

Summerland Council meets with mayor of occupied Ukrainian town

By Doug Holmes

Several members of Summerland Council recently participated in a Zoom meeting with Mayor Ivan Malieiev and First Deputy Marina Loginova from Kirillovka, a town in southeastern Ukraine currently under Russian occupation.

The meeting was arranged by Sergei Shubin, head of communications for the Kirillovka municipality before he and his family fled the war and took refuge here in Summerland. Elena Chernikova, an interpreter from Summerland, translated during the meeting.

When Russian troops entered Kirillovka on March 25, 2022, the municipality began a mass evacuation of the local population. Within a month, more than 60 percent of its 6,600 residents had been relocated to safer areas of Ukraine or beyond.

Mayor Malieiev chose to remain in Kirillovka. He told us he was later detained by the Russian military and special services and put in solitary confinement for two months. They demanded he cooperate but he refused.

The mayor was then deported to Ukrainian-controlled territory and ended up in the city of Zaporozhye, located 170 km from Kirillovka. First Deputy Loginova also made her way to Zaporozhye using false identification to get through Russian checkpoints.

Most of the 23 members of Kirillovka city council managed to flee, although several stayed in Kirillovka and are cooperating with the Russians.

Council meetings are being held in Zaporozhye and from there the municipality helps displaced Kirillovka residents including providing humanitarian assistance. Teachers from Kirillovka continue to hold classes online.

The municipality is also accessing its limited funds to help the Ukrainian armed forces in support of its military operations. Kirillovka residents also assist where they can – they knit socks and have sewn more than 3,000 pillows for soldiers at the front.

According to Mayor Malieiev, little can be done for those residents remaining in Kirillovka, most of whom are elderly. Russian security services monitor communications with Ukraine so even contacting them would put them in danger.

Kirillovka Council, however, is preparing for when the community is “de-occupied” to ensure a rapid post-war recovery.

In Zelensky-like fashion, Mayor Malieiev remained calm and confident throughout our hour-long meeting. He talked about “when” the Russian occupation would end and never expressed doubt that he would return to help bring Kirillovka back to its former glory.

Before the war, Kirillovka was a popular beach resort that welcomed more than a million visitors a year. The town was renowned for its sandy beaches and warm waters of the Azov Sea and two estuaries. There were spas and mud baths, amusement parks, recreation centres, a dolphinarium, festivals and sporting events. Half the size of Summerland, the community supported five cultural centres, four libraries and three museums.

Preparing for the “de-occupation” of Kirillovka includes establishing contacts abroad. The mayor spoke of Canada’s ongoing solidarity and unwavering support for Ukraine. In reaching out to us, he expressed interest in establishing relations with Summerland to set the stage for future post-war partnerships and cultural exchanges.

Our conversation with Mayor Malieiev was engaging and at times emotional. When asked how we can help, he said he just wants us to stand with Ukraine, for as long as it takes.

We agreed to keep in touch.

Doug Holmes is mayor of Summerland