

City Council discusses ordinance for mayor to provide financial support from guest tax for ORCA

Athens City Council introduced an ordinance at first reading that would authorize Mayor Steve Patterson to enter into an agreement. The agreement would provide financial support from the city's transient guest tax for the operation of the Outdoor Recreation Council of Appalachia (ORCA).

Introduced by Council member, 2nd Ward, Jeff Risner, the ordinance addresses both ORCA and the Regional Council of Governments that coordinate services and programs for local governments across jurisdictional boundaries. Section 1 addresses that the financial support would be provided by the transient guest tax to the general fund.

"Provided that the proceeds of such tax are sufficient, legally available and lawfully appropriated for the purpose, and the city's general fund reserve balance is 9% or higher." Risner read from Section 1 of the ordinance. The agreement explained the financial support can only be provided if the guest tax's proceeds are sufficient.

ORCA is a Council of Governments, created to utilize outdoor recreation assets in Appalachian Ohio. Its purpose is to provide community members with benefits to help diversify rural economies. Current ORCA members are within Athens County where they "manage and develop the Bailey's Trail System in partnership with Wayne National Forest," as mentioned on their website.

Risner answered questions after the regular body meeting regarding where the transient guest tax funds would go. "It would go to, first of all, to keep ORCA functioning, mainly for administration personnel, paying for the electric bills..." Risner said. He added that the transient guest tax itself hasn't changed from being a fund for ORCA but what has changed is the amount of money used.

The original amount of the transient guest tax, proposed six or seven years ago, was around \$90,000 according to Risner. He included that because of a drop in income among council members and city officials, the administration and the auditor felt it was best to negotiate a lower sum.

The reason for lowering the sum of the financial support to ORCA is because Bailey's Trail System, for example, is outside Athens' city limits. "Part of the reasoning is that the Bailey's trailhead and all that are far outside the city's limits, so it's not technically a city project at all. And the idea is you're using city funds to promote or help an entity that is really not part of the city..." Risner said.

Risner spoke on behalf of the Council to acknowledge that the most efficient way to contribute is to come up with a different type of funding mechanism based on population. He said that each resident would contribute \$1 to the city and the funding would still come out of the transient guest tax.

The ordinance was moved to a second reading to be heard again at the next City Council regular body meeting.

In other business:

- Mayor Patterson spoke during the Communications segment of the meeting to share the loss of Somerset Mayor, Tom Johnson. Mayor Patterson said Mayor Johnson took him under his wing and was an ally to himself and other Ohio mayors.
- An ordinance was approved after the third reading authorizing the service-safety director to enter into a buyout agreement for the carport-mounted solar array at the Athens Community Center. Council member, At Large, Micah McCarey said the administration has been interested in this for some time.
- An ordinance was read at first reading to make appropriations for current expenses and other expenditures of the city of Athens during the fiscal year ending Dec. 31, 2025. Introduced by the Finance & Personnel Committee, it was said that \$53 million dollars was used for expenditures ensuring that every department of the city was represented. The ordinance was moved to a second reading.