

Notes from the October 2020 meeting of the Hamilton, NY, Town Board (10.8.20)

The coronavirus pandemic's economic impact on Town operations becomes more focused at each new meeting of the Town Board.

The October 8 monthly meeting, held via Zoom, opened with a public hearing on a proposed local law that will allow the Town to override the State-mandated tax cap in preparing the 2021 operating budget. The State's tax cap for local governments and schools is tied to inflation and allows a 1.56 percent increase for 2021; the local law will allow the Town to increase taxes by 4.0 percent.

Town Supervisor Eve Ann Shwartz said that a potential loss in sales tax revenues and a likely reduction by 20 percent in State CHIPS funds (for local highways) and AIM funds (aid and incentives for municipalities) necessitate the tax cap override. The Town anticipates using \$126,500 from its fund balance (about 25 percent) to maintain operations and stay within the four percent tax increase. The proposed Town budget for 2021 includes no salary increase for Town employees, but must accommodate for mandated increases in costs such as health care and liability insurance.

Chris Rossi, the lone Town resident in attendance at the hearing, spoke in favor of the law. It was passed unanimously by the Board. The Board will now proceed to finalize the 2021 budget before a public hearing scheduled, via Zoom, beginning 6:30 p.m. on October 28. The budget will be adopted at the Board's November 12 monthly meeting.

Highway Superintendent Luke Dowsland provided a comprehensive report on work completed by the Town crew, including emergency clean-up of 14 trees downed in a windstorm the night before the board meeting. In addition to their normal workload, the crew regularly takes on maintenance and special projects at considerable savings to the Town. Last month, for example, the crew dug up and replaced the floor drain at the Town garage and replaced it with a DEC-approved oil and water separator. Dowsland estimated savings of at least \$10,000 by keeping the work in house. Scheduled replacement of Town equipment included the sale through auction of two trucks, a mowing tractor, and a grader. The Board authorized Dowsland to spend \$49,000 in FEMA funds to purchase materials in anticipation of a project scheduled to begin next spring on Borden Road.

Brush, limbs and refuse from tree-clearing projects have been accumulating at the Town garage. The Board's extended discussion of how best to reduce that accumulation to wood chips reflected the current financial pressures: A week's rent on a commercial "tub grinder" is \$20,000; a new wood chipper is a \$60,000 purchase that would serve the Town long term; and the same chipper can be rented for a month for \$4,000. The Board settled on renting the chipper and monitoring the costs of operation and maintenance to inform a future decision about buying a chipper.

Bookkeeper Brynley Wilcox reported that the State's annual AIM payment of \$35,347 was 20 percent lower than anticipated in the budget – a casualty of the pandemic economy. She and Board member Peter Darby have met with auditor Dan Farrow to review the 2019 audit, which is on file at the Town Office. The Board appropriated \$90,000 to pay current bills.

Town Clerk Sue Reymers anticipated that the new website will come on line October 22, improving the public's access to information about the Town. She is working with Board member Mary Dinski, assisted by the Partnership for Community Development, in preparing grant requests to support a community/meeting room at the new Town Office. Reymers continues coordinating the transition into the new Town Office, including adaptations to the operating system.

Codes Enforcement Officer Mark Miller's report reflected an active September.

Chris Rossi said the Zoning Update Committee met with the Town Council and members of the Planning Board and ZBA to discuss proposed density of development changes and the use of conservation subdivisions in the new zoning Law. Her committee will meet with the Town Council to discuss a draft noise law.

Rossi also represents the Town on the Hamilton Climate Preparedness Working Group. She said the group is working on a joint municipal Climate Action Plan (CAP) for the Village and the Town.

Mary Dinski reported on the Partnership for Community Development's work in support of local businesses and communities. PCD anticipates some challenges as a result of the pandemic economy. The Earlville for Earlville Project is progressing and the Cornell group working on the project has received 100 responses to its community survey.

The Board mourned the passing of Bill Nolan, a dedicated member of the Zoning Board of Appeals, and Bill Excell, mayor of Earlville.

The next regular meeting of the Board is scheduled November 12, 2020 at 6:30 p.m. via Zoom.

Reported for the Town Board by Jim Leach