



CITY OF ABSECON
Municipal Complex
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CITY COUNCIL
REGULAR MEETING
SEPTEMBER 19TH, 2024
MINUTES

FLAG SALUTE – Mayor Horton

ROLL CALL

PRESENT: Councilmembers Sandy Cain, Alex Clark, Steve Light, Tommy Marrone, Christine Parker, and Council President Nick LaRotonda

ABSENT: Councilman Richard DeRose

ALSO PRESENT: Mayor Kim Horton, City Administrator/CFO Jessica Thompson, City Engineer Ed Dennis, City Solicitor Bill Blaney Esq., City Clerk Carie Crone, Police Chief J.R. Laughlin

STATEMENT OF THE SUNSHINE LAW & NOTIFICATION THAT THIS MEETING IS ELECTRONICALLY RECORDED

PRESENTATION – Perry Mays – Chairman of the Coalition for a Safe Community of Atlantic County: Mayor Horton: The Coalition works to educate and promote safe communities by hosting events and outings. Their goal is to create a healthy and safe community for all of Atlantic County.

Perry Mays: Thanked Council for having him there tonight. Introduced himself and noted his extensive experience working with the AtlantiCare. Initiated the program that became the Coalition for a Safe Community. The Coalition has moved into three counties (i.e. Atlantic, Cape May, Salem), with the goal being to become state-wide. Notable programs include a high-school Team Summit, Photography Program (commended by the NJ AG), as well as community walks, gardens, and cookouts (including Police, churches, organizations, neighbors, etc.) The goal is to come together as a community to ensure safety. Recently extended into Egg Harbor City, focusing on issues specific to that community. The entire process has certainly brought the communities together. Hopes to return to Absecon to discuss the process as related to this specific community. There are plenty of avenues a community may take to bring together youth, seniors, clergy, law enforcement, etc.

REGULAR MEETING AGENDA

2024 ORDINANCES FOR ADOPTION

Motioned for the second reading of Ordinance #17-2024: Councilman Clark; Seconded: Councilman Marrone

Roll Call: Cain – Yes; Clark – Yes; DeRose – Absent; Light –Yes; Marrone – Yes; Parker – Yes; LaRotonda – Yes

17 Amending the Code of the City of Absecon, Chapter 114 – Alarm Systems.

Motioned to open the meeting to the public for comment or discussion of Ordinance #17-2024: Councilman Clark; Seconded: Councilman Marrone. All in Favor, None Opposed.

Chief Laughlin: This Ordinance needed some adjustment. It pertains to when Police are called for a business burglar alarm, and the owner neglects to make the necessary and proper repairs, resulting in further faulty alarm calls. This results in wasted police time and resources. The Ordinance change includes updated fine costs to match today's standards.

Motioned to close the public portion: Councilwoman Light; Seconded: Councilman Clark
All in Favor, None Opposed.

Motioned for the final reading and adoption of Ordinance #17-2024: Councilman Clark;
Seconded: Councilman Light
Roll Call: Cain – Yes; Clark – Yes; DeRose – Absent; Light –Yes; Marrone – Yes; Parker – Yes; LaRotonda – Yes

Ordinance #17-2024 has been heard and is finally approved.

APPROVAL OF BILL LIST – \$ 1,546,698.15

Motioned to accept: Councilman Clark; Seconded: Councilman Marrone
Roll Call: Cain – Yes; Clark – Yes; DeRose – Absent; Light – Yes; Marrone – Yes; Parker – Yes; LaRotonda – Yes

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Closed Session as to form and content only – 8/1/24

Regular Meeting Minutes – 9/5/2024

Motioned to accept: Councilman Clark; Seconded: Councilwoman Parker

Roll Call: Cain – Yes; Clark – Yes; DeRose – Absent; Light – Yes; Marrone – Abstain (8/1), Yes (9/5); Parker – Yes; LaRotonda – Yes

REPORTS

Councilwoman Parker – Community Affairs: Have not met since last meeting. Reminded the public that Creekfest will be on Saturday from 1pm-8pm at Faunce Landing Boat Ramp. Jitney shuttles will be available from the Wagon Wheel on Pitney Road. There will be 3 bands, 13 food trucks, and wonderful weather.

Councilwoman Cain – Economic Development: Have not had a regular meeting since last Council Meeting, however earlier that day they had a combined meeting with the Finance Committee to listen to a presentation by AECA, to decide whether it would be good for Absecon to join this organization. There will need to be a discussion, likely between the Finance and Economic Development Committees, to make the decision.

Councilman Marrone – Public Works: Gave a shout out to Absecon Public Works for all their hard work going above and beyond. Mentioned that Public Works will be helping with Creekfest. The Committee spoke in depth about the work on the tennis court (i.e. colors, renovations, etc.) Also spoke about raising the road, but acknowledged roadblocks suffered from the County. Hope to apply pressure so that they get more County engineering accomplished. Discussed swing sets and recently moving a stop sign away from someone's property.

Councilman Clark: Mentioned that Absecon Public Works has been lining the fields for all the home soccer, baseball, and football games. Commended the great work they have been doing in addition to their regular duties.

Mayor Horton: Commented on the long period of time waiting for the Shore Road Project.

E. Dennis: Repeated that the issue is with a Right-of-Way. There are steps that need to be taken in order to move forward, and the City will be taking responsibility for some of those steps, on behalf of the county, in order to move things along. Reminded the public that the City has had their work done for months.

Mayor Horton: Asked what action could be taken to speed the process up.

E. Dennis: Has none to recommend. Does not believe the issue is one of policy, but just a matter of doing the work that needs to be done for this Right of Way. They will go above and beyond to try to move the matter along.

Councilwoman Cain: Asked if the City wanted to paint on a County/State road, would the City need their permission.

E. Dennis: Specified that for the intersection of Shore Rd. and Route 30, the City would need state approval to have an arrow drawn on the road.

Council President LaRotonda: Asked whether the City could request that.

E. Dennis: Confirmed. Stated that he has a contact at the State and that they can submit a request.

Councilwoman Cain: Acknowledged the already-existing sign in place.

Councilman Clark: Suggested they also address the intersection on Route 30 near McDonalds with a similar issue. Suggested an arrow be written on the middle lane to prevent potential collisions.

Councilman Marrone: In regard to the intersection of North Shore Rd. and Route 30 heading south, people race up to the right lane (straight-only) due to lack of runway. Asked whether a good solution for the issue would be to make the middle lane a left-only.

E. Dennis: Would need to reach out to the State about the matter. The issue is based on capacity and the volume of people making a left turn. Assured that they could look at the entire intersection and address the action needed.

Councilman Clark – Finance: Echoed Councilwoman Cain's announcement that the ACEA visited the Finance Meeting for a presentation earlier that evening.

Councilman Light – Parks & Playgrounds: Have not met since last Council Meeting. Echoed praise for the City's Public Works. Thanked the Police, Fire, and EMT, for their presence at the recent 9/11 Ceremony.

J. Thompson – CFO/Admin.: Announced that the budget is 77% expended, which is on point to where they should be at this time of year. They discussed several contracts which need to be worked out by the end of the year. Clarified that the tennis courts are closed from September 13th to November 12th. Calderon Avenue Project will move onto the roadway portion beginning on the 23rd.

Chief Laughlin – Public Safety: In the month of August, there were 2,940 calls for service, 565 traffic enforcements, 36 motor vehicle accidents, 52 arrests, 21 burglaries (14 motor vehicle) and 3 thefts. Asked the public to lock their vehicles. Reminded the public that it's getting darker every day and to adjust their houses exterior lighting, it helps deter burglars. Reminded everyone "see something, say something." He will be attending a meeting to address the current crisis in the juvenile justice system. Now, there is nowhere in the county to take juvenile offenders, even for serious crimes. The Prosecutors Office requested Chief Laughlin be in attendance to help come to a possible solution.

E. Dennis – City Engineer: Provided update for several construction projects. Corrected that the Calderon Ave. Project would not be working until the week of the 30th. On Crestview Ave. the tree-

clearing process is complete (tried to minimize clearing), so the next step will be the drainage work. The tennis courts have been milled and paved. There is a 30-day period needed for the asphalt to settle before they can paint, so painting will be completed mid-October. In the meantime, they will be installing nets, fencing, etc.

Councilman Light: Asked whether they would install a draining perimeter around the courts.

E. Dennis: Confirmed that there were several areas of drainage concerns so they will be addressed as part of the project.

Mayor Horton: Asked what colors were decided.

E. Dennis: The tennis courts will be gray and blue, and the pickleball courts will be light blue and royal purple.

City Clerk: Monthly Report – August 2024

- Municipal Court: \$12,965.04
- Tax Office: \$4,679,558.31
- Construction Office: \$16,022
- Municipal Clerk's Office: \$6,179

Mayor Kim Horton: Thanked Attales School's Dr. Horner and Principal Burns for holding an impressive 9/11 Ceremony, also, the fireman, police, EMTs, and residents who attended. September is National Hunger Action Month. Today, she and the Police Dept., participated in Shoprite's Help Bag Hunger Day. Last year alone, the event raised over \$8k for the community to fight hunger locally. The County is holding a free adult flu vaccination clinic. One of the events will take place at Elizabeth Ann Seton Church on October 21st from 10am-12pm.

PUBLIC PORTION

Motioned to open to the public: Councilman Marrone; Seconded: Councilman Light
All in Favor, None Opposed.

Theresa Hudson – 4 Stone Circle: Claimed that the matter she is there to discuss is without political agenda. Provided an update on the CSLR (Cooperative Sober Living Residence). Alleged that there has been high turnover so there is a whole new set of residents in the house. Previously asked for a sign to be created to identify the CSLR house. Wants to revisit the idea.

Council President LaRotonda: Spoke with Lloyd of Public Works about the matter last week. According to T. Hudson's husband, Lloyd did stop by the area in question.

T. Hudson: Asked, in terms of policies and procedures, whether anything had been established.

B. Blaney: Had ordinances being prepared, although did not make it on the Agenda for that night. The Ordinance will address some issues, but likely not all. They're still waiting on legislation as well.

Mayor Horton: Volunteered she and Chief reach out to the owner of the property.

T. Hudson: Listed some problems with the establishment (e.g. the manager is supposed to be present 24/7, etc.). Wants something written in statute so that violations may be issued.

Council President LaRotonda: Also believes they must have inspections completed, so will check with Michael O'Hagan about those requirements. Believes inspections are required every time there is a new tenant.

B. Blaney: Asked whether T. Hudson was referring to the residential manager.

T. Hudson: Confirmed. Indicated the manager is supposed to be on site 24/7, however there have been 2 instances during which they tried to contact him and he has not been there. Acknowledged that the manager has been very nice when they have communicated.

B. Blaney: Clarified that there is a State regulation which she is referring to.

T. Hudson: Confirmed.

B. Blaney: Indicated they may then be able to write something up requiring the same thing.

T. Hudson: Listed areas of issue that would fall under an inspection (e.g. exterior lighting, room sizing, etc.) Claimed the residents go to the methadone clinic at an early hour in the morning.

B. Blaney: Asserted that Mike will follow up about the inspections.

Council President LaRotonda: Suggested a meeting be set with Mike regarding the matter. The State must make certain inspections, but stated that life safety inspections are the responsibility of the municipality. Has been in contact with the DCA, although information is not easy to ascertain.

T. Hudson: Asked if there was any way to verify whether they had a proper license.

Council President LaRotonda: Confirmed that Mike O'Hagan has received that. The information is crucial in order to ensure zoning restrictions.

B. Blaney: Expecting additional limitations for where they may be located. Suggested T. Hudson reach out to Mike Ruffu from his office, as to schedule a meeting so they can discuss the ordinance.

T. Hudson: May take the matter to the County level at a Commissioners' Meeting to discuss which sober living establishments should receive grant money.

B. Blaney: Suggested T. Hudson reach out to the State Agency when she sees violations.

Council President LaRotonda: Unfortunately, they are not properly staffed, so there is inefficiency.

Raffi Kassian – 705 White Horse Pike: Owns office building at 705 White Horse Pike. Tried to go from office space to residential but their request was denied by the Zoning Board. His surveyor recommended redevelopment. The neighboring property at 707 White Horse Pike is also interested in changing their use as well from office to residential, because they are hurting financially also. His attorney suggested presenting his case to Council before taking more formal steps.

E. Dennis: Clarified that R. Kassian wants to declare the site in need of redevelopment and doing a redevelopment plan. This would be a statutory process and would need to be initiated by the City, a study would need to be completed by the Planning Board, and Ordinances would need to be adopted (Same process as for the Memorial Field site). This is not typically a matter that a private individual could bring to Council for approval, it is a City-driven process. The City could listen to this case and decide that it has merit. Pointed out the differences between coming before the Zoning Board for an approval and asking the City to take on the task of declaring the site in need of redevelopment. There are very strict criteria that allows for the declaration for needed redevelopment because the matter becomes so complex. A Redevelopment Plan would need to then be created by the Planning Board and then brought back to Council, and then Ordinances must be completed.

B. Blaney: The process usually occurs with locations such as abandoned strip malls, etc., that you know will no longer serve the way they were originally intended. Asked whether R. Kassian feels as though he no longer uses the building as office space.

E. Dennis: Questioned how the empty office space at that specific property compared with other empty office space throughout the city. Unsure whether that would even make him eligible for the declaration.

R. Kassian: His broker has the numbers relating to residential space and office space in the city.

B. Blaney: Clarified that R. Kassian wants to change the property to residential space.

R. Kassian: Confirmed that he wanted to change the property from office to residential.

B. Blaney: Referred to their conversation during last Council Meeting about the matter. Asked whether the plan was to turn the current office space into residential units or take down the building and build up again.

R. Kassian: Plans to use the existing building. Tried to have housing for 55+ (due to highway safety concerns), but was still rejected. The surveyor said his only option was to redevelop.

E. Dennis: Referred to Master Plan re-examination (10-year re-examination of zoning, etc. by Planning Board.)

Council President LaRotonda: Believes re-examination will be coming up soon, mentioned the lengthy process.

Councilman Clark: Pointed out that a partnership with ACEA could possibly help bring business in to fill up office space. Explained that the ACEA presented to the Finance Committee earlier today and they explicitly stated that a goal would be to fill vacant buildings.

R. Kassian: Lamented that his office space has been empty for a very long time, blaming the recent pandemic. Explained that he had been to the Zoning Board twice. The first time they pulled their application, and the second time altered the proposal for 55+.

B. Blaney: Asked if he and his neighbor were the only things located at the site.

R. Kassian: Explained that Remax was located directly next to him and there is another complex between his neighbor.

Council President LaRotonda: Suggested R. Kassian continue to work with Councilwoman Cain, as this is a matter of Economic Development. This is a matter to consider. Will find out from the Planning Board when they plan to review the Master Plan. Reminded R. Kassian that Council cannot supersede the verdict of the Zoning Board.

R. Kassian: Stated that the Mayor already informed him that the Master Plan will not be reviewed for another 3 years. His attorney told him that instead of waiting the 3 years, to present his plan to Council for the declaration of redevelopment.

B. Blaney: Reiterated how that was usually used in cases of derelict locations which can no longer be used for their original intention.

Council President LaRotonda: Repeated his suggestion for R. Kassian to continue working with Councilwoman Cain.

B. Blaney: Told R. Kassian to share with Council his Zoning Board submission so that they may view their plan. Suggested maybe his neighbor also submitting a proposal to show that there is greater interest in the idea.

R. Kassian: Indicated that he will get together with his neighbor and work on their plans. Complained that his tenants are not committed to a lease.

Councilman Clark: Asked how many tenants he currently has.

R. Kassian: Currently has 4 tenants.

B. Blaney: Shared that he visits many law offices that are empty for the majority of the week.

Greg Seher – 625 Yarmouth Avenue: Had another regularly scheduled Zoning Board meeting since the last Council Meeting. He discussed the Council Meeting to the Board. Assured Council that the Board is always willing to have discussion with Council. Encouraged attendance at their Meetings, especially when it's of particular interest.

Councilwoman Cain: Advised Raffi to watch the Council Meeting so that he may hear what was said and speak to his lawyer. Emphasized she wants to help local business.

G. Seher: Repeated his, as well as the Board's, willingness to answer any questions.

Harry Hartman – 632 Woodland Avenue: Attended the Finance Meeting. Asserted that he cares about Public Safety. Shared that his primary concern is with the significant increase for police pay in the budget. Is not saying that they don't deserve it. Over the next 4 years, there's a 38% increase in Police salaries. Shared that his son is an Absecon police officer. Repeated that he supports public safety. Complained that it took 9 months for the contract to become public information. When asked for particular information, the Council gladly provided it. Ultimately, does not understand why the contract took so long. Aware that during contract negotiations they sometimes prefer to keep things under wraps.

B. Blaney: Spoke with the attorney putting together the contract, and does not believe that it's even complete. A draft has been completed, but reviews are still required. They ratified the contract in April.

Council President LaRotonda & Councilman Clark: Expressed their agreement with H. Hartman that they are disappointed with how long the process is taking.

H. Hartman: The City's own auditor has projected \$1.2m in 2025 for owed just in debt. Emphasized that this number jumps dramatically from what it was previously. Noted that the cost of living is also changing. Complained that there's no way to avoid a tax increase. Wants information to be general knowledge. Claimed that they would not find a similar contract anywhere in South Jersey.

B. Blaney: Asserted that they were all like that. Most are coming in 7-8% a year. Has yet see the final contract, but theirs is around those numbers.

Chief Laughlin: Within Atlantic County Police, Absecon is at the middle to lower end of the pack.

B. Blaney: Emphasized that Absecon is nowhere near the highest paid PD. Agreed with Chief Laughlin that they were low-middle.

H. Hartman: Denied that he thought differently.

B. Blaney: Explained that percentages are built into the contract guide. The guides usually include 4-6% raises in the guide. There used to be a 2% guide cap, which did not always guarantee movement within the guide. The guides not pretty much guarantee movement. Additional 2-3% on top of the already-established percentages, the equal 7-8%

H. Hartman: Has analyzed the numbers for teachers' unions and wants to see the police union numbers.

B. Blaney: Explained that police union numbers always tend to be a little bit higher than teachers.

H. Hartman: Wants to see the numbers for himself.

B. Blaney: Suggested looking at the internet or to send OPRA requests to each municipality. Sometimes you can't get the results or are only sent a MOA because the contract is not finalized.

Councilman Clark: In the meetings, they had documentation of all other municipal police information, including their salaries, guides, percentages, etc. The City's lawyers and the Union's lawyers came prepared with all the necessary information. Emphasized how low the police were before this year's contract.

Council President LaRotonda: The City has been constantly losing officers who are leaving to go to higher paying positions with other municipalities.

Councilman Marrone: In order to pay the police a respected salary, they needed to provide substantial increases. A respectable pay wage is required to earn retention. It needs to be made desirable for police officers to come to Absecon. The fact of the matter is that no one wants to be a police officer in today's environment. The recruiting process is hard for the Chief enough as it is, and once good police officers are hired, they are leaving to other municipalities. Two police officers he has seen hired have already left Absecon to earn more money somewhere else.

Chief Laughlin: Indicated that Absecon was lucky for a long period of time to get already-trained officers transferred to the city. At one time during recruitment, they'd receive about ~600 applications for trained police officers. Now, however, they are lucky to get 15 applicants with experience. So, they may have to start sending recruits to the police academy (which hasn't typically been done since 1990.) Police salaries in other counties (Cape May, Ocean, north Jersey.) are significantly higher than in Atlantic County. The fact of the matter is that people need to do the job and people need to pay for the job to be done. If Absecon fails to be competitive and no one wants to work here, the options are for either Shared Service, or pay the officers more. Emphasized the cost of doing business.

H. Hartman: Repeated that he is not saying the police don't deserve good salaries. Budget-wise, he is not satisfied. Referred to the City's impact sheet. Complained that the City is unable to calculate their impact sheet because the contract is not finalized.

B. Blaney: Stated that the calculation can be made based on the MOU. The money is settled.

H. Hartman: Complained that the MOU does not have the salary of every officer.

Council President LaRotonda: That information is already known internally.

B. Blaney: Informed H. Hartman he could have the salaries of each officer, as it is public record.

H. Hartman: Does not desire that information. Has issue with the City borrowing money, but accepts that. Declared that a tax increase next year is inevitable now.

G. Seher: 625 Yarmouth Avenue: Asked the Chief to provide long-term context to his August crime report.

Chief Laughlin: Shared that the numbers are relatively steady over recent years. The numbers went down a bit during the pandemic.

T. Hudson – 4 Stone Circle: Praised Perry Mays and his mission. Supports the Coalition coming to Absecon. Emphasized the need for education within the community. Believes P. Mays would be a great asset to the community.

Motioned to close to the public: Councilman Light; Seconded: Councilman Clark
All in Favor, None Opposed.

CLOSED SESSION - #130-2024 – Contract Negotiations

B. Blaney: In accordance with the Open Records Act N.J.S.A. 10:4-6, the City Council will go into Closed Session. Closed Session is to discuss personnel issues and contract negotiations. Action may be taken after.

Motioned to enter Closed Session: Councilman Marrone; Seconded: Councilman Light
All in Favor, None Opposed.

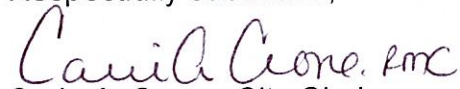
(Closed Session)

Motioned to adjourn Closed Session and re-enter the meeting: Councilman Light; Seconded: Councilman Marrone
All in Favor, None Opposed.

ADJOURNMENT

Motioned to adjourn: Councilman Light; Seconded: Councilman Clark
All in Favor, None Opposed.

Respectfully submitted,


Carie A. Crone, City Clerk

Approved: 10-3-24