

Matthews refuses railroad company’s ‘money grab’ to charge more for free downtown parking

BY NORA O’NEILL
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Matthews leaders are publicly criticizing a company that will get rid of a quarter of the town’s free parking spaces after offering a much-higher price to keep them cost-free.

Transportation company CSX approached leaders at the town of Matthews earlier this year

with demands the town pay \$130,000 annually to continue using nearly 200 parking spaces located on CSX’s right-of-way, Mayor John Higdon said. The town previously paid only \$800 a year, according to its website. But CSX’s new terms were clear: pay 162 times more for the parking spaces, or lose access to them entirely in October, Higdon said.

“They approached us

with the ridiculous request to pay them 16,000% more than we do currently for some free public parking that we’ve had for decades, and Matthews also has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to maintain and beautify,” Higdon told The Charlotte Observer. “We just feel like it was an indefensible move on their part, just a money grab.”

The parking spaces,

which sit along Old Depot Lane, West Charles Street and East Charles Street, account for 28% of the town’s downtown parking spaces, said Becky Hawke, the town manager.

The proposal from CSX also included a 30-day cancellation clause and a 3% annual increase over the \$130,000, according to the town’s website. Because the town refused, CSX will now turn

the spaces over to a private company that will charge people to park, according to the town of Matthews and CSX.

“CSX received an unsolicited offer from a third-party to lease the subject property that included better liability and indemnity protection for CSX,” a spokesperson told The Observer. “While discussing the new offer with the Town of Matthews, CSX was unable to reach a mutually beneficial agreement.”

Paying CSX \$130,000 and more a year would be a waste of taxpayers’ money, Higdon said.

It’s unclear what will happen with the spaces on Oct. 11, Higdon said, but the town is working to secure lease agree-

ments with local businesses and developers that have private lots in order to offer new free parking spaces. He said the town expects to replace the same number of parking spots that are being displaced by the change overtime.

Higdon said the town is committed to offering free parking for residents and visitors downtown. Parking enforcement has become a profit-driven business in other regions, he said, and it takes away the charm of a town.

“It’s just kind of a hassle,” Higdon said. “We’ve never had it ever in Matthews since 1879 and we don’t intend to start now.”

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Bizarre dead-body rumors impede Helene disaster response, NC county spokeswoman says

BY JOE MARUSAK AND ADAM WAGNER
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False social media rumors are hurting the emergency response to the Helene disaster in Western North Carolina, the spokeswoman for hard-hit Buncombe County said Thursday.

“1,000 unidentified bodies” at the Asheville hospital, one rumor claimed this week. “Buz-zards everywhere.”

The Charlotte CEO/founder of a beverage company helped fuel the falsehood by spreading the rumor to her Facebook followers, according to a copy of her post reviewed by The Charlotte Observer.

Two-thousand people trapped in a Candler church, another since-debunked rumor stated.

And a photo shared online showed people in a supposed N.C. mountain mudslide during Helene. The slide happened elsewhere in the world and not during Helene, Buncombe County spokeswoman Lillian Govus said Thursday.

“Those are not true,” Govus said, replying to a question from The Charlotte Observer and The (Raleigh) News & Observer during her county’s daily Helene disaster-response news conference on Zoom.

“And those hurt, because ... we have to redirect resources and make sure that our emergency personnel check that off the list. And it may be the fourth time that we’ve done that.

“... It takes away time and resources from us being able to do those critical lifesaving maneuvers in our community,”

Govus said.

“Verified information is critical at this time,” she said. “But as we are trying to disseminate accurate, correct and truthful information in real time,” investigating outlandish rumors “is a really big obstacle for us to overcome.”

“So I would ask that if you are so compelled to share information on social media, that those sources be from the county, the city of Asheville, the agencies that are supporting us at the federal level, at the state level with North Carolina Emergency Services, and verified individuals.”

Kody Kinsley, secretary of the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services, called the social media rumors of hundreds of bodies piled up “disinformation.”

“It’s just not true,” he said Thursday.

“We don’t have a big backlog of work here,” Kinsley said. “There’s no large number of decedents that we’re processing.”

As of Wednesday afternoon, North Carolina was working on identifying four bodies, he said.

The state has now confirmed 115 deaths from Helene, and the sheriff of Buncombe County has counted 72 just in his county, The News & Observer reported.

“Our search and recovery has not ceased,” Buncombe Sheriff Quentin Miller said. “We’ve been trying to do that 24/7. We cannot stop. We must continue to move forward.”

REPORTING HUMAN REMAINS DURING HELENE CLEANUP

If someone finds human remains while cleaning up debris, Kinsley

said, they should call their local law enforcement’s non-emergency phone number. Those local officials will work with the state team to gather the remains and start processing them.

To help identify bodies, DHHS has shifted medical examiners from the eastern part of the state to the west. When a body is found, Kinsley said, it is collected by one of six fatality recovery teams working in the storm-damaged region.

Next, the body is taken to a central processing site where examiners first try to identify the person. When they were found in their home or were carrying identification, that’s easier. But sometimes, Kinsley said, identification requires DNA work or assistance from North Carolina’s State Crime Lab.

After a body is identi-

fied, the examiners work to determine whether the cause of death is storm-related. In the case of a drowning or the victim of a landslide, that’s obvious.

Other times, it’s more difficult, Kinsley said, as in the case of someone who is found in a home and could have died from either blunt force trauma or a heart attack.

Those cases require more extensive work from forensic pathologists.

DHHS tries to let families of storm victims know what happened as soon as it can, Kinsley added.

“We very quickly inform the family and then after that we add them to our storm total. And then we continue to process the remains to return them to the family,” Kinsley said.

News & Observer reporter Virginia Bridges contributed.

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