



WEST POTTS GROVE TOWNSHIP

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WORKSHOP MEETING AUGUST 18, 2021 7:00 P.M.

The monthly Workshop Meeting of the Board of Commissioners was called to order by Board President; Steve Miller.

ROLL CALL

Board members present were Commissioners Miller, Palladino, Valentine, La Rosa and Green. Also present was Township Manager; Scott Hutt, Township Solicitor; Jamie Ottaviano, Police Chief; Joe Sokolofski and Township Secretary; Joanne Herb.

President Miller also mentioned, we also have a special guest tonight; Representative Tracy Pennycuik.

MINUTES

A motion by Commissioner Green, seconded by Commissioner La Rosa to approve the Minutes from the previous Workshop Meeting. Roll Call: Palladino; yes, Valentine; yes, La Rosa; yes, Green; yes, Miller; yes.

OLD BUSINESS

Sewer Projects Update by Bursich Associates

Chad Camburn, of Bursich Associates commented on *Grosstown Road*, noting; you can see it's pretty much done at this point; the paving and striping are done, although there are a few remaining punch list items. We still need to get the videos for the laterals that were installed. There is some clean-up work in some of the concrete areas and some lawn restoration.

Quinter Street; it is under HUD review. I anticipate putting that out to bid early to mid-September.

Mr. Camburn also reported, on the Sewer side; the last *Joint-Municipal Sewer Meeting* was held on August 12. Updates from the Borough; bulk revenue is above budget, sludge hauling expenses are below budget, so that's good. Their tentative 5-year Capital Plan at the Treatment Plant includes the Hydraulic By-Pass System in 2022; so if you have any objections to that, the Board should contact the Pottstown Borough Authority to let them know if you either are, or are not, interested in participating in that. This Township's cost would be approximately \$24,000, which is your allocation of the \$230,000 anticipated cost for the project. The next meeting will be held of September 16.

Update on Municipal Projects by Bursich Associates

Mr. Camburn reported; *School Lane* was advertised for bidding on August 3 and a Pre-Bid meeting was held on August 11. This was a Mandatory Pre-Bid meeting because you're using Grant funding. Three contractors attended, which means you will have a maximum of three contractors bidding on the contract. Bids will be opened on August 26 and with the Grant expiring on September 30; Scott submitted an extension request to the County on August 4, so we're waiting to hear back from them. I do not anticipate there being a problem with that extension, which is a one-year extension to September of next year.

Mr. Camburn also reported on *Nagle Road*; we reached out to PennDOT for Liquid Fuels reimbursement qualification. There are certain requirements of a Township road that need to be met in order to qualify for Liquid Fuels. There is no way for Nagle Road to meet those requirements. We are trying to work with the PennDOT Liquid Fuels Representative to see if they are willing to work with us to still make that eligible without hitting the letter of law on the requirement's, for example; you're required to have a 40 foot radius cul-de-sac bulb at the end, and there's no way to do that with the public land out there. We are proposing, what's called a hammerhead; essentially an area for a 3-point turn, and also the length of the road does not meet the requirements as well. We reached out to PennDOT and will coordinate with them to see what we can do to make it work.

President Miller stated; prior to this meeting, the Board of Commissioners had an Executive Meeting with the West End Fire Department Committee, which was formed to discuss the issues of the Fire Department. No decisions were made; it was for informational purposes only.

Bridge Dedication

Mr. Hutt reported; we are holding our Bridge Dedication Ceremony for Former Manager; Roger Villano, on Friday, August 27, at 1:00 p.m. The South Grosstown Road Bridge will be closed from 12:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m. All community members who wish to attend are welcome.

West End Fire Company No. 1

Mr. Hutt stated; West Pottsgrove Township's Board of Commissioners has and will continue to work extremely hard to ensure public safety remains a priority within the Township. That means making sure the product matches our needs, in tandem with being fiscally responsible to our taxpayers.

For those reasons, the Board reached out to Pottstown Borough in November of 2020 regarding Mutual Aid for fire protection services. At that time, the circumstances surrounding West End, including but not limited to; financial difficulty, constant leadership changes, appropriate response times, building issues and multiple legal matters; raised concerns regarding the stability and reliability that they are capable of remaining the fire protection provider for the Township. Since November 2020, Pottstown Borough's Fire Department has been on primary Mutual Aid with calls in West Pottsgrove Township. We have been monitoring all responses since that time. This past May we had eight calls in our Township, four of which the Borough was not dispatched due to the nature of the call, being solely for Fire Police, fire investigations, or other similar circumstances. Of the four calls that both West End and the Borough responded to; Pottstown Borough responded first each time and on an average of four minutes and four seconds per call.

For the month of June, we had eleven calls in the Township; nine of which are eligible to be categorized as responses by both. Pottstown Borough responded first eight of those times, by an average of two minutes and twenty-seven seconds per call. The allegations that Pottstown is incapable of providing adequate protection to our Township could not be further from the truth. When you go by the numbers, Pottstown Borough Fire Department has been a more reliable company to calls in our community. We understand that some members of our community have a better sense of security because there is a fire station actually located in the Township. However, the facts are the facts; Pottstown Borough does provide more reliable protection. They have paid drivers, ensuring trucks are rolling on time to any scene; it is unquestionably a more professional organization.

On April 21, 2021, at the Township's Workshop Meeting, I read a statement reiterating much of what I just said, also laying out the issues that have plagued West End for a number of years. Including their lack of internal accountability, IRS Tax liens, a carousel of leadership changes, alarming health issues within their building, financial distress and a repeated disregard to revise internal procedures to correct their course. Stating facts at that meeting resulted in a further divide between the company and the Township administration, as well as more fighting with the company's ranks.

On June 22, 2021 the Township held a special meeting to discuss the viability of West End remaining it's primary source for fire protection services. Again, at that meeting we discussed the many shortcomings surrounding West End. However, between April and June, we also discovered the Attorney General's office was investigating West End regarding their acceptance of financial contributions, which has now been expanded to all company finances. The existing company members sought to circumvent their existing debts and maneuver around the elected Treasurer by opening accounts and registering an employer identification number (EIN), with a new company. However, these debts cannot be sidestepped and remain owed. The Township also learned, via a collection agency, that West End owes \$31,099.87 for equipment purchased on October 23, 2020. At the time of the Collection Agency reaching out to the Township for intervention, they had not paid any of that debt. Since that time, they have issued small payments to keep the agency at bay; however, the company still owes \$21,099.87 to date. The Collection Agency is still reaching out to the Township for guidance on how best to reach members of the company and obtain payment. The Township remains perplexed as to why this debt was never satisfied, being that on October 1, 2020, a few short weeks prior to this equipment purchase, the Township turned over the Fireman's Relief Association funds in the amount of \$21,154.30. We have yet to get a response from the company as to what that money was used for. The Attorney General's investigation remains open and we cannot offer further comment at this time.

The result of the aforementioned special meeting was; the Township agreeing to work with the Fire Company leadership and a Steering Committee, assembled by the Fire Company. We were meeting on a bi-weekly basis until early August, when they asked to reschedule due to other conflicts. During those meetings, the Township reiterated its stance to match fundraising and to fully fund a mailer to Township residents asking for donations. Since the Steering Committee was assembled, the Fire Company again, had a change in the President position. A full company meeting was said to be held on August 2, 2021, at which time the Police were called to intervene, resulting in no company meeting being held.

When the Township inquired as to why full company meetings were not being held, we were told when the Governor instituted COVID restrictions they stopped and the Fire Company's Board of Governors were tasked with running all operations. However, the Governor lifted those restrictions months ago, yet no meetings have been held and new leaders keep being dismissed and appointed. Overall, the meetings between the Township, Fire Company leadership and the Steering Committee did not result in any meaningful progress. There was too much focus on the internal politics of West End and not enough on creating a strategy to resolve the core issues that have plagued them. This is no reflection on the Steering Committee, we believe they experienced what the Township has been going through, which ultimately is a group that has no real interest in improving, but rather expects to be fully taxpayer funded; with no oversight. The previous years have shown what taxpayer funding and no oversight have resulted in; Chief's and Presidents with no pulse on the operations, allegations and arrests for embezzling funds, a complete disregard to building maintenance and a general attitude that can only be described as a misguided pride in being at odds with the Township.

President Miller opened up this up to discussion, as far as what Scott has stated. I know we had the meeting prior to this with the Fire Company and I know there were some concerns then, but we are now in a public meeting.

Commissioner Green stated; I have just recently heard the Fire Company's building insurance is going to be cancelled; is that true? Mr. Hutt noted; I received the same letter right before this meeting started. The building insurance is being dropped due to them being a high risk due to the amount of claims, those claims not being allocated properly and from what I understand; their management. Commissioner Green addressed the people that were from the Fire Company and present at the meeting; is that true? Are they dropping your insurance? Ms Kollar, from the Fire Company stated; we had no idea until a few minutes ago. Apparently, it was gotten eight days ago and we just got word of it now. Someone spoke out, asking; who signed for the letter? President Miller stated; we are in a public meeting, there is a comment section and we will be more than happy to allow you to comment then. President Miller then asked Commissioner Green if there was anything more he would like to add, with regards to the issues with the Fire Company. Commissioner Green commented; after hearing this with the building insurance being cancelled, that is just terrible. President Miller stated; what I recommend then is that we have an Executive Session. A decision may happen or may not, but for the record we will be coming back and ask you not to leave.

The Board of Commissioners adjourned into an Executive Session at 7:15 p.m.

Reconvened

The Board of Commissioner reconvened the Workshop Meeting at 7:30 p.m. President Miller stated; no finalization of anything happened and no decisions were made; we simply discussed things. At this time, I will reopen the discussion to the Board of Commissioners.

Commissioner Green commented; after hearing the Township Manager statistics information and hearing what we just found out about the Fire Company, I would like to propose this motion;

A motion by Commissioner Green, seconded by Commissioner La Rosa to suspend the relationship with West End Fire Company as the fire protector provider in West Pottsgrove Township and that we enter an agreement with Pottstown Borough to be our fire protection provider. Also, that we continue to work with the Steering Committee to assist in resolving their issues; financial etc. We believe fire protection services are a priority for our residents, and this time off from responding to calls would be a time to work on their issues. This is again, no reflection on the Steering Committee and we still intend on working with them as promised. Commissioner La Rosa seconded this motion. President Miller stated; before we take it to a vote, I would like to turn it over to anyone in the audience for any comments.

Eric Hoffman – 16 Fairview Street – commented; my only request would be that we postpone this motion for one meeting. We just found out about this today and would like the opportunity to reach out to West to see if there is anything that can be done about another provider. We still have insurance and didn't know anything about this until about twenty minutes ago. So, all I'm asking for is to postpone this vote right now for one meeting and give me the opportunity to collect more information and get back to you. I am not completely opposed to what you are thinking and I would like to try to resolve this without losing fire services for any period of time. Even if we were secondary, I don't want it shut down if we can avoid that. May I have a couple of days to review this and see what we can do? President Miller commented; to respond to your statement; it is our outlook and the vote has not been taken, but should the vote go towards the motions that were made; we would work with the Steering Committee and continue to have meetings on a regular basis with the hopes we can still turn it around. Mr. Hoffman commented; my only fear with that is; by stopping the fire service, might stop the fire members by participating and making any progress whatsoever. We've got two weeks until the next meeting; all I'm asking for is for you to postpone your vote and see what kind of information I can get to you. President Miller stated; so noted.

Lori Eckman – 915 Levensgood Road – I have already talked to Wes, and Wes is confused as to who he even needs to talk to within that fire department. Speaking of members; there has not been a company meeting since January, so whoever said the Board of Governors handles problems within the Fire Company as of right now; no they don't. Minutes of July 2020, which I have at my house states, that if we go into a different phase with COVID, then the Board of Governors handles all of the company business. We have not gone into a different phase. Everyone thinks I am against the Fire Department; I am not. I want this Fire Department to thrive as it has, but when you have people in the leadership roles that keep destroying that Fire Company, the inside of that Fire Company, the name of that company; they've destroyed everything. I just don't see how this can keep going. I've had the Police called on me for attending a meeting, myself and six other people and we're members; we were just sitting there waiting for the meeting to start and the Police come walking in; that's a great way to handle your members.

Kathleen Scully – noted; I am the Treasurer of the West End Fire Company. Due to situations that are still going on, people that are in spots that should not be in spots; I feel it's best to resign. I try as hard as I can to keep things going, but they sneak behind my back to get stuff, instead of coming to the Treasurer and asking for things for the Attorney General. I have had enough. I asked the Chief two times about money, and got told no two times from the Chief; and he is still there as Chief. I am resigning as of today.

Ms Kollar asked; are there two motions? President Miller explained; no, we have a motion by Commissioner Green, with a second by Commissioner La Rosa. We have a motion on the table and then opened it up for discussion before our voted. Ms Kollar commented; so we are not considering what Eric said. President Miller stated; that is a comment, the only ones that can make a motion is the Board. I assure you the same as I said to the other gentleman; our intention is to, one way or the other and it's our hope, regardless of the way the vote is, we would still meet with the Fire Company on a regular basis and hope the Fire Company can get themselves straightened out.

Mark Schaeffer – asked; within this motion, would you put a time frame on the suspension of the operation, or are you keeping that open-ended? Mr. Hutt stated; it would be for 18 months.

Eric Hoffman commented; up to 18 months? Mr. Hutt stated; it would be for 18 months. Mr. Hoffman stated; you are going to try and sign a contract with Pottstown then for 18 months? Mr. Hutt stated; yes.

Michelle Sassaman – asked; do you know how much that will cost to bring in the Pottstown Fire Company? Mr. Hutt noted; depending on Worker Comp and insurance rates, because they fluctuate; approximately \$135,000 to \$145,000. Ms Sassaman commented; and the Township will be paying that? Mr. Hutt noted; yes, just as we have been paying for the Fire Company.

Eric Hoffman - commented; if we continue with the Steering Committee and we do the fundraising match, can we consider an Escrow Account, continue that relationship and let the money sit until we resolve the Fire Company? President Miller stated; that could be something we could look at, yes. Commissioner Green stated; as long as you are working in good faith, why wouldn't we? President Miller stated; our intention here is to right the Fire Company and also preserve fire protection to the residents of the Township. If your intentions as a Steering Committee is to go and have that done, we can still have that open door so we can see that; that is our intention. It is not to say; we're done. Our intention is to, hopefully within that period of time, the Fire Company can be straightened out through the Steering Committee and the people of the Fire Company, and come back, as you spoke of earlier. That way we could have a better and stronger Fire Department. Mr. Hoffman commented; my intention is to still raise money for funds for the Fire Department for West Pottsgrove. President Miller commented; we are not closing the door, I just want you to understand that.

Evan Brandt, from the Pottstown Mercury - commented; does that mean when there is a fire call that West End is no longer permitted to respond? President Miller stated; that is correct, it would be Pottstown Fire Department.

Commissioner La Rosa commented; just so you know, I will still be your liaison and like it was said before; we are not closing the door, we will try to make things right.

President Miller stated; that all being said, I have a motion on the table from Commissioner Green, seconded by Commissioner La Rosa. Roll Call: Palladino; yes, Valentine; yes, Green; yes, La Rosa; yes, Miller; yes.

Mr. Hoffman asked; when does that take effect? Mr. Hutt stated; it takes effect now.

NEW BUSINESS

Pool Property Assets

Mr. Hutt reported; I am seeking approval from the Board to sell or donate all of the equipment we have at the old pool property. These materials include some refrigeration equipment, kitchen equipment, pool safety devices; things of that nature.

A motion by Commissioner La Rosa, seconded by Commissioner Green to approve selling or donating all of the equipment we have at the old pool property. Commissioner Valentine asked; what might be sold if we're going to have it as a park? Would we keep things like the benches? Mr. Hutt noted; most of the equipment, as the freezers we don't need multiple of, but we could keep the benches. Roll Call: Palladino; yes, Valentine; yes, La Rosa; yes, Green; yes, Miller; yes.

CITIZEN COMMENTS

Lori Eckman – 915 Levingood Road – noted; I am glad the Police Chief is here, because I am requesting more Police patrols up by my residence. Some of you might know, my vehicle was vandalized two weeks ago. I now have a camera sitting outside of my house, but I am requesting more Police drive by and patrol.

CORRESPONDENCE

There was none.

ADJOURNMENT

President Miller stated; I would again, like to thank our Representative; Tracy Pennycuick for taking her time and coming out this evening to our meeting, so from the Board of Commissioners; we thank you. We will be going in to another Executive Session. No official action or deliberation will occur at this Executive Session, instead it's for informational purposes and to discuss another personnel matter only.

A motion by Commissioner Green, seconded by Commissioner La Rosa to adjourn the Workshop Meeting and head into an Executive Session. Roll Call: Palladino; yes, Valentine; yes, La Rosa; yes, Green; yes, Miller; yes. The Workshop Meeting adjourned at 7:45 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,

*Joanne T. Herb
Township Secretary*