



## 'Sex and the City' author to visit historic Cape May

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## House of the Week

Real Estate Resource



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## Lower budget keeps tax rate stable in 2024

Collected a large surplus, had strong collection rate

By JACK FICHTER  
Cape May Star and Wave

VILLAS — Lower Township Council introduced its proposed 2024 budget, which increases the tax levy slightly but does not raise the tax rate, during a meeting March 4.

In his annual budget message, Township Manager Mike Laffey said the proposed tax levy is \$23,092,558, up from \$23,021,351, an increase of \$71,207 that he attributed to insurance costs.

The township completed 2023 with a surplus of \$9.7 million, the highest ever. Laffey said the increase in surplus is largely due to new revenues generated through occupancy taxes and interest earnings.

He said the tax collection rate for 2023 was 99.06 percent, which helped add more than \$1.4 million to the surplus. All other revenue collections exceeded projections for 2023 and brought in an additional \$1.4 million, Laffey said.

One cent on the tax rate is equal to \$373,719. The proposed budget uses a 97.75 percent rate to compute the reserve for uncollected taxes in 2024.

The budget uses \$4.8 million from the surplus fund to keep the tax rate level, he said.

"We feel confident using this amount of surplus because we're well within the parameters of our fund balance policy," Laffey said.

Assessed valuation of properties in the township increased by \$10.9 million to \$3.7 billion.

The 2024 proposed municipal budget is below the legal levy cap by \$510,923 and below the legal spending cap by \$85,100, according to Laffey.

Auditor Leon Costello, of Ford-Scott and Associates, called the proposed budget sound with a stable, solid surplus.

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## Grants to help city pave roads at quicker pace

Cape May was addressing only one street every year

By JACK FICHTER  
Cape May Star and Wave

CAPE MAY — While road reconstruction in town can be an annoyance, especially the current detour of traffic from Lafayette Street onto Washington Street, underground utilities are being replaced and galvanized water connections are being replaced.

The good news is the Lafayette Street project is on time and expected to be completed before Memorial Day.

At a March 5 City Council meeting, Mayor Zack Mullock said when he became mayor, he was aware the city's roads were in poor condition.

"Not only were the roads in bad condition but we had lead pipe, we had bad utilities that were over 100 years old, so we had a lot of work to do and for some years we were basically doing one block per year of city streets," he said. "The reason for that was it was matching up with DOT (Department of Transportation) grants that we were receiving from the state."

Mullock said the city received a diminishing return only reconstructing one block at a time with the cost of mobilizing the equipment. He said the city looked at every street

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Provided

## Rolling along

Employees of the city of Cape May and their families held a roller skating party March 1 at Convention Hall. Showing their skating skills are Petty Officer 1st Class Edward Burke — the U.S. Coast Guard Training Center Cape May's recruit band leader and husband of City Clerk Erin Burke — and their son Edison.

## City on track to pay off convention hall in 2026

By JACK FICHTER  
Cape May Star and Wave

CAPE MAY — Mayor Zack Mullock said he was taken aback by a Star and Wave story quoting Dennis Crowley, chairman of the city's Municipal Taxation and Revenue Advisory Committee (MTRAC), stating a bond that financed Convention Hall had never been paid off and the city still owes \$3.5 million.

At a March 5 City Council meeting, Mullock said the bond was originally scheduled

to be paid off in 14 years. He said the Edward Mahaney administration decided on a bond with a shorter payoff.

The Convention Hall bond will be paid off in the next three years, according to the mayor. It was issued in 2013 for \$10.7 million.

"This is a positive thing; we're going to be paying off this wonderful building in a matter of three years. We'll have this big building on the beach without any debt," he said.

He acknowledged there

had been some controversy with the building, which has been plagued with heating, air conditioning and mold issues since its opening. In addition, the hall has a smaller kitchen than originally proposed.

Mullock said Convention Hall is a beautiful building but the "façade could be dressed up." He said upgrades to the building could be available at a later date that would be decided upon by the public.

He said early issues associated with the building, including being underinsured, have

been addressed.

"I take that news article as a little bit of an opportunity to say to the town, 'Let's have pride in that building,'" Mullock said.

He said going forward, Convention Hall has the opportunity to be a really wonderful building without a lot of funding.

"I'm not proposing anything, and anything that would be proposed would have to have a long conversation and frankly, a lot of public participation," Mullock said.

## Sides battle over control of Cold Spring Cemetery

By R.E. HEINLY  
Special to the Star and Wave

COLD SPRING — While the earthly remains of centuries of generations from greater Cape May rest peacefully beneath the ground of the historic Cold Spring Presbyterian Cemetery, all is not so tranquil above it.

The beloved non-denominational cemetery is adjacent to the equally historic Cold Spring Presbyterian Church on Seashore Road in Lower Township. Both are among the most prominent and visited historic sites on the Jersey Cape.

It is featured in the new Lower Township historic sites tour guide. Tours of both are provided seasonally on Saturdays. The cemetery's historic significance is a major reason so many people over the centuries have selected it as their bur-

ial site, including this writer's family.

The esteem and affection many have for the cemetery is a major reason for the intensity of the current conflict.

It has two basic dimensions: one about the ongoing maintenance of the cemetery and the second about the relationship between the church governing board and the cemetery's, the lot owner's role vis-à-vis that of cemetery governing committee and that committee's transparency and openness to allow owners' input in its decision making.

There are questions about legal, financial and procedural issues. The lot owners contend that the cemetery should stay legally a separate entity clearly separated from the church. They claim they're entitled to a bigger voice in cemetery affairs. They want cemetery board

members to be elected at the annual meeting not appointed by the church committee.

The cemetery committee disagrees. The last several annual meetings have grown increasingly passionate and contentious over these issues.

The controversy over quality of the day-to-day management and maintenance of the cemetery dates from the 2015 retirement of highly respected longtime supervisor George Carpenter, whom each side praises highly.

Both sides also agree that the quality deteriorated under a company hired from 2013 through 2019. Both also agree that the current maintenance company, Seaside Management, is doing a much better job. Both recognize that the committee is obviously limited in its expertise in this area.

Most of the controversy centers around the cemetery

committee's lack of transparency, openness to lot owner input and frequency of meetings. Procedural and financial issues are also involved and overall, the legality of the basic relationship between the role of cemetery committee and the church.

Lot owners have requested an inquiry by the state cemetery board that, according to Quin Archer, executive director of the New Jersey Cemetery Board, is under way. The state board previously ruled that the lot owners should have voting rights and should play a role in amending the cemetery's by-laws to do so.

While leaders of the lot owners, other than requesting anonymity in print, have said attempts to communicate with cemetery committee officials to obtain their viewpoints on the matter have been unsuccessful.



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