now might be different, Brown said, but for today much of the local populace depends on the newspaper for information about their community of many kinds. These are items citizens "don't find on Channel 12," he said of an area television station.

Brown also referred to what he believes is a need for city officials to support local

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businesses. "We consider ourselves to be small-business-friendly people."

However, Brinkley said that while she understands newspapers' desire to stay afloat by fighting measures such as Senate Bill 186, she is more concerned about municipal finances.

"We need to understand that it is not the responsibility of the city government to sustain a newspaper," she said. "It is our responsibility as commissioners to fight just as hard to watch where the taxpayers' money is spent."

It is unclear when final action will be taken on the bill in Raleigh.

Other Business

Also at Thursday night's city commissioners meeting:

- The board voted unanimously to award an \$89,947 contract to Smith-Rowe, a Mount Airy company, for construction of a new parking lot downtown. The facility on Virginia Street will contain 52 spaces, which will help alleviate parking shortages sometimes experienced in the central business district. The money for the construction will come from a special tax levied on property owners in the area.
- City officials were told that a transfer of property from a local business group to the municipality for the building of a mini-park downtown is almost complete. "It's just a matter of getting the property surveyed," City Attorney Hugh Campbell said. Rick Vaughn of Main Street Granite, the business entity involved, appeared before the commissioners Thursday night, when there was no discussion regarding the scope of the mini-park planned at the corner of North Main and West Oak streets. It is possible that the board will vote on that issue at an upcoming meeting.
- Appointed Bertie S. George to the governing board of the city housing authority. George will fill an unexpired term of Charlotte Collins, who resigned from the group for health reasons. That term ends on Feb. 16, 2015. The board in question oversees Mount Airy's public housing neighborhoods.

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