https://www.fauquier.com/localnews/a-look-at-a-head-spinning-year-for-the-warrenton-town-council/article_1e2f2fef-648e-4340-b849-acd009897e48.html

A look at a head-spinning year for the Warrenton Town Council

By Tate Hewitt Staff Writer
Feb 11, 2026



Illustration by Jon Wile

It's understandable if readers have a lot of questions about the Warrenton Town Council after last year.

The last 13 months in the small town have been dizzying — delivering a new majority to the town council that moved swiftly to change the town government's position on data centers. But that alliance fell apart by the fourth quarter, and key staff members were pushed out — leaving citizens with a lot of questions about the town's direction.

Questions like: did leaders protect the town from Amazon, have they fulfilled their promise of making the town more open and transparent – or has the Warrenton Town Council lost the plot?

Put more simply, what exactly happened in council chambers last year?

To help readers draw their own conclusions, here's a roundup of the town council's hits and misses, over the past year.

First moves against Amazon

Data centers stayed a national news story in 2025 as communities across the United States pushed back against the artificial intelligence boom.

It was old news in Warrenton though, where a special use permit to build an Amazon data center on Blackwell Road sparked an outcry in 2023, led to multiple lawsuits and finally a sea change on the Warrenton Town Council in 2025. But the story hasn't stopped there.

Council newcomers Roy Francis, Larry Kovalik and Michele O'Halloran joined reelected William Semple and Eric Gagnon to form a new anti-Amazon majority. They came into office with a plan to increase transparency and resist Amazon – and once at the dais, they quickly put the plan into action.

In one of their first acts, **they fired previous town attorney Martin Crim** — replacing him with Chap Petersen, a former state senator with an anti-data-center track record. He was instructed to change the town's approach to two lawsuits, including **a lawsuit by Citizens for Fauquier County** (CFFC) over the town's refusal to release some town records relating to Amazon.

The new town council then released those documents. The *Fauquier Times* staff **read all 3,050 pages,** finding nothing that sheds new light on what some critics have argued was an unfair approval process.

The town remains a party in another lawsuit it was unable to withdraw from, which will go to a seven-day trial in Fauquier County Circuit Court this March.

New commission fails to make a report

Council members' first moves set the tone for the year. At the same opening meeting, members **formed a new committee**: the Commission on Open and Transparent Government.

This new land use committee was assigned to investigate three recent decisions in Warrenton — the Amazon data center, the Arrington subdivision and the redevelopment of Warrenton Village Center — and to produce its first, Amazon-focused, report in early 2026.

Council members Semple and Gagnon were named to the commission, along with **three citizens who oppose the Amazon data center**.

In March, the council hired former town attorney and **campaign donor** Whit Robinson **to work as the commission's "special counsel"** with a $50,000 budget for his legal services and an extra $10,000 for "a third-party expert in information technology."

He was instructed to conduct an internal review of the town government and issue subpoenas to reveal how the Amazon project came together, but progress quickly stalled due to a debate over whether Robinson could copy town records and search them with artificial intelligence — drawing concern from town staff **and statewide police groups**.

And Robinson never issued any subpoenas, frustrating commission chair Semple.

By November, the council **paused the commission indefinitely** after meeting only three times, and O'Halloran spoke about disbanding it entirely. Despite failing to produce a report, the commission still cost around $60,000 **during a belt-tightening year**.

Facing a push to remove him, **Robinson resigned in January of this year** – the fourth attorney associated in some way with the town to part ways.

Firings, failed hiring and ethics complaints

Despite its failed mission, the commission left a big, if unintended impact — it led to the departures of Town Manager Frank Cassidy and town attorney Petersen.

By October, the commission debate over town records had **bubbled over to town council chambers**, swaying at-least Gagnon's vote to **fire Cassidy "without cause,"** leaving Finance Director Stephanie Miller **in the town manager role**.

It's still unclear why council members Kovalik, Paul Mooney and David McGuire voted to remove Cassidy — reportedly they gave no explanation during a closed session with their peers, and they remained silent **after they returned to the dais**.

Later that night, **Gagnon floated replacing Peterse**n while the attorney was teaching a class in South Korea. The council voted to consider it during the next session, but before they could meet, Petersen sent in a letter announcing that **he would not seek to renew his contract** at the end of the year.

Meanwhile, council members' silence left a vacuum that filled with rumors and dissatisfaction from citizens and staff members who disliked how Cassidy was dismissed and **demanded to know why**.

The *Fauquier Times* and others submitted Freedom of Information Act requests, which didn't reveal council members' reasons but did demonstrate **coordination in the days before the vote** — including a script of what would be said that day.

Gagnon responded to some of those citizen critiques by distributing pamphlets during the Nov. 12 council meeting, placing some right next to government agendas, which triggered an ethics complaint from Karen Lavarnway, who had challenged Gagnon in the **2023 special election for Ward 5**. The council **scheduled a special meeting** to discuss that complaint, and another incident allegedly including Robinson, but **ultimately took no action against either of them**.

At the end of the year, the council **voted to hire Mark Dycio**, a Fairfax-based attorney who specializes in tobacco and Virginia Alcohol Beverage Control law, as interim town attorney. Council member O'Halloran opposed the hiring, citing a **potential conflict of**

interest — Dycio's representation of a Warrenton company connected to council campaign donations.

Cart before the horse, the council did not have a contract before hiring Dycio, so **a special meeting was planned** for Dec. 30. But not enough members attended and the meeting was canceled in seconds, leaving the town government to begin the new year **without legal representation**.

On Jan. 12, Dycio withdrew his bid. The council hired Philip Carter Strother as interim town attorney and **Christopher Martino as interim town manager** the following day — leaving the town in Martino's hands, which some data center activists do not trust.

Symbolic move may likely lead to (another) lawsuit

The firing of Cassidy might be Warrenton's most memorable, if hard to follow, story of 2025. But what may become the most consequential decision of the year took place months earlier.

In February, the council instructed staff to begin removing any mention of data centers from the town code. The town's **planning commission approved the changes in May**, and a month later the council voted to finalize the change, **removing any mention of data centers as a permissible use** in the town zoning ordinances.

The move was mostly symbolic; there are few if any parcels in town large enough to build a data center on, and the change does not fully ban data centers—any future applicant would need to convince Warrenton's leaders to pass an amendment adding them back into the town's code.

But the move did have an immediate effect: It opened a new legal avenue for Amazon to challenge Warrenton in court.

Here's how that went down. A month after the change in the town code, an attorney for Amazon asked the town to confirm that the data center giant still had a vested right to develop the land. In late October, the town's zoning administrator denied there was a vested right. By November, **Amazon had appealed that decision** to the Board of Zoning Appeals.

In his last appearance before the town council on Dec. 9, Petersen explained that appeal can go one of two ways:

“To the extent the BZA does not support the town, then we have an automatic right of appeal,” Petersen said, adding that Amazon would also appeal a decision that was not in its favor. “So, this matter will probably eventually, no matter what happens, come before the circuit court.”

*Reach Tate Hewitt at **thewitt@fauquier.com**.*

*Want to read more stories like this? A subscription to the **Fauquier Times** helps power quality, local news coverage. **Subscribe today.***



David McGuire appointed to Warrenton Planning Commission