

**BOROUGH OF FOUNTAIN HILL
COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES**

Sept 17, 2019

7:00 PM

The Council Meeting was held at the Doctors' Pavilion at St. Luke's University Hospital – Bethlehem Campus on 701 Ostrum Street, Fountain Hill, PA 18015.

The event was also broadcast live on Facebook Live.

Council members present were: Ms. Jordan, Mr. Ferencin, Mr. Blatt, Mr. Trotter, Mr. Atkinson, Mayor Gifford, Mr. Trabel, and Ms. Halleman. Also, in attendance were Ed Bachert (Police Chief), Cordula Voges (Finance Director), Pete Lehr (Borough Solicitor) and guests.

Council President Atkinson called the meeting to order and asked for everyone to rise for the Pledge to the Flag.

Council President Atkinson welcomed the great interest in the special Council meeting and thanked St. Luke's for providing its meeting facilities. He expressed his concern with the Borough's budgetary matter and presented his budget analysis as related to the police coverage in the Borough of Fountain Hill. He stressed that property taxes have gone up 78% in the last five (5) years, in part also because 49% of the Borough's properties are tax-exempt. He continued that the Police operating budget has risen 31% in the last five (5) years and total police related expenditures (including Borough contributions to the pension and healthcare) make up at least 53% of the General Fund expenditures. To resolve some of these budgetary matters he listed the following options in lieu of property tax increases:

- Elimination of the local Police Department (similar to Borough of Bath leaving the Regional Police Department)
- Regionalizing the police force (complex but not realizable for the 2020 budgetary year).
- Using partial State Police coverage (e.g. five (5) days midnight – 5 a.m., Friday & Saturday midnight – 4 a.m.).

Council President Atkinson emphasized that he does **not** support the elimination of the local Police Department though. However, he proposed to examine and discuss the use of partial State Police coverage.

PRIVILEGE OF THE FLOOR

- Pre-Scheduled Appearances
 - Lieutenant Long, Patrol Section Commander, PA State Police (PSP)

Lieutenant Long explained the duties of the PSP. In addition to patrolling interstate highways, the PSP is mandated to provide law enforcement coverage to Pennsylvania municipalities that do not have their own police departments, as well assist municipalities that have their own full-time force with traffic supervision, violent crime suppression, some case investigations, and other services as requested. PSP troopers are assigned to patrol zones, which may cover several municipalities, and their assignments may include patrolling municipalities, patrolling highways, responding to

assistance requests from other agencies or municipalities. The most common incidents to which PSP responds include requests for assistance, collisions, burglaries, thefts, assaults, criminal mischief, and 911 hang-up and disturbance incidents. Due to the coverage and incident-demands (e.g. Patrol Section in 2018: 16,500 calls, 1,600 criminal calls, 800 crash calls) PSP prioritizes incoming calls.

Lieutenant Long's presentation was followed by a Q&A session. - PSP answers are formatted in *italics* to set them apart from the questions. -

Mayor Gifford thanked the Lieutenant for his time and PSP's general patrol service. In light of the coverage and incident-demands, she questioned the PSP response time. *PSP's available manpower and the urgency of the actual situation determine the response time. A specific standard response time cannot be given.*

Council member Ferencin asked about the relationship between PSP and the Borough of Bath that has been under official PSP coverage since 2018. *In 2018 alone, PSP responded to 850 Borough of Bath calls and entertains a regular bi-weekly contact with the mayor.* Mayor Gifford questioned the comparability between the Boroughs of Bath and Fountain Hill though. She hi-lighted that the Borough of Fountain Hill is embedded in the City of Bethlehem, is not connected to any current PSP coverage area (except for the Sands Casino), and PSP does not respond to Borough Code violations.

Council President Atkinson asked about PSP's community involvement. *Lieutenant Long mentioned school visits (e.g. lunch with students) and frequently attending public community events and meetings to connect to the community.*

Mayor Gifford asked if PSP responds to late disturbance calls such as complaints about loud music. *Lieutenant Long reiterated the response time will depend on the available manpower and the urgency of the actual situation. He also noted that resources can be expanded as needed. Fountain Hill Police Chief, Ed Bachert, added that even with local police force coverage all after-hour calls are transferred to the 911 system and then dispatched.*

Council member Helen Halleman commented that PSP is focused on state responsibilities, whereas the local police force provides a greater sense of security in the local community. She appealed to the local police force to decrease the overtime.

Mayor Gifford asked if PSP follows up on residents' requests for patrolling neighborhoods during absences. *PSP does follow up and accepts any existing mutual EMS connections.*

- Discussion on Agenda Items

Council President Atkinson invited the public to comment and raise questions. Due to time constraints and to give as many residents as possible the opportunity to speak, he asked speakers to limit their speaking time to three (3) minutes.

- Mr. Roof asked what the current existing mutual EMS connections are. *Police Chief Ed Bachert listed the City of Bethlehem and Salisbury Township.*
- Ms. Figueroa thanked the St. Luke's hospital organizers for providing the meeting facilities enabling this special meeting.
- A Fountain Hill resident and St. Luke's employee (Christina) asked to review all expenditures in detail, increase the presence of small businesses, and encourage neighborhood crime watches partnering with the local police. She also hi-lighted that only

seven (7) % of Fountain Hill hospital calls are directed to the Fountain Hill police. The number of calls has decreased because they are directed to the St. Luke's Allentown campus.

- The resident of 1045 Moravia Street inquired what type of crimes mostly happen at night. *Council President Atkinson responded that this is still analyzed. Police Chief Bachert added that the local police on average responds to 3,500-4,500 calls/year during nighttime. The majority of those crimes are: burglaries, suspicious persons, DUI.*
- The resident of 584 S. Benner reported that she experienced a child medical emergency and the child was saved by the quick local police response.
- The resident of 1456 Jeter Ave inquired about: Ceiling for Real Estate (RE) taxes; call volume to the Lehigh County 911 Center for fire calls, number of general 911 calls and response time; possibility of City of Bethlehem regional police coverage.
- The resident at 834 Tomblor questioned the necessity for the Swimming Pool and library.
- Mr. J Rohrbach noted that state police coverage is free to the Borough.
- The resident at 1146 Moravia asked if state police would also patrol randomly. She also mentioned that the Fire Department was slow to respond to a recent fire at the Fountain Hill Elementary School, but the local Police force appeared within minutes.
- The business owner at 513 S Clewell mentioned that only the local police force could offer the security needed to attract small businesses to the Borough.
- The resident at 802 Dodson Street noted that domestic violence calls tend to peak between midnight and 1 a.m. and wondered if savings by reducing the Part-time police force and not replacing the vacant Full-time police officer position justify the need for a local police force during that vulnerable time of night.
- Mr. Patrick Figueroa encouraged the general public's participation in Council meetings. He also recommended to scale back services if needed and promote small business growth.
- The resident at 505 Norway Place thanked the local Police force for the quick response to a sewer incident back in 2015. She pleaded with St. Luke's hospital to increase its financial contributions to the Borough.
- The resident at 946 Jeter Ave asked if police officers' layoffs were planned? *Council President Atkinson answered that no layoffs are planned due to PSP coverage. However, PSP coverage should reduce the current Overtime, decrease the number of Part-time officers, and not filling the current Full-time position.*
- The resident of 1218 Stanley Ave doubted sufficient PSP coverage during the suggested hours. She fears an increase of crime. Instead, the Borough should scrutinize Healthcare and other expenditures.
- The resident of 1136 Broadway noted that future PSP coverage might not be free.
- The resident of 600 Hoffert St asked for an explanation of the "unfunded police pension plan". *Council member Blatt explained that the "unfunded police pension plan" is a result of actuarial calculations – based on economic or demographic assumptions, changes in plan provisions or applicable law – satisfying the funding requirements of ACT 205 of 1984.*
- The residents of 606 Smiley and 852 N Clewell asked to re-consider the hours for PSP coverage.
- The resident of 1452 Jeter Ave asked for the individual police officers' opinions. She also recommended to review the use of funds and benchmarking the Borough's finances to other comparable municipalities. *Officer S Fritzingler, the President of the Fountain Hill Police*

Association, thanked the general public for its support for the local police force. He noted that Council does not support the local police services enough.

- Ms. V Morales argued that PSP coverage would lead to an increase in crime.
- Mr. Reinsmith noted that the Boroughs of Fountain Hill and Bath are not comparable. He also expects a lack of security with PSP coverage.
- Mr. Spencer praised the local police force and appreciated their patrol services. He ran out of the limited speaking time.
- The resident of 1444 Graham St was not aware that St. Luke's Hospital was RE Tax exempt because of its not-for-profit status.
- The resident of 1045 Moravia St, a former Tipton Borough resident, noted that crime increase in Tipton Borough after its local police force was replaced by PSP coverage.
- Ms. Kuplin, St. Luke's Hospital President, thanked the local police fore and appreciated its special partnership with the hospital. She hi-lighted some of its contributions to the community as laid out in the brochure - available at this Special Council Meeting -. She emphasized that as a nonprofit hospital, St. Luke's operating surplus is returned to the hospital and the community and St. Luke's commitment to partner with Fountain Hill leadership and foster the growth of the community.
- Council members D. Trotter and A. Jordan, defended Council's unbroken support for the local police force. It was never intended to abandon the local police force. They both stressed that all Council members are committed to serve the public's interest and the public interest only.

ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 9:25 p.m.

**BOROUGH OF FOUNTAIN HILL
LEHIGH COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA**

By: _____
Leo Atkinson - President of Council

SUBMITTED BY

By: _____
Cordula Voges, Finance Director

ATTEST:

By: _____
Cordula Voges, Finance Director