

NORRISTOWN MUNICIPALITY WORK SESSION
Tuesday, October 20, 2020

The Council Work Session of October 20, 2020 was called to order by Council President Derrick Perry at 6:30 PM by way of the virtual gotomeeting.com application.

There was a **Moment of Silence** followed by the **Pledge of Allegiance**. The following Council members were connected to the meeting:

Valerie Scott-Cooper
Thomas Lepera

Hakim Jones
Rebecca Smith

Heather Lewis
Derrick Perry

Also tuned in were: Crandall Jones, Municipal Administrator; Chief Mark Talbot, Norristown Police Chief; Sean Kilkenny, Municipal Solicitor; Jayne Musonye, Director of Planning & Development; Norman Butts, Director of Finance; Amrinder Singh, Code Manager, Thomas Odenigbo, Director of Public Works, Chief Thomas O'Donnell, Norristown Fire Department.

Motion to Approve Minutes

There was a **motion by Councilwoman Scott-Cooper, seconded by Council Vice-President Smith**, to approve the Council Meeting Minutes from October 6, 2020. **The motion passed unanimously.**

Executive Session Announcement

Council President Perry announced that Council met in Executive Session prior to the meeting to discuss litigation and personnel issues.

Public Comment

Rachel Fecho, 715 Noble St.

Good Evening Norristown residents and Council members,

The past few months I have let my emotions get the best of me regarding the sewer sale, and I started to lose sight of whom it is that I am truly angry at. I am angry at Aqua.

Why would a giant company like Aqua be interested in little old Norristown? Do they look at us and think “Wow, this is a great community on the verge of becoming something great! Let’s make them an offer to help them along the path towards revitalization!”?? No. Their objective is profit for their executives and shareholders, and anyone who thinks they are interested in us for ANY other reason is trapped in wishful thinking. There are very, very few win-win situations in life, and certainly even fewer in business offers like this. Over the past 10 years, Aqua’s stock value has skyrocketed. In January 2010, it was \$14/share. In January 2020, it was \$52/share. What does that mean? It means they are extremely profitable. Where does their profit come from? The people paying their utility bills. They are gobbling up public utilities all across the nation, and specifically targeting communities like ours because they see us as struggling, and think we are the perfect target for their bait. The big juicy worm of quick, easy money. They have lots of money to throw at us, so they have our council jumping for that worm. They have every intention, and every legal protection in place, to recoup every penny of that \$82 million, AND THEN SOME. Their stock price didn’t jump nearly 400% in 10 years without an enormous profit earned off the backs of ratepayers. Don’t let those ratepayers be Norristown residents.

Our local sewer authority is fiscally sound and contributes to our community, while still offering us the lowest rates around. Our rates haven’t been raised in 5 years, and even then, it was only 2.5%. They have the funds for necessary upgrades and maintenance. Their board members and employees are members of our own community, and are accountable to ratepayers, not to Wall Street.

Council, I’m not angry at you. I’m angry at Aqua for duping you. It’s not too late to turn back.

Sincerely,

Rachel Fecho

William Ward, 635 W. Main St.

Dear Council:

Here are a few reasons to keep a strong HARB in Norristown:

Improve quality of life- The PA State Constitution guarantees every resident- not just the rich- the right to an historic environment.

Preserve the gift of our magnificent architecture- This cannot be replaced; if it's lost, it'll be piecemeal, bit by bit, until, one day, we'll wonder where it went.

Protect real estate values- Preservation has been proven to stabilize & improve real estate values. Norristown has been a place where young families can buy reasonably, and live while gaining equity. It would be unfair to pull the rug out from under them.

Save homeowners money- It's far cheaper to paint a window, or replace a few slates, than to replace all the windows with plastic, or put on a whole new roof (even if a salesman tells them otherwise).

Work toward an aspirational goal- Don't we want to look like a Media, or a Doylestown, or a West Chester?

Don't think that they prosper & look good because they're rich. (The rich are actually more prone to ruin their historic buildings than the poor, as they have the money to do it.) They look good because, years ago, rules were adopted to prevent the piecemeal destruction of their architecture. All the other county seats have preservation laws, most of them much stricter than Norristown's. It's not accidental.

David McMahon, 721 Haws Ave.

This evening there will be a lot of conversation about the upcoming budget proposal for 2021 and constraints that Norristown finds itself in as a result of our current pandemic – but, frankly, also through years of over-spending. And I'd like the public here tonight to think about these financial challenges in the context of the proposed purchase of our sewer system by Aqua Pennsylvania. This Council and the Municipal Administrator have been spending as if the sale of the system has been guaranteed and it has not been. And just to be clear - this is not a "sale" with "profits" going to fix budget shortfalls and pay for a laundry list of projects, this is a payday loan of \$82 million that would be repaid by the public in the form of excessive rate increases over very strong and unheeded public opposition.

There are corporations out there looking to exploit the financial crisis caused by COVID-19 and to profit from that crisis. Aqua PA is one of them. At a public hearing about the sale on June 9, a resident, Rachel Fecho, referred to Aqua PA's acquisition of our last and largest publicly held asset as predatory. Marc Lucca, the president of Acqua Pennsylvania since 2016, was offended to be characterized in that way - but he really shouldn't be because here are some examples of how his boss and other colleagues speak about profiting from this pandemic.

A colleague of Marc's, Matthew Rhodes of Aqua's parent company Essential Utilities, stated that the company would "continue to see a strong pipeline of municipal acquisitions, especially given the passage of fair market value legislation. And now with economic pressures, as the COVID-19 crisis continues, we are anticipating more municipalities will be looking for solutions to financial constraints."

In fact Mark's boss at Aqua America, Walter Lynch, in that same August 6 Conference call with investors said "We now have about 800,000 customer opportunities in our pipeline as many communities are seeking solutions to these challenges which include regulatory, financial and those posed by COVID-19 in managing water and wastewater systems"

Keep in mind when he says 800,000 opportunities he means 800,000 communities under enormous strain. This sort of preying on stressed communities in a time of real and sustained hardship is actually common enough to have its own term – disaster capitalism.

And make no mistake, this is disaster capitalism. This is how New Orleans ended up with no public school system after Hurricane Katrina - but a private for-profit system instead. It's how a regionally directed water system failed the citizens of Flint Michigan - still, to this very evening - despite the loud protestations and concerns of those residents. It's how PROMESA made Hurricane Maria the disaster in Puerto Rico it never needed to be, instead of turning the island over to profiteers. It's how collective-bargaining rights were stripped from workers in Wisconsin under the pretext of a debt crisis. The sale of a well-run locally controlled public utility right here

in Norristown, one that accounts for fully one-third of the value that we own as a community, is about to be sold off for a one-time cash payment that we will regret deeply and will be forced to pay for from here on in. Just because Aqua PA is here with the complicity of local officials doesn't mean they aren't the wolf. Stop the sewer sale. Sign the petition

Netta Johnson, 1004 Arch St.

Greetings Council Members and Norristown Residents,

Day after day day and week after week I'm learning more and more about this subject. I keep asking -myself why the five council members - Derrick, Sonya, Valerie, Heather and Tommy - want to put this burden on the residents of Norristown? The answer is simple, they just don't care.

This sale along with the effort to dissolve a board that has manage the "only" remaining asset in Norristown to be financially solvent is WRONG for Norristown.

Earlier today I spoke with a resident from Cheltenham. She shared that they had the "wool pulled over their eyes." She stated that their bill has increased, and they are being charged for infrastructure repairs and another fees. Norristown: we can't afford this, and it doesn't need to happen. We don't need another tax burden placed on us.

Norristown, Stand UP, Speak OUT and Fight BACK! There are powerful and wealthy people pushing this deal and they don't live here in Norristown.

This to me is a TRUMP move by Democrats that we voted into office. The action is what we are fighting against and YOU Norristown can STOP it.

Bill Ward, 635 W. Main Street – Mr. Ward had a question regarding window replacement in the HARB District. He noted that plastic windows offer no return on investment.

Jim Schneller – Mr. Schneller is part of the Norristown Public Garden Club stationed on the Norristown State Hospital grounds. They were asked to leave which has caused hardship for the members. Their eviction was extended until Spring 2021. He asked Council to urge the State Hospital to find a new location for them.

Presentations

Proclamation recognizing Paul Rihn

Councilman Jones read the proclamation which recognizes and honors the momentous contributions of Paul Rihn of Habitat for Humanity who was named "Volunteer of the Year." Council declared October 15, 2020 as "Paul Rihn Day."

3rd Annual Department of Buildings & Code Compliance Appreciation Day

Municipal Administrator, Crandall Jones, read the proclamation which recognizes the staff of the Norristown Department of Buildings and Code Compliance for their dedication, service, and hard work in ensuring that properties in Norristown are in compliance with State and Local laws, codes and regulations. Council declared October 30, 2020 as "Code Compliance Appreciation Day."

Announcements

The Norristown Recreation Center will re-open on November 2, 2020 and will follow all COVID-19 measures. The new hours are Monday-Friday 3 pm to 8 pm and Saturday 12 pm to 3 pm.

"Keep Norristown Beautiful" will host a "Riverfront Rescue" on Saturday, October 24th from 9 to 11 am.

Councilman Jones commended the East Norriton Pharmacy and Reverend McCray of the Norristown Church of

God for providing free flu shots to 30 local residents on the last Sunday of September.

Councilman Jones congratulated the first Hispanic woman ordained as a Priest in the Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania, Jessie Alejandro, having been ordained at St. John's Church. He noted she is very active in the community.

Free food distribution drive sponsored by "Gangster Vegan" on Saturday, October 24th at noon. Location: Partners for Family, 329 East Main Street. Tone & Tenor will provide music.

Mt. Zion AME Church "Praise & Worship with Norristown Day " Saturday, October 24th from 11 am to 4 pm at Simmons Park. Social distancing. Contact Pamela Davenport at 484-213-2922.

"Trunk or Treat" will be held in the Norristown Recreation Center parking lot. Space available.

Fire

Water Rescue Dry-Suits purchase

Fire Chief O'Donnell provided the details regarding this purchase of water rescue personal protective equipment for trained and certified Fire Department personnel. There was **a motion by Councilman Jones, seconded by Councilwoman Scott-Cooper**, to approve the purchase. **The motion passed unanimously.**

Purchase of structural firefighting coats and pants

Fire Chief O'Donnell noted that the total for the purchase of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for the Fire Department personnel is \$28,150. There was **a motion by Councilwoman Lewis, seconded by Councilwoman Scott-Cooper**, to approve the purchase. **The motion passed unanimously.**

Police

Resolution No. 20-88: motion to approve requests for Disabled Parking Spaces

Police Chief Talbot requested Handicapped Parking Spaces for: 1327 Redwood Lane and 1034 West Airy Street.

Chief Talbot also requested the removal of a Handicapped Parking Space at 1013 West Airy Street. There was **a motion by Council Vice-President Smith, seconded by Councilwoman Lewis**, to approve the requests. **The motion passed unanimously.**

Municipal Administrator

Presentation of proposed 2021 Budget

Municipal Administrator, Crandall Jones, conducted a Power Point presentation regarding the 2021 proposed budget including "Considerations for 2021 budget," a "2021 Revenue Summary," "Projections" and options to close the gap by possibly using the Fund Balance, reduce expenses, increase taxes or a combo approach. He noted that this information is available on the Municipal website.

There was **a motion by Councilwoman Lewis, seconded by Council Vice-President Smith**, to approve the advertisement of the proposed 2021 Budget. **The motion passed unanimously.**

Resolution 20-87 – PennDOT agreement for Barbados Street Rights-of-Way roadway maintenance

There was a **motion by Councilman Jones, seconded by Council Vice-President Smith**, to confirm prior approval with this Resolution and authorize the execution of the Agreement, as attached, so that this Resolution shall serve as Exhibit G to the Agreement as requested by PennDOT. **The motion passed unanimously.**

Municipal Council Award of Bids for Municipal Hall addition and renovation project

Jerry Gorski, Gorski Engineering, provided a Power Point timeline of the bidding process.

Councilman Lepera voiced his concerns over the inability of some contractors to consider the cost-saving ideas after the bidding process was completed because they weren't alternates. He asked that there be a re-bidding process for the contractor. Councilman Jones asked to keep the cost as close to the cost in the bidding process.

Mr. Gorski explained that a re-bidding process could result in a higher cost in building materials due to the current pandemic situation. Mr. Crandall Jones added that it could also affect the agreement with regard to the available space that the staff and employees would temporarily relocate to.

There was a **motion by Councilwoman Scott-Cooper, seconded by Councilwoman Lewis**, to intend to award bids to Cedar Electric for the electrical work, Myco Mechanical for the HVAC, Integrity Plumbing & Mechanical, Inc. for the plumbing, Gordon H. Bayer, Inc. for general construction for the Municipal Hall renovation project. **The motion passed 5-1.** (Councilman Lepera voted nay.)

Mr. Gorski recommended a purchase order through COSTAR for an emergency generator from Modern Power Systems of Bristol in the amount of \$189,919. There was a **motion by Council President Perry, seconded by Councilwoman Scott-Cooper**, to approve the purchase order. **Motion passed 4-2.** (Councilman Lepera and Councilman Jones voted nay.)

Council discussion on potential Residential Tax Abatement Programs

Municipal Solicitor Kilkenny provided an outline of the local tax abatement programs. He noted there are 3 programs for which he gave specific details. The first applies to "New Loan Construction," which would not apply to the land. The second is "The improvement of deteriorating real property where improvements are made to existing single-family residential homes in a blighted neighborhood and "Tax Exemption and Mixed Use Incentive" program signed this year, similar to blight certification.

Building & Codes Enforcement

Historical Architectural Review Board – September 2020

Mr. Amrinder Singh, Manager, requested approval for the following properties:

257 East Main Street
602 West Marshall Street
430 East Marshall Street
638 Noble Street
629 West Main Street

There was a **motion by Councilwoman Scott-Cooper, seconded by Councilwoman Lewis**, to approve the HARB requests. **The motion passed unanimously.**

935 West Marshall Street Project review (HARB appeal)

Due to lack of favorable approval by the HARB, Mr. Schwartz, son of the property owner, requested Council approval to use vinyl in replacing windows, which he said he was told by the contractor will maintain the historic look.

There was **a motion by Councilwoman Lewis, seconded by Council President Perry**, to approve the appeal for the recent HARB decision for the property owner at 935 West Marshall Street. **The motion passed unanimously.**

Review proposed updates and amendments to Chapter 31 (HARB)

Mr. Singh conducted a Power Point which proposed options to amend Chapter 31 which was originally adopted in 2003 and updated in 2010. Option #1 includes eliminating HARB Zone B District and include it in Zone A and add language to allow slate roofs to be repaired/replaced with suitable roofing materials that give the same slate aesthetic and to allow wood windows to be repaired/replaced with suitable materials to give the same architectural aesthetic. Option #2 proposes keeping the current boundaries for HARB Zones A & B and change it to the proposed language. Option #3 proposes eliminating HARB completely.

There was **a motion by Councilman Lepera, seconded by Councilwoman Scott-Cooper**, to approve Option #1. **The motion passed unanimously.**

There was **a motion by Council President Perry, seconded by Councilwoman Lewis**, to open the agenda to include the rejection of a sprinkler system bid for the Municipal Hall Renovation project. **The motion passed unanimously.**

Public Comment: None.

There was **a motion by Council President Perry, seconded by Councilwoman Lewis**, to reject the sprinkler system bid for the Municipal Hall Renovation project. **The motion passed unanimously.**

There was **a motion by Councilwoman Lewis, seconded by Council President Perry**, to close the agenda. **The motion passed unanimously.**

Planning & Municipal Development

Consider granting Preliminary Land Development approval to DB Housing Group, LLC (c/o Brian Corcodilos) for new construction at 257 East Main Street.

There was a Power Point presentation conducted by Mr. Cortland Shankweiler.

There was **a motion by Councilman Jones, seconded by Councilwoman Lewis**, to approve new construction of a mixed-use structure at 257 East Main Street, with proposed commercial and amenity space on the ground floor and (19) residential apartments throughout the 2nd to 5th floor above, a common rooftop deck/green space and (11) surface parking spaces in the rear, accessed from East Penn Street. **The motion passed unanimously.**

Request a Zoning map amendment to rezone 700 Sterigere Street (Elmwood Car Wash, LLC).

Mr. Gerald Rath, Esquire, presented exhibits and Mr. Robert Ratoskey provided information about the property. Jayne Musonye, Director of Planning & Development, advised Council that this is still subject to the Land Development process.

There was **a motion by Council President Perry, seconded by Councilwoman Scott-Cooper**, to advertise the

Zoning Map amendment. **The motion passed unanimously.**

ADJOURNMENT

There was a **motion to adjourn the virtual Council Meeting by Council President Perry, seconded by Councilwoman Lewis. The motion passed unanimously.** There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned.

Respectfully submitted,

Roseann M. Santangelo, Clerk of Council