

March 27, 2023

The special meeting was called to order at 6:00 p.m. by Mayor Chiariello who issued the formal statement in compliance with the provisions of the Open Public Meetings Act, Chapter 231, P.L. 1975.

Roll call was taken and present were: Mayor Chiariello, Deputy Mayor Clark, Councilwoman Quinn, Councilman Hertzberg, Councilman Blumetti, Interim Township Manager/CFO Grant Rome, Township Attorney Tom Ryan, and Assistant Township Clerk Roxanne Landy.

**Open Public Meetings Act-Executive Session:**

On motion by Deputy Mayor Clark, seconded by Councilman Blumetti and unanimously carried, the following resolution was duly adopted:

WHEREAS, Section 8 of the Open Public Meetings Act, Chapter 231, P.L. 1975, permits the exclusion of the public from a meeting in certain circumstances; and

WHEREAS, this public body is of the opinion that such circumstances presently exist.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED by the Township Council of the Township of Sparta, County of Sussex, State of New Jersey, as follows:

1. The public shall be excluded from discussion of an action upon the hereinafter specified subject matters.
2. The general nature of the subject matter to be discussed is as follows:
  - a. Personnel
  - b. Litigation
  - c. Contract Negotiations
  - d. Miscellaneous Legal Advice

It is anticipated at this time that the above stated subject matter will be made public when deemed appropriate.

This resolution shall take effect immediately.

On motion by Councilman Blumetti, seconded by Deputy Mayor Clark and unanimously carried, Council reconvened into public session at 7:00 p.m.

**Salute to the Flag:**

Mayor Chiariello led the assembly in a salute to the flag.

**Budget Discussion:**

Interim Manager Sam Rome began the discussion and stated that there would be a 0% tax increase for 2023. He indicated that he would be able to see what the County tax increase would be once it was up on their website. Mr. Rome stated that Sparta's tax collection rate was 99%. He indicated that there had been a large decrease of \$600,000 due to some grants. Discussions centered on additional upcoming grants.

In response to a question, Mr. Rome indicated that cable has been doing down consistently over the last several years due to people switching to fiber and satellite.

Mr. Rome stated that there had been an increase last year in the Township's normal fees and permits and there was about six million in surplus and was using five million for the budget.

In response to a question, Mr. Rome stated that in order to keep the capital amount up and the capital program going, he was using the extra five million towards capital projects that the Town pays for in cash.

Mr. Rome stated that the Township would be losing approximately \$500,000 worth of debt service payments this year because some of the old bonds would be paid off and the debt ratio was almost down to zero.

In response to a question, Mr. Rome stated that this year's surplus should be around 11 million.

In response to a question concerning how the surplus is calculated, Mr. Rome stated that the budget and the revenues had to equal. He stated that if the Township has a good year and has excess revenues, whatever the excess revenues is over top of what the budget was, that money automatically goes back to surplus.

In response to a question regarding the biggest driver of excess revenue, Mr. Rome stated that fees and permits were up and the town had received \$20,000 from Ogdensburg for taking over their court system.

In response to a question concerning the brownfield solar project, Mr. Rome stated that negotiations were still ongoing. He stated that the developers were working on changing the plot lines. He stated that once the developers break ground they might get started giving the Town partial payments. Mr. Rome indicated that the money would basically go into surplus and next year it could be used to pay for more capital projects in cash instead of bonding.

In response to a question regarding the Sparta Public Library, Mr. Rome stated that it was separated out because they have their own separate tax rate according to the State.

Under the general administration portion of the budget, Mr. Rome stated that there had been a 2% increase on most of the OES.

In response to a question regarding the Tax Department, Mr. Rome stated that an extra full time person had been hired for that office because the Tax Collector had been working short staffed for quite a while. He stated that the Collector deals with tax, water, sewer and garbage payments through her office and there is a heavy workload.

Discussions ensued on how to make the budget easier to read and understand.

Mr. Rome indicated that money was put into the budget to set up an Engineering Department with one full time engineer and possibly a part time assistant and for any other services that would be needed.

Discussions ensued regarding engineering costs and looking at different models before hiring an in house engineer.

Mr. Rome indicated that he would like to hire someone to do GIS mapping and maintain all of the Township's maps internally again.

Discussions centered on Planning and Zoning Board expenses and how the salaries are spread out across different categories between employees.

Discussions centered on an increase in salary for public buildings and grounds. Mr. Rome stated that it was for an in house cleaning person rather than an outside service.

Discussions centered on an increase in wages for the DPW employees. Mr. Rome stated that the contract for the rank and file had to be changed to a higher salary because the cost of a CDL license in New Jersey had increased and the higher wage was negotiated in their new contract.

In response to a question concerning telephone expenses, Mr. Rome stated that the Township has basically been operating on two systems and he was trying to get Century Link to remove their lines from the building. He stated that's where the extra charges were coming from. Discussions centered on how to get Century Link to remove its lines and stop billing the Township.

Discussions centered on EDC expenses. It was indicated that an economic development specialist had been brought in from the county to help businesses through the Township's processes, but that person has since left.

Discussions centered on sewer utility expenses and salaries. Mr. Rome stated that the Township had not instituted mandatory hookups for people in the sewer service area and the current customer base is too low to cover the bills that the Township currently pays. Mr. Rome stated that some monies had been received because of the conversion of the old sewer plant to a pump station and the Township saved between \$75,000 to \$100,000 a year in operating costs. Mr. Rome stated that pension costs were stable and he was able to keep the cost the same. He stated that social security went up as well as for the police and fire department. Mr. Rome indicated that the sewer expenses were up 8% because of SCMUA fees. He indicated that there was movement with VoTech with the purchase of the allocation to SCMUA. He stated that the pipes were being installed and was waiting for the paperwork to be signed off on.

In response to a question regarding what the total amount of taxes to be collected was, Mr. Rome stated that the total tax levy was \$105,000,000. He stated that the municipal portion was \$19,000,000 including the Library.

Discussions centered on the school budget and the increase in their tax rate. Mr. Rome stated that he would get the School Board's actual figures probably by next week.

In response to a question regarding the increases in taxes, Mr. Rome stated that on the municipal portion it would be \$4.77, \$153 for the school tax, \$.60 for Open Space and \$38.94 for the County.

Mr. Rome indicated that he would like to introduce the budget at the April 11<sup>th</sup> Council meeting.

In response to a question concerning the Planning Board and allocating money into relooking at design standards, Mr. Rome stated that he could put extra money under professional services in the Planning Board budget and take it out on the revenue side so that it doesn't change the tax rate.

Discussions centered on the Township's collection rate. The Tax Collector was recognized for the great work that she does with a 99% collection rate.

Discussions centered on the water utility. Mr. Rome stated that the Township was in the process of getting one water tank painted this year which usually costs about a half million dollars.

Discussions centered on the solid waste contract which is up next year. Mr. Rome stated that the Township made out quite well on the last contract with all of the fuel cost increases. Mr. Rome indicated that an additional condo association had been picked up into the contract last year. In response to a question, Mr. Rome stated that he would look into the recycling contract as well.

In response to a question as to if there were any areas in the budget that could be cut, Mr. Rome stated that he thought that the Township was good where it's at as far as services it provides. He stated that if the budget were lowered, the Town would just be putting more money into surplus. He stated that the Township collects 18% of the total tax levy and the rest goes to the County and the School Board.

In response to a question regarding surplus, Mr. Rome stated that the Township should have nine months of surplus to pay bills.

#### **Open to the Public:**

Christine Dunbar, 101 Wagon Wheel Road, addressed Council and thanked them for going over the budget. She stated that she was going to be expressing her concerns as a member of the Environmental Commission, as a citizen and as an environmentalist.

In response to her question regarding a Planning Board budget item, Councilman Blumetti stated that it was a combination of Harbor Consultants as the planner, Mr. Simmons the engineer and

Mr. Collins, the attorney. He stated that the total amount budgeted for the professionals was \$124,500.

Ms. Dunbar stated also that there were new storm water regulations coming up and there would need to be money put aside for that and it might be expensive.

Mayor Chiariello stated that he believed that Sparta was already meeting that higher standard because it is already a Tier A municipality.

Ms. Dunbar stated that municipalities would be receiving a \$25,000 grant and it would need to be applied for.

Ms. Dunbar stated that her sewer bill in Sparta Commons was very high. Councilwoman Quinn stated that the municipality was trying very hard to get more customers into the system in order to lower the cost.

Ms. Dunbar expressed her concerns regarding the road salt management situation in Sparta. She stated that the Environmental Commission had taken a serious look at road salt management and had made some specific recommendations. She stated also that the recommendations should be considered before any decision is made on the size of a salt dome to be purchased. She stated that air temperatures were warmer and the Township might be able to do with less salt on the roadways. She stated that as a teacher she has looked at the science from NOAA and NASA.

Ms. Dunbar stated that a lot of wells are located near the area of the Paulinskill Water Shed in the ED zone and there needed to be care taken with salting around those areas because it can get into the groundwater. She stated that she had done monitoring of the water and the readings were not good in terms of salinity and it could have health effects. She stated that it could be mitigated by just putting down the correct amount of salt according to the weather. She stated that the salt trucks could be upgraded and the cost would be between five to ten thousand dollars per truck. She stated that a highly recommended conservation organization's consultant was available to answer any questions they may have about the new automated devices that are available.

In response to a question, Ms. Dunbar stated that some water tests that she had done on Demarest Road showed a high level of salinity and some surface water in the Fox Hollow area are of moderate concern. She stated that the water in the lower Paulinskill was much cleaner.

Councilwoman Quinn stated that she would be interested in hearing from Jim Zepp, the DPW Director and what he believes would be a good path forward. She stated further that Sparta's topography had to be taken into consideration and felt that Mr. Zepp would be in the best position to point the Township in the right direction.

Ms. Dunbar stated that an outside opinion might also be valuable to consider as well. In response to a question, Ms. Dunbar stated that some towns by the shore were decreasing their salt usage. She asked Council to take it into consideration as far as the size of a salt dome and keep in mind that most municipalities put down much more than they really need to on roadways and with the automation on the trucks it would really help.

Deputy Mayor Clark stated that the level of salinity would need to be identified and how the change in salt distribution would lead to less salinity levels.

Councilwoman Quinn stated also that if accidents started happening because the township switched to a different model, the township would be held liable. She stated that more data needed to be collected and Jim Zepp should be part of that process.

Councilman Blumetti stated that it never hurt to bring in an outside professional to give an opinion and he believed that there could be a balance struck for salt usage without compromising safety.

Ms. Dunbar stated that she had hoped to get a written response from Mr. Zepp or the Engineer as to salt disbursement management. Mr. Rome stated that he would find out a status from Mr. Zepp and stated further that he thought that there were units in the trucks that measured salt.

Ms. Dunbar stated that the people at the Musconetcong Water Shed do seminars on road salt management. Ms. Dunbar stated further that they were looking for a state-of-the-art truck in New Jersey so that they can invite DPW to come and look at it.

Ms. Dunbar stated that the Township has reached the bronze level for sustainability and were going for the gold. She stated that the Environmental Commission was supporting green businesses and open space through different programs and some extra money would be appreciated.

No one else wished to be heard and this portion of the meeting was closed.

**Adjournment:**

No one else wished to be heard and no further business was brought up, motion was made by Deputy Mayor Clark, seconded by Councilman Blumetti and unanimously carried to adjourn at 9:31 p.m.

Respectfully submitted

Roxanne Landy, RMC  
Assistant Municipal Clerk