

BOROUGH OF WATCHUNG
COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES

APRIL 29, 2020 - 7:30 P.M.

(THIS MEETING WAS A VIRTUAL MEETING)

MAYOR'S STATEMENT: Mayor Keith S. Balla called the meeting to order at 7:30 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 RESDIENTS 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 [P] Goodloe [P] Eisenberg Knegten [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 16 members present virtually.

=====

DISCUSSION / COVID-19 UPDATES

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

Carolyn Solon reported there were no food donation or PPE drop offs made but a wonderful resident did drop off freshly baked muffins which were distributed to the Police Department. She said she was on a very long conference call with the State today regarding PPE reimbursement. She said right now according to FEMA it still a 75 percent federal funded reimbursement with 25 percent non-federal share. She mentioned the State is recommending to FEMA and asking for 90 percent reimbursement. She also said she checked in with the long-term care facilities who were very appreciative of the large PPE donations they received. Ms. Solon also was informed they will be starting the process of COVID testing at the long term care facilities in South Jersey and then moving North. She said according to the news, the State parks and Golf courses are scheduled to re-open on Saturday with restrictions. She said we need to check the Governors Executive Order when it's released and make sure we don't contradict it in regards to closing off our lots around the lake. She also said there is concern and discussion regarding the fall flu season approaching and what will happen if COVID flares up over the summer and we have a combination of both COVID exposers and the flu. She said we are waiting for more guidance from the Department of Health but suggested we start discussing our plan if this occurs.

Councilman Jubin said contact tracing and increased testing is going to be critical. He said we did live through the rapid rise of it but there is concern it could happen again. He recommended we mention resources such as contact testing might be needed for re-opening. Ms. Solon said she will follow up with this question.

Administrator Damato reported there were three new COVID positive cases for Watchung today and one new death. He said the UV light sanitizer is now in the custody of Mr. Gunther our Public Works Manager and all Departments are aware and will be coordinate using the equipment through him. He also said the parking lots around Watchung Lake were closed today along with the Texier House lot. He said the lots were blocked with barricades, police line tape and signs stating no parking by police order. Mayor Balla said he reached out to Senator Booker's office regarding the Census information who reached back and reported that Watchung has a 60.2 percent response in regards to completing the census information. He did mention that our adjacent neighbors, Berkeley Heights have a response rate of 76.2 percent and Scotch Plains with a response rate of 73.3 percent. Mayor Balla said it is important we reach out to our residents reminding them to submit this information. Councilwoman Goodloe asked if a reminder through our Nixle Alerts went out to the residents about the census, reminding them to fill out the forms. Clerk DeRocco said OEM Director, Carolyn Solon sent her a Census reminder this morning but it was referring to the month of April and she was looking for something more recent to post. She mentioned since there is an extension on the time that possibly Linda Monetti through the Recreation Department could put together a poster with the kids. Councilwoman Eisenberg Knegten thinks the poster idea is great and would love to help out if it's needed.

Councilwoman Goodloe reminded everyone today the Feed to Give Program launched. She said this is the program where Lawson's is selling raw chicken breasts at \$1.50 a pound and they're donating all proceeds to the Food Bank Network of Somerset County. Administrator Damato said the pickup is at Valley View School.

Councilwoman Eisenberg Knegten reminded everyone about the "Make some Noise" effort to acknowledge our first responders, essential works, healthcare workers, etc. She asked if another reminder

could circulate out to our residents regarding this event. Mayor Balla feels between the Nixle Alerts and the email blasts those are effective ways to hit all of our residents.

Councilwoman Eisenberg Knegten encouraged the Council figure out collectively what Committee our Borough communications should fall under in order to make sure they are streamlined. She said these communications should represent the entire Council so they should be thoroughly discussed. Councilman Jubin also agrees with keeping the discussions open and everyone working together. Councilman Black feels we have been communicating and discussing things comprehensively and need to continue to keep building the way we are.

Councilman Jubin reported the Administration and Finance Committee has looked into extending the deadline for resident tax payments to June 1st. He said the Committee is confident in recommending the Borough could take this on without putting duress on our cash flow. Councilwoman Goodloe said she supports extending the grace period until June 1st. Attorney Murphy said the Council would need to pass a resolution for the same reasons, as long as they are consistent with as the Governor's reasons to extend the grace period from the 10 days up to the June. 1st. He said the procedure would be a formal adoption by the Council. He recommended the Council call for and notice a Special Meeting and within that notice have the consideration of the adoption of that resolution. Attorney Murphy said he would draft the resolution if the Council wishes to go forward with this. He also said there needs to be 48 hours-notice of the Special Meeting and they can adopt the resolution at the Special Meeting. He advised the Council they could wait until the May 7th meeting but his concern is that the statute that refers to setting the interest rate on the delinquent taxes requires that when there's a change in the interest rate, you're required to provide notice to all of the taxpayers of the change in interest rates. He said there has been no guidance from the Division of Taxation on this yet but he anticipates there will be within a day or so. Attorney Murphy confirmed Saturday would be the earliest the Council could hold a Special Meeting. Councilman Martino suggested we hold the Special Meeting on Monday night. Clerk DeRocco reminded everyone that the Special Meetings specific to COVID-19 are only scheduled through the end of April. She advised if there is going to be a Special Meeting on Monday she will advertise it tomorrow.

Councilman Jubin suggested the Council continue to hold these COVID-19 related Special Meetings into the month of May. He said we need the ability to discuss with one another in a public forum and also to give the public an opportunity to stay informed and to ask questions related to these matters. Councilwoman Goodloe agrees and feels these meetings are definitely great but with things stabilizing a bit, she suggested holding them less frequently. She proposed starting May, 11th holding these Special Meetings just two times a week. Councilman Jubin also agreed with the new proposed schedule for the month of May.

Councilman Jubin stated there are many trials being done at a rapid rate to try and find some type of vaccine for this virus. He advised everyone even if the stay at home restrictions are lifted to maintain social distancing and to please wear masks if they go outdoors. He also said he heard from a resident in town that although the parking lots were blocked off, that there was an abnormal amount of pedestrian traffic around the lake. He is concerned blocking off the lots may not work and especially with the weather approaching. He suggested possibly having volunteers stand outside the lakes reminding people to please maintain social distancing. Mayor Balla suggested mobilizing our volunteers who we have the emergency vests for. Ms. Solon reminded everyone this could potentially be an issue because the volunteers have no authority. She also said the County's thought is once all the parks open up people will go elsewhere which will decrease the number of people walking. Councilwoman Goodloe thinks it is a great idea to post signs around the lake encouraging a walk in one direction whether or not we re-open the parking lots immediately or not. Council President Robinson suggested putting chalk signs around the lake as well as other signage. Mayor Balla said he has encouraged everyone to walk in one direction. He also mentioned they need to enforce this now because people aren't following what was recommended for the last four weeks. Councilwoman Eisenberg Knegten said having some visual reminders may be good for people who are not Watchung residents using our lakes. Mayor Balla agrees the signs can be put up. Councilman Jubin asked if we could utilize the electronic sign at the circle as another method to encourage residents and visitors to maintain social distancing and walk in one direction around the lakes.

Councilman Jubin suggested the Council do twice a week Special Meetings in regards to COVID-19 related issues for the first two weeks of May on Tuesday and Thursday at 7:30 P.M. Councilwoman Eisenberg Knegten agrees with this suggestion.

Councilman Martino said as per our Borough Ordinance, the Council has to authorize putting up signs around the lake. Attorney Murphy suggested if the Council wanted to take formal action on the implementation of the signs they lump that together with the Special Meeting for the resolution to approve the extension of the grace period. Council President Robinson asked if the Ordinance applies to the orange signs that has been moving around town or just signs in general. Councilman Jubin said he thinks the original emergency authorizations gave the right to override general policy of the State, County and Borough if it was for public safety purposes. He asked if Attorney Murphy to look into this matter.

=====

PUBLIC PORTION

No one from the Public desired to be heard.

=====

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business to come before the Council the meeting was adjourned at 8:40 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 30, 2020 at 7:30 P.M. Mayor Balla said this Special Meeting will include an Executive Session.

Respectfully Submitted,

Regina Angelo, RMC
Deputy Clerk