

TOWN OF PHILLIPSBURG

WORK SESSION MEETING MINUTES

March 6, 2024— 6:00 P.M.

- 1. CALL TO ORDER 6:00 pm By CP Marino**
- 2. OPEN PUBLIC MEETING ACT STATEMENT Read by CVP Paulus**
- 3. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE All**
- 4. INVOCATION Led by Councilman Scerbo**
- 5. ROLL CALL – Present - Marino, Paulus, Clark, Kennedy, Scerbo**

-Also in attendance: Mayor Piazza, Attorney Baldwin, and Deputy Clerk Turner

6. WORK SESSION DISCUSSION (NO ACTION-DISCUSSION ONLY)

Parking regulation and rates – Police Chief Stettner stated that he believes parking permits would better serve the downtown area if they were limited to lots, with no street parking permits. Permits for street parking invite the businesses’ employees to fill those spots which deters potential patrons who cannot find one. Regarding parking kiosks and meters, Captain Maczko explained that coin meters get vandalized and broken. Service visits are \$995, regardless of the labor hours required for repair. Manhours to collect and deposit coins include 2 officers to empty the meters, a DPW worker and the officers to transport the coins to the bank, and the officers and a finance office employee to remain at the bank while the money is counted and deposited. He recommended removing coin operated meters and using one parking app. Currently, the Town’s parking kiosks/apps are provided by 3 different companies. If an officer believes that a vehicle is not in compliance, each of the 3 different apps must be checked. He recommended the town remove the kiosks and erect signs where the kiosks are currently located that direct patrons to a parking app and include a QR code that links directly to the app. Captain Maczko and Chief Stettner both recommended the Park Mobil app because their service fees are less than the other apps. Regarding an officer dedicated to parking, Chief Stettner stated the Police Department has advertised twice but has received no applications. Council discussion and questions covered downtime of kiosks due to supplies or repairs, placement of signs, and the re-sale value of the kiosks.

Division of Inspections fees – Director of Municipal Services Pat Kays stated that inspection/ construction/permit fees have not been updated in many years. The fees are supposed to cover the cost of inspectors visiting sites and office staff processing paperwork. The department has historically taken in much less money than covers these services. A review at the end of 2023 resulted in finding old permits that had been overlooked which brought in a higher amount in fees. The department has worked to speed up the permitting process. Mr. Kays has been in contact with the State for guidance on modifying the fee schedule, which has not been done since 2000. This includes recording the hours required to perform the various duties, both on site and in office. Any increase has to be approved by the State. Mr. Kays noted that Phillipsburg’s fees are lower than all the area municipalities, and lower than the lowest fees charged by the State.

Landlord registration fees have consistently been met with pushback from landlords, who, in too many cases, pass the increase on to their tenants. Mr. Kays feels that a stepped fee based on the number of units would be beneficial. Individual buildings require more inspection time since each one is different, compared to an apartment building in which all of the units are the same.

Property Sales/ inspection fees – Mr. Kays proposed a stepped fee based on the number of days prior that the request is made, similar to Lopatcong’s fee schedule: More than 10 days \$50, less than 10 days \$100, less than 4 days \$175.

Mr. Kays would like to modify the Property Maintenance Code Program and provide incentives to homeowners to bring their property to code, not to punish homeowners. He would like to have Code

Enforcement Officer Melendez be able to present solutions and provide information on grant opportunities and local organizations that can provide assistance. Additionally, penalties could be tied into the sale or transfer of the property.

Council members and the Mayor thanked Mr. Kays for the information and agreed that the fee schedules need to be updated and that property owners shouldn't be punished but should be held accountable.

NJDOT Truck Route Ordinance – Town Engineer Tim O'Brien stated that NJDOT approved the Designated Truck Route and an Ordinance outlining the route and restrictions on town roads will be presented at the next Council meeting. He noted that if changes are made to what NJDOT approved, the multi-year process will begin anew. Mr. O'Brien stated that signs will be posted, and local deliveries will not be impacted. CP Marino noted that because the regulations are complicated, Police Officers will need to be trained regarding issuing citations.

7. PUBLIC DISCUSSION ON AGENDA ITEMS –

-Joe Meyner – stated that under a previous administration a rent control document he helped draft had leasing requirements that landlords must advise tenants if the rent would be increased the next year. CP Marino requested a copy of the document.

-Joan Pierce – stated rent control is a good idea. Rents have increased substantially, often with no repairs or improvements made to properties. Along with increases in everyday expenses, taxes, etc., people cannot afford increases in their rent.

-Bill Benz – stated that parking downtown is a problem and it's great the town is addressing it. He urged Council to move quickly on rent control. If it is drawn out over time it can sour investors on purchasing properties.

CP Marino stated if Council wishes to proceed with rent control there will be several more Work Sessions addressing it. CP Marino requested each Councilmembers opinion on proceeding or not.

-Councilman Scerbo stated he is in support of rent control, that something has to be done to help residents, but it is important to consider both the tenants' and landlords' viewpoints.

-Councilman Kennedy stated that he is against rent control. A list of affordable areas in New Jersey included Phillipsburg. The average rent in Phillipsburg is considerably lower than other larger Warren County towns and similar to other area towns. If the average rent were comparable to the towns with higher rent, he would consider rent control. Outside investors will not come to Phillipsburg if there is rent control. If a rent control board were established, it would require an attorney on the board which would cost taxpayers more money.

-Councilman Clark stated that as the only renter on Council he has a unique perspective. He is not against rent control and believes it would be appropriate at the right time, given the right circumstances. But this is not the right time, nor the right circumstances. The town is economically depressed, the town is in one of the most affordable areas of New Jersey, and the market will cap rents. He feels rent control will drive out businesses and deter investors. He suggested looking into State programs that help renters in need.

-Council Vice President Paulus agrees with Councilman Scerbo and supports rent control. She has spoken with renters and heard stories of rents being raised by several hundred dollars after minor improvements or repairs were done. She suggested an advocate for renters and business owners.

-Council President Marino stated he supports rent control, and it is important to listen to everyone: renters, landlords and the professionals. He stated an elderly tenant had their rent doubled and then a new owner increased it another \$100 per month. CP Marino stressed a fair and honest approach and the importance of hearing testimony from everyone. He asked Councilmembers to bring ideas to the next work session.

8. ACTION ITEM

CP Marino stated that a budget meeting will be held March 13, 2024 from 6:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. The regular Council meeting scheduled for March 13, 2024 will start at 7:00 p.m.

9. PUBLIC PETITIONS

-Resident – asked if all the coin operated parking meters are replaced with an app’s QR code, what will people who don’t use a smartphone do? CP Marino stated he didn’t know and that is one reason it is being discussed.

-Joe Meyner stated that the rent control document he worked on solved past economic problems and did not stop investors or property improvements.

10. ADJOURNMENT – 7:12 PM

Councilman Clark moved to adjourn. Seconded by Council VP Paulus.

Ayes: 5

Nays: 0

Absent: 0

Motion passed.