ARTICLES OF INTEREST

Plan for Bedford reversion revealed

City wants to be a town again and join with county

BY JUSTIN FAULCONER
Media General News Service

BEDFORD — The nuts and bolts of a detailed effort to revert the city of Bedford to a town, joining it with Bedford County, were unveiled last week to a highly interested public for the first time after three years of planning.

After a presentation in which City Manager Charles Kolakowski laid all the reversion cards on the table, Bedford City Council voted 6-0 with a member absent to enter into a mutual agreement with the county that outlines a transition proposal.

Shortly afterward in a separate meeting, the county Board of Supervisors voted 6-1, with Chairwoman Annie Pollard opposing, to also enter into the voluntary agreement.

The city, which estimates the process to finalize the reversion will take 18 months, is tentatively targeting July 1, 2013, as the transition date. There will be several public hearings during the review, Kolakowski said.

Bedford has been a city since 1968 but is choosing to give up its independent status to join with the county, though it would still govern itself through a town charter and continue to maintain services. The agreement is only a proposal at this point, Kolakowski said, and will go before a lengthy review from a state agency called the Commission on Local Government.

Reversion allows for a "solid economic future" that is believed to provide better opportunities for the county and city as a whole, Kolakowski said. "We're not doing this because we have to," he said. "We're not going broke."

However, the city is stressed economically and has lost a number of major employers in recent years.

"Our competition is not with Bedford County," Kolakowski said. "Our competition is with international industries."

The deal would allow for boundary adjustments that would allow the town to grow. Under state law, cities with fewer than 50,000 people can seek reversion to town status. Mayor Skip Tharp said as long as he could remember, the city population has been about 6,000.

The reversion also would improve the county school system that currently contracts with the city, Kolakowski said. Once the city becomes a town, Bedford Elementary School would switch to county ownership. The county would lease Bedford Middle School from the town, and county leaders would plan to construct a new middle school in the Liberty zone.

The county will make payments to the town not to exceed $11.2 million over a 15-year period in exchange for full ownership of the Bedford Central Library, elementary school and the Bedford Welcome Center.

Justin Faulconer writes for The News & Advance of Lynchburg.

RICHMOND TIMES-DISPATCH

Confederate flag rally in Lexington

100 protest plan to ban display on light poles

BY STEVE SZKOTAK
The Associated Press

LEXINGTON — About 100 people rallied Thursday evening in opposition to a proposal to limit the flying of the Confederate flag in the western Virginia city where Robert E. Lee and Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson are buried.

The Sons of Confederate Veterans staged the "Save our Flags" gathering Thursday night as the City Council was considering an ordinance to limit flags on downtown poles to just those of the United States, Virginia and the city of Lexington. The proposal has angered defenders of the divisive Southern symbol. It would not limit the flag's display elsewhere.

"I am a firm believer in the freedom to express our individual rights, which include flying the flag that we decide to fly," said Philip Way, a Civil War reenactor who turned out for the rally clad in a wool Confederate uniform. "That's freedom to me."

Mimi Knight, watching from a wrought iron fence at a sea of Confederate flags in a small city park, was not part of the rally. But she said she

FLAG, Page B7

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The Sons of Confederate Veterans staged a rally against a proposed ordinance to limit flags on downtown poles to just those of the United States, Virginia and the city of Lexington.

Flag

From Page B1

thought the city ordinance seemed too restrictive.

"These are the things that make Lexington what it is," she said. "The Confederate flag is part of our heritage."

Supporters of the ordinance were not apparent at the rally.

The event, which was catered, offered free hot dogs and bluegrass music. Speakers addressed the crowd amid supportive shouts of "amen." A flier promoting the rally depicted Lee with a tear rolling down his cheek.

Officials in this college town of 7,000 insist the flag limits are not aimed at the Confederate flag.

"They can carry their flags anywhere they want," City Manager T. Jon Ellestad said. In January, the city received hundreds of complaints when Confederate flags were planted in holders on light poles to mark Lee-Jackson Day, a state holiday.

People complained "that displaying the Confederate flag is very hurtful to groups of people," Ellestad said. "In their mind, it stands for the defense of slavery."

The complaints convinced city leaders they should have clear guidelines governing the flying of flags and banners on light poles, Ellestad said.

Heritage groups such as Sons of Confederate Veterans said the restrictions on the flying of the Confederate flag in Lexington are especially painful because of the two military leaders' strong ties here.

A Virginia NAACP representative could not be immediately reached for comment.

The NAACP launched an economic boycott of South Carolina in 1999 about the Confederate flag that flew atop the Statehouse dome and in the chambers of the House and Senate. A compromise in 2000 moved the flag to a monument outside the Statehouse. The group's president says the flag is a symbol of slavery and segregation.

Jackson taught at Virginia Military Institute before the Civil War. He died in 1863 from wounds suffered at Chancellorsville along with pneumonia, and is buried in Lexington. Lee became president of what is now Washington and Lee University, where he is buried.

"By all means they should be honored in their hometown," said Brandon Dorsey, commander of Camp 1296 of the Stonewall Brigade of the Confederate Veterans. "I look at the flag as honoring the veterans."

This is not the first time Lexington, at the southern end of the Shenandoah Valley, has clashed with the Sons of Confederate Veterans.

The city attempted nearly 20 years ago to ban the display of the Confederate flag during a parade honoring Jackson. The American Civil Liberties Union, which successfully defended the group's bid to carry the flag, is closely watching this dispute from afar.

"City Council could live to regret this ordinance, as it imposes unusually restrictive limits on the use of the light poles," said Kent Willis, the ACLU's executive director in Virginia. "Sometime in the future when city officials want to use those light poles to promote a special event, they may find themselves handcuffed by their own lawmaking."