

**BOROUGH OF WATCHUNG**  
**COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES**

**APRIL 20, 2020 - 7:30 P.M.**

*(THIS MEETING WAS A VIRTUAL MEETING)*

**MAYOR'S STATEMENT:** Mayor Keith S. Balla called the meeting to order at 7:31 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 [ P ] 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 18 members logged-on virtually.

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**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 over the weekend we received food donations from very generous residents. She said in anticipation of the warmer weather the DPW has moved the food donations from the OEM trailer to the Texier House Museum in order for the food to remain in a climate controlled environment.

She said she will be going to the County tomorrow to pick up more PPE supplies for the Borough including N95 masks, full face shields and hospital masks. Ms. Solon also said she made a few changes to the volunteer paperwork and it's now being reviewed by our legal team for final approval and hopes that the application process can start tomorrow. Mayor Balla asked for an update regarding the long-term care facilities. Ms. Solon said the State has mandated that long-term care facilities provide a daily report into the State database regarding COVID positive patients and staffing, and also how they're doing on PPE. Ms. Solon said the long-term care facilities are in pretty good shape right now.

Administrator Damato reported there was 1 new reported COVID case for Watchung and no new reported deaths. He said the County let us know that the Department of Health had made some unannounced visits to Somerset County long-term care facilities over the weekend. He said these visits were due to the large percentage of cases and deaths that were reported. He said the exact numbers are going to be reported on the Department of Health website by tomorrow and he will keep everyone posted. Administrator Damato said there have been several conversations with various levels of government and the State about reducing interest rates or extending grace period for tax payments. He said the Administration and Finance Committee, CFO Bill Hance and myself have been tossing around ideas on this topic. The State stressed the pros and cons for each municipality must be a carefully weighed decision. He reported that Somerset County OEM and New Jersey State OEM will be providing guidance in the next couple of days on the non-congregate care issue. He said they would like to have first responders who have come in contact with COVID patients to be isolated in hotels around the County. We have not received protocols from the County on this but as soon as we do we will get that out to the Council. Administrator Damato said the Raritan Valley Community College COVID testing site tested 145 people today. He also mentioned at this point virtual weddings are not permitted in New Jersey due to the witness issues involved. He said the County did mention that they are just beginning to look into the possibility of removing the Open Space tax or reducing it.

Mayor Balla asked how long the volunteer registration process will take, including the Police background check. Administrator Damato said as per Chief Cina the process should be completed within one to two days.

Councilman Martino asked what the downfalls would be if we waived the interest on tax payments for our residents until June 1st. Administrator Damato said we would be losing revenue and also if we are reducing the interest rate, any outstanding liens or other delinquencies would also enjoy that reduction. Councilman Martino said he is getting a lot of calls from residents concerned on how they will get to City Hall to pay their taxes if the stay at home order is still in place. Administrator Damato said we encourage electronic payments, mailing tax payment checks or residents using the drop box at town hall. Councilman Martino asked if the Council could collectively discuss waiving the interest on tax payments for our residents for thirty days. Administrator Damato said the interest is only one part of it, the cash flow may be a bigger issue rather than the loss in the interest payment.

Councilwoman Eisenberg Knegten said many people have put their mortgage payments on deferment and think they do not have to pay their taxes May 1<sup>st</sup>. She feels it is important we remind residents they still need to make their tax payments.

Councilman Martino feels communicating to our residents is very important and requested we post on the Borough website when taxes are due as a reminder. He also asked if our CFO, Bill Hance could get us some information on how waiving the interest for 30 days would affect us in the long run. Mr. Hance said last year we brought in about \$82,000 for the interest cost on taxes which came out to about \$6800 a month. He also said it's not the loss of revenue that will be the big issue but the extra 30 days we would have to wait.

Councilwoman Goodloe agrees we should send a reminder out to all the residents advising them even if they did defer their mortgage payment they still need to pay their taxes.

Councilman Jubin asked Administrator Damato if the County advised the percent positive rate of those being tested in Somerset County verses the overall tested number. Administrator Damato said those specifics have not been given but he will ask if those numbers could be made available.

Councilman Black wanted to confirm we will not be extending resident tax payments until June 1<sup>st</sup>. Mayor Balla said as of right now we will continue with the May 1<sup>st</sup> deadline.

Councilman Martino stated the State is the only agency that can extend the grace period and all we can do as a Municipality is eliminate the interest.

Councilman Eisenberg Knegten said she read that this Thursday our neighbors in Warren will be going outside their homes from 7:00 P.M. to 7:05 P.M. to bang pots and pans and cheer to honor our first responders and local heroes. She said she would love Watchung residents to also participate in this. Mayor Balla asked her to send over any details she had on this.

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**PUBLIC PORTION**

No one from the Public desired to be heard.

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**ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business to come before the Council the meeting was adjourned at 7:57 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 21, 2020 at 7:30 P.M.

Respectfully Submitted,

Regina Angelo, RMC  
Deputy Clerk