

To:

Mayor Walt Williams
Council President Dave Pierce
Councilor Bill Tuttle
Councilor Susie Lahsene
Councilor Chris Barhyte

CC:

City Manager Heather Kibbey

Subject:

Stark Boat Ramp

As relative newcomers to the City of Rivergrove we are shocked and disappointed at the behavior of some of the community, and the city, with regard to matters surrounding the Stark Boat Ramp. Our first exposure to the city's behavior was with a combative and hostile response to neighbor complaints. Our neighbors are long-term residents of the city, having lived here for decades, and the response of the city to their concerns has been dismissive. These are residents that lived here for a significant amount of time before raising some of these issues. The activity at the boat ramp is clearly not the same as it was decades ago. What we experienced a couple of years ago was concerns being dismissed, demands being made for them to provide documented proof or evidence of what was being reported, and then a City Council meeting setting the example of conflict rather than resolution. Rather than attempting to bring together different ideas and concerns in order to develop solutions that addressed all sides, the public was split into teams of competing complaints. The result is that, instead of a conversation, the issue devolved into personal attacks and outrageous claims to stir up social media outrage. This time around is no different, with some residents asking for a "return to peaceful, neighborly relations" in their submissions to the city, while declaring "Boat Ramp threatened.. again! Need your help!" on social media. We have to lay much of the blame for this on the City Council for not approaching this as representatives of ALL the residents, which still includes the immediate neighbors. For some Former Councilors to complain about a small number of people getting a hearing is to open the door to ignore other parts of the city for raising other issues they may find inconvenient. Different neighborhoods have different conditions that raise different issues. And as

to the complaints that the issues are brought up repeatedly, that is usually a sign that they are not being addressed.

Although the current City Council may be attempting to approach this in a neutral manner, the remains of the combative prior City Councils are evident in how this Town Hall is being organized. If the comments already posted to the website are any indication, we can expect this Town Hall to be as combative, disorganized, and unproductive as in the past. The City Council has not provided any specifics about WHAT is being considered as “administrative issues.” The lack of communication leads to assumptions, outlandish claims, and unhelpful counter suggestions. We understand that City Council is a volunteer position, but the city has the resources to bring in outside help and expertise, in not only the legal points, but also in mediation and negotiation. The use of a Town Hall should be later in the process after information has been provided and public input has been made on that information.

The City Council missed a great opportunity to address many of the communication issues with the Boat Ramp Report as delivered by Councilor Pierce and Former Councilor Ruble. Unfortunately the end result contains little in the way of proposed solutions, and instead appears to be merely a directed rebuttal of issues and concerns raised by neighbors in prior comments and petitions. This seems inappropriate as it gives the impression that the conclusions have been accepted, a decision has been made, and it further gives the impression of bias and prejudicial decision making by the City Council. The back-and-forth responses between Councilors Pierce and Lahsene did provide for one very interesting comment in Councilor Pierce’s response: “As noted by OSMB, we are not the only city with a boat ramp between two residential properties. It is not a unique situation.” Given this statement, known before the report was completed, the Boat Ramp Report misses the opportunity to provide information on how those other boat ramps in residential areas are managed! If this is not a unique situation, then perhaps the other jurisdictions responsible for those have managed to resolve issues in a manner we can copy. We hope that this is pursued as the information gained would be much more useful than the current report.

We would like to make these recommendations to the City in order to work

towards a more civil discussion and perhaps act as a model of future, emotionally charged topics:

- 1 - Research the other public boat ramps that exist in similar residential settings as noted by OSMB and collect information on how they are managed.
- 2 - Once information has been collected, make it public, and ask for opinions, recommendations and feedback from the public over a comment period without the charged atmosphere of a live meeting.
- 3 - Consider asking for volunteers to form advisory panels for this and any other issues that are of high concern. This allows a small group of the public to become subject “experts” that can then be important resources to the rest of the public, which can be effective in reducing wild accusations and conspiracy theories.
- 4 - Find a consulting resource to aid the volunteer City Council in organizing the above, public notifications, agendas, minutes, and provide guidance on running an effective public meeting, especially given the move to all online formats.
- 5 - Consider an online archive of all prior City Council agenda and minutes so that some historical context is available to the public.

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