

BOROUGH OF WATCHUNG
SPECIAL MEETING
FORUM - DEER MANAGEMENT
MINUTES
SEPTEMBER 28, 2017
7:00 PM

OPENING STATEMENT: Mayor Stephen K. Pote called the meeting to order at 7:06 PM and made the following statement: Under the provisions of N.J.S.A.10:4-6 et seq., notice of the time and place of this meeting was given by way of annual notice to the Courier News, Echoes Sentinel, and Star Ledger, and posted at Borough Hall.

SALUTE TO THE FLAG and a MOMENT OF SILENCE FOR OUR SERVICE MEN AND WOMEN, SERVING HOME AND ABROAD AND FOR VICTIMS OF HURRICANES HARVEY AND IRMA AND THE EARTHQUAKE.

ROLL CALL:

Joren [P] Black [A] Nehls [P] Gibbs [P] Mobus [A] Sopko [P]

Also present were Administrator Tom Atkins, Attorney Ed Purcell was present for Mr. Cruz, Clerk Michelle DeRocco, and Deputy Clerk MaryAnn Hance.

Although not present at roll call Councilman Black arrived at 7:10 PM.

There were 70 members of the public present

SPECIAL PRESENTATION

INTRODUCTION :

Mayor Pote said the goal of this forum is to have healthy and constructive dialogue on the best way to proceed with any Deer Management program. This meeting is for the purpose of gathering facts, and no official action by Mayor and Council will be taken this evening. A decision will be made at the next Council meeting, October 5, 2017. Mayor Pote thanked the presenters for their attendance as well as all members of the community.

Each session below, I, II, will be allotted a 45 minute presentation time, followed by a 15 minute question and answer period, first from Council, and then the Public. All time limits will be strictly but equitably enforced. Mayor Pote asked everyone to be courteous to each presenter and after Council members ask questions the public may do so.

Administrator Tom Atkins explained the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection will not be present for their discussion due to a medical emergency of one of the presenters. Mr. Atkins asked if the other person would be able to do this without the other but he was told both presentations were interwoven with each so it would not be possible. Mr. Atkins questioned if there was a possibility for a replacement but was informed all others were committed to other areas. However, they did stress they would be happy to come at a later date. Mayor Pote each group will now have another 5 minutes each, since the DEP is not attending this evening.

I. Overview

Hans Juette, Wildlife Management Advisory Committee Chair
Dr. Jay Kelly, Associate Professor of Biology and Environmental Science
Raritan Valley Community College
Joe Nappe, President / Warren Blue Ridge Sportsmen, Inc.

Hans Juette gave an overview of the current Deer Management program, with mounted photos, of the destruction caused by overpopulation of the deer herd. He said the trees continue to die and there are very few saplings. He also said a healthy forest can only support 120 deer, or 20 deer per square mile.

Mr. Juette introduced Dr. Jay Kelly for his presentation.

Dr. Kelly explained the extensive study was funded by the National Science Foundation he has done with students on the impact on our ecosystem from invasive plant species which can effect wildlife and clog waterways. Dr. Kelly said the study included the Duke Estate property and the overpopulation of deer and the damage caused by this overpopulation. He noted that outside the enclosed area of the estate there is much damage. There are no predators to control the deer population and scientific studies show for a healthy balance there should be approximately 8-10 deer per square mile. In some cases there have been counts of 100 to 300 per square mile, in places like Duke Farm and Hunterdon County.

Joe Nappe is a member and president of Warren Blue Ridge Sportsmen's Club and has been involved in deer management for 20 years. He said all safety procedures are strictly followed and there have been no complaints, or police issues. He said all new members must be sponsored by current members and everyone must be tested annually for marksmanship. Mark McCarthy, also a member of the club said all the shooting is done from elevated stands and the hunters never carry loaded guns to or from the sites.

Councilman Gibbs asked Mr. Nappe if there have been any incidents, including firearms, in the last 20 years and Mr. Nappe said there have not been. He further explained all members must take firearms training annually. Mr. Nappe said they have a gun range on the club property and members must pass an accuracy test before they are allowed to hunt. The club uses a range of 35-50 yards, when the State requires 20 yard accuracy for firearms. Councilman Gibbs asked who certifies the results and Mr. Nappe said the State does this.

Councilman Gibbs asked Dr. Kelly if he is a hunter and what happens to the deer population if there is a pause in the culling. Dr. Kelly responded he is not a hunter and cannot answer the question regarding the population if there is a pause in the hunt. Councilman Gibbs also asked if deer prefer native plant species and does the presence of invasive plants preclude deer effect and Dr. Kelly said deer do prefer the native species.

Councilman Nehls asked Dr. Kelly how long he has been conducting this study and how was the comparison between old and young growth in the forest done. Was this based on aerial photos? Dr. Kelly responded that the study has been ongoing for four (4) years and determinations were mostly from the aerial photos.

Councilman Sopko said he had visited the Duke Estate many times in the 70's and 80's and there were so many deer that they moved to a herd. He said there was an enormous amount of money spent importing trees and plants, building stone walls, creating lakes and ponds etc. but the understory and trees are pretty much gone now and the lakes are filled with silt. He asked Dr. Kelly to expand on the analysis of shade vs deer and why he thinks the deer are the issue. Dr. Kelly said he addressed this largely since advocates of logging as a way to stimulate tree growth, determined that when looking at species by species some cannot tolerate shade at all, some that can tolerate shade and others that can tolerate intermediate shade and he said the number of shade tolerant trees has diminished while the tolerant ones have flourished. All information is readily available from the Forest Service.

Mr. Atkins said the fifteen minute allotted time has been reached. Council President Joren said before Dr. Kelly leaves she would like to give the public the opportunity to ask questions. Mayor Pote said he agrees with this request.

Freddie Hayeck, Sunbright Road, asked what would happen to the property values in Watchung if there is a decrease in vegetation and curb appeal is diminished. Mr. Juette responded that property values in Watchung have decreased from those of twenty years ago.

Doris Lin, Freehold Township, said when comparing the photo of the exclosures vs those outside that area, if you want the forests to look the exclosure area again that the deer have to be almost totally eliminated. Dr. Kelly responded that a deer population is necessary but there must be a balance.

Janet Pizar, Millburn, thanked Dr. Kelly for his presentation including presenting the deer as the problem for these unwanted impacts. However she asked if he was aware that the deer and deer population is really the symptom of the problem because we are fighting against a culture of recreation and sport hunting. She is doing everything to maintain a higher population in order to allow hunting. Mr. McCarthy from the Blue Ridge Club said the State is doing whatever it can to harvest female deer in order to control the population and there is a very strict limit on the male deer but no limit on female.

Council President Joren read from the DEP manual: Deer Management program that a healthy deer herd has great value to the people of the State. She read the current goals of the New Jersey Deer Management program are:

- 1) To maintain a healthy deer population on suitable habitat throughout the State;
- 2) To keep the deer population at a density tolerable for New Jersey Residents; and
- 3) To maximize the recreational and economic values derived from this renewal, natural resource.

II. Concerns from Residents

Rachel Funcheon, Introduction

John Kluthe, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)

Doris Lin, Director of Legal Affairs for the Animal Protection League of
New Jersey League of Humane Voters

Ray Barratt, Rachel Funcheon, Residents

Rachel Funcheon said she is co-leader with Ray Barrett for the “Save the Watchung Deer Group” with their only agenda being to save Watchung’s wildlife and to keep a balance with the ecosystem. She said they are not asking to stop the hunt completely but would like compromise and balance on the issue since many residents object to the hunt. She also said the group is asking the Mayor and Council to review yearly the need for having the hunt; reorganize the Wildlife Advisory Committee to include people of varying viewpoints, not just those in favor of a hunt; to increase transparency on the hunt when we need one; to re-write the resolution for the deer hunt to include updated information; and finally, to skip the hunt this year because the deer population is low and in balance.

Ms. Funcheon introduced John Kluthe from the United States Department of Agriculture.

Mr. Kluthe explained a program he is involved in called the Natural Resources Conservation Service which is under the US Department of Agriculture. This organization offers conservation planning, and as a result of the planning they offer financial assistance for those who qualify in order to implement those plans. A landowner would apply to the Natural Resources Conservation Service for a forest management plan and once the plan is written there would be a list of conservation practices that the landowner might want to implement to meet their goals.

Ms. Funcheon introduced Ms. Doris Lin, Director of Legal Affairs for the Animal Protection League of New Jersey League of Humane Voters.

Ms. Lin spoke about the deer management in New Jersey in general she said she will be discussing how and why the deer population is kept artificially high in the State, myths about deer hunting and non-lethal solutions to human deer conflict. Ms. Lin said the population is declining and presented a graph showing this. She explained that the biological carrying capacity of a particular species that can exist in the ecosystem without harming any other species in the ecosystem and the cultural carrying capacity is the maximum number of a species humans can tolerate. Deer are an important part of the ecosystem. Ms. Lin said the Fish and Game Council, which is a division within the Fish and Wildlife Commission, elects the head of the Fish and Wildlife. She also said those lobbying in Trenton include the National Rifle Association, US Sportsmen’s Alliance, New Jersey Outdoor Alliance, and the Audubon Society are all lobbying for pro-hunting bills. Ms. Lin said it is important to follow the money since hunting and fishing licenses pay the salaries of the Division of Fish and Wildlife. She also said insurance statistics show collisions with deer are greater on the first day of hunting since the practice is to force deer out of the forests and also by people feeding them, including baiting, high speeds, poor lighting and lack of signage. Ms. Lin said Lyme disease is caused by the black legged tick which is nicknamed deer tick. These ticks live on many species and is most commonly spread by mice not deer and there are recommendations to protect against Lyme disease including spraying clothing with insect repellents, mowing lawns, and checking your body for ticks once coming indoors. Hunters claim they help prevent deer from starving, however, they do not hunt the weak, sick, older deer only the largest, strongest ones.

Ray Barratt and Rachel Funcheon gave their presentation and stated that management of the herd is necessary but there needs to be a balance and as their presentation shows, the deer population in Watchung has been reduced by 90% since 2002. Mr. Barratt also said the firing of weapons in the Borough is a very important issue which must be reviewed because accidents happen. Both Mr. Barrett and Ms. Funcheon said the Mayor and Council have been getting misleading data. Ms. Funcheon gave statistics for deer/auto collisions which she said is only 1.9%. Mr. Barrett and Ms. Funcheon requested the Council have a concept of what a five (5) year plan is, and what is the desired number of deer per square mile, how many deer are to be culled per year, and how often are future counts to be done, adding that they believe these should be more frequently. Ms. Funcheon suggested the number of weeks for hunting be reduced from 11 to 4, post the cull sites, publish all location addresses, maps and each day cull is planned, and post more deer crossing signs in the Borough. She also requests the Wildlife Management Advisory Committee be reformed to include a better balance of members, publish their meeting schedules and comply with the Sunshine law; and suggests not doing the hunt this year since the herd size is at a good balance.

Councilman Black asked Mr. Barrett and Ms. Funcheon if the Borough foregoes the hunt this year when do they feel would be the logical time to resume? Mr. Barrett this should be reviewed yearly by the number of deer in the herd. Councilman Black said in prior years when sites were made public there were harassment issues and some of the people felt intimidated and therefore dropped out of the program.

Councilman Gibbs asked Ms. Lin if she had any scientific backup for her comment regarding less food means less embryos and Ms. Lin said she will find that information and send it to him. He then asked Ms. Funcheon if she checked other towns in the State to see if they allow hunting on private property. Ms. Funcheon said she only checked Essex and Union County and they only do hunting on State or County owned land. Councilman Gibbs said those counties are overbuilt and there is no comparison since the requirements to hunt on a private property must have permission from all the surrounding owners in a 450’ radius. Councilman Gibbs also said Warren has a lot of open space owned by the County or State, or town and the Borough of Watchung does not allow private residents to hunt on their own property.

Mayor Pote commented that the 27 deer per square mile count is an appropriate amount and that it is low and in balance as reported by Mr. Barrett and Ms. Funcheon. He said since the aerial survey there have most likely been births of 80 deer. Mayor Pote also said the groups comments on 62% of the land in Watchung being residential, that there is approximately 27 deer per square mile is a statistic for a “forest area” but Watchung does not have forests. Mayor Pote asked Ms. Funcheon about her report Borough of Watchung

on accidents and she explained 98% of accidents in the Borough are for incidents other than deer accidents. He also asked what they are basing reducing the number of weeks for the hunt and why. Mr. Barrett said they are basing firing firearms in the Borough as a dangerous thing to be avoided but if it has to be done, he would like to see much more police coverage and signage and make safety the number one thing.

PUBLIC PORTION

Paul Michaelis, High Tor Drive, asked where the count of 1610 in 2002 came from. He said he has been in this town 50 years and has never seen that many deer. Councilman Nehls said this was on a legal document which the Council presented to the public and it was from a company that the Borough hired to do the survey. Council President Joren said it was the same company who did all three surveys. Mr. Michaelis also said he has a technical report of a controlled study in Connecticut of deer tick vs deer density.

Phyllis Juette, Elsinore Drive, asked if there was any information on a town who stopped deer culling for a while and then started again and what happens in that interim time? Mr. Barrett said they do not have any but they are following Saddle River who has not culled.

Steve Rubino, Deer Run, said the presentation by Ms. Lin of documentation presented on the proper population density for a well-balanced forest should not be over 10 deer per square mile and we are over that amount so he does not understand why it is thought we do not need a deer management program. Councilman Gibbs said Mr. Rubino is correct that the publication does show that where the maximum biodiversity is the goal the number of 10 per square mile would be undesirable.

Richard Wellbrock, Tall Timbers, said he is on the Wildlife Management Committee and he resents the fact that he has been accused of not doing his "homework" to come to conclusions. He said the Committee is open-minded, they do their homework and spend a lot of time discussing this issue. Mr. Wellbrock also said members of the public were invited to meetings and asked to give comments and not one comment was received. He said he resents being called dishonest. He said the Borough should expand the program and do everything allowed by State law.

Mr. Mensky, Oakridge Lane, said he had a deer fence installed, noting it is a one - time cost. He also said the hunters are not just targeting trophy deer and we do need surveys of the number of deer and need to manage the numbers and keep residents informed on how decisions are made.

Ray Miller, Valley Road, said there are many deer resistant plants, and repellents available. He also suggested that as part of a Veterinarian's training, they may do a sterilization program for deer.

Ashley Cohen, Hill Hollow, said if the documentation on the surveys comes from the Borough then obviously the Deer Management Committee is not doing their "homework".

Mr. Engelmeyer, Valley Drive is opposed to the hunt and the Borough needs to re-evaluate the program.

Dorothy Addario, Rock Avenue, said she is in favor of the hunt it may only have taken four years to reduce the herd from 1610 to 270 but it took eleven more years to reduce it to 165.

Lynda Goldshein, Sherwood Drive, said she is in favor of the hunt and the Borough needs more sites and also should approve bow hunting. She also said hunters must first kill two doe before killing a buck and then must report to the State.

Hans Juette, Elsinore Drive, said the Borough does not do the "Community Based" program which was a much longer hunting season – September to May. He said we only do what the State allows.

Ray Barrett said the letter that goes out to residents from the Borough still lists it as a "Community Based" program and this could cause major problems for insurance and other issues. He said the Council should be very careful what the hunt is called going forward.

Sue Lewis, Deer Run, said she still has as many as 20 deer on her property and no matter what she plants it does not survive. As far as automobile accidents caused by deer, both her husband and daughter have had one – it is a real problem.

Ms. Kaufman, Glen Eagle Drive, said residents need better communications from the Borough.

Stephanie Parascandolo, Cain Circle, said she purchased her home here because of the trees and deer and said she feeds the deer.

Dorothy Addario, Rock Avenue, said it is not the issue of ornamental shrubs, plants and flowers in our yards, it is about the health of our forests.

Sarah Joren, Hoboken, said according to the DEP, every effort must be made to donate as much meat as possible to charity and according to information provided from the town, only 28% is donated and she asked if there is a reason for this.

Hans Juette explained that all the meat under the Community Based program was donated to food banks; now the group does donate some of the meat but they may use the meat anyway they wish to and Mark McCarthy, a Blue Ridge Club member said all the meat is used.

Lynda Goldshein, Sherwood Drive, remarked that not all residents can afford to fence their property since it is very expensive.

Janet Pizar, Millburn, said she is the founder of Public Trust Wildlife Management and has been following the white tailed deer management in New Jersey since 1998. She said the deer are not the problem but a symptom of the problem and basically deer and wildlife are natural resources. Ms. Pizar said the State is happy to increase the deer population for deer harvest.

Mr. Engelmeyer, Valley Drive, asked what authority the Borough is working under for the deer hunt and asked why the Council is sending information out under the old authority and who is taking on the liability and insurance on the properties.

Denise Cohen, Hill Hollow Road, said she never received the deer survey of 2014. Mayor Pote said the survey was done in 2013 and results were published in 2014 in the newsletter.

Angie Metlar, Sussex County, said hunting is an 18th Century method and there are many other methods which could be used such as the one in Saddle River which includes surgical sterilization. Mayor Pote requested that she send the Borough any of these sources. Ms. Metlar said much of the information is in the packet Ms. Lin has given to the Council.

Jessica Ray, Warren resident and also a member of the Watchung Volunteer Rescue Squad said she loves the deer too but we must get back to a good level so our ecology is healthy and in unison.

Councilman Gibbs questioned the advocates of sterilization and wanted to know, who are we to make this decision and asked for any literature they might have.

Mayor Pote thanked the presenters for their time and preparation for their materials this evening. He said on October 5th the Council will provide their decision on the support or not for the deer hunt.

ADJOURNMENT

The next meeting of the Mayor and Council is the regular scheduled meeting to be held on Thursday, October 5, 2017 at 7:30 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

MaryAnn Hance
Deputy Clerk