

Gold mining committee takes shape in Buckingham County

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DILLWYN – Less than a month after it was first approved, the gold mining committee in Buckingham County is still taking shape. One member of the group has already resigned, while residents keep pushing for more involvement in the process.

The committee launched last month, through a unanimous 7-0 vote from Buckingham County supervisors in their Dec. 12 meeting. The plan included two supervisors, District 5 representative Harry Bryant and District 4 representative Jordan Miles, along with one citizen. The board selected Joseph Abbate of Yogaville Environmental Solutions for that third spot, but he stepped down later in the month. During the Monday, Jan. 9 board meeting, supervisors appointed Heidi Berthoud as Abbate’s replacement. Berthoud is the owner of Blue Ridge Wellness and a member of the environmental group Friends of Buckingham.

The board gave the committee a specific assignment. They were to review the recently completed state gold mining report and develop options for how Buckingham County can respond.

A call for involvement in Buckingham County

But it wasn’t the number of people involved that concerned residents. Even before the committee was created, Buckingham County citizens had come before supervisors, asking for at least three to four people to be included in the decision. Even now that the committee’s been formed, residents still came Monday night, asking the board for a change. “We encourage more input, not less,” said Heidi Berthoud. Speaking during public comment, before supervisors appointed her to the committee, Berthoud pointed out the gold mining decision would affect the entire county, so more people needed to be involved.

“I really haven’t heard good reasons for limiting the additions of public participants,” she added. “Why do you want to limit inclusion? Democracy is the best way to serve the county. Letting in metallic mining will be counter to growing the county. Who wants to move to a poisoned community?”

If supervisors weren’t inclined to add more people to the committee, Berthoud suggested they just put the proposed “Prove It First” ordinance to a vote.

This is one of the options supervisors heard about in meetings over the last few months. This ordinance requires

applicants to produce one instance of a mining operation anywhere in the world, similar in type and scope, which succeeded in operating without poisoning the people and environment in which it was located. If they can show a similar example, they would be granted approval to operate. If they can't, the project can't move forward. Now, there are a few "catches" when it comes to this ordinance. First, it has never actually been tested in court. Second, no city or county in the U.S. has actually adopted it before, although the board in Reading, Pennsylvania is considering it as well.

'We're in a dangerous position'

That request, to move forward with a vote on the "Prove It First" ordinance, was echoed several times Monday night, as residents came forward. They asked for either a vote, up or down, on the proposal or more inclusion on the gold mining committee.

"I question why we're considering a committee," said Friends of Buckingham member Chad Oba. "Why not just go straight to the ordinances, decide what you want to do (and) have someone make a motion? (But) if we're going to have a committee, let's include as many experts as we can gather. Don't we want to hear from people? Let's include people, let's hear their voices."

Marie Flowers agreed, saying she just wanted answers to her questions.

"I would like to know the reason why you can't just bring up a vote," Flowers said. "I don't understand why you can't just give us a reason why this is dragging out so long."

Does Buckingham County have a gold mine?

Currently, there's no gold mine actually operating in Buckingham County. There is a group prospecting, however. In April 2019, the Canadian prospecting company Aston Bay Holdings announced they were beginning to search for gold in the area.

To be clear, Aston Bay isn't a mining company. It's a prospecting company. That means they search for gold, silver or other minerals, identify and purchase a location, then sell that information (and property) to the highest bidder. They can do this because under Virginia law, prospecting doesn't require a state permit if you're searching for anything other than uranium.

In statements given in March 2019 and July 2020, company officials declared their drilling confirmed a "a high-grade, at-surface gold vein system at Buckingham, as well as an adjacent wider zone of lower-grade disseminated gold mineralization." In other words, they found enough to keep going. At the beginning of 2020, the company secured the right to prospect on 4,953 acres of land in Buckingham County.

As for a timeline on when work might be finished, first it has to be restarted. The company hasn't done any work in Buckingham since early 2020.

"We have conducted only preliminary exploratory drilling on the local landowners' properties at Buckingham, and none for the past two years," [Aston Bay](https://astonbayholdings.com/news/aston-bay-announces-exploration-agreement-for-gold-exploration-property-in-virginia-usa/) (<https://astonbayholdings.com/news/aston-bay-announces-exploration-agreement-for-gold-exploration-property-in-virginia-usa/>), CEO Thomas Ullrich said. "We have several quality potential projects, but a limited amount of funds. Over the last year and a half, we have been investing in the landowners in another county. We look forward to investing in Buckingham again."

What happens next?

There's no specific timetable for when the Buckingham committee will bring back recommendations. They plan to meet at the county offices, at 4:30 p.m. on the third Monday of each month.

The General Assembly also has not made any indication what they'll do with the gold mining report. No lawmakers pre-filed any bills on the issue as of the beginning of this year's session on Wednesday, Jan. 11. But that doesn't mean it couldn't be added to an Assembly committee's calendar later this month.

