

NORRISTOWN MUNICIPALITY
COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES
NOVEMBER 8, 2023

The Council Meeting of November 8, 2023 was called to order by Council President, Thomas Lepera, at 6:30 PM in the Montgomery County Intermediate Unit 23, 2 West Lafayette Street, 1st Floor, Norristown, PA 19401.

There was a **Moment of Silence** followed by the **Pledge of Allegiance**.

The following Council members were in attendance:

Rebecca Smith
Dustin Queenan
Lauren Hughes
Heather Lewis
Thomas Lepera

Also in attendance were:

Municipal Administrator, Crandall Jones; Sean Kilkenny, Municipal Solicitor; Acting Police Chief, Michael Bishop; Jayne Musonye, Director of Planning & Development; Thomas Odenigbo, Director of Public Works; Kathy Pfister, Director of Finance; Thomas O'Donnell, Norristown Fire Chief; Amrinder Singh, Codes Manager; Bri'Ana Cropps-Hawkins, Recreation Director; Tracie Henry, Special Events Coordinator.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

There was a **motion by Councilman Queenan, seconded by Councilwoman Smith**, to approve the Minutes of the September 19, 2023 Council Meeting. **The motion passed 5-0.**

EXECUTIVE SESSION ANNOUNCEMENT

Council President Lepera announced that Council met in Executive Session to discuss real estate and personnel issues.

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

Council President Lepera stated that negotiations with the County regarding the former prison site are planned for Thursday, Friday and Saturday this week. He said there will not be voting tonight on this issue and that a RFI (Request for Information) will be sent out to get the attention of Developers.

Council President Lepera said that the first item that will be covered is a presentation of a Citation from State Representative, Gregory Scott, to Norristown Police Officer Butterworth. State Rep Scott praised the Norristown Police and Fire Department for "doing Yeoman's work" every day. He presented a Citation to Officer Butterworth for his life-saving efforts on September 24, 2023 at Riverfront Park where he saved a person from a car that went into the river. State Rep Scott said this was from "The House of Representatives in Harrisburg to you."

PUBLIC COMMENT

Olivia Brady, Stanbridge Street – She said that even though the decision for the prison has been postponed, she is “cautiously optimistic.” She said that the prison is of immense value to the citizens. She also said there needs to be more transparency – do not keep things a secret. She added there needs to be a partnership to re-vitalize.

Anthony Uhrich, Rosemont Avenue – He noted that the construction on Rosemont and Washington Avenue has displaced 30-40 cars, many belonging to elderly people. He suggested using Washington and Forrest or where the abandoned Rite-Aid was. He also said that this is the 5th anniversary of a Handicapped Parking request for a person on Washington and Rosemont. He added that this morning he had no water with no notice about it. He also received a \$50 fine for having native pollinators on the sidewalk.

Jim Watters, Norristown – He said he made a video titled, “Shame on You, Norristown.” He said that trash in bags sometimes goes to drains. He said as part of “Keep Norristown Beautiful,” he saw a blighted property he hadn’t noticed before at 15 Oak Street. He said there are more out there. He added there are flood plain issues and that there’s a problem with FEMA filling-in on Barbados Island and there’s also filling-in in Bridgeport. He said that a 2 foot excessive flood damaged the sewer plant.

Peggy Dellisanti - She said she is happy there will be more time and thought with the prison issue. She said that the prison issue gives a reason to come to Norristown. She said that the “Friends of the Prison” will continue to hold public forums. She said that the old buildings have character and soul. She said that everyone should have a common goal.

Phil DeFranco – Marshall Street – He said that Norristown has an unwillingness to do historic preservation. He said that 2 weeks for proposals is not enough time. Council President Lepera said it is a year, not 2 weeks. Phil said that Norristown could be like Phoenixville.

Lisa Terue, Forrest Avenue – She said she lived in Norristown for 22 years. She said that the old prison could be used to bring people together with music. She said it could be beneficial and a nice change.

John George, East Main Street, Norristown – Mr. George is the owner of the 3 Saints Distillery. He said he was saddened to hear there was a proposal to tear down the prison. He said it has great architecture. He said “Kudos to those” who stopped the demolition. He said to identify all the options and pick the best option.

David McMahon, 721 Haws Avenue – He thanked the Council members who met with his group of supporters for the prison. He said there will be more town halls to discuss future use of the prison. He said it is a nationwide issue and that eyes are on Norristown. He said to aim high because it is an architectural masterpiece.

Judge Nicholas, Dekalb Street, Norristown – He said he has been in Norristown since the 1970s. He said he hopes there is a creative adaptive re-use of the prison. He said he was in the criminal justice system for 49 years and he said that referring to the demolition of the prison as a monument of injustice is wrong. He said that when they closed the prison, there were still incarcerations. He added that 13% of the County budget is for Corrections. He said that wrong-doing uncorrected gets repeated.

BUILDING & CODE COMPLIANCE

Historical Architectural Review Board – October 2023

Amrinder Singh, Code Manager, noted the following properties are confirmed to be in compliance with the HARB Ordinance:

22 East Elm Street
1214 West Airy Street

He noted that 35 East Airy Street (the former prison) is not included.

There was **a motion by Councilwoman Smith, seconded by Councilman Queenan**, to approve the HARB applications for 22 East Airy Street and 1214 West Airy Street. **The motion passed 5-0.**

PLANNING & MUNICIPAL DEVELOPMENT

Presentation of two proposed mixed-use developments on the southwest corner of Main & Dekalb Street and at 225 East Main Street

Director Musonye explained that these are conceptual plans.

One of the representatives, Frank Sobelli, said he started to look at the town as a whole. He said he met Al Zone, Director of the Elmwood Park Zoo, 18 months ago. He introduced his team. He said they looked into what happens in Norristown. He said that his team, which includes members Josh Matthews and Brian Phillips, has a joint vision. He said that Main Street has incredible assets.

The Power Point included looking at “Vacant Lots and Surfaces,” “Main Street Activation Plan,” “Example Intersection,” “Streeteries and Pedestrian Improvements,” “Murals, Wall Art,” “Low-Rise Infill Housing Mixed Use.”

He showed on the Power Point what projects the team has completed such as the Cherry Street Pier.

Mr. Josh Matthews said that they looked at King of Prussia, Plymouth and Conshohocken. He said they have the ability to piggy back off the Justice Center.

He said they plan to have Pop-Up businesses for a year or two until the investment market improves. He said that 40-50 apartment units with businesses are being proposed for the 225 East Main Street site.

He said they want to be a partner with a cohesive plan.

Crandall Jones said that the goal is to have the town activated. He noted they should contact the Special Events Coordinator.

Presentation of proposed FY2024 Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Projects and request for authorization to advertise a Public Hearing for December 7, 2023.

Director Musonye said this is the fourth step in getting the annual CDBG. Ms. Musonye provided a time line of the steps leading up to this including a Public Hearing on October 2, 2023. She noted that the projects being presented tonight will be advertised in the Times Herald and then the process will begin.

The projects include: Owner-Occupied Rehabilitation Project, Fair Housing, Small Business Assistance Center, Main Street Economic, 5-Year Consolidation Plan, Section 108 Loan. She said that the balance is \$2,720,000 with the last payment due in August 2030. Other costs include administration of the grant, salaries and related costs for Planning. She said that the \$919,005.00 is dependent on the US Congress.

Ms. Musonye said that this will be advertised in the Times Herald with a 30-day waiting period and then she will come back to Council with a published budget.

There was **a motion by Councilman Queenan, seconded by Councilwoman Hughes**, to allow the advertisement of the CDBG proposed projects. **The motion passed 5-0.**

Request for Council authorization to enter into a subrecipient agreement with Montgomery County to receive \$800,000 in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding for small business assistance and economic development initiatives in Norristown.

Director Musonye named the programs that are recommended:

\$228,000 for Small Business Assistance loans that need to meet criteria such as a full-time job must be created or retained for every \$35,000 put into the business.

\$160,000 Downtown Area Business Initiative to help with retro-fitting and equipment for the businesses.

\$128,000 for the Historic Façade Preservation Program – need to certify that the work to be done meets the criteria. When that is done, they can advertise to businesses wanting to participate in this program to apply. It's a minimum dollar for dollar match up to \$7,000 but the owner can put in more money. It is being paired with the \$50,000 CDBG money.

\$82,000 for the Small Business Assistance Center and the Norristown Experience to be in one office at 401 Dekalb Street. Ms. Musonye noted that the Solicitor is looking into the lease. The money can be used for painting and putting in a conference room.

\$164,000 Planning Staff managing process salaries. It will reimburse the General Fund for total of \$800,000.

There was **a motion by Councilwoman Smith, seconded by Councilman Queenan**, to enter into a subrecipient agreement with the County for \$800,000 of ARPA funding. **The motion passed 5-0.**

FINANCE

Presentation of the proposed 2024 Municipality of Norristown Operating Budget

Crandall Jones explained that the purpose of the presentation is to make it available to the public and it is also available on the Municipal website.

The topics covered in the Power Point included: 2023 Budget Status; 2024 Budget Considerations; 2024 Budget Options.

Kathy Pfister, Finance Director, presented a Power Point covering these topics: 2024 Revenue Summary; Revenue Trends; 2024 Department Summary; Budget Trends; Balancing Options; Last Year's Solution.

She said the options for this year are:

Tax Increase ¼ mil

Use ARPA Funds

Move savings to CIP (Capital Improvement Plan)

She noted there will be 3 Public Meetings on November 9, 15, 20 of 2023. December 5, 2023 is the Final Adoption.

POLICE

Resolution 23-74: Motion to approve requests for Disabled Parking Spaces

Chief Bishop explained that medical documents were provided by the residents to support their request. He added there is no off-street parking available.

There was **a motion by Councilwoman Hughes, seconded by Councilwoman Smith**, to approve Resolution 23-74 for Disabled Parking Spaces for:

646 Stanbridge Street

522 Haws Avenue

858 Cherry Street

566 Noble Street

The motion passed 4-0. (Council Vice President Lewis was not available for voting.)

Resolution 23-76: Request for Council to approve the purchase and upfitting of a new Ford Explorer SUV for the Police Chief

Chief Bishop noted that these types of vehicles must be ordered early due to limited supply.

There was **a motion by Councilman Queenan, seconded by Councilwoman Hughes**, to approve the purchase of a new Ford Explorer for the Police Chief to include upfitting with emergency equipment for a price not to exceed \$49,318.00. **The motion passed 5-0.**

MUNICIPAL ADMINISTRATOR

Request for Municipal Council approval of Assessment Appeal Stipulations agreed upon by the Norristown Area School District

Crandall Jones explained that the properties that were negotiated on are: 151 West Marshall Street for a refund of \$6,851.10 and 1700 Pine Street for a refund of \$11,291.74.

There was a **motion by Councilwoman Hughes, seconded by Councilwoman Smith**, to approve the Assessment Appeal Stipulations. **The motion passed 5-0.**

Resolution 23-75: Request Municipal Council approval of Intent to Award Letter for Poley Skate Park to Spohn Ranch Skate Parks with the low bid amount of \$1,000,000.

Crandall Jones explained the issues they've had with the previous proposal with a skate park developer such as unnecessary mark-ups. He noted that the skate park project is a community-engagement process. He said he is part of the Steering Committee which also includes Khal Hassan and Jimmy Gorecki.

Khal Hassan, Pennoni Engineering, stated that the references provided all checked out. He said that after the required documents, meetings and concepts are completed, they will move forward with the design and construction.

There was a **motion by Councilwoman Hughes, seconded by Councilman Queenan**, to approve Resolution 23-75 to approve the Intent to Award Letter for Poley Skate Park to Spohn Ranch Skate Parks. **The motion passed 5-0.**

DEPARTMENTAL REPORTS

Monthly updates to Council on the October 2023 activities within the presenting departments.

Police

Chief Bishop shared that there were 3,523 service calls, 645 Part I crimes, 14 fatalities, 8 incidents with no rounds fired, 70% decrease in gun violence, 40% decrease in robberies, would be higher if not for the Tik Tok incidents, 43% increase in domestic incidents – calls increased 33%. Attended 12-13 community events, 100% increase in attending, 73% decrease in car crashes, increased pedestrian injuries due to crossing the wrong part of the street, overdoses are down, increase in non-fatal overdoses. From 2015-2023 51% decrease in Part I crimes, 6,000 less victims, 59% decrease in violations, 2,000 less victims. Two new Officers on the street and two new staff members.

Fire

Chief O'Donnell noted that year-to-date there were 1,138 emergency calls, response time 4 mins. 43 seconds, busiest time is Tuesday at 7 pm, 2,104 training classes, 3 firefighter injuries, 2 civilian injuries, 0 casualties. There were 372 inspections, 243 public education classes, 11 fire drills, 301 fire detectors installed, visited 1,074 homes. The Fire Safe House was used on six occasions.

Code

Mr. Singh reported that they are in the process of hiring 3 new inspectors. He is working with the Municipal Administrator and the Municipal Solicitor to update forms and inspection reports. He said that since the adoption of Chapter 251, 1,200 contractor licenses were issued. YTD: 3,073 tickets were issued, 4,733 notices were posted which is an increase of 54%. There were 688 transfer inspections and licenses issued for 1,344 housing units which is a 72% increase from last year.

He shared that Norristown has met a Lead Safety milestone – 4,475 rental units are certified lead-safe or lead-free. He thanked Crandall Jones and Council. He said it also wouldn't be possible without the workers, property owners, realtors and lead inspectors.

He added that he will have a more formal report at the January Council meeting.

ADJOURNMENT

There was **a motion by Councilman Queenan, seconded by Councilwoman Smith**, to adjourn the Council Meeting. **The motion passed 5-0.**

Respectfully submitted,

Roseann M. Santangelo