



BOROUGH OF LEONIA

COUNCIL- Special Meeting
~ Minutes ~

Trina Lindsey, Borough Clerk

312 Broad Avenue
Leonia, NJ 07605
<http://www.leonianj.gov/>

March 27, 2023

7:30 pm

Leonia Senior Center

A Special Meeting of the Mayor and Council of the Borough of Leonia was held in person at the Leonia Senior Center at 305 Beechwood Place, Leonia, NJ, and virtually via GoToMeeting on March 27, 2023. The meeting was called to order at 7:30 PM by Mayor Zeigler.

Those present were led in the Flag Salute by Council President Grandelis.

A moment of silence was observed for the victims of the March 27, 2023 Nashville School Shooting.

Mayor Zeigler read the following statement: "In compliance with the Open Public Meetings Act, the notice requirements have been satisfied. The meeting dates for the year are confirmed at the Annual Reorganization Meeting, are posted on the public bulletin board in Borough Hall and on the Borough website, published in the Record within the first 10 days of the New Year, and copies are sent to the Star Ledger. Notice of this meeting by the March 24, 2023 Sunshine Notice containing the time, date, and access information was sent to the Record, Star Ledger, and has been posted at the Borough Hall and on the Borough website."

PRESENT: Mayor Judah Zeigler, Council President Louis Grandelis, Councilwoman Maureen Davis, Councilman Pasquale Fusco, Councilman Christoph Hesterbrink, Councilwoman Joanne Terrell, and Councilman William Ziegler

ABSENT: None

ALSO PRESENT: Borough Administrator Andrea Wardrop
Borough Clerk Trina Lindsey
Deputy Borough Clerk Jonathan Mandel

Public Comment

Mayor Zeigler read into the record two letters from ACS students.

Matthew Piao:

“Dear Mayor the library is a really big part of the town and my birthday is coming up. So it would mean a lot. Stop the budget or cut only a little cut. Please stop. It is important because of people who can’t afford books can go there and get books. Please. Please.”

Giuliana Mena:

“Mayor Zeigler, I can’t believe you would cut the library budget so I want you to stop cutting the budget. Please stop, please. The \$60,000 why? I love the library so I am going to ask you to put it on the new. Stop cutting the budget.

Diane Scarangella, 217 Harrison Street, wished to express how pleased she is to know that the Mayor and Council appreciate and acknowledge how important the library is to the community. Ms. Scarangella hopes that a solution can be found that would help alleviate the burden of the cuts so that the library will not feel as much of a hit.

Rose Ann Magaldi, 144 Christie Street, expressed her inability to find any information on the website regarding the budget and facts relating to it. Ms. Magaldi wished to know where she may find this information and asked for the process that was followed to determine how to create a proposal for what was perceived to be an appropriate deduction for each department’s budget. Ms. Magaldi also wished to know how proposed budget cuts would affect library services and if it was possible to publicly raise funds to be given to the library.

Lela Charney, 140 Highwood Avenue, read into the record “These are perilous times and the need for accessible educational, social, and cultural programs is great. Leonia Library has always offered a wide range of relevant creative and vital programs, up-to-date information, technology, and a range of educational opportunities for growth and development. To me, we need it more than ever. I realize that the budgetary challenges for a small municipality is great, but cutting the library is not the way to go for a healthy community. The Leonia Library like the schools also sells Leonia, just imagine a town without a library. People are seeking communities that value learning, certainly true in Leonia, this is a town that does value learning. I understand that our library is one of the most active libraries in the county, an indication of its value. All are welcome, all are celebrated, and the access to information is open to anyone without charge, a basic foundation in democracy. I urge the Mayor and Council to work with the community to find ways to maintain the funding of the library.”

Suzanne Dickerson, 400 Allaire Avenue, read a letter from Leonia Arts expressing the value the organization has of the library and the hope that budget cuts may be avoided.

Beth Guttman, 118 Eastview Avenue, wished to express her support of the library and her family’s love of Maker’s Day.

Marion Komar, 248 Christie Heights Street, hopes that some cuts can be reduced and some adjustments can be made due to the library’s high usage.

Carolyn Pekse Steinberg, 541 Ridgeland Terrace, expressed that library programs are just as important as other departments’ services and wished to know what would be the tax cost should the library have no cuts. Ms. Steinberg stated that she would feel comfortable having her taxes increased by an amount of around \$20 and feels that other Leonians would as well.

Donna Racik, 342 Park Avenue, seconded the comments made by Ms. Steinberg and stated she would like to know what the percentages are that are proposed to be cut from each department's budget. Ms. Racik spoke about how Leonians care about one another and it is what makes the community special, with the library representing the town's cultural diversity and community.

Mike DeGidio, 408 Grand Avenue, wished to bring attention to how one of the proposed budget cuts is not replacing a police officer whose role has recently become vacant. Mr. DeGidio wished to bring attention to this issue as one of the most consistent concerns within the municipality is over traffic and pedestrian safety. Mr. DeGidio applauded the Mayor and Council on their successes in building the Leonia Police Department and stated that he would hate to see this progress stopped.

Susan Boyd, 112 Prospect Street, stated that the library holds a special place in the hearts of Leonians and expressed her hope that those budget cuts are aligned between departments. Ms. Boyd spoke as to the generosity of the Leonia Libraries donators and of the various programs offered to the public, inviting others to visit the library to see the programs for themselves.

Betty Carillo, 350 Sylvan Avenue, spoke as to the "third of a mil" term that has been spoken about concerning minimum funding, stating that it is a number given by the state based upon rateables. Ms. Carillo explained that the "third of a mil" differs from municipality to municipality and that Leonia does not have many rateables and thus does not have as high of a baseline. Ms. Carillo further spoke as to the retiree benefit's impact on the budget of the library.

Mayor Zeigler replied to Ms. Carillo to reiterate that his previous statement on retiree benefits was that there was always a need for the library to fund retiree benefits but it wasn't followed by the municipality. Due to this, it was not an agreement by the library to fund retiree benefits but their statutory obligation.

Mayor Zeigler explained that the same budget process was followed for every department within the municipality, with a meeting in December being held with every department head to discuss their submissions. Follow-up was held to determine how over the budget cap the municipality was with the state's mandated insurance and pension increases. Statutorily the municipality may only increase the budget by 2%, with the proposed budget being way over that. The CFO created a list of cuts after meetings with the various department heads to help curtail the budget increase.

About whether fundraising can be used for a specific purpose, the mayor stated that he was unaware of the regulations surrounding it. Ms. Boyd, as President of the Library Board, explained that fundraiser funds can be used for particular purposes as designated by the donation but may not be used for the staff.

Mayor Zeigler stated that he does not wish for there to be a situation where there is thought as to whether or not it should be one department or another who is to shoulder the burden of cuts, as it is a slippery slope to delve into. It is the Mayor and Council's intent to try and minimize the pain each department feels by equally spreading cuts. Mayor Zeigler noted that it is typically unproductive to pit one institute against another.

Mayor Zeigler noted that the budget challenges for municipalities both large and small are difficult and reiterated that many of these issues would not be occurring if the Governor and state elected officials did what was right.

Non-Consent Resolutions

RES. 2023-98 Corrective Resolution – Lease of Borough Property

[2023-98 Corrective Resolution – Lease of Borough Property.pdf](#)

Borough Administrator Wardrop explained that RES. 2023-89 is a corrective resolution to correct RES. 2023-89, which had an incorrect address listed.

Motion by Councilwoman Davis, second by Councilman Fusco, that Resolution #2023-98 be approved.

On a roll call, the vote was recorded as follows:

| | | | |
|------------------------------|-----|-------------------------|-----|
| Council President Grandelis: | aye | Councilman Hesterbrink: | aye |
| Councilwoman Davis: | aye | Councilwoman Terrell: | aye |
| Councilman Fusco: | aye | Councilman Ziegler: | aye |

Consent Resolutions

RES. 2023-96 Authorize the Submission of a Bergen County Community Development Block Grant'

[2023-96 CBDG Project – Beechwood Place Road Impro.pdf](#)

[Beechwood Place – Engineer Cost Est.pdf](#)

RES. 2023-97 Authorize Advertisement for Temporary Seasonal Help for the DPW

[2023-97 Temp Seasonal DPW – Auth to Advertise.pdf](#)

Motion by Councilman Ziegler, second by Councilman Fusco, that the Consent Agenda

On a roll call, the vote on the Consent Agenda was recorded as follows:

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|------------------------------|-----|-------------------------|-----|
| Council President Grandelis: | aye | Councilman Hesterbrink: | aye |
| Councilwoman Davis: | aye | Councilwoman Terrell: | aye |
| Councilman Fusco: | aye | Councilman Ziegler: | aye |

Review of 2023 Operating Budget

Borough Administrator Wardrop began the discussion of the 2023 Operating Budget, making note of a small change in the inclusion of Recreation salaries and wages. The new budget amount is \$17,776,513.

The Mayor and Council reviewed the percentage budget cuts proposed for each department of the Borough of Leonia. Councilman Hesterbrink noted that from his understanding of the budget the proposed library cut is higher than the other departments and that bringing the cuts down to an equitable level is what the Governing Body should focus on.

Council President Grandelis stated that as a Governing Body, it is their decision to be made what cuts can be deemed necessary based upon the Chief Financial Officer's

recommendations. If it is the will of the Governing Body, they should review the budget and make the changes where possible.

Mayor Zeiger stated that the Mayor and Council are obligated to look through every proposed cut for every department.

Councilwoman Davis believes that an important piece of information to keep in mind is that many items within the budget are contractual. One such item that was cut was an entire position, as noted by Mr. DeGidio. Councilwoman Davis noted that as someone who has been involved in pedestrian safety for the past eight years, she is aware that the number of officers translates to safety. Councilwoman Davis expressed that budget cuts, even those seen as discretionary, can have a large impact on services. In particular, Councilwoman Davis stated that it would be a disservice to cut the training budget any further because a sizeable amount of the current police force was hired within the past two to three years. Councilwoman Davis stated that more could be cut from each department's budget, but to do so would mean cutting into essential services.

Mayor Zeigler confirmed with Councilwoman Davis that her stance is that she is not in favor of the \$5,000 cut for professional services and training. Councilwoman Davis stated that she is not happy with many of the other proposed cuts to other departments as well.

Council President Grandelis stated that as part of the budgeting process, one of the many goals was to get the Borough of Leonia as many resources as possible for departments such as the health department, where grant opportunities are helping to provide the services of a health educator at no additional cost to the Borough. Council President Grandelis clarified that the suggestion to reduce the funding of professional development was made by the Police Committee and that the list of proposed cuts is a mixture of items from both the Chief Financial Officer and offsets discussed at the committee level.

Councilman Fusco questioned the difference in the proposed budget and actual spending in 2022, as the actual was much lower than what was proposed. Mayor Zeigler replied that the great fallacy is that by state regulation municipalities must compare budget to budget and not the actuals and budget. Councilman Fusco further questioned the disparity between what would be passed with the proposed cuts versus what was spent in 2022.

Mayor Zeigler stated that the big increase from last year's budget is the inclusion of state health benefits. Mayor Zeigler observed that if the Borough of Leonia were to increase the budgeting of the health benefits by a 22.6% increase it would be closer to 1.8 million, rather than the 2 million that is currently being budgeted.

Borough Administrator Wardrop replied that what is being budgeted for state health benefits in 2023 is based on invoice amounts. Consideration must be taken for how some individuals will change from single plans to family plans or to another plan entirely that would have different premiums. The January invoice is what is used to project the costs for the year.

Mayor Zeigler wished to know the amount that was invoiced in the year prior, as if the state is in the habit of invoicing more than the actual cost it may be possible to cut some of the funding from insurance to lessen the burden elsewhere.

Borough Administrator Wardrop replied that based on the employee census the invoiced amount is what the state will be billing the Borough.

Mayor Zeigler stated that if it is known that the state tends to be inaccurate in insurance billing, the Borough should be able to reduce the amount budgeted for it. Mayor Zeigler suggested that the budget for insurance be reduced by \$60,000.

Councilman Hesterbrink wished to know if the health benefits invoice includes the police officer who is set to retire. Borough Administrator Wardrop replied that the individual receives retiree health benefits.

Borough Administrator Wardrop reiterated that the invoice for state health benefits is based on census data received during open enrollment in October.

Mayor Zeigler responded that he believes that the Borough of Leonia would be very safe reducing the insurance budget by \$60,000 and would veto any budget that has an insurance line item higher than \$60,000 less than what is stated on the invoice.

Councilman Fusco stated that overbudgeting for what is needed is a problem that faces all levels of government, especially on the state and federal levels.

Mayor Zeigler expressed that it is the obligation of the Mayor and Council to call the state on their bluff as it is residents' tax dollars that are at stake.

Councilwoman Davis wished to know if legally the January invoice must be used in budgeting or if it can be changed. Borough Administrator Wardrop replied that it is typical to use the invoice to budget for the year but it is allowed to not follow it if you wish to budget another amount.

Borough Administrator Wardrop explained that the Borough of Leonia is allowed to budget however much they want but at the end of the year if there is a lack of funds a fund transfer might be necessary.

Mayor Zeigler listed other items that could be spared a cut by cutting from the insurance budget.

It was confirmed by the Borough Administrator that the \$2,000 being cut from the Borough Prosecutors funds is a correction to an error that overbudgeted the line item.

Further discussion was held over the proposed budget cuts to the Police Department relating to an officer's retirement. Councilwoman Davis provided further explanation as to the reasoning behind the cuts and pending concerns held within the department. Mayor Zeigler expressed his concern over cutting money from items such as community policing relations.

Mayor Zeigler questioned what is the life hazard use fees line items, as it is currently being cut by 100%. Borough Administrator Wardrop replied that Fire Prevention had confirmed that it was an item that could be cut from the budget with no issues. Councilman Ziegler added to the point by stating that from his discussions with the CFO, he learned it was a double-funded item and thus could very safely be taken away from the budget.

Mayor Zeigler held reservations over cutting funds from committees such as the Stigma Free Task Force.

Councilman Ziegler expressed his agreement with Mayor Zeigler on taking funding from the insurance invoice to reduce budget cuts elsewhere. Councilman Ziegler also mentioned his

appreciation to the CFO for his suggestions but stated that as has been shown through the hearings the "1/3rd of a mil" funding is not enough for the value of Leonian's place in their library. Councilman Ziegler further spoke as to the Police Department budget and his desire to see the funding restored for training and the wisdom of pushing back the potential hire of another officer with the budget as it stands.

Councilwoman Davis expressed that the Police Chief may agree with the decision to push back a potential hire but is not in support of it.

Councilman Ziegler spoke as to the funding received by the America Rescue Act in the amount of about \$472,000 per year for both 2022 and 2023. In 2024, the Borough of Leonia will not have this additional \$472,000. Councilman Ziegler wished to know as members of the Governing Body had the option to spread out this payment to minimize the hit.

Mayor Zeigler clarified that the \$472,000 must be spent this year or else it is forfeited. Councilman Ziegler in response reiterated that it must be taken into consideration that the Borough of Leonia will not have this assistance in the year to come.

Councilman Fusco commented that this amount is not a gift but rather that it was paid for already through federal taxes to the government.

Mayor Zeigler confirmed with the Borough Administrator that tipping fees could be confidently reduced.

Mayor Zeigler proposed that the following items previously proposed as budget cuts be reintroduced to the budget:

- The \$3,500 for the Stigma-Free Taskforce's budget.
- The \$14,000 for the Special I Police Department role.
- The \$5,000 for professional development in the Police Department.
- The \$2,000 for community policing.
- The \$2,300 for fire prevention.
- The \$60,000 for the library.

These items total to an amount of \$86,800 no longer being proposed cuts from the budget.

With Mayor Zeigler also proposing a cut to the insurance line item in the amount of \$100,000, the Borough of Leonia will be saving an additional \$13,200.

Mayor Zeigler requested a motion to approve this course of action. Motion by Councilwoman Davis, Second by Councilman Ziegler.

On a roll call, the vote on Mayor Zeigler's changes to the proposed budget was recorded as follows:

| | | | |
|------------------------------|-----|-------------------------|-----|
| Council President Grandelis: | aye | Councilman Hesterbrink: | aye |
| Councilwoman Davis: | aye | Councilwoman Terrell: | aye |
| Councilman Fusco: | aye | Councilman Ziegler: | aye |

The Chief Financial Officer was directed to put the proposed line items back into the budget and make the \$100,000 reduction to prepare the budget for its introduction.

Adjournment:

There being no further business to come before the Mayor and Council, on a motion by Councilman Ziegler, second by Councilwoman Davis, and unanimously carried, to adjourn this meeting. The meeting was adjourned at 8:54 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Jonathan Mandel,
