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**SNOW HILL MAYOR AND COUNCIL MEETING**

**Public Hearing Meeting Minutes**

**Tuesday, April 25th, 2023**

**7:00pm – Public Hearing Session**

A public hearing meeting of the Mayor and Town Council of Snow Hill, Maryland was held at The Old Fire Hall on Green Street on Tuesday, April 25th, 2023, with Mayor Pruitt presiding.

**PUBLIC OFFICIALS PRESENT**

Mayor Mike Pruitt

Councilperson Regina Blake

Councilperson Janet Simpson

Councilperson Jenny Hall

**STAFF IN ATTENDANCE**

Andy McGee, Police Department Chief

Carol Sullivan, Executive Administrator

Jerry Jeffra, Communications Officer

Michael Creech, Fire Chief

Rick Pollitt, Town Manager

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1. **Explanation of the purpose & process for the Public Hearing by the Mayor**

Mayor Pruitt opened the meeting at 7:01pm. He welcomed all in attendance and noted his surprise at the low turnout. The Mayor reminded everyone that the budget was submitted to the Town Council on March 28th, and through two public work sessions, the Council has met with staff and deliberated on the budget proposal. Now it is time to hear from the public.

Town Manager Pollitt described several key provisions of the proposed budget, including the provision for a modest increase in the property tax rate to be devoted entirely to public safety and an increase in water and sewer rates resulting from the recent rate study performed by Jean Holloway of Sercap. Mr. Pollitt added that the wastewater treatment plant is in critical condition requiring expensive improvements that are impossible to meet through the current rate structure which has been shown to be operating at a severe deficit. If the deficit continues, Mr. Pollitt warned that the Maryland Department of the Environment could revoke the Town’s permit to operate and could hire another agency or company to take over the department, adding a profit element to the rates necessary just to operate.

Mayor Pruitt then introduced Ms. Holloway, a Snow Hill native and current property owner who has a long and distinguished career advising local governments on water and sewer rate structures. He noted that Ms. Holloway has already presented her findings to the public at a prior meeting and that her study has been posted on-line at the Town’s web site.

1. **Brief presentation by Jean Holloway on her Water & Sewer Rate Study**:

Ms. Holloway gave a recap of the major points of her study indicating that revenue produced from water and sewer rates were not sufficient to meet the expense of providing the service. For example, she noted that the cost of treating a thousand gallons of wastewater required more than twice the amount of money raised by the sewer rates. The water account did not fare quite as badly but was still operating at a deficit. She noted that failure to address these issues will hamper the Town’s ability to receive grants or other funds for necessary repairs and upgrades.

Mayor Pruitt then requested the floor be opened for the public to deliver their comments.

On the motion to open the Public Hearing by Councilperson Blake, seconded by Councilperson Hall, the motion was approved by the following vote.

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| **NAME** | **AYE** | **NO** | **ABSTAIN** | **RECUSED** | **ABSENT** |
| **Regina Blake** | **X** |  |  |  |  |
| **Janet Simpson** | **X** |  |  |  |  |
| **Jenny Hall** | **X** |  |  |  |  |
| **TALLY** | **3** |  |  |  |  |

1. **Public Comment**

Former Councilmember Rita Williams expressed her concern with the water & sewer rate structure that provides a base minimum exceeding what some people will use and her fear that people will waste water believing they are being charged for more. She also asked if the Town was continuing to accept raw sewage from other locations for treatment at our wastewater treatment plant. She finished by sharing her concern that tenants will struggle to pay the increased utility rates and she asked if the public was permitted to open their water meter boxes.

Diana Walsh asked if granting authorities looked for a certain percentage of a Town’s budget being devoted to water & sewer operations as a criterion for considering financial assistance. Mr. Pollitt and Ms. Holloway both shared that the more investment a local government can inject into the service, the more likely they will be to score well on competitive grant applications. Ms. Walsh then asked if there will be a list of resources for citizens to take advantage of to combat the coming rate changes and Mr. Pollitt assured her the staff was currently developing such a list and that it would be comprehensive.

 Ms. Walsh also commented on the need to provide accurate water meters for all users and expressed her support for a full-time grant writer. She concluded by asking for increased police attention to speeding traffic and illegal drug sales.

Margaret Fletcher then commented about the way water meters are read and described on the utility bills and complained about the location of some meters being in driveways and subject to damage by motorists. She also spoke in favor of gradually easing into the higher utility rates but was informed by Ms. Holloway that any system that did not meet the cost of providing the service would simply exacerbate and prolong the deficit. A question about delinquent payments by townspeople yielded the reply that 97% to 98% of the Town’s users paid their bills on time.

Former Councilmember Rob Hall asked if Ms. Holloway would recommend differentiating utility rates between residential and commercial users? Ms. Holloway replied that it was more trouble than it was worth due to the small size of the Town. Mayor Pruitt acknowledged that while a 0-gallon allowance may seem fairer for residents using much less than the proposed 6,000-gallon allowance, he and the Council agreed that the proposed system was the least painful of all of the available options.

There were no further comments offered by the public.

On the motion to close Public Comments by Councilperson Blake, seconded by Councilperson Simpson, the motion was approved by the following vote.

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| **NAME** | **AYE** | **NO** | **ABSTAIN** | **RECUSED** | **ABSENT** |
| **Regina Blake** | **X** |  |  |  |  |
| **Janet Simpson** | **X** |  |  |  |  |
| **Jenny Hall** | **X** |  |  |  |  |
| **TALLY** | **3** |  |  |  |  |

1. **Final Remarks by the Mayor and Council and Conclusion of the meeting**

Councilperson Blake thanked everyone for coming out and announcing their opinions and wanted to remind everyone about the election on May 2nd. Councilperson Hall mirrored Councilperson Blake’s sentiments. Councilperson Simpson also thanked everyone for coming. Mayor Pruitt remarked that the election and budget schedules are so close together that it makes it difficult for any newly elected official to relate to the new budget. The Mayor suggested entertaining the idea of moving elections to October to give newly-elected officials an opportunity to have greater participation in the budget process.

1. **Adjournment**

On a motion to adjourn by Councilperson Simpson, seconded by Councilperson Hall,and unanimously approved, the meeting was adjourned at 8:08pm.

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| **NAME** | **AYE** | **NO** | **ABSTAIN** | **RECUSED** | **ABSENT** |
| **Regina Blake** | **X** |  |  |  |  |
| **Janet Simpson** | **X** |  |  |  |  |
| **Jenny Hall** | **X** |  |  |  |  |
| **TALLY** | **3** |  |  |  |  |

 Respectfully Submitted,

 Jerry Jeffra

 Communications Officer