

BOROUGH OF WATCHUNG
COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES

APRIL 17, 2020 - 6:30 P.M.

(THIS MEETING WAS A VIRTUAL MEETING)

MAYOR'S STATEMENT: Mayor Keith S. Balla called the meeting to order at 6:31 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 Special Virtual Meeting was given by way of Special 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 RESIDENTS WHO HAVE DIED FROM COVID 19 COMPLICATIONS, AND OUR FIRST RESPONDERS, DOCTORS, NURSES AND GROCERY STORE WORKERS SERVING IN THIS PANDEMIC.

ROLL CALL:

Robinson [P] Black [A] Goodloe [P] Eisenberg Knechten [P] Jubin [P] Martino [P]

Also present were Administrator James Damato, Attorney Denis Murphy, Clerk Michelle DeRocco and CFO Bill Hance. Also present was OEM Coordinator Carolyn Solon.

There were 15 members present virtually.

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DISCUSSION / COVID-19 UPDATES

Mayor Balla asked Carolyn Solon our Office of Emergency Management Coordinator to provide an update on COVID-19, procedures, food, supplies and any area in need of improvements.

Carolyn Solon said another large food donation was dropped off today and thanked our residents for their generosity. She said as of now all of the donations are still being inventoried but we are pretty much set for donations. She said there was a conference call regarding the volunteer procedures and the paper-work has been finalized and handed over to our legal support who is reviewing those documents.

Administrator Damato reported there were four new COVID-19 positive cases in Watchung bringing our total number of cases to 55 and one new reported death for a total of 4. He said the County website has very detailed information on the cases in each municipality. Administrator Damato said the State and the Attorney General's Offices are currently permitting the temporary licensure of physicians who are licensed in other countries to be temporary licensed in New Jersey for use in COVID cases. He also said Somerset County has begun its own program of collecting names of people willing to volunteer. He said anyone wishing to volunteer can sign up on the Somerset County website. He mentioned private test sites should soon be opening up in New Jersey but the locations are unknown as of right now. Administrator Damato said the Prosecutor on the conference call today mentioned under the Executive Order 124, inmates with less than one year left on their sentences were being released from Somerset County jails. The Prosecutor wanted to assure the residents of Somerset County that there was no one released from Somerset County jails as a result of that Executive Order. Administrator Damato also said the Raritan Valley Community College test site administered about 72 tests today. He said 10 people were turned away because they either didn't have a prescription or they didn't live in Hunterdon or Somerset County. He advised anyone who goes to that testing site needs to have proof they are a resident of either Hunterdon or Somerset County and a written prescription in their hand. He mentioned there is some federal legislation pending to help municipalities over and above what FEMA is providing. He said it is a \$250 billion appropriations bill to local governments with a population of 500,000 or less. The legislation says that payments would be made in 30 days of the application and that the funds will be directly related to the public health emergency and would have to be incurred during the period of March first to December 30th, 2020.

Councilwoman Eisenberg Knechten thanked Administrator Damato for continuing to circulate the breakdown of statistics of COVID-19 cases. She asked if the reports received from our Health Director Kevin Sumner can be posted on the Borough website. Administrator Damato said that is a Mayor and Council decision and if everyone agrees he will gladly post those statistics.

Councilwoman Goodloe agreed with Councilwoman Eisenberg Knegten that we should post the charts on the website from Middlebrook Regional Health Commission as we get them for our residents to see. Council President Robinson does not agree with posting the statistics from Middlebrook onto the Borough website for our residents. She believes people are capable of getting information by clicking on all the links already being provided to them and that it can be disturbing to see and to be reminded every day of what these statistics are. Council President Robinson also feels that the numbers may not agree with the Counties numbers, or the State's numbers, making them somewhat unreliable. Councilman Jubin feels if we post the statistics on our Borough website we run the risk in potentially creating more confusion in terms of the discrepancies of the numbers. He said it is best for us to utilize one source and the most accurate source of information which he feels would be the Somerset County website. Councilman Martino asked how posting these statistics on our website will control the crisis and also what positive outcome we are looking for by doing so. He asked if the psychological benefits of posting these statistics are in our resident's best interest. Councilman Jubin said these numbers are just nice to know but not a reason for a change in our behavior. He feels it is very important that we maintain social distancing. He said we are best served by relying on the Somerset County statistics that are updated for us on a daily basis. Councilwoman Eisenberg Knegten explained for everyone listening that our Health Officer, Kevin Sumner has been providing us with a grid of statistics showing all the municipalities that are a part of the Middlebrook Health Commission. She said the grid shows the new positives, the total positives to age range in the municipality, the gender breakdown within the municipality, and the number of fatalities in the municipality. She stated this information is very specific and isn't available on the Somerset County website. She does not understand why we as a Council are choosing to conceal data that is sent to us. Councilman Jubin said this virus can affect anybody at any age and feels social distancing should be maintained regardless of any numbers coming out. He said no one on the Council is trying to hide any data but his concern is that if that becomes the mandate people are going to be working day and night, just to get numbers out which may be interesting to see but they are not essential for the treatment of the infections. Councilwoman Goodloe said she does not see the issue with posting a little chart on either Facebook or the website that we already receive. She feels our residents deserve this type of information and knowledge is important. She also said the Somerset County website information doesn't have a demographic breakdown of the statistics. Councilman Jubin said it is best to have a central source of information. He advised he will speak with Kevin Sumner and ask if they can post their statistics every other week or every week on the Middlebrook website and then maybe we can include a link from there but he feels the Somerset County website is a sufficient source for us to utilize for information. Councilwoman Eisenberg Knegten clarified all she was asking in her earlier statement was for us to post the grid to our website once Kevin Sumer provided the Borough with that breakdown of data. She said she was never implying the Middlebrook Reginal Health Commission create a grid and have it sent to us by a certain time. She strongly feels this data should be provided to the residents as it relates to their health. Councilman Martino said we need to be careful when we use the word transparency as this is not a Borough generated chart or Borough generated data. He suggested we reach out to our Board of Health Chairperson and get their opinion on this matter. Councilman Jubin said he has already reached out to our Board of Health Chairperson and he is also in agreement that we should have one main source of information. Councilman Jubin said he would be happy to reach back out and consult with the Board of Health again on this topic and report back at our next meeting.

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PUBLIC PORTION

No one from the Public desired to be heard.

Carolyn Solon, Office of Emergency Management Coordinator, said her concern with posting the numbers on the Borough website has to do with the residents that have lost family members to this pandemic. She also mentioned we think about how they would feel looking at the numbers and their loved one as just being a number.

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ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business to come before the Council the meeting was adjourned at 7:50 P.M. to the Call of the Chair. The next Special Meeting of the Mayor and Council is scheduled to be Virtually held on April 20, 2020 at 7:30 P.M.

Mayor Balla said on behalf of all the residents of Watchung we would like to express our sincere, condolences, and deepest sympathy to the family and friends of those that were lost due to that Coronavirus. He said every life is precious and every person is critical, critically important to all of us. He said we are a family in Watchung and will continue working together to care for and protect the safety and health of all of our residents and our first responders. He thanked everyone for their assistance and helping out in every way throughout this crisis.

Respectfully Submitted,

Regina Angelo, RMC
Deputy Clerk

