

BOROUGH OF WATCHUNG

MAYOR AND COUNCIL MINUTES MARCH 15, 2018 7:30 P.M.

OPENING STATEMENT: Mayor Stephen K. Pote called the meeting to order at 7:33 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 ALSO A SPECIAL PRAYER FOR OUR FRIEND, FATHER, COLLEAGUE AND FORMER MAYOR JERRY MOBUS WHO PASSED AWAY FIVE YEARS AGO THIS WEEKEND.

ROLL CALL:

Gibbs [P] Black [P] Nehls [P] Mobus [P] Sopko [P] Alberto [P]

Also present were Administrator Tom Atkins, Attorney Albert Cruz, Chief Financial Officer Bill Hance, Borough Engineer Tom Herits, Deputy Clerk MaryAnn Hance, and Administrative Assistant Regina Angelo.

There were 20 members of the public present.

Mayor Pote deviated from the agenda to take the time to discuss the recent Nor'easters that devastated the Borough:

“Up front, I had a number of comments I wanted to make in regards to the recent Riley and Quinn storm activity in Watchung. Afterwards, I am going to ask that my OEM Coordinator, Police Chief, DPW lead, Administrator, and Council, or their surrogates, please add to my points when I am complete.

While there are some criticisms of how things were handled, and while there are definitely areas of still-needed improvement, overall, I think Watchung employees, volunteers, and hired contractors did a very good job of handling the situation over the last week.

Having been a part of multiple phone text conversations with our Chief and several Council during the five day period, having traveled 50-60 roads from Thursday evening through Sunday to see both the damage and the progress being made, having been a part of multiple daily conversations with two members of our OEM, our DPW head, our Administrator, our Police Chief and his team, and having had a multitude of conversations daily with several Councilmen, namely Council President Gibbs and Councilman Nehls, I can confidently tell you that under tough and sometimes complex circumstances, I saw excellent coordination to ensure that Public Works, our tree removal services, the public utilities, police, Administration, the County, OEM, CERT, Fire, Rescue, and Mayor and Council were working together. Often cable and phone companies also were brought in. We never would have had restored service in the timeframe we did had it not been for this coordination.

It's very easy to criticize, and there will be opportunity to have lessons learned discussion like I facilitated six years ago after Sandy. However, let me provide for you an overview of what transpired in town, to ensure the public is aware of some of the details over this period:

The winds we faced on Friday, March 2, were some of the strongest sustained winds (50-60 miles per hour) and gusts of 70+ miles an hour; we have not had these strong winds in Watchung since probably Sandy. With already very wet soil conditions and the wind conditions, we were clearly set up for a situation where trees, even large trees, and large branches, and possibly wiring, were in a weakened state.

DPW was ready for the snow on Wednesday, March 7th. However, from talking with snow removal services and DPW, this was probably one of the highest moisture, heaviest snows we have had in decades. We also had in some cases an excess of 21" fall, most of which came at a clip of 3-4" an hour over several hours in the evening. Almost all of our streets were plowed initially during or right after the first 6 inches of snow. Our DPW worked almost continuously on Wednesday evening through Thursday evening. They were back for an extended day on Friday. At some point during this time period, two snow removal trucks had to be repaired, which set back plowing a little.

Trees and tree branches could not handle the snow. Never before have I seen so many trees, branches, and poles fall. Somewhere between 6 and 12 inches of snow, trees, branches, and consequently lines and poles started to fall. If I had not seen it for myself, it would have been hard to imagine the collective and widespread damage to our trees and power lines. Almost every road had some form of brush in the street, and in excess of 40 roads had some major branch, tree, pole, or line problem. Trees as large as 12-18, even 24" in diameter came down in multiple places throughout the town, including on Johnson Drive, Mountain Drive and Edgemont, Spencer Lane, Somerset Street, Bonnie Burn, to name a few. These were huge trees that immediately blocked traffic and brought things to a standstill. Trees of this size were not going to be cut up or even moved by our DPW workers, who, limited in number, on Thursday were still trying to remove snow, now trying to also navigate downed wires and poles. DPW also started the task of working with power companies to shut off power where primary, lateral, secondary lines had fallen, so that some trees could be removed.

As of Thursday morning, 1525 Watchung households out of 2300 were without power. Literally overnight this occurred.

On Thursday morning we activated additional tree professionals who we had previously contracted with after Sandy, to be on call and treat us with priority in case of an emergency like this. Two major companies were themselves unable to reach us because of the snow. Although relatively close in proximity, because of hazardous conditions throughout the state, they could not reach us until midday on Friday and Saturday morning.

The police, DPW, and OEM coordinated with Public Service and JCP&L to begin the process of both inventoring and prioritizing the job of first shutting down power at sites where there were issues, and then coordinating the removal of wires in conjunction with the trees. From Thursday morning on, I was on the phone or emailing both JCPL and PSEG a multitude of times during the day, pushing them for status, an increased presence, and focused areas of concern they needed to be aware of. Our OEM coordinator was in constant contact with the County.

By Friday we had a partial list of where there were issues, but this list continued to grow as additional trees fell both Thursday night and early Friday morning. We spent a good part of Friday continuing to clear the arteries through Watchung (Hillcrest, Bonnie Burn, Somerset Street, Washington Rock, parts of Valley Road, Mountain Blvd, Stirling Road). There were some extremely big trees and wires that fell on these streets. Because of the amount of snow, and because of several impasses, Public Works was still spending significant time plowing or replowing roads, widening their coverage.

On Friday, OEM lead and I declared a state of emergency, which among other things will hopefully provide some reimbursement for the significant costs we face from tree removal services.

On Saturday there was tremendous progress made by PSEG, working with our tree services companies, DPW, and OEM to remove trees and replace poles and wires. At the same time, I would often see several trucks at a given location, and having traveled to many locations on any given day, I know there were a multitude of locations where this was the case. At one point, there were 10 or 11 PSEG trucks concurrently on Johnson Drive, across four or five major problem areas; most of them were there all day Saturday and Sunday. I saw the same at Spencer Lane, where there were three or four trucks; on Mountain Drive and Edgemont, where I saw four trucks. People may not realize that in some cases four or five consecutive poles and connecting wires fell or were damaged by the storm.

Sunday was a lot of the same. As power was reconfirmed to be off, wires, poles and trees could be removed. New poles and wiring could then be put in their place. Sunday we also coordinated with transportation people at the High School, to ensure that personnel there were notified of all of our remaining concerns, upon which they would make decisions to bus their children or require parents to take their kids by car. I am sure I wasn't alone, but representing Watchung I also personally put extreme pressure on, in this case, JCPL, to help ensure that WHRHS would be open on Monday. The same communication listing street concerns also was posted on borough website, Facebook and sent via email to the public.

The police did excellent work putting up numerous blockades, barriers, signage, at dozens of locations, as wires, poles, and trees fell. The police also played a key role with the County and utility companies. The police coverage here was tremendous, because these incidents happened quickly and with dramatic impact. Our OEM not only also coordinated efforts, and focused our utilities, they were constantly reporting into the County to ensure that the County was aware of our status and that we were following procedure.

CERT opened the exempt hall for a number of hours on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. About a dozen people took advantage of this service over these three days. The police made the courthouse also available. If there were times when at night no one from the public appeared, CERT coverage would end, but the police knew that CERT was on call 24x7 to return at a moment's notice if anyone needed help. At all times, members of our fire and rescue personnel were on call and resident in their buildings.

While our communication using Watchung delivery services definitely could have been better, Council Councilman Nehls and I made a concerted effort to work with Council President Gibbs who provided regular updates which we knew Council President Gibbs would be putting up on the Watchung Neighborhood Network website. I myself also answered personally 25 emails and phone messages from residents in town, during this period. We also talked with many more as we traveled Watchung's streets, trying to provide them some form of status and ETR (estimated time of resolution).

Finally, while I say again there are still improvements to be made and lessons learned which we will collect, there were many lessons learned from Sandy that we rectified for this storm:

Generators in Firehouse, Exempt hall, Borough Hall were of great use during this period.

Police were much better equipped with additional equipment to assist in their work.

We had previously contracted with in-demand tree services; these services were committed to us and this was key in us resolving issues faster.

We have policies and procedures in place that were followed.

Coordination with PSEG and JCPL was much improved, not only on the street but in the back office where priorities could be better planned, progress reported, and pressure directly applied to individuals.

As I stated, incredible coordination across the various employee, volunteer, and contractor groups. We did make use of a very popular Facebook page to improve on some of the communication. The CERT team was formed, was available to assist and were of great help.

And while it is very easy to criticize, our Borough also has received numerous compliments, for example from people I heard from on Spencer Lane, Hillcrest, Valley Road, Mountain Drive, Edgemont, High Tor, Ridge Road, to name a few, for the good work of the borough. I am extremely proud of the work of the collective team. Thank you everyone for your time, commitment, and results."

Administrator Atkins reported on behalf of Gary Greeves the OEM coordinator. Mr. Atkins reminded the Council of the chain of command in an emergency management crisis. Gary reported to the County OEM at least four times a day during the storm. Mr. Atkins said in all of Somerset County the Borough of Watchung was on the top of the list effected most by the storm. Mr. Atkins also said Gary helped coordinate an evacuation on Thursday morning for a group home. Mr. Atkins reported that Gary was in constant

contact with him, the Council and the County with updates regarding the storm at all times. Mr. Atkins read the CERT team report on behalf of Carolyn Solan. Mr. Atkins reported that the Exempt Hall was open Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday for long periods of time to help travelers and residents warm up. There was a motorist stranded Wednesday night who the CERT team along with the Police Department helped get moving. We did not open the Exempt Hall Saturday or Sunday because no one required CERT services.

Council President Gibbs reported on behalf of Police regarding the storm. He said as the snow kept accumulating and residents were on their way home from work the traffic got progressively worse. Council President Gibbs said there were a number of primary roads that were closed during the storm which as a result backed up the secondary roads. He said the Police did a phenomenal job trying to get the Borough organized. Council President Gibbs also said the Police did a good job informing the residents via Nixle alerts about certain roads being closed. The court room at the Police Department was also being used for a warming center. Council President Gibbs said overall the Police Department did an outstanding job especially the amount of patience the officers displayed during this hard time. He added that he was not thrilled with the utility company response during the storm and would like to see that improved.

Chief Cina reported that a lot of Police Officers spent the night at headquarters the first night of the storm. He also said residents came out with chain saws to help officers get debris out of the way for the Public Works Department. He said the Police Department did a lot of welfare checks thanks to resident phone calls.

Councilman Nehls reported on behalf of the Public Works Department regarding the storm. He said Public Works started removing trees March 2nd with the first storm. Councilman Nehls said the Borough has a five man crew to take care of the whole town. He also said he was on the phone with Mr. Burns more in the last few days than his past 12 years on the Council. He said the DPW did as much as they possibly could to get the roads open but they will not touch trees with power lines on them. Councilman Nehls said touching power lines during a storm like this can result in fatal injuries. He added that the amount of snow made it difficult for even him to get to his office in Middlesex on Friday. He said we can learn, listen and try and fix things for improvements but all in all he is proud of the Public Works Department.

Councilman Black referred to the Fire Department for their report. Assistant Fire Chief Albie DeSandolo reported for the month of February the Fire Department answered 20 requests for service. During the recent storm members of the Fire Department were stationed at fire headquarters to ensure quick response to residents. Councilman Black added that we are very fortunate for all the volunteers in our community as well as our Police Department.

Council President Gibbs said our volunteers do a tremendous job but would also like to give kudos to the residents for working together in this hard time. He said this town really demonstrated how a community can come together in these types of disaster situations. Council President Gibbs said he heard this storm had some of the densest snow we have ever had. He said the Borough has a large amount of ash trees which are starting to die and weaken due to the Ash Borer beetle. Council President Gibbs said future storms are going to take a lot of those weakened trees down in our Borough and cause a mess. He suggested the Environmental Committee look at a replanting program to go multiyear to try and replace the death of our ash trees.

REPORT OF STANDING COMMITTEES:

1. Administration & Finance – Councilman Mobus reported the 2018 budget will be introduced tonight. He said the Committee met with Mr. Atkins and Mr. Hance and reviewed all budget items over with a fine-tooth comb. Mr. Atkins commented on certain aspects of the budget that increased due to the recent storm activity in the Borough. He said we are going to adopt a resolution tonight for a surplus policy which is relevant to situations like the storm and helps with our bond rating.

2. Police – Council President Gibbs said he had nothing further to report.

3. Public Works / Buildings and Grounds – Councilman Nehls reported the Public Works Department completed 96 service calls plus 24 work orders. He said the Library is still closed due to the recent storm. We are waiting on PSE&G to repair a line so the entire building has power.

4. Public Affairs:

Open Space – Councilwoman Alberto had no report.

Environmental – Councilwoman Alberto had no report.

Recreation – Councilman Mobus said the Easter Egg Hunt this year will be cancelled as a result of the excessively wet ground.

Historical – Councilman Mobus said the new members on the Committee have already been very effective, and the appointment of Ralph Diem as an Alternate will be confirmed tonight.

Board of Health – Councilman Black had no report.

5. Fire – Councilman Black had no further report.
6. Laws/Ordinances – Councilman Black had no report.

REPORTS - OTHER:

7. Engineer – Mr. Herits said he finished all of his sections for the Hazard Mitigation Plan that the Borough is working on. He said we have received approval for the DOT grant for High Torr Drive. Councilman Nehls asked Mr. Herits to finalize the list of the roads that need paving ready for discussion. Mayor Pote asked if the Library was still out of power, and Mr. Herits said it was, however, he would make a call to see what the issue was.

8. Police Chief – No report.

9. Fire Department – No report.

10. Rescue Squad – Diddy Addario reported the Rescue Squad responded to 21 calls in the month of February. She said the Rescue Squad was staffed with a full crew during the storm. She also said the effects of the storm created more calls than normal and made it difficult for the EMS crews to get around. She also said laptops for documenting electronic patient care reports have been placed in both our ambulances.

11. Emergency Management – Mr. Atkins had no report.

12. Attorney – Attorney Cruz had no report and said there is no Executive Session scheduled for tonight.

13. Clerk – Deputy Clerk MaryAnn Hance asked the Mayor and Council to please sign the bill list.

14. Administrator – Mr. Atkins said the audit report for 2017 is in your mailboxes for review. He said everyone will be getting an email regarding the Risk Management training coming up. He said if we all complete it successfully we get a \$2,000 credit on our liability premium.

PUBLIC PORTION / AGENDA ITEMS ONLY

Lynda Goldshein, Sherwood Road, said she was talking to a few people who didn't know there was a warming center open at the Exempt Hall during the storm. She asked if we are still using the Watchung radio station to communicate with the residents when the power is out. She also asked why the town should have to pick up all of these branches when they can just be put in the woods. Mayor Pote said the branch pickup is being looked into. Ms. Goldshein commented about treating ash trees on her property. Council President Gibbs poked of the method of treatments available for the ash trees. Mayor Pote asked Councilwoman Alberto to work with the Environmental Committee treatment methods, and to educate the public.

Wendy Robinson, Hill Hollow Road, said she is very grateful to the town and public works during the storm. She said she is proud to live in a town with this kind of response. She asked if the remaining debris will be picked up. She also said PSE&G had no information when she called during the storm.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

None

NEW BUSINESS

CONSENT AGENDA: The Consent Agenda items listed below were unanimously adopted following a motion by Council President Gibbs and a second by Councilman Nehls and upon roll call the vote was as follows: Gibbs, Black, Nehls, Mobus, Sopko, Alberto "aye."

Approval of the following Council minutes:

March 1, 2018 - Regular Meeting

Acknowledging Receipt of the following Borough Reports:

CERT Meeting Minutes – February 27, 2018
Building Department Monthly Report – February 2018

Acknowledging Receipt of the following Correspondence:

#7 – Communication from Mayor Pote Regarding Term of Office

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CONSENT AGENDA RESOLUTIONS:

The Consent Agenda Resolutions listed below were unanimously adopted following a motion by Council President Gibbs and a second by Councilman Nehls and upon roll call the vote was as follows: Gibbs, Black, Nehls, Mobus, Sopko, Alberto “aye.”

R1:03/15/18 Purchases Over \$2,000 - Assessor Services (Tax Assessor- 2018 Inspections)
Atlantic Tactical (Police- Body Armor)

R2: Authorize Appointments – Shelini Parikh / Green Team; Maria Alberto/Municipal Alliance

R3: Authorize Appointment Part-Time Clerk – Planning Board/Board of Adjustment / Theresa Snyder

R4: Authorize Appointment- Historical Committee / Ralph Diem

R5: Authorize Payment of Tax Sale Certificate #16-10 / 464 Watchung Avenue

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NON-CONSENT AGENDA ITEMS: Items listed below will be individually addressed and acted upon accordingly. Council reserves the right to refer an item to Committee for further review and discussion.

Councilman Mobus moved the following resolution with a second by Councilman Black and upon roll call the vote was as follows: Gibbs, Black, Nehls, Mobus, Sopko, Alberto “aye.”

R6:03/15/18 Resolution Authorizing Transfer of Funds

Introduction of Ordinance OR:18/02 entitled “ORDINANCE TO EXCEED THE MUNICIPAL BUDGET COST OF LIVING ALLOWANCE AND TO ESTABLISH A CAP BANK WHEN THE COLA IS EQUAL TO OR LESS THAN 2.5 PERCENT (N.J.S.A. 40A:4-45.14)” Public Hearing to be held on April 19, 2018.

Councilman Black moved the following resolution with a second by Councilman Nehls and upon roll call the vote was as follows: Gibbs, Black, Nehls, Mobus, Sopko, Alberto “aye.”

R7: Introduction of Ordinance 18/02 – Cap Bank Ordinance

Councilman Mobus moved the following resolution with a second by Councilman Black and upon roll call the vote was as follows: Gibbs, Black, Nehls, Mobus, Sopko, Alberto “aye.”

R8: Introduction of 2018 Municipal Budget (Public Hearing to be held on April 19, 2018)

Councilman Mobus moved the following resolution with a second by Councilman Black and upon roll call the vote was as follows: Gibbs, Black, Nehls, Mobus, Sopko, Alberto “aye.”

R9: Authorizing Self-Exam – 2018 Municipal Budget

Councilman Mobus moved the following resolution with a second by Councilman Black and upon roll call the vote was as follows: Gibbs, Black, Nehls, Mobus, Sopko, Alberto “aye.”

R10: Establishing the Surplus/Fund Balance Policy

Council President Gibbs explained this was a recommendation from the rating agency to assist the Borough in gaining a triple A bond rating.

Councilman Black moved the following resolution with a second by Councilman Mobus and upon roll call the vote was as follows: Gibbs, Black, Mobus, Sopko, “aye;” Nehls, Alberto, “nay.”

R11: Supporting the Delaware River Basins Commissions Efforts to Enact a Permanent Ban on Natural Gas Development and Fracking

Councilman Mobus moved the following resolution with a second by Councilman Black and upon roll call the vote was as follows: Gibbs, Black, Nehls, Mobus, Sopko, Alberto “aye;”

R12: Payment of Bills

PUBLIC PORTION - GENERAL DISCUSSION

Lynda Goldshein, Sherwood Drive, said she thinks a great spot for the library would be Camp Endeavor, as of right now it is not being used for anything. Councilman Mobus said it is a Green Acres property and we cannot use it for a library. Councilman Nehls further explained that once the town accepts Green Acres money, it becomes Open Space and cannot be used for other purposes. Council President Gibbs said you can't build a building on it because it is subject to Green Acres restriction. Ms. Goldshein said she was going to look into a way to get around the restriction. Ads

Virginia Hartmann, Ellisen Road, said for 17 years we have researched why a library is good for our town. She stated there were matching funds available in 2018 for the library. She said there are petitions out there against the library but the one petition for the library has twice as many names. She said nobody is demonstrating for other things in town except wanting a new library. She said she suspects the Council is being told how to vote for the library. She commented that the Republican Committee loves another “no” vote for the library. The library should be used as a community center. She added that people are starting book clubs in the new coffee shop because the rooms in the library are falling apart. She said she does not want to go to another town for library services.

Tom Franklin, Wildwood Terrace, asked if there is any information from the state regarding application times for the library grant. Mayor Pote said he asked the County library to speak regarding the library timelines. Mr. Franklin asked everyone to say their feelings on the library. He said doing a referendum in November would be bad timing as we will miss the grant opportunity in the fall. He also said he believes the town does want a library.

Diddy Addario, Rock Avenue, said she wanted to remind the Council even if they dissolve the library the tax payers still pay because we are in the Somerset County Library System. She commended the town on their response during the recent storm. She said the public should realize they have a responsibility to prepare themselves for an emergency as well.

Pete Martino, Sunbright Road, said the issue of public safety in town could be better. He asked if a pre-storm analysis was done. He asked why City Hall wasn't open during the storm. Mr. Atkins said he made the decision to close Borough Hall on Wednesday, explaining he did not want employees and staff on the road for safety reasons. Mr. Martino asked where the residents should get information from. He said Reverse 911 had no information available and Nixle alerts were limited to only road closures. He said the radio station also had no information available for residents. Mayor Pote commented that the communication process does need to be improved and we will work on that for the future. Mr. Martino also commented on how bad the traffic was in the Borough after the storm.

Tom Franklin, Wildwood Terrace, said back in 2014 the political Committee in this town was in favor of a library building with an 8 to 2 vote and one of the people who was not in favor of the library is now the Chairman of the Committee. He commented that the political Committee has no business getting involved in Council issues.

Virginia Hartmann, Ellisen Road, said when we see certain things that don't add up we start to have doubts about our local government officials. She said when you lose the confidence in your local government you start to become suspicious of everything.

Lynda Goldshein, Sherwood Drive, we had a question about the library situation listed on the ballot and it passed well which means most of our town supports the library. Whatever funding we receive would be helpful for the library.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business to come before the Council, the meeting was adjourned at 9:42 P.M. to the Call of the Chair. The next scheduled meeting of the Mayor and Council to be held Thursday, April 19, 2018 at 7:30 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Regina Angelo
Administrative Assistant