

**MINUTES
HAZLETON CITY COUNCIL
REGULAR MEETING
TUESDAY, JANUARY 14, 2025**

Call to Order: Council met at a Regular Meeting session on Tuesday, January 14, 2025, in Council Chambers. The meeting was called to order at 6:08 p.m.

Silent Meditation and Pledge of Allegiance: A silent moment was taken followed by the Pledge of Allegiance.

Roll Call: Bruno-present; Colombo-present; Nilles-present (via telephone); Ondishin-present; Perry-present

Minutes of Previous Meetings: The minutes of the December 17, 2024, Regular Meeting were approved unanimously.

Presentations/Proclamations/Communications: None

Bid Opening: None

Courtesy of the Floor (ON AGENDA ITEMS ONLY): Dee Deakos, 43 Mine Street, Hazleton, spoke of ***Ordinance 2025-1*** An Ordinance Authorizing the Erection of Stop Signs and Creating a 4-way Stop at the Intersection of Ferrara Avenue and Terrace Boulevard. Deakos said she is against the fact that they want to change the way the City votes in elections. She stated the City cannot change their form of government because residents do not come out to vote. Deakos said rather than spending money on a lawsuit, there should be education in the voting process. She said this is “deluding” the resident’s vote. Deakos stated the Department of Justice is wrong in bringing this lawsuit against the City.

Atty. Logsdon stated Ordinance 2025-1 was not done in response to the DOJ lawsuit.

Mark Rabo, 1st Street, Hazleton, spoke of the raising the EIT above the “cap” limit. He said only Home Rule municipalities are allowed to go above the ACT 511 “cap” limit. He said the PA State Legislature should amend ACT 511 to include the 11 optional Plan municipalities in PA. He is asking City Council to “hold off” in passing Ordinance 2025-1. He stated the City of Lancaster had put in the same ordinance. Rabo stated 68.2% of Lancaster residents agreed with the new form of government. Rabo said it would take a long time to complete the government change.

ORDINANCES AND RESOLUTIONS:

ORDINANCES:

(1ST READING)

Ordinance 2025-1

An Ordinance of the Hazleton City Council Placing a Government Study Commission Question on the 2025 Primary Election Ballot and Designating the Number of Members to Serve on Said Commission (**1st READING**)

Presented by Perry. Seconded by Ondishin.

On the Question:

Mayor Cusat stated the City has been planning to change their form of government since being under the ACT 47 Plan. He said the City was afforded certain revenue sources that were not under the current Optional Plan law. Mayor Cusat said he reached out to several other municipalities with the same form of government, but they did not want to get involved. He wants the City to be able to utilize revenue sources, and not always use the real estate property tax revenue. He said there are other options, and the City could adopt them and call it Home Rule. Mayor Cusat stated during the study, the election process will “come up”. He said if any of the suggestions brought up, by the Department of Justice would come up; they will be discussed. He said this ordinance is in no response to the DOJ's complaint. He stated after the City reviewed their budget, they decided to change their form of government. Mayor Cusat said the, current, City's form of government is over 30 years old.

Bruno asked if there is any benefit to waiting on this ordinance. Mayor Cusat said no. He said February 18th is the first date, to get signatures, to run. He said this commission would require at least seven people to run for the commission seats. Mayor Cusat said they would need time to get signatures. He stated there may be a rush to get the Bureau of Elections to put a referendum on the ballot. He stated the City is already late in the process.

Perry stated the last Government Study Commission was performed, in the City, in 1984. He asked Mayor Cusat if the City would create what they want on the ballot. Mayor Cusat said the City would create a Government Study Commission, including seven members, and inquire of past and present employees of the City. He said there would be their findings, placed on the ballot as a “whole” for the residents to vote on. He said the City is one of the fastest growing cities in PA.

Perry stated the City may need to create more City jobs to take care of the issues. He said the City Code Book has changed over time. Atty. Logsdon stated this is perfect timing for a change.

Roll Call: Bruno-yes; Colombo-yes; Nilles-yes; Ondishin-yes; Perry-yes

ORDINANCE PASSES UNANIMOUSLY ON 1st READING

Ordinance 2025-2 An Ordinance Authorizing the Erection of Stop Signs and Creating a 4-way Stop at the Intersection of Ferrara Avenue and Terrace Boulevard (**1st READING**)

Presented by Ondishin. Seconded by Nilles.

On the Question:

Perry stated this is a new road, David Avenue, that is finished in the City. Atty. Logsdon showed all City Council members, on the computer GIS system, the area which the stop signs would be placed. He said the intent is to slow down traffic in this Heights area and abide by the speed limit. Perry said this would give this area, of the City, the ability to expand.

Perry asked if the City needs to have an ordinance to change the name of the street. Mayor Cusat said, eventually, there will be an ordinance for this change.

Roll Call: Bruno-yes; Colombo-yes; Nilles-yes; Ondishin-yes; Perry-yes

ORDINANCE PASSES UNANIMOUSLY ON 1st READING

(2ND READINGS)

None

RESOLUTIONS:

Resolution 2025-1 A Resolution Updating the Fee Schedule for the City of Hazleton

Presented by Nilles. Seconded by Ondishin.

On the Question:

Mayor Cusat said there are only three changes to the City's Fee schedule. He said two changes are to include an interpreting fee for the Zoning hearings of \$100.00 per case. He stated the third change is to set an escrow account for big projects coming into the City. He said this account would be for \$3,000. Perry asked if the Fee Schedule is available for anyone walking into City Hall. Mayor Cusat stated the City's Fee Schedule is on the City's website. Atty. Logsdon said the new fees are very reasonable. He said there has been an increase in the advertising fees. He stated the \$3,000 escrow fund is for professional reviews of large land development projects in the City.

Roll Call: Bruno-yes; Colombo-yes; Nilles-yes; Ondishin-yes; Perry-yes

RESOLUTION PASSES UNANIMOUSLY

New Business: None.

Old Business: None.

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Comments from the Audience: Mark Rabo, 1st Street, Hazleton, said the City of Hazleton could put the question of changing the City's form of government on the general election ballot. He said question #3, in Ordinance 2025-1, allows the City to go either way, Home Rule or amend Optional Plan. Mayor Cusat said the City wants to be recognized as a Home Rule City and under a Home Rule Charter. He said, then, the City could modify the EIT tax. Rabo said the current governing body would need to rewrite the

administrative code. Rabo said Nanticoke did rush this process through; they were caught in a “whiplash”.

Renee Forte, 762 North Laurel Street, Hazleton, said she received a letter from Code Department employee, Alexis McGeehan. She said the letter was dated January 7, 2025, in reference to a rental property at 762 Laurel Street, Hazleton. The letter stated Forte did not have a business license. She stated the bill was \$375.00. Forte spoke to McGeehan and explained the property is a double-garage, with a “shell of building on top” used for storage. Forte stated, the next day, she received a call from Harriera Property Registry. She said McGeehan called Harriera to give them all her personal information. Forte received a phone call from Diane Panzarella, City Code Department Manager. Panzarella told Forte her garage did not have water or sewer, and this property is considered abandoned. Forte received a copy of the City ordinance, and told Panzarella that she and her husband are not landlords. Forte said Panzarella “started on her” about all of her code violations. Forte received a code letter, several days later, regarding chipped paint, windows covered by a solid piece of wood- which the City Code Department told Forte to do that, steps that are leaning, and the sauna tube which needs to be replaced. Forte said winter is not the best time to fix these violations. She said this is “spite-work” by Panzarella. Forte said Panzarella should worry about the other dilapidated properties in the City.

Mayor Cusat asked Forte if the garage and house are on two separate deeds. Forte stated the house is on one deed, with a business garage behind their house. Mayor Cusat said anyone who owns two or more properties were sent a letter about being a landlord renter, and if there was a dispute, to come to City Hall and discuss the issue. Mayor Cusat said Forte’s property would be considered vacant, and not an abandoned property. Mayor Cusat said according to the City ordinance, if there are two separate properties, the one is considered a rental. He said Forte could appeal this issue before City Council. Forte wants this resolved before the February 22, 2025 date she was given to fix her code violations. Ondishin and Perry told Forte she could send her emails to them.

Laura Stancu, North Poplar Street, Hazleton, spoke of the recent Department of Justice lawsuit filed against the City. She said this is wrong, it is discrimination, and they are trying to take the City residents rights away. Stancu said the City is growing. Stancu asked why Hazleton is always targeted. She told Mayor Cusat she supports him “100%”.

Eliesel Lazala, 611 Alter Street, Hazleton, stated he is a student at the Hazleton Area Academy of Science School. He stated HASD has only one translator. He said there is a high population of Hispanics in the City. He said there are no translators at the Stem School, or the Castle school. He said they had spoken to the HASD, but nothing has been done. Perry said the City has nothing to do with the Hazleton Area School District. Mayor Cusat asked Lazala if anyone had gone to the Hazleton Area School board meetings. He suggested Lazala get as many people as possible to go to the meetings and address this issue at their podium.

Atty. Logsdon said City Council and Mayor Cusat do not have jurisdiction over the HASD but are able to give the City’s opinion. Atty. Logsdon said the HASD should be providing language access for all students.

Atty. Logsdon stated due to the recent Department of Justice recent lawsuit against the City, there could be no discussion regarding the matter. He said the City is taking it very seriously, and has submitted this to their carrier. He said the City has disagreed with what was in the lawsuit. Atty. Logsdon said the City

will continue to listen to people in this community. He stated the City has sent a press release regarding this issue.

Perry stated this lawsuit is a disservice to everyone in the City.

Comments from Mayor: None

Comments from City Administrator: None

Comments from Council: Colombo congratulated the HASD FBLA for sending many students to the PA States.

Colombo reminded all to check on their neighbors and “fur babies” in this winter weather.

Ondishin said he is upset about the recent DOJ lawsuit.

Perry said the City will deal with the DOJ lawsuit “as it comes across their desk”. He thanked Forte and all the City residents for coming to speak at the City Council meeting. He stated the City residents could send any emails to the City Clerk or to the City Council members.

Comments from Junior Council: Mateo Feola stated there are 69 members of the Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA) going to the FBLA PA State Conference. Feola is the FBLA Hazleton Area Chapter President, and was elected Region 16 FBLA President.

Adjournment: Perry motioned to adjourn the meeting. The meeting was adjourned at 7:14 p.m.