

**Town of Montreat  
Board of Commissioners  
Public Forum Meeting Minutes  
February 10, 2022 – 6:00 p.m.  
Town Hall & Zoom**

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Board members present: Mayor Tim Helms  
Mayor Pro Tem Tom Widmer  
Commissioner Kitty Fouche (arrived at 6:15 p.m.)  
Commissioner Mason Blake  
Commissioner Jane Alexander  
Commissioner Kent Otto

Board members absent: None

Town staff present: Alex Carmichael, Town Administrator  
Angie Murphy, Town Clerk  
David Arrant, Chief of Police  
Barry Creasman, Public Works Director

Approximately twenty five members of the public were present. Mayor Tim Helms called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m., and led the group in a moment of silence.

**Agenda Approval**

Mayor Tim Helms asked if the agenda could be modified to allow the public to comment first then the special guests could speak. Commissioner Jane Alexander moved to adopt the agenda as amended. Commissioner Mason Blake seconded and the motion carried 4/0.

**Public Forum**

Ms. Arrington Cox of 203 Virginia Road stated that bears cannot be running through the streets of Montreat but on the other hand the bear dogs are bred to catch the scent and give chase. Ms. Cox prays for all involved and knows the situation can be resolved.

Mrs. Joely Rogers of 97 Shenandoah Terrace had an issue with bear dogs mauling a bear at her home previously. Mrs. Rogers thanked the Commission for taking the situation seriously. She stated that she and her husband were not anti-hunters. The experiences that Mrs. Rogers has seen at her home in the past year and a half have been troublesome to her and her husband. The dogs have seemed uncontrolled in her opinion.

Mr. Rusty Douglas of 227 Alabama Terrace stated that there is nothing good that can happen with bears and dogs running through a playground on a national holiday. Mr. Douglas feels that surely there is some way to prevent that and he would hate to see Montreat on the national news.

Mr. Mark Rogers of 97 Shenandoah Terrace made the recent Youtube video of the bears and dogs on his property. Mr. Rogers stated that he's only ever been worried when the dogs have been involved. He felt that the hunters in this situation did not have any control. Mr. Rogers was told that what he did, getting between the dogs and the bear, was very dangerous.

Mr. Philip Arnold of 530 Magill Drive would like a clarification of the agreements between bear hunters and Montreat and who can go on whose land.

Mr. Jim Gibbs, President of Mt. Mitchell Bear Hunting Club and Mill Creek Wildlife Club which owns approximately 1300 acres of land extending 7 miles from Montreat and Blue Ridge Parkway (known as the Old Toll Road, stated that the Mt. Mitchell Bear Hunting Club leases the land and hunts the bear on the land. The hunting club maintains the Toll Road and the trails that extend from their property. The two clubs have enjoyed the use of this land since the 1940s. Mr. Gibbs stated that over the past 70 years the clubs have worked to foster good relationships with the Town of Montreat, Montreat College and Montreat Conference Center (MRA). Mr. Gibbs even stated that the late Billy Graham enjoyed the property and even hunted with the clubs on occasion. Today the clubs allow the public to use their land and trails for hiking and other recreational uses year round. The Old Toll Road connects to the Montreat Wilderness as well as the Pisgah National Forest and the property is enjoyed by many every year. Mr. Gibbs stated that he has been hunting these mountains his entire life and there are more bears now than ever have been before and this is due to proactive bear management policies. Mr. Gibbs stated that it's the club policy to use game cameras to monitor the bear population and they only harvest mature male bears over 200 lbs. The use of game cameras allows hunters to see the bears before releasing hunting dogs. It is also the club policy to not hunt in residential neighborhoods or Town but it sometimes may be necessary to retrieve dogs in Town. Mr. Gibbs stated that his club will not go onto posted private property to collect dogs without the property owner's permission. It is important for everyone to know that the Mt. Mitchell Bear Hunting Club is not the only group to hunt bears in the area and it is his opinion that the most recent problems in Town have come about from less responsible hunters. They are not the hunters in the video that was circulated. Being a good neighbor is important to Mr. Gibbs and his bear club.

Mr. Don Collins, former Mayor of the Town of Black Mountain, has been hunting on the Old Toll Road for over 50 years and he stated that the Mt. Mitchell Bear Hunting Club was a great group of responsible hunters. Mr. Collins further stated that these gentleman were the most restrictive, watchful and careful of respecting the rights of the Town of Montreat. Mr. Collins advised those in attendance to not judge all bear hunters and assume they are all the same. Mr. Collins also stated that the last thing the hunter's want to do is upset the residents in Town.

Captain Andrew Helton, of the NC Wildlife Resources Commission/Law Enforcement Division, stated he and other wildlife officers are here for the citizens of Montreat as well as to support bear hunters and other citizens. Captain Helton stated it was his job to enforce all fishing, hunting and boating laws and any other misdemeanors that occur while in their presence. The wildlife officers work public and private lands. Captain Helton stated that the bear population in NC is growing very rapidly. Bears can be found across all 100 counties in NC and they are growing at a 6% rate each year. The only way to control the bear population in NC is by hunting. Captain Helton said that

Asheville has an amazing amount of problem bear calls and there are so many living in the city limits. Montreat is very fortunate to have some hunting going on because it controls the bears. Captain Helton stated that there were more black bears in the North Fork Watershed than in the Smokies.

Ms. Arrington Cox of 203 Virginia Road asked if they had a relocation program to which Captain Helton advised that they did not have a program like that. Captain Helton said that wildlife officers do not have the manpower, the resources or the land mass for such a program.

Mrs. Joely Rogers of 97 Shenandoah Terrace thanked Captain Helton for coming to educate the citizens. Mrs. Rogers recently read a book entitled "Fuzz: When Wildlife Breaks the Law" by Mary Roach which takes a community wide approach to how people store their food. Mrs. Rogers questioned whether improper garbage disposal techniques could be addressed in Montreat. Captain Helton advised that the wildlife commission does have a program entitled Bear-wise. Bear-wise involves education as well as requiring bear-proof trash cans. Bear-wise is a state wide program and you can visit [ncwildlife.org](http://ncwildlife.org) for more information. Mrs. Rogers also asked during hunting season if dogs run through her yard chasing a scent can she shoot at the dog? What is she allowed to do on her own property? Captain Helton stated that as a homeowner you have to abide by local town ordinances. He went on to say that as a landowner in NC you do have the right to protect your property. Captain Helton stated that he would not recommend firing a gun but would lean more toward beating on pots and pans. Captain Helton also stated that homeowners shouldn't attempt to catch the dogs and remove the tracking collars.

Mayor Tim Helms asked if there was anyway has a municipality to regulate who goes through the Town to hunt. Captain Helton stated that the Town of Montreat could do a local Town Ordinance which would mandate who can come hunt. Mayor Helms pointed out that it seems like a group of not so respectful hunters came into Town and caused all these problems.

Commissioner Mason Blake asked Captain Helton if it was true that the hunter's don't have a right to come onto private property to retrieve their dogs. Captain Helton stated that is true and ethically they need to have permission from the landowner to come collect their dogs. Captain Helton advised that Montreat citizens should advise wildlife officers of outlaw hunters. Wildlife Officers can come and check out hunters and educate them on proper hunting techniques. Wildlife Officers have a 1-800 number and are on call 24 hours a day. Captain Helton stated officers need to be called if hunters are coming and turning dogs and bears loose. Mayor Helms asked Police Chief David Arrant to find out the names of the outlaw hunters and advise them that they aren't welcome anymore.

Chad Davis of the Mt. Mitchell Bear Hunting Club advised that every member of the hunting club has a membership card in their wallet which is one way you can distinguish between members.

Mr. Mark Rogers of 97 Shenandoah Terrace stated that the errant dogs have been on his property three times in the past year and a half. Mr. Rogers has very clear video of the hunters for identification purposes. Mr. Rogers asked if dog hunting is the main way bears are hunted. Captain

Helton stated there were several methods of hunting bear but dog hunting is the best and most effective way.

Mayor Pro Tem Tom Widmer asked Captain Helton what homeowners could do if they had a situation with out of control dogs. Captain Helton advised calling the 1-800 number as well as getting license plate numbers. Captain Helton also advised to never get in between bears and dogs. He also mentioned getting the bear hunters names off the dogs collars which will allow wildlife officers to check and make sure the hunters are abiding by state and local laws.

Mr. Seth Hagler of MRA mentioned that the MRA has a long partnership with the Mt. Mitchell Bear Hunting Club and they've also been good neighbors.

Dr. Mary Standaert of 118 Shenandoah Terrace thanked the Mt. Mitchell Bear Hunting Club for attending this evening. Dr. Standaert stated that there were no discharge laws in the Town of Montreat. She thanked the former Council for implementing bear boxes in Town. Dr. Standaert also suggested putting the 1-800 number for wildlife in an obvious place for residents. Dr. Standaert mentioned that this evening there will be a presentation for the 2020 financial report. She stated this is required by state statute and it must be done in a timely manner. It is in Dr. Standaert's understanding that this is long overdue and that Montreat is in violation of state statute and she's unsure why that is. Mayor Helms advised Dr. Standaert that the Town of Montreat switched auditing firms and there were communication issues as well as issues with COVID19 and working from home. Mayor Helms advised Dr. Standaert that the State was apprised by Town Staff of what all was going on with the audit and auditors. Town Administrator Alex Carmichael stated that the 2020 audit has been submitted to the State with 2021 to be completed by June, 20, 2022 and immediately after 2022 will be due by October 31<sup>st</sup>. Dr. Standaert mentioned that without the other two completed audits that no one knows the financial status of the Town of Montreat. Dr. Standaert stated that there were serious problems pointed out in the audit such as the Fund Balance dropping to 16% of the annual budget when the Council had set 35% as the target. Dr. Standaert expressed her displeasure that the Town as a whole was not apprised in a public manner of what was going on with the audit.

Mr. Tom Frist of 98 Frist Road commented that the bear discussion was a wonderful conversation with people comparing different views to come together to solve a problem.

### **Adjournment**

Mayor Pro Tem Tom Widmer moved to adjourn the meeting. Commissioner Mason Blake seconded and the motion carried 5/0. The meeting was adjourned at 6:59 p.m.

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Tim Helms, Mayor

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Angie Murphy, Town Clerk

