

**MINUTES
HAZLETON CITY COUNCIL
REGULAR MEETING
TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 12, 2024**

Call to Order: Council met in a Regular Meeting session on Tuesday, November 12, 2024 in Council Chambers. The meeting was called to order at 6:01 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; Ondishin-present; Perry-absent

Minutes of Previous Meetings: The minutes of the October 8, 2024, Regular Meeting were approved unanimously.

Presentations/Proclamations/Communications: Oath of Office was given to incoming Junior Council Members

Ondishin gave the Oath of Office to all incoming Junior Council members.

Bid Opening: None

Courtesy of the Floor (ON AGENDA ITEMS ONLY): Dee Deakos, 43 Mine Street, Hazleton, spoke of Resolution 2024-50. She asked what market lease is the City talking about. Ondishin said this references to the evaluation of HCA.

Allison Leonard, 107 Franklin Street, Hazleton, spoke of Ordinance 2024-21. She asked what ordinance this clarifies and is it included in the agenda packet. The City Clerk said no, the past ordinance is not included in the agenda packet.

Atty. James Brando, Slusser Law Office, said he is here, tonight, to represent his client, Regina Fisher. He said the ordinance is Ordinance 2024-17.

J.T. Klein, 226 E. 1st Street, Hazleton, spoke of Ordinance 2024-21. He said “they” still have a guy who cannot get a pension check, but the City wants to change the pension ordinance.

ORDINANCES AND RESOLUTIONS:

ORDINANCES:

(1ST READING)

Ordinance 2024-21

An Ordinance Amending the Code of the City of Hazleton to Reconcile and Incorporate the Pensions (FIRE, POLICE AND NON-UNIFORM) Pursuant to Ordinance NO. 2022-3, SECTION 1-10) (1st **READING**)

Presented by Nilles. Seconded by Ondishin.

On the Question:

Mayor Cusat said in the 2002 Code Book, all of the City pensions were eliminated from the Code Book. He said the City “pulled” all of the City pension ordinances, back to 1939, re-typed them, and “red-lined” them. Mayor Cusat said the City will put back all the pension ordinances back into the 2022 Code Book. He said this process will be completed by 2025. He stated no changes were made. He stated the pension ordinance will be in one chapter.

Nilles said this gives all the City unions three weeks to come back and discuss any issue. Mayor Cusat agreed.

J.T. Klein asked why the City’s pension board cannot review this ordinance. Mayor Cusat said the City’s pension board is an investment board. Allison Leonard said if there are questions, this ordinance should be tabled.

Ondishin stated it would be good to “go” on the first reading and “get it moving”. Bruno said there is still time for any City union to review the pension ordinance.

An audience member stated the police and fire unions are not happy. He asked if Mayor Cusat will send this to the City union president’s. Mayor Cusat said he will send an email to all union presidents.

Nilles stated there are thirty “some” documents, in the pension file, and the City is putting them into one ordinance.

Mayor Cusat stated he wants to get this process done for the pensions to be in the 2025 City Codification Book.

Roll Call: Bruno=yes; Colombo=no; Nilles=yes; Ondishin=yes; Perry=absent

ORDINANCE PASSES 3-1-0 ON 1st READING

(2ND READINGS)

Ordinance 2024-17

An Ordinance Authorizing the Vacation of a Portion of an Unnamed “Paper Street” Between Branch Court and Lincoln Street in the City of Hazleton (2nd **READING**)

**NO MOTION TO REMOVE FROM TABLE
ORDINANCE DIES**

Ordinance 2024-18 An Ordinance Authorizing the Vacation of a Portion of an Unnamed “Paper Street” Identified as an Extension of N. Pine Street and located North of E. Holly Street in the City of Hazleton (**2nd READING**)

MOTION TO REMOVE FROM TABLE

Presented by Nilles. Seconded by Bruno.

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

MOTION TO REMOVE FROM TABLE PASSES 4-0

On the Question:

Mayor Cusat said the owner of both properties owns the entire length “on both sides”. Atty. Robert Sensky discussed this “paper street” area to City Council members.

Presented by Nilles. Seconded by Colombo.

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

ORDINANCE PASSES 4-0

Ordinance 2024-19 An Ordinance Authorizing the Vacation of a Portion of an Unnamed “Paper Street” located to the north and to the rear of the Properties on Lahm Avenue and off of Mill Street in the City of Hazleton (**2nd READING**)

MOTION TO TABLE:

Presented by Nilles. Seconded by Bruno.

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

ORDINANCE TABLED 4-0

Ordinance 2024-20

An Ordinance Amending the Code of Ordinances of the City of Hazleton, Part I, Chapter 66, Land Bank, Section 66-3, Board of Directors (**2nd READING**)

Presented by Nilles. Seconded by Bruno.

On the Question:

Atty. Logsdon said the ordinance that was passed creating the Land Bank prohibits a board member from being an official. He said the City did not mean to be so restrictive. He stated the City did not have a definition of a public official.

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

ORDINANCE PASSES 4-0

RESOLUTIONS:

Resolution 2024-50

Authorizing the Mayor to Enter into a Consultant Agreement with Raftelis to Perform a Market Lease Analysis and Valuation Study and Report

Presented by Ondishin. Seconded by Nilles.

On the Question:

Atty. Logsdon said Raftelis put in a proposal to put a valuation on the property for the Hazleton City Authority. He stated any future agreements, with the HCA, the City needs to put a value on their assets.

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

RESOLUTION PASSES 4-0

Resolution 2024-51 A Resolution Rescinding Resolution 2024-46 and Replacing it with Resolution 2024-54

Presented by Ondishin. Seconded by Nilles.

On the Question:

Atty. Logsdon said the City needs to clarify between the local county LSA grants and the statewide LSA grants. He said this was brought to the attention by the Community Development Office. He said this refers to county's that have gambling facilities.

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

RESOLUTION PASSES 4-0

Resolution 2024-52 A Resolution Approving the 2025-2029 Five-Year Consolidated Plan and Annual Action Plan for Fiscal Year 2025

Presented by Nilles. Seconded by Colombo.

On the Question:

Atty. Logsdon said this ordinance refers to the Community Development five-year plan for block grant funds. He said included in this ordinance are street improvements, funds for homeless services, and administration funds. He said the total is \$650,000.

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

RESOLUTION PASSES 4-0

Resolution 2024-53 A Resolution Requesting Local Share Account Statewide Funds for Hazleton City for the Wyoming Street Phase II Improvements Project

Presented by Nilles. Seconded by Bruno.

On the Question:

Atty. Logsdon stated this application is for statewide LSA funds. Ondishin asked what the work will entail. Mayor Cusat said the City finished, a few years ago, in Phase I, from Broad Street to Green Street. He said this is the ninth year the City is applying for the funds.

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

RESOLUTION PASSES 4-0

Resolution 2024-54 A Resolution Requesting Local Share Account Statewide Funds for Hazleton City for the Remaining Street Paving in the Heights Neighborhood of the City

Presented by Nilles. Seconded by Colombo.

On the Question:

Mayor Cusat said the City started paving in the Heights area two years ago. He said the City applied twice for the funds, but did not receive them.

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

RESOLUTION PASSES 4-0

Resolution 2024-55

A Resolution Requesting Local Share Account Statewide Funds for Hazleton City for the Pine Street Park Improvements Project

Presented by Ondishin. Seconded by Nilles.

On the Question:

Mayor Cusat said the funds will be used for the basketball court, playground and soccer areas.

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

RESOLUTION PASSES 4-0

New Business: Dan Lynch presented the City of Hazleton's 2025 proposed budget.

Lynch said there will be no action taken, tonight, on the City budget, only a budget presentation.

He said the 2025 budget proposes a real estate tax increase of 1.531 mills, or 18.8%. He said the 2024 real estate tax increase was 20.2%, 2021 real estate tax increase was 9.7%, and in 2018, it was 20.2%. Lynch stated there are a number of reasons that are "driving" this proposal. He said the first is a drop in total revenue. The net drop in revenue is \$372,000. The City's 2018 loan through the Redevelopment Authority required "balloon" payments at the end, and in 2025, it is the City's largest payment of \$172,000. He said the mills would need to be increased to .19 mills. Lynch said the Hazleton Police Department Flock camera system was purchased through grants, but the grant has expired. He said the City would need to pick up this cost. He said, also, inflation and the cost of health care costs, for the City employees, has increased by 15% (\$330,000) to over \$2,000,000 a year.

Lynch said the City has seen steady growth of City tax collections. He said the earned income tax has increased about 33% since 2020. He said the PPT tax has shown some growth.

Lynch said the City's COP's grant will expire. He said this is a five-year grant. Lynch said with the original agreement, the City would need to pick up the costs, of the police officers, in years four and five.

Lynch stated the Hazleton City Council elected, in 2016, to take an early payment, from the HCA, for their services, and took the 2025 payment in year 2016 of \$450,000.

Lynch said there are contractual pay increases, for City employees, at 3%, except for the Hazleton Fire Department increase is 2%.

Lynch said the City reduced the ACT 205 EIT tax by 50%.

The City has a total taxable assessed value of \$1,012,898,700. The proposed budget assumes a collection rate of 90%. There are 9,926 unique parcels in the City. The median assessed value for City properties is \$76,400.

Lynch stated the breakdown of \$1.00 of real estate tax is .90 cents goes to the General Fund, 2 cents goes to recreation, and 8 cents goes to debt service. For the 90 cents going to the General Fund, 0.9 cents are for General Administration, 0.39 cents for the police department, 0.19 cents for fire department, .20 cents for DPW, and 0.10 cents for parking, code, planning & zoning insurance.

Lynch said with the City taking the early \$450,000 HCA payment, in 2016, and with City Council neglecting to properly fund the 2017 budget, the City needed to enter ACT 47 in 2018.

Old Business: None.

Comments from the Audience: Dee Deakos, 43 Mine Street, Hazleton, said the City does a lot of LSA grants. She stated that the City needs more LSA's for public safety. She said there are a lot of alleys without a stop sign, streets without street signs, parking that goes all the way to the corner, and a lot of the intersections to "push the button" are not working.

J.T. Klein, 226 E. 1st Street, Hazleton, said he stands here, tonight, with his brothers of the Northeast PA Professional Fire Fighters Union, along with the Hazleton Police Department. Klein stated John Leshko, who retired in May with 20 years of service to the City, has not received a pension check yet. He, recently, had a massive stroke. He stated John needs to receive the money he earned. Klein stated Mayor Cusat receives a 3% unlimited longevity pay along with an "unbelievable" health insurance plan.

Comments from Mayor: Mayor Cusat thanked everyone for being at the meeting tonight. He stated he understands the pension discussion is "touchy" and this cannot be discussed in public because it is a personnel issue.

Mayor Cusat said the City Christmas Tree Lighting and Santa parades will be done before the next City Council meeting.

Mayor Cusat wished everyone a Happy Thanksgiving.

Comments from City Administrator: None

Comments from Junior Council: Nilles asked Lynch where the City is at with the audits. Lynch said the 2021 audit is "wrapping up" and the 2022 City audit is underway and "moving along".

Nilles asked if there is, currently, any activity at the old St. Joseph Medical Center. Atty. Logsdon said no.

Nilles said he noticed the parking sticks being installed, one at Laurel and 5th Streets. Mayor Cusat, said currently, there are 20 parking sticks installed. Nilles asked for a list of all City locations that have the parking sticks installed.

Nilles wished all veterans a Happy Veteran's Day.

Ondishin thanked all veterans for all they do.

Comments from Council: None

Adjournment: Ondishin motioned to adjourn the meeting. The meeting was adjourned at 7:26 p.m.