

New Alton Business District Taxes Approved, Criticized

by Dalton Brown, News Reporter
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ALTON - After the Alton City Council voted 6-1 to raise sales taxes within the recently established Route 3 and Buckmaster Business District, one resident voiced his disapproval. Mike Batchelor, who also raised concerns about the tax increase at a public hearing [last month](#), returned to City Hall to question the economic benefit of the district and the priorities of city officials.

While public speakers at [Monday's Committee of the Whole meeting](#) were allowed to make comments before their items of concern were voted on, Batchelor said he was caught off guard by his inability to do the same.

“I had a prepared speech, but you guys kind of trashed that with your vote to raise taxes, so forgive me for going a little bit off script,” Batchelor said. “I was the only one to speak up in the public forum to question why anyone thought it was a promising idea to raise taxes on anyone right now, let alone two discount retailers that cater to our lowest income population.

“We are going to spend \$3.8 million - as it says by this estimate - to fix up this property, and as Director Caffey has admitted, we will only get \$6 million back over the next 23 years. That is a bad business deal.”

Planning & Development Director Greg Caffey said last month the sales tax increase of 1% on most retail items would generate an estimated \$6 million in revenue “over the life of the district,” which he later clarified was “a maximum of 23 years.” According to the Route 3 and Buckmaster Business District Plan prepared by PGAV Planners LLC, the total estimated cost of the business district project is \$3,828,000, including site preparation, demolition, construction, and more.

Batchelor also said he’s had a front row seat at City Council meetings for the past seven years, and questioned the priorities and past decisions of city officials.

“I’ve recently had to keep myself from laughing when you questioned a few hundred dollars spent on toilet paper at our parks, yet none of you batted an eye when we spent a million dollars to put new lights on a bridge to make the lights colorful,” he said, referring to a [nearly \\$1 million project](#) to install decorative lighting on the Clark Bridge the council approved on Aug. 23, 2023.

“So congratulations, we’ve got people from all over the region next spring that will flock to our city to see colorful lights on a bridge, and they’ll have to drive past dozens of empty businesses downtown, countless ‘for lease’ or ‘for sale’ signs faded with age, see a dwindling population of people, exploding population of empty lots, deteriorating streets, missing sidewalks, and with our new sewer separation as we just saw last week, rainwater on the roads no longer has a place to drain, so our road’s partially flooded.”

He then listed examples of what he believed were either bad policy decisions or a lack of transparency from the council, which he called “the most dysfunctional body I’ve ever seen in Alton’s history” - aside from Alderwomen Rosie Brown and Betsy Allen.

“Recently, I went to a ward meeting with Alderwoman Brown, and I’ve been to several with Alderwoman Allen. I will say that I think these two women out of this body, no offense, are the only bright spots for our future,” Batchelor said. “I truly believe Alton will succeed if each group and ward succeeds. Continually throwing money at downtown does little to help upper Alton or anything else in the town.”

He then said to Alderwomen Brown and Allen: “I want to thank you two for your service, for what you guys have been doing. I think that you two give me hope that we can turn things around - it’s getting to the point where I don’t know if we can do that.”

The City Council ultimately voted 6-1 to establish and impose Business District taxes within the Route 3 and Buckmaster Business District - Alderwoman Brown cast the sole “no” vote.

The council also voted 6-1 to approve an action taken under a suspension of the rules at a prior meeting - specifically, the approval of an ordinance establishing the business district and approving the business district plan. Alderwoman Brown cast the sole “no” vote against that item as well.

A full recording of the Oct. 11, 2023 meeting is available at the top of this story, on the [RiverBender.com Facebook page](#), or on [RiverBender.com/video](#).