

TOWNSHIP OF BLAIRSTOWN
WORKSHOP MEETING
Wednesday, January 25, 2017 7:30 PM

MINUTES

The meeting was called to order at 7:30 by Mayor Shoemaker. Those present were Mr. Avery, Mr. Lance, Mrs. Van Valkenburg and Mayor Shoemaker. Mrs. Dalton was absent. Also present were: Clerk Leidner and (Attorney Kevin Benbrook) Christine Rolef, Treasurer.

The **FLAG SALUTE** was conducted.

SUNSHINE STATEMENT

Mayor Shoemaker read the following statement: Notice of this meeting has been sent to two newspapers of general circulation in which notice was given of the date, time, place and general agenda in accordance with the Open Public Meetings Act.

PUBLIC COMMENT – up to 5 speakers, 3 minutes each

Robert Ho – 87 Mohican Road – Mr. Ho questioned if an Economic Impact Study was done. He feels sewers present a very negative impact on all property values, even without an Economic Impact Study. He feels this is being forced upon residents. He moved here over 8 years ago and realized this was an economic risk. He is against it. He noted some of the Township Committee are on the BEC who will benefit from the sewer project. He feels they should be recused from making a decision on this project. He feels that those supporting this project will not be elected in the future and vice versa. He suspicious that Blairstown's economy will be affected, noting people will not buy homes here and pay higher taxes. Finally, regarding lower income housing, he pointed out Stroudsburg, Pa., Hackettstown, and Netcong who provide such housing, fell victim to undesirables and property values were lowered.

Joe Tafuni, 89 Hope Road – Re: Roadway, maintenance and repairs. He commented the roads are in poor shape. Milling and paving must be done and it is a big expense. DPW maintenance must be done. He stated the Fire Dept. presentation revealed the need of another apparatus valued over \$1,000,000. So, he suggested, along the lines of the First Aid Squad, the Fire Dept. should charge for false alarms. He noted perhaps an Ordinance could be drafted to cover same. Mr. Tafuni questioned hazardous site remediation as being an ongoing unknown. He pointed out 3 septic systems are failing in the Village Area. He questioned if Warren County. Health Dept. was approached about active remediation, funding, or condemnation. Mr. Lance responded there are only 2 septic systems failing. Whereas Mr. Tafuni believes the BEC's purpose is to make this a better town, he disagrees that they should be doing sewer studies. The focus should be on how to make this town appear more inviting. Finally he stated he is against the sewer project which he estimates to cost over \$12,000,000.00. minimum.

Laurie Tafuni, 89 Hope Road – Re: COAH. She feels developers will want to locate 87 units in the area where the sewers are suggested. She noted that area will be overwhelmed, i.e. businesses will be impacted, there is no parking, homes and the elementary school are located there.

She feels COAH should be more widespread throughout the area.

She is against the sewers.

She lives down the road from the Recycling Center, which she pointed out is in the historical preservation area. They are not permitted to be a trash transfer or trash convenience center. She noted they would be fined by health officials if they took refuse. She does not want to see it become a trash convenience center but remain a recycling center. She fears problems with wells and homes in the area, coming from a contaminated historic site.

Mrs. Tafuni pointed out there is only 1 trash convenient center opened located at the dump, in Warren County.

John Kovacs, 12 Cedar Glen Drive – Mr. Kovacs questioned Mr. Avery as to how many dwellings pay taxes here and have a septic system. The response was 2,200. 161 dwellings would be on a sewer system and pay taxes on it. Mr. Kovacs also questioned how much of the projected \$9 to \$12 million for sewer installation, would each taxpayer be billed per month. Paul Avery responded - about \$12.00 per month for the project itself however he added, there has been no settlement as to how it would be split out.

The Mayor interjected, “this project is an ongoing study”. The engineers have preliminarily estimated what they believe the cost would be. Mayor Shoemaker noted The Township has not had a public meeting where all of the numbers have been presented. He explained the Township Committee has not received a final report which gives them the information for that public meeting. Mayor Shoemaker further stated that alternatives are being investigated now, which may drive project-cost down. Mr. Avery noted that an Economic Development Study is being done.

The Mayor declared the problem is, complaints have come to his attention that some property downtown can't be sold. The Mayor noted the Village is an asset of the Township that benefits all the people.

Mrs. VanValkenburg noted there are differences of opinion between the Members on the Township Committee regarding the matter of the sewers. Most of the owners in town are investors or non-occupants. Mrs. Van Valkenburg noted if sewers are approved, the owners will pass the cost to the people who can't afford it. She noted there are a lot of Section 8 individuals in that area. She pointed out, to the government, it will not make a difference and no funding can be expected as a result.

Mrs. Van Valkenburg suggested enhancement in town should be done by way of an effort to get the buildings to look better in order to bring in visitors.

Mr. Lance stated it does matter if sewers are installed. He noted, even if this was given to the town free, look at the COAH obligation. Mr. Lance indicated that he is confident we will settle on 87 units in a 10 year plan. He anticipates after that time, a great number of additional units will be forced upon the town. He is opposed to this project economically, and feels it will upset the makeup of this community.

The Mayor pointed out there is no place for people to come into the Village area since it is all built up. Mr. Lance suggested Blair Academy should be placed on notice that this project will never happen because 2 committee members are opposed. (Sewer funding approval require 4 votes).

Erin Hanelt, 67 Hoagland Road – Ms. Hanelt suggested that Blair Academy contribute more towards this project. She objects to incurring a monthly expense resultant from the sewers and feels she should have control over how she spends her money. She asked if the flooding of downtown is taken into consideration in “the Study” before the treatment plants are implemented. The Mayor noted out the US Corps of Engineers has come in to offer a solution to the flooding. They have not developed a plan yet. She feels this project is being forced upon residents.

The Mayor explained, a study was started about 1 ½ yrs. ago. Blairstown is trying to have the study completed to present to the Township Committee, with alternative systems for funding, to try to get the cost down. It will then be presented to the Town and finally the Township Committee will take a vote. He declared, “This is not in any decision stage right now”.

Mrs. Hanelt is concerned with COAH drawing an undesirable element. Additionally, she fears with sewers, the State will assume the stance that Blairstown can afford to have more people and thus impose a bigger obligation.

Mrs. VanValkenburg interjected if a public meeting was held at NWRHS, she projected, ¾ of this town would be against the sewer project. She mentioned Hackettstown, Newton, Oxford and Belvidere, whose COAH obligation is greater since they have water and sewers, which made it very easy to enable this.

PRESENTATION - Nature Conservancy – Offer to Plant Trees – Michelle DiBlasio

Michelle DiBlasio, who works for Nature Conservancy, is interested in implementing some reforestation efforts along the Paulinskill River, on a town-owned parcel behind the Blairstown Diner. It is the Alpine – Sunoco site. She would go out with someone from the town to map out the area. She is aware this area is used for parking for the 4th of July Celebration at Footbridge Park.

She stated their interest is to increase riparian and in-stream habitat for wildlife and to improve water quality by installing native, hardwood tree and shrub species along stream bank and adjacent flood plain. The plantings will create a canopy which covers the water, cooling it and creating a better habitat for fish. Additionally, the plantings, edify the banks, preventing nutrient runoff into the stream. They desire a 100 ft. buffer.

She noted Blair Academy permitted them to do tube plantings on a couple of locations. Tubes remain on the trees for 4 to 5 years to protect them from deer browsing. She pointed out this is what the proposed project will look like.

She explained that Nature Conservancy will be responsible for all labor, material and maintenance costs. There are over 20 species of trees and shrubs to be planted. She offered that mowing can be done through them, to keep the trees from choking.

Ms. DiBlasio explained they have an agreement used for state and private land owners. She suggested a simple contract for the town, outlining Nature Conservancy is responsible for all costs, and maintenance, and noting - the town not to remove the trees. She will provide sample agreements for reference.

Mr. Lance mentioned he would like to see something similar done at the Jones Farm on Rt. 94. Ms. DiBlasio revealed the State had given permission in October, 2016 to implement their restoration work there. It was noted the town is co-owner of this property. Creation of a conservation park or a community garden were some future ideas mentioned. The goal is to open recreational activities and bring people to the site to raise awareness to their water resources in their backyard.

She concluded by offering to setup a site visit.

The Mayor declared this is a work session today and this will be taken to the regular Township Committee meeting next month.

PRESENTATION - Stephen Welsh from Bruno Associates – Grant Writing

Mr. John Bruno, Chairman of the Board of Bruno Associates, and Stephen Welsh, grant writer appeared before the Committee.

Mr. Bruno revealed that his firm is the largest grant writer in the State.

He explained Congress passes laws for aid to municipalities, boards of education, and subdivisions. It is their job to get the most money for the client. They know where every dime is coming from both in Trenton and Washington. He pointed out as an example, they got \$1,000,000. for water in Sussex County.

He noted the average return for every \$1. they charge for the municipality receives \$15. He pointed out that 92% of the grant applications filed are funded.

His research revealed that Blairstown has gotten very little in federal, state and foundation grant aid.

Mrs. Van Valkenburg noted that a majority of the Township's budget is paid by a hydro-electric plant. She mentioned that Blairstown does not have a municipal tax. Whereas it was thought previously that no grant money was allocated because of this, she revealed that Mr. Lance said this is not the case.

Steve Welsh, Bruno Associates, explained that the reason they are here, is a result of a newspaper article indicating they had gotten grants for Sussex Borough. Since 2015 they have gotten Sussex 3 grants for \$400,000., \$360,000. and \$400,000 which was the max allowed for each project and about ½ cost of the projects.

His investigation revealed 3 programs that Blairstown would be eligible for:

- 1.) Small cities CDBG, \$400,000. maximum. The ranking – which is Municipal Distress Index, indicates Blairstown is on the list.
- 2.) USDA – Dept. of Agriculture which gives a combo of grant/loan/contribution.
- 3.) NJ Environmental Infrastructure – NJEIT is a loan-only program but there is a portion which allows “forgiveness”. If qualified, \$500,000. can be given “off”. 75% of the money borrowed is at 0% interest. 25% is at prevailing rate. Combined rates are less than 1% over a 30 year span. There is no limit on the size.

The Mayor asked how they are paid.

Mr. Welsh responded there will be a yearly contract. They are paid a stipend. It is not a percent of the grant. There is no limit on the number of federal, state, and county foundation grant programs for which they apply. He revealed he has been doing this for 44 years.

Mr. Lance noted this method of payment is preferred over a past contract years ago, in which the vendor received a percentage, thus using up the portion of the small-cities grant, for consulting fees.

The Mayor asked how stipends are determined.

Mr. Bruno responded that he will get a general idea of the number of hours needed to be spent. He revealed his fee is \$375. per hr. but he will not be involved with it much, except for the office. There is no charge for travel from his office which is 1 hr. 10 mins. away.

Mr. Bruno continued “he would treat Blairstown the same as he treats Sussex”. He said Sussex has received a couple of million dollars in 1 ½ yrs. They are paying Bruno Associates \$36,000. which is a low figure. (He explained the average project is between \$10,000 - \$20,000.) He pointed out Blairstown is double their population. He declared “for the first year, he would charge Blairstown the same”, as long as they move fast. He noted the quicker, the better.

Mr. Bruno explained their fee is payable monthly. He declared they will not do anything at all that will cost The Township money. They would meet regularly with the Township.

He pointed out an example of a technology grant for Belleville requiring follow-up to the original application. He stated “you have to be on the front lines”. Mr. Bruno said they are watching for grant opportunities every day of the week.

Mr. Lance revealed the biggest need is developing a back-up well for the Water Dept. He asked how long it would be to get a yes or no on a grant for the well.

Mr. Bruno responded, in the first 4 months he tries to get their feedback regarding the amount of payback. There will be no response regarding federal or state grants or at least 6 months. His professional staff will connect with contacts on federal and state level to expedite matters.

Mr. Welsh said some applications can be submitted on a rolling basis anytime during the year, and on a quarterly basis.

They confirmed they can seek assistance to firefighters, in response to Mr. Lance's question.

Christine Rolef, CFO, asked for examples or statistics on smaller loans or grants i.e. \$10,000 - \$20,000. She explained the Township also has Historic and Police needs. Mr. Bruno said they would have to meet with the Engineer or whoever is involved, to get a general idea of what is needed. He revealed they would go for the max. They are not engineers but work with them, telling them what they should do. The engineer would have to sign off on the project.

Mr. Welsh cited he just got a grant for Mt. Lakes for \$7,000.

Mr. Bruno noted The Ford Foundation and Lucent Technology Foundation are in the \$10,000.00 - \$15,000.00 range. They pursue that every day.

Mrs. Rolef asked if she could provide Bruno & Associates a list of grants in the area the Township seeks, which are unlimited.

Mr. Bruno responded affirmatively to Mrs. Rolef. He added if there is a 501 C3 organization in town, there are some foundation grants for that.

The Mayor stated the decision will be made at the regular Township Committee Meeting on 2/8/17.

Mr. Lance called Sussex Borough and got rave reviews.

Debra Waldron, Chairwoman of the Land Use Board, stated the volunteer Fire Dept. needs a fire truck. She asked what kind of a grant could be expected.

Mr. Bruno responded, the filing date for assistance to firefighters has already passed but it will come out again.

He would file for whatever equipment is needed. He revealed he got \$560,000. for a firehouse in Harrison. He said they would work with the Fire Dept. They are treated as a separate entity. She asked if the water project goes to bond, can the grant dollars that comes after-the-fact, be applied?

Mr. Welsh responded if already started, he equated it to being like history which you can't go back on. He said you need to go forward.

Mrs. VanValkenburg asked if there is any money to develop Master Plans. Mr. Bruno responded "Yes, there is no question about that".

NEW BUSINESS

1 – 2017 Budget Recommendations/Discussion

Mr. Lance explained the first sub-committee meeting will be on Fri. 2/17/17.

He stated the biggest concern with everyone is to maintain a "0" tax rate. He added, as usual, also minimize the draw down on fund balances. He stated the draw down last year was \$600,000.

Mrs. Van Valkenburg noted the 2% Open Space Tax can't be used for anything in the General Budget. She would like to go forward with road improvement, maybe with grants. She pointed out, in the last 8 years, only 3 or 4 miles were done. She stated "that's nothing" and noted there are a lot of roads. She said Open Space has over 1 million dollars in the fund which she pointed out could be used to help out the Town.

Mr. Lance responded that people move here because there is a zero tax rate. His concern is adding a municipal tax that will be increased continuously. He indicated an option may be a dedicated road tax similar to the Open Space tax. He is opposed to a Municipal Tax. Mr. Lance revealed that it is the County Tax Board issues the decision. The Mayor asked Mr. Lance to look into this for the next meeting.

Mrs. Van Valkenburg expressed concern, besides the roads, with the condition of the Water Company, and drainage issues. She clarified, she is not looking to add taxes. She is stating issues that must be looked at.

Mr. Avery suggested numbering the changes that need to be made in the Water Company. Mrs. VanValkenburg suggested a dehumidifier to keep the pipes from rusting.

The recent water loss, off Sunset Hill Rd., was mentioned and Mr. Avery indicated there needs to be an immediate emergency fix. The Mayor noted there is no legal representation tonight, and a formal vote will take place on 2/8/17 at the Twp. Comm. regular meeting, but asked for a consensus of Committee members to authorize Carl Stoddart, Supr. DPW, to go ahead and fix it. All agreed.

The Blair faulty meter at the girls' dorm was mentioned. Mr. Lance suggested 2 master meters be installed for Blair Academy instead of the many that are now being read for billing.

TED RODMAN'S COMMENTS – Mohican Rd. repair

Ted Rodman pointed out a grant from the State for \$185,000.00 was received this year for Maple Lane. It will be in the budget for next year.

He noted the milling for Lambert Rd. is not eligible for the State aid grant. The Township would be responsible for a \$200,000 bill there.

Ted Rodman noted Carl Stoddart recommended Mohican Rd., (which is not on the list), from Cobblewood to Gaisler be done. Mr. Lance agreed this makes more sense. Ted Rodman said since it is such a long, wide road, they may only go for half of it if all are agreeable to changing it. He reiterated it is not on the list.

The Mayor asked for authorization for Ted Rodman to file that application, as the deadline is a week from Friday, otherwise the money will be lost. All agreed.

ICE RINK

Mrs. Van Valkenburg informed that last night someone tried to cook inside the tented area of the Sycamore Park Pavillion, burned the table, (which should be replaced), discolored the mats with the hot pot, and attempted to go onto the slushy ice rink. She would like to see the Police Dept. expanded to midnight.

DOG PARK

Mrs. Van Valkenburg revealed that cars are driving onto the Dog Park and taking shortcuts thereby destroying the fields. Mr. Lance suggested reflectors and improvements next year, to keep people on the oil & chip driveway, instead of on the grass. Mayor Shoemaker said he would talk with Carl Stoddart tomorrow.

FROM THE PUBLIC

Rosalie Murray, Heller Hill Rd., questioned if Heller Hill is on the list of roads to be fixed, stating it is a disaster from Edgehill Rd. to Union Brick Rd. She requested it be put on the list.

Doug Pitchell, 31 Belcher Rd., Blairstown, suggested remote security cameras at the Ice Rink. Regarding the sewers, he stated NJ has the highest foreclosure rate. He feels anything put on as an assessment, will not have a positive effect on house values. He noted there are two Township Committee members who are Rotarians. He asked if the 4 steps of Rotary Code: 1.) Is it the truth?, 2.) Is it fair to all concerned?, 3.) Will it build good will and better friendships., 4.) Will it benefit all parties involved? - could be applied to the sewers.

Laura Tafuni, 89 Hope Road, stated there was a problem with a homeless person living behind the Library and another living at the Laundromat. She believes 24 hr. Police coverage is needed to combat drugs as well. She also suggested a gate which can be closed at night at Sycamore Park.

Debra Waldron, Chairwoman Land Use Board, 54 Maple Ln., stated the LUB has a motto which is "no negative impact". The Board's decision can't provide for physical or financial harm to the Public. It has to be an inherently beneficial use to the community. She feels sewers are not an inherently beneficial use to the entire community but services a limited number of people.

Mrs. Van Valkenburg confirmed the number of 161 properties but within each one there could be multiple families thus equaling 215-220 units.

Mrs. Waldron noted the \$11 million figure does not include replacing pipes, sidewalks, insurance and inspection fees, to name a few, which are unknown costs. She asked Kevin Benbrook, Esq., if the COAH number would increase when it is seen that the proposed sewage treatment is over 2 times the overall required for downtown. His response was yes. Mrs. Waldron noted in Montville that was done. The expansion was doubled in size, predicated on future growth. A builder came in and had property which was not eligible for the septic systems, so he sued the Township, won, and was allowed to build condos. He got an expansion on the number, claiming he could not make a profit based on lower income. For every 4, 1 was a lower income condo. She cautioned what is thought to be good, can really be harmful. She beseeched Township Committee to stop the sewer study.

Mr. Lance questioned if Blairstown wants the future growth. He wants a rural community that is why Blairstown has the big Open Space community.

Other problems addressed were:

Signs at the park which were torn down.

Cedarville Rd. has no storm drainage. Snow and rain comes down from Gaisler Rd. and floods that street.

Retirees will be forced into foreclosure if they incur additional sewer costs.

When people sell their homes, they will be forced to put in new septic systems. Will money be provided for them to do so?

Nothing has been done regarding the flooding of 4 years ago. Taxes are expected on homes that still have not been repaired, thus lowering property values.

ADJOURNMENT

As there were no further comments from the public, Mr. Lance made a motion to adjourn the meeting, which was seconded by Mr. Avery. All members voted in favor. The meeting was adjourned at 9:52 pm.

Respectfully Submitted by:

Marion Spriggs,
Deputy Clerk