

The First Amendment

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

IndexJournal

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OUR VIEW

Fireballs and bears, oh my!

Unusual sightings in the area have dominated local social media this week.

Thursday, around 12:30 p.m., many residents across the Lakelands and the Southeast saw a fireball quickly falling from the sky. Experts from NASA believe it was an asteroidal fragment or meteorite, and pieces of it landed with extraordinary force just south of Atlanta in Blacksville, Georgia.

Two Fridays ago, a black bear was spotted swimming in Lake Greenwood. Since then, bear sightings have occurred almost daily in the northern part of Greenwood County. We've learned from the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources that there have been at least a handful of bear sightings reported in Greenwood County every year for about a decade. So, while it is apparently not unheard of for these magnificent mammals to be in our neck of the woods, it's certainly not common for them to be seen by so many people.

The bear has become quite the local celebrity. Residents have quickly taken to using artificial intelligence (AI) software to create images of a bear in various places around town, and businesses are doing the same. Some show bears bellied up the bar enjoying a cold beer, another image shows a bear dining outside at a popular drive-thru restaurant, one shows a bear playing tennis at Gatewood, and one shows a bear relaxing on a massage table of a local masseuse. These social media posts are light-hearted and humorous, although it's a bit concerning how many people seem to have been duped into thinking some of these images are real. (But that's a conversation for another day.)

Opinions vary on whether the bear should be allowed to take up residence in the Lakelands or be deported back up north, as do opinions on why a bear would venture this far south in the first place. Theories are mixed and include displacement by Hurricane Helene or displacement by overdevelopment. Both could be true. Regardless, sightings could become more frequent as volatile weather patterns and deforestation continue. Those who've been in the Lakelands for decades can recall a time when armadillos were a rarity here; however, now, they're everywhere. They are powerful, wild animals, and plenty of mountain communities live in harmony with bears and know how to take proper precautions to keep them from ransacking property. Time will tell whether black bears select the Lakelands as a suitable habitat, or perhaps they'll decide too many trees are being cut down for their liking and mosey on to more forested areas. In the meantime, if you see a bear, there's no need to call 911; simply keep your distance and admire from afar.

Turning off the hum of politics

Perhaps the most delightful thing about vacationing in France this year was something beyond the great food, spectacular culture, lush vistas and kind people.

The best thing about this year's time away from the United States was not having to hear about Donald Trump and politics every time you turn a corner. Maybe it's not until one gets away for a bit that you realize how inundated and exhausted we are by politics through social media, television, radio, newspapers and all of the messaging that slams into our brains daily. Being able to mostly turn that off for a few days has been a vacation in and of itself.

Sure, we heard about the sudden bombing of Iran, the New York mayor's race and the not unexpected announcement by S.C. Attorney General Alan Wilson that he is running for governor.

So maybe the best vacation advice of the year — either inside the U.S. or out — is to turn off social media and television for a few days to get away from the incessant hum and chatter of politics. It will be good for your soul.

In France, my younger daughter and I had a good time visiting Paris, Bordeaux and

several small villages along the Dordogne River. Here are some observations:

Air-conditioning. We visited during an unexpected heat wave in a part of the world that doesn't do air-conditioning well. In one hotel, the lowest setting for the A/C was 76 degrees — and it was still humid. In an apartment we rented briefly, the 18-inch-thick walls did a great job of keeping out the heat, but it was still warm inside. To get cooler, we bought a \$30 fan.

Food. Once you eat bread baked by the French, you won't want the schlock that most Americans eat. It's fresh, clean-tasting, hearty and inexpensive — as are wine, cheese and more. Everything seems less processed.

Transportation. The high-speed trains between big cities are way cool. It took 2.3 hours to go 350 miles from Paris to Bordeaux, for example. Ubers are affordable. Trams are easy. But driving in a rented car on narrow French country roads can be exhausting.

Smoking. About the only disappointing part of some local restaurants were smokers at outside tables. While smoking doesn't appear as ubiquitous here as it once was, it's noticeable and makes one think about how much more pleasant restaurants are in the U.S. since smoking has been banned.

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ANDY BRACK
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As a government reporter, I have attended a great deal of council meetings throughout my time at the Index-Journal. So much so, I've started to understand the rhythm of these meetings, the intricate and sometimes tedious process of running a government.

There's always a call to order, invocation, pledge of allegiance, approval of minutes, multiple readings, votes, public comments and sometimes an executive session. The language of government is technical, and it's meant to be ironclad. While the process of conducting local government meetings can be tedious, those who understand Robert's Rules of Order know why those parliamentary procedures exist. The process is to ensure that your elected leaders are taking the right path for the good of your town, city or state.

Usually, reporters don't insert themselves into the story, especially for government reporting. But, in this case, I had an unsettling interaction with a family member of a certain mayor during

a recent council meeting. After attending, I wanted to share my experiences covering the Town of Calhoun Falls. Interestingly enough, my experience was somehow not the highlight of the latest dysfunctional Calhoun Falls meeting.

Remember how I said there's always a call to order, invocation and pledge at the start of government meetings? Well, that was about all that was standard decorum at last week's Calhoun Falls meeting.

With residents having little to no insight or access to documents about the day-to-day matters of the town they're paying taxes to, these meetings are their only opportunity to "possibly" learn the status of their town.

Most municipalities email media packets to local media outlets ahead of meetings to allow for thorough reporting of the detailed, often number-heavy information discussed. After all, these public meetings discussing public matters should be as transparent as possible. But Calhoun Falls hasn't been too eager to "allow" the press, nor its residents, and even some council members, for that matter, to see behind the curtain. No media packets are distributed, and it appears that repeated requests by residents and some council members to view financial statements have fallen on deaf ears.

When phrases like councilperson Sam Hill's "Whites on one side, Blacks on the other" or councilperson Viggo Lassen's "God's not going to help us. We've got to do this ourselves" are thrown out during a meeting, I knew immediately this was more than extreme dysfunction; it's deliberate negligence by the leadership.

Case in point, the first item on the agenda for Monday's meeting was approving a year's worth of financial reports. With June 30 — the end of the fiscal year — quickly approaching, Calhoun Falls needs to pass a budget for their 2025-26 fiscal year.

However, council members Lassen and LaSean Tutt raised concerns, again, that they had yet to receive financials and budget reports from Mayor Holland and Town Clerk Wendi Lewis. The two have continued to be denied access to requested public information for over a year now.

If your council doesn't know what's going on, how on earth can residents be expected to truly know what's happening in their town? And how can council members be expected to vote without all of the information they need?

When Calhoun Falls leaders discussed the fate of the town's fire truck, police department, and the future of the town, what unfolded wasn't a serious plan for public safety; it was turbulence disguised as governance.

The town is on the verge of canceling an order for a much-needed fire engine without knowing the full penalty for backing out of the contract. Council members are unclear on the terms, unsure who should sign the cancellation, and visibly split on whether the town can even afford to keep its existing equipment running.

Council then discussed staff reduction, sadly, a move that might have to happen out of desperation to meet payroll. No plan, no specifics, just vague warnings that someone, somewhere, might have to be let go.

Then it was on to raising the water rates, another high-tension moment for residents.



RENEE ORTIZ
REPORTER'S
NOTEBOOK

A community silenced

Sights of a Calhoun Falls meeting

Video clips of the most recent town hall meeting can be found online at indexjournal.com/viewpoints.

The town owes over half a million dollars in unpaid bills for bulk water purchases from the City of Abbeville. Additionally, Calhoun Falls was supposed to be receiving monthly payments from McCormick for water sales, but it seems the money has never been sent back to Abbeville. Residents are still paying their water bills, but that money hasn't made it to Abbeville either.

Hill immediately moved to go into executive session. For the first time in an hour, an actual vote was taken during the meeting. With public comments and committee reports left, council returned within minutes, but took no action.

Instead, the mayor read aloud a letter of resignation from a now-former police officer, the same officer who had ejected Lassen from a meeting in June 2024. In his letter, the officer named Lassen and his comments as the reason for his resignation. The letter read as a grievance to Lassen's "meddling" and included a line: "The leadership here is awesome."

For residents, the takeaway is clear: while town officials bicker, the town continues to fall further and further into debt. Lassen, at one point during the meeting, stated the town is around \$1.8 million in the hole. However, since no official documents have been provided to show the true state of the town's finances, it's hard for anyone to know just how grim the picture really is.

If this meeting was any indication of the day-to-day leadership in Calhoun Falls, this town couldn't operate a lemonade stand, let alone balance a budget.

Residents are being asked to trust a leadership team that can't answer basic financial questions, refuses to provide public records to council members and repeatedly dodges accountability, which leads, once again, to residents being left in the dark.

Next in the meeting, the floor opened for public comments from Troy Mayor Brian Dixon, a self-described activist Traci Fant and Mayor Holland's father, Ricky Holland. Councilman Lassen then made a motion to allow residents to ask questions after the comments. No one else on council voted with him, with Hill just saying, "I vote no." An official vote never took place, just a "motion failed" comment by the mayor with no input from residents.

Before Dixon took to the podium for public comments, a family member of the mayor, later identified to be Holland's cousin, walked past reporters from WYFF, Fox Carolina and The Post and Courier to my location. I could tell she was recording me on her phone, which is fine; I was recording the meeting, too. But when I asked her to not stand in front of my camera, she said she was fine where she was and gave a smug smile. She then turned around and blocked my camera.

Now, it's my job as a reporter to be unobtrusive and respectful to attendees; after all, it's their meeting. But I will not tolerate being disrespected while doing my job, nor will I tolerate my video and audio being purposefully interrupted.

That's when I sternly said "Lady, get out of the way of my camera," to which she turned around and repeatedly said, "I have a name!" and to "Shut your mouth!"

The meeting somehow continued in the background, all this happening while the mayor was speaking about how he'd have police escort out anyone making disturbances during public comments. It wasn't until I interrupted the meeting to ask for assistance that other members of the mayor's family came and escorted the woman away. No police came to assist, and the meeting continued like nothing had happened.

Later, when Holland's father was at podium, he spoke about how sad it was that council couldn't get along, but he then went on to disparage Lassen and Tutt for their social media posts in which they've called for transparency from the mayor and clerk. Lassen and Tutt have continued to be vocal in their desire for full transparency for the people, even posting the handful of financial documents and statements that they have been able to obtain. Ricky Holland said that residents were at fault for the status of the town. Then he said it was actually state Rep. Craig Gagnon's fault, then also called out Abbeville County Council member Christine Long. Gagnon and Long were both in attendance.

I bet you can guess who Ricky Holland didn't mention as being at fault for getting the

town into this disastrous mess.

After Ricky Holland's time for public comments was up, the additional family members of Mayor Holland who were in the audience, gave him a standing ovation. Words were then exchanged between a family member and an elderly woman in the crowd. Holland's family could be heard telling her, "We are a family; don't you support your family?"

During the heated exchange, the woman yelled, "Don't make it racial!" Police then rounded up the woman, and she was told to leave. However, at no point was Holland's family told to leave the meeting for their behavior and comments.

Fant, an organizer for Freedom Fighters of the Upstate, who lives in Greenville, then took to the podium. She called the attitude displayed by residents to the town council and mayor "sad" and told residents, "You need to work on your hearts."

By now, one might expect residents to be heated. After all, an audit report published in the spring laid out their town is sinking in debt, is mismanaged, and possible fraud. The people of Calhoun Falls are pleading for real answers and real solutions, yet they are being met with threats and name calling during a public meeting.

Tensions were visible and vocal. The crowd was fed up and their reactions made it clear they felt ignored. It created a hostile atmosphere for everyone. What should've been a structured, public meeting felt more like a powder keg, one spark away from blowing.

Not two minutes after the meeting ended, the town clerk shut the lights off, kicking everyone outside with high tempers and no answers.

The parking lot then turned into a screaming match between attendees and members of Holland's family. This embarrassment was captured, not just by the Index-Journal, but also by WYFF, Fox Carolina, and the Post and Courier. A fight almost broke out twice before police intervened to break up the crowd. This behavior also happened after last month's meeting.

With no financials, no votes, and now, no budget, these Calhoun Falls monthly meetings definitely do not follow the standard municipal meeting template. And, sadly, the residents continue to be silenced in their political process.

Meetings picked back up since the state's audit report was released in April. Since the state's forensic audit of the town was released, the Calhoun Falls Town Council has passed nothing, other than Resolution 2025-03, which, on its face, seems like a step in the right direction for the staggeringly misguided town.

The resolution outlines a series of fiscal, administrative, and procurement reforms aimed at addressing the 26 findings from the forensic audit report. The resolution mandated stricter financial controls, transparency measures, utility system fixes, and accountability protocols for the Town of Calhoun Falls.

The majority of these so-called "new rules" are not new at all. They are basic standards of public finance and government accountability that the town should have already been following under South Carolina law.

Since passing the ordinance, council has continued to fail to follow its own rules.

What's happening in Calhoun Falls isn't a breakdown in communication; it's a breakdown in governance. Rules are ignored, residents are shut out and meetings descend into theater while the town spirals deeper into debt and disarray. Council can't pass a budget, won't provide answers and can't agree on basic transparency.

The people of Calhoun Falls deserve more than hostile meetings, backroom spending and chaos masquerading as leadership. They deserve access, accountability and action, not another night of shouting matches, no votes and unanswered questions. Until that changes, these so-called meetings won't be steps forward. They'll just be reruns of the same failure to act.

As the Calhoun Falls story continues to unfold, I am saddened to see a continual process that is dismissive and silencing toward the collection of residents who call Calhoun Falls home.

Contact Renee Ortiz at 864-943-5643. Follow her on X at: [IJReneeOrtiz](https://twitter.com/IJReneeOrtiz)

VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

This mayor is bad for business

Senator Garrett: This is Jack Logan founder of Put Down the Guns Now Young People Organization. Senator I'm requesting you to ask Governor Henry McMaster to remove the Mayor in Calhoun Falls from

office. Senator our organization began back in 2010 and we would go to Calhoun Falls twice a week. The people in that town both black and white people are good people. They don't deserve the behavior the Mayor is displaying. I do remember him when we first started going which I will discuss

with Sled. I do understand the law that the Governor can remove him if a crime been committed and he is charged but Senator u a man of integrity. This Mayor is bad for business.

JACK LOGAN
Greenville