

## Community Information Meeting hosted by Alderman Frank Baptist

September 8, 2024 2-4:30pm

Mr. Baptist stated he would host another meeting around the first weekend of October to have the Mayor of Benton speak to the community. (Note: Mr. Baptist has announced that meeting will be October 6<sup>th</sup> at 2pm.) He then introduced his fellow alderman representing this district (Ward 1), Steve Brown.

Mr. Brown stated he has been an alderman for about 5 years and enjoys it; he hopes he has made a positive impact; noted he was opposed to the storage buildings proposed for behind our neighborhood and Rolling Brook; has opposed the proposed truck stop at exit 116 by Caldwell Elementary and worked with Bill Donner to prevent that; he is the CEO of the Alcoa Federal Credit Union and is running again for alderman. He said he is always available if we have questions or concerns.

Mr. Baptist asked Mr. Brown, as a member, to discuss the A&P Commission. Mr. Brown said the commission works on things like bringing Buc-ee's to Benton. Anything food or hospitality related gets a small tax that has allowed the city to do things like purchase the land that they have now sold a portion of to the Buc-ee's corporation, and plan to build soccer fields and more parks and recreation facilities with the rest of that land. He said studies done on this tax show the vast majority of it is coming from people outside of the community coming into Benton and spending money.

Mr. Baptist stated he is also a member of the A&P Commission; said this is how the city was able to build the Event Center which helped provide the money used to buy the property mentioned previously. Mr. Brown noted the Event Center has been so successful, the city was able to pay off the loan they took out for building it 7 years early and then did not need to take out a loan to buy the land at exit 114 (the Buc-ee's and Parks and Rec land).

Mr. Baptist then introduced Benton Police Chief Scotty Hodges. He has 28 years of experience and has been the police chief for 7 years. He was asked who to contact in regards to a neighborhood watch program. He said Lt. Quinton Jackson. Mr. Baptist noted he had gotten the information and passed it along to a Board member. (Note: the Board member is Don White and he passed the packet of information on to Board member Jonathan Elrod who is working on the neighborhood watch.) Chief Hodges noted neighborhood watch programs have been dying down in recent years.

Chief Hodges was asked what else we can do besides a neighborhood watch, with concerns about break-ins; he was also asked if there is extra concern because of Buc-ee's. Chief Hodges stated to call the non-emergency line at 501-778-1171 or 911 if you see something. He believes Benton police staffing will need to increase because of Buc-ee's. He noted it takes about 10 months to train and release a new officer to patrol on their own and that the police department had been understaffed in recent years. There had been a significant decrease in applicants during that time as well, but applications are starting to increase again.

Chief Hodges presented crime statistics for the city. These statistics are for crimes that are required to be reported to the FBI. 2021 saw the lowest crime numbers in a decade and each year since has seen a decrease in crime. He believes an increase in staff has improved our crime statistics. He believes strongly in the see something, say something adage. There are on average 11 officers each shift and this

will need to be increased as the city size increases. He noted the majority of our officers leave for better jobs (state police, etc.) and not for negative reasons. He also noted that his administration does not put up with any inappropriate behavior from the officers. Starting salary increased in June of 2023 to be more competitive and there is a plan to hire 6 additional officers in December of this year. He also noted the Benton PD has officers in each Benton public school as well as in the Career Training Center (CTC).

Mr. Baptist noted members of the community are using their home protection cameras to identify bad actors and asked what the future plans are with the city and cameras. Chief Hodges stated they are looking into a real time crime center that would handle location monitoring. The city currently employs 304 cameras and they are looking into expanding that with FLOCK cameras. These cameras could be license plate readers or live-feed cameras at an intersection. They are also looking into an AI program that can be used to monitor camera feeds that can learn what "normal" looks like on that feed, then flag something that looks abnormal for a person to review. He also said they were looking into drones that could automatically deploy for a 911 call where it could be used to deliver an AED or video the scene or talk to a person on scene sooner than officers could arrive. He stated they are still doing the research/legwork on all of this; it will all need funding and approval.

Mr. Baptist asked if there was a way to notify residents when a drone was deployed to their area; Chief Hodges did not think so; Mr. Baptist suggested a notification to a point of contact on the POA Board so the information could be sent out to the neighborhood.

Don White asked if these cameras would be used to issue traffic tickets sent through the mail and Chief Hodges said no, it's not legal in Arkansas at this time to use cameras to give tickets (exception for ticketing in construction zones because the camera captures the speeder and an officer pulls them over when they exit the construction zone). Mr. White mentioned the POA is considering upgrading our cameras and will there be a way to hook in and be compatible with the city's system. Chief Hodges said the FLOCK system is a \$3000 per year per camera subscription to provide access to the police, but he thinks AI might be able to access any camera feed. FLOCK can be used to share data by agreement with other municipalities so someone leaving a crime from here could be tracked by camera into Little Rock and arrested.

Another attendee noted the statistics provided (handout) show 70% of crimes in Benton are theft and wanted to know if there is a break down between residential and business. There is not. Then asked what we can do as a community to cut down on theft. Chief Hodges stated do not leave anything valuable in your car; it's a risk vs reward – someone will check the door and only break a window if they can see something valuable in there; he also stated not to put your valuables in the trunk of your car when you are in the parking lot about to go in a store or fitness center because bad actors are watching for that and will break into your car to grab your valuables.

Another neighbor identified himself as retired state police and explained there is a ring of people who aren't from here that travel up and down the interstate and find areas where they can get in and out of quickly; if they get your wallet from your unlocked car, they then go straight to a store to buy gift cards with your credit cards before you even know your wallet is gone. He also stated these criminals are brazen and cameras are no longer deterrents.

Chief Hodges talked about solving a crime where the criminals from Houston were staking out cars in fitness center parking lots with two groups communicating via cell phones to tell each other what they were seeing and where to hit. Another neighbor asked about the masked man who was seen on several cameras walking up Stonewall Dr. and jumping a fence into a backyard and whether that was related to an arrest of 4 suspects a few days later on Springhill, but the Chief did not know if it was related or not. Chief Hodges also spoke briefly about helping to solve a pharmacy burglary ring that involved 31 states, with 200 cases.

Mr. Baptist asked what the chief suggests for those not in POA/HOA neighborhoods and Chief Hodges said cameras and he particularly likes the Ring cameras. Mr. Baptist asked if any neighborhoods have license plate readers and would that be useful. Chief Hodges said you would need a reader at every entrance to the subdivision and that FLOCK has that available. The license plate reader is \$3000 per year to capture images, \$3000 per year to have live images, or \$5000 per year for both features together.

Chief Hodges said you can call him any time and he will answer (so don't call at 3am thinking you can just leave him a message). His cell phone is 501-840-5425

Mr. Baptist introduced John Parton, community development director. Some of the divisions he oversees include planning and zoning and flood plain. Mr. Parton spoke about the city's flood plain management program. He said it's still fairly young. If development impacts the flood plain, the office should review the development plans. They receive approximately 2000 permit requests per year (some of which are bundled permits for new construction). If they determine something is in the floodway, then they will coordinate with the Corp of Engineers or FEMA, or with both. Along with this, the Streets and Drainage Department is working on drainage issues using money from the storm water funds collected through utility bills. Also, new developments must have a run-off study.

Mr. Parton said FEMA will be updating the flood maps again.

He noted it is hard to go back with neighborhoods built before the flood commission was created; at the time Heritage Farm was built, they were only looking at how to get street water drained back to tributaries (like the neighborhood creeks). The city now requires fence building permits because fences can block that flow of water. In answering a neighbor's question about flooding in Heritage Farm, he noted the "right to review" for any developments that are within the county but are within 1 mile of city limits (this is what was used to stop the storage buildings development). And then he said the streets department continues to look at all areas of the city where flooding is occurring and work to correct those issues, but the city cannot do anything to private property for flooding issues, only correct issues within their streets and drainage.

When asked about the creeks in Heritage Farm, he said the city will clean out the waterways/tributaries and to notify them of all areas needing cleaning. (Note: Jennifer Floyd photographed the creeks in Heritage Farm and sent those photographs with a request for cleaning them up to Mr. Parton on 9/11/24.)

Mr. Brown stated Northshore Dr. will be widened due to the housing development occurring along it. This project is scheduled for approximately 2 years from now when Congo Rd is finished.

Mr. Parton mentioned detention (retention) ponds – he stated some of these ponds have been taken over by the municipality because the POA/HOA for that area could not properly maintain it. There was some discussion on whether the pond behind the pool is being maintained appropriately and whether the city would like to take it over, but an answer was not found.

Garry Elrod asked if the city was doing anything to assist a homeowner in Heritage Farm that appears to have a ground water flooding issue and Mr. Baptist assured him that the city is getting in contact with that owner.

Another neighbor asked if there were any results to share with us from when surveyors were out documenting the area like our retention pond. Mr. Parton just said that is an ongoing project helping the city determine the cost of remediating flooding issues and how to best schedule/organize the remediation.

Another neighbor asked how is responsible for a tree that is in the section of yard between the roadway and the sidewalk, but Mr. Parton was not sure. He did note the nuisance law has been amended to allow the city to trim or remove trees that are impacting public safety (for example, impeding traffic), but they must be on the right of way.

Another neighbor expressed concerns about the appearance of Edison Ave; noted there are broken up sidewalks and other things that are less than appealing. Mr. Brown stated the city is looking for grants to repair/replace sidewalks.

Mr. Brown asked if Mr. Parton could speak on the effects expected by bringing Buc-ee's to our city. Mr. Parton reminded us how malls used to have anchor stores (like Dillard's or JC Penney) and new studies show Buc-ee's acts like an anchor development. It brings complimentary development to the area; exit 114 is a good area for our city to grow and Buc-ee's is investing in that area to make it more developable.