

Cape May Point preparing its 2024 spending plan

By RACHEL SHUBIN
Special to the Star and Wave

CAPE MAY POINT — The borough plans to introduce its 2024 municipal budget in a few weeks, according to information shared at a Borough Commission meeting Feb. 8.

"It's coming down to the wire with the budget and we're working hard to keep things down," Deputy Mayor Anita van Heeswyk said. "Things have gone a little crazy as everyone knows, but I think we're going to come in fine."

Borough Administrator Ed Grant echoed van Heeswyk, stating the bud-

get numbers are currently being ground down with the auditors.

"We're [also] working with the lifeguards and the Cape May Point Taxpayers' Association, [who] was generous to award a grant which will appear in our budget," Grant said. "We are working how to administer that and how it's going to be utilized and processed."

Commissioner Catherine Busch reported the borough hosted a pre-construction meeting for the Higbee Beach Wildlife Management Area Pond Creek Restoration project that is commencing this

month and is expected to continue through its completion in/about December 2026. (See story this edition).

"The main concern that we conveyed, which is similar for every town on the island, would be about traffic," she said. "They already have in their plan that between Memorial Day and Labor Day they are limiting contractors to about five trucks a day and their route will be county roads. There will be more information in the future."

Busch also reported the emergency repair on Lighthouse Avenue has been completed.

"The paving will be remilled in the future, after it's completely settled," Busch said. "There is a little dip there now that will be fixed."

The borough continues to protect federally and state-listed species by adopting the Beach Management Plan during the meeting. The commission entered into an agreement with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP)

"Just to clear it up, the precautionary beach has been decided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife and the

NJDEP, not the borough," Mayor Bob Moffatt said. "It will not affect any of our protected beaches and swimming beaches."

The Borough is scheduled for an upcoming beach replenishment, and the engineering is in the works, according to van Heeswyk.

"[There will be] another back passing to fill St. Peters, probably late fall or early winter," she said. "They will be doing the same as before, going out into the park and Nature Conservancy, taking its sand, and putting it at the Cove in Cape May. The segment from the park that

is adjacent to that is going to come over to St. Peters."

Other areas have been scoured out for beach replenishment, van Heeswyk added.

"We're asking for a little extra for another area and we'll see what happens," she said.

In other news, Grant reminded borough residents to contact his office if there are any trash and recycling collection issues, as there was some confusion during the week.

The Planning Board is still seeking candidates, and Moffatt asked if anyone knows a resident who wants to serve to reach out.

LTPD calls for service dropped more than 7 percent

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Crimes against persons totaled 314 including five rapes, nine aggravated assaults, 51 simple assaults, and 241 intimidations. The department reported seven instances of extortion/blackmail, 14 shoplifting cases, two thefts from motor vehicles, 12 motor vehicle thefts, 104 other larcenies, 52 false pretenses/swindle/confidence game, 17 credit card/ATM fraud, two robberies and 80 instances of destruction/damage/vandalism of property.

Property offenses include burglary, theft, criminal mischief and shoplifting. The exact amount of value in theft-related offenses is hard to determine, as officers and vic-

tims usually estimate the value of property stolen and recovered.

The estimated amount of stolen property totaled \$366,473 with an estimated amount of \$197,473 recovered or 53.8%.

Domestic violence in New Jersey is viewed as a serious crime and carries with it penalties such as fines and prison time. Victims have the right to request temporary restraining orders; if granted a final restraining order hearing is automatically scheduled. Police officers must follow guidelines under the NJ Protection of Domestic Violence Act when arresting suspected abusers. Neglecting the elderly or handicapped can be considered domestic violence in New Jersey.

In 2023, Lower Township police answered 369 domestic violence calls with 74 restraining orders granted, 22 temporary restraining orders violated with 101 criminal complaints. Domestic violence calls in the township were down from 499 incidents last year.

The Lower Township Police Department investigated 395 motor vehicle accidents and conducted 4,359 motor vehicle stops during 2023. A total of 93 injuries were reported in motor vehicle accidents with no fatalities. The department issued 1,113 vehicle summonses and 171 written warnings.

A total of 62 driving while intoxicated arrests were made, down from 70 in 2022.

The department recorded 12 use of force incidents with seven subjects arrested and three injuries to officers. Use of force dropped from 20 incidents in 2022.

With changes to policing and legislation in recent years, there have been some shifting changes in work and tasks at the police department. One significant advancement and change was the implementation of body worn cameras, which the Lower Township Police began using in 2017.

Not only did the officers need to learn new policies and procedures, the Records Department took on the responsibility of downloading/uploading videos, making video copies (including necessary redaction), troubleshoot-

ing cameras and associated equipment, tracking video requests, etc. Administration and supervisors have taken on the additional task of reviewing videos for various purposes.

During 2023, the Detective Division was assigned 210 investigations and conducted an additional 66 follow-up investigations. They also assisted the Uniformed Patrol Division in nine missing person cases, where all parties were located. Additional types of investigations include: 10 juvenile welfare complaints, 21 burglaries, 15 suspected bias incidents, 14 assaults, 21 sexual assaults, 18 deaths and 16 fraud investigations.

Additionally, the Detective Division conducts all firearms background in-

vestigations, while the Records Division handles all the administrative tasks for firearms applications. 2023 was another year of significant changes in firearms laws, systems and applications. Permit to Carry (PTC) applications changed at the beginning of the year. Originally, they were sent to and approved by the Cape May County Superior Court and now they are approved by our Chief of Police, as of Feb. 1.

The division completed investigations of 391 applicants, down from 472 last year. A total of 82 permits to carry applications were approved, up from 46 in 2022.

The Detective Division conducted 72 Megan's Law investigations.

Convention Hall

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service, we need to relook at that 1947 statute," Crowley said.

He said the tourism utility has run at a deficit. It derives revenue from shows in Convention Hall, an assessment on mercantile licenses and the city's general fund, which has covered any deficits in tourism utility budget.

MTRAC member Martin Van Walsum said he did

not think there was a market for a general sales tax increase but perhaps there would be public acceptance for a targeted use.

Cally Zebrowski, treasurer of the Washington Street Mall Business Improvement District (BID), told MTRAC at an earlier meeting that mall merchants were not in favor of a sales tax increase.

At the Feb. 8 meeting, she suggested polling City Council to see if they are in

favor of the local sales tax increase.

"If we levied a 1% tax only on alcohol sales, would the businesses object to that?" Van Walsum asked.

Zebrowski said she thought the businesses affected by the additional sales tax may object but with enough education on the use, other businesses may find it acceptable.

The tax would amount to 7 cents on a \$7 beer, Van Walsum said.

MTRAC

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agreement to provide municipal court services to Cape May Point has a 2 percent annual escalation clause that is less than the actual rise in costs of about 5 percent.

"As a result, we lost 11 percent of the ground in the course of four years," Van Walsum said.

What remains a mystery, he said, is how the city came up with numbers in many of the agreements.

"There is a sense of uneasiness among city employees if a shared service contract is relatively short or is coming up for renewal," he said. "There is a little insecurity if we don't renew it, 'I could lose my job,' so we should be conscious of that as we go through the process."

MTRAC is suggesting the city communicate all its costs with municipalities it has agreements with and how much time a Cape May department is devoting to the other municipality, then calculate the costs based on that figure.

"Both sides will feel it's extremely fair that everything is transparent, everything is open and above board, the municipalities know exactly what they're paying for and why they're paying it, and the city understands exactly how much cost recovery that they are realizing," Van Walsum said.

He said one item became apparent in MTRAC's examination of shared service agreements. He said the city cannot have "floating numbers in municipal governments," it is very

important to have a fixed amount going into and coming out of the budget process. Van Walsum said the agreements can be revised annually.

MTRAC is suggesting the city examine the previous three years of shared service agreements with three- to five-year durations being ideal.

"We're talking about their being a fixed component, but by fixed we mean fixed annually, even though it may be a three- or five-year agreement that fixed component would still change as costs go up, whether it is through an escalation or through assigning a percentage to it that can be calculated," he said. "There would be a variable component as well that would be done on a rolling three-year basis, so a 2024 agreement would be based on 2021, 2022 and 2023 but then the amount of reimbursement for 2025 would be based on 2022, 2023 and 2024."

Van Walsum said if a municipality had less activity, it would pay less and if they created more activity for Cape May, they would pay more.

"We would make sure that we are consistently and constantly updating those numbers to stay as reflective of things like a 27% increase in health-care costs as possible," he said.

MTRAC was also tasked to suggest additional shared services agreements for the city. West Cape May Volunteer Fire Company has been housing Cape May's Fire Department while a new

firehouse was constructed, an arrangement that worked well, according to Van Walsum.

He said there was some interest in Cape May providing fire protection to West Cape May.

Due to the geography of Cape Island, Cape May is often the first to arrive at a fire or accident scene located in Lower Township or slightly off the island.

Van Walsum said the city of Cape May does not have any financial arrangement with Lower Township for reimbursement of costs.

The city's police contract for West Cape May and Cape May Point ends in December 2025. The city's contract to provide municipal court services to Cape May Point is up for renewal.

"I don't expect that in any of these agreements we're going to find some Earth-shattering difference between what we're receiving and what it's costing," he said.

Councilman Mike Yeager said the Cape May Police Department is able to employ more law enforcement officers because it provides services to West Cape May and Cape May Point.

Police Chief Dekon Fashaw said the police shared services policing agreement was the result of a state Department of Community Affairs directive. He said at that time there was no specific formula for the costs.

"We, your police department, and the city of Cape May, have made a strong relationship with both boroughs," Fashaw said.

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