

Cape May Point may increase tax rate to fund 2020 budget

By RACHEL SHUBIN
Special to the Star and Wave

CAPE MAY POINT — Decisions regarding the borough's budget for 2020 will determine whether there will be a tax increase this year.

Chief Financial Officer Jim Craft said the borough's budget currently proposes raising taxes to cover an increase in the budget while keeping the surplus at the same amount it was last year after the budget was adopted. "The assessed value of the town went up 1.5 percent," Craft said in a Jan. 28 meeting.

Increases were seen in wages, salaries, computer operation, trash removal, permit fees and the volunteer fire department. Recycling costs decreased and collection of taxes remained the same, Craft said.

"I just want to be clear — the borough doesn't have any money," Deputy Mayor Anita VanHeeswyk said. "The money is taxpayer money. There are people in town who continue to say they are concerned [about tax increases]. There are people still living here now who thought they were going to move."

VanHeeswyk said the borough does a great job with a small budget.

"I'm confident in that we have been using the surplus to bring down the tax rate to keep it even," VanHeeswyk said. "We do want to keep our surplus up for emergencies."

Commissioner Bob Mullock said the surplus is solid but the commissioners need to look and anticipate for the future.

"I'm not sure what kind of increase we'd have over the next few years," Mullock said.

The impact of payroll increases due to the rise in minimum wage were noted by Mullock. Mayor Bob Mofatt said in 2019, Cape May Point lost five lifeguards because Cape May pays more.

Capital improvements in the borough is another major factor in the budget.

"We are continuing the payoff of capital ordinances we introduced in prior years," Craft said. "Funding is set aside for future road projects and other improvements and still keeping the balance between \$300,000 to \$400,000 in the capital improvement fund." There is reserve in place

for the potential public works building, which is projected to cost \$1 million, Craft said.

"With Yale Avenue we are looking at \$1 million for that project now," Borough Administrator Steve O'Connor said. "If you're looking at the schedule we talked about with Bruce (Graham) in fall 2020, you're going to need that whole million for 2020."

O'Connor said the Yale Avenue project would begin in fall 2020 and be completed in spring 2021.

"All of these projects will be paid off without a decrease in the surplus," Mullock said. "We will pay it off over a period of time. Overall we will have projects absorbed in the year's capital budget."

Grants for the lead pipe removal need to be considered, Mullock said. There are state funds set aside.

"We were excluded from a USDA grant for being more urban," VanHeeswyk said. "We are not considered rural because we have infrastructure."

Mullock said engineer Bruce Graham projected \$850,000 and there is \$165,000 in grants. "We do have on the capi-

tal budget, two streets that are not identified," Mullock said. "So if we get those grants, we'll use the unspecified street money in this budget."

The borough wants the Yale Avenue project to be timely, Mullock said.

"Getting that lead out is priority No. 1 and we don't want to go past fall 2020," Mullock said. "We met with the engineer specifically on that subject."

VanHeeswyk said she wanted to make sure the borough was funded for this project.

"There is leeway but it is very aggressive payment on those ordinances," Craft said.

The water and sewer budgets increased \$14,000 from 2019.

"The water increase is a result of increases in Cape May City for doing much more than desalination," Mullock said. "They basically are increasing every year, sometimes substantial amounts."

The budget likely will be introduced at the Feb. 13 meeting and adopted in March.

In other news, VanHeeswyk said the borough is work-

ing on the five-year update for the Community Rating System (CRS), which offers discounts on flood insurance rates for residents of municipalities that take steps to lessen flood hazards.

"There are big changes in the last five years in the way they look at things," VanHeeswyk said. "There were several problems with elevation certificates that a particular surveyor doesn't do right. Another major change was they are giving more credit for open space."

VanHeeswyk explained elevation certificates used to count for points as they came in but four of the certificates were not accurate due to surveyor error.

"They would give you credit for what was right and take away for what was wrong," VanHeeswyk said. "Now it's a percentage. If 90 percent are right, you don't get any credit. We receive a huge amount of credits for our elevation certificates."

Avalon and Sea Isle City receive greater discounts due to their open space credits.

"You can only count what is in the boundary of your municipality," VanHeeswyk said. "It's the wetlands and back bays. Our municipal boundary is here and we're dry because of infrastructure in the wetlands and we can't get credit."

Mullock asked if they could receive credit for 12 acres of Lake Lily. VanHeeswyk said they only count the edges around the lake and the beach park.

There is a possibility Cape May Point could lose five CRS points, VanHeeswyk said.

"In 2023 there is strong possibility we could lose five to 10 more points, which would put us at no discount," VanHeeswyk said. "FEMA doesn't want to give discounts. They expect us to do these things and we're working as hard as we can on this with the changes. 2023 is going to be an ugly year."

P.A. system

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The firm's report suggested widening the Promenade from the arcade at Jackson Street to the north end of Convention Hall at a cost of about \$370,000, which would not include engineering fees.

DeSatnick said Lower Cape May Regional High School science teacher Jeff Martin and students are taking monthly measurements of the surf zone and beach using the Emory Method.

Another LCMRHS science teacher, Richard Demers, an FAA-licensed drone pilot, has applied to join the committee. He said he has been a member of the CMBP since 1987.

Demers said he could fly a drone over a section of beach and create a topographical map within 10 minutes. He

said the cost of purchasing a drone is \$500 to \$1,500.

LCMRHS owns two drones that are not in use, Demers said.

"That's our job to collect data to present to the Army Corps and DEP in the future," DeSatnick said.

Rife said the city would have concrete data when it meets with the Army Corps. Inderwies said he wished to speak with the city's information technology expert, Dan Shustack, who also flies drones.

Lifeguards will be visiting schools this May with a beach safety message, Rife said, adding that an entire seventh-grade class from Middle Township will visit lifeguard headquarters.

"I know that we're going to have the same amount as last year, close to approxi-

mately 2,000 children under our education program," Rife said.

He attended a U.S. Life-saving Association conference in Hawaii in December that included a seminar from the state Drowning and Injury Prevention Advisory Committee.

Rife said Hawaii has an epidemic of drowning from snorkeling accidents. He said from 2008 through 2017, 183 snorkeling deaths have occurred, of which most are tourists.

"More Hawaiian visitors die from snorkeling than from motor vehicle crashes, aircraft crashes, falls or homicides combined," Rife said. "So, if you substitute what we're going through of injuries in the surf zone for what they are going through snorkeling, you have

a roughly apples-to-apples comparison of two predominately tourist-driven locales that could not basically survive without their tourism."

Safety brochures have been distributed in Hawaii to educate the public on snorkeling deaths. Tourists are warned not to snorkel at unguarded beaches, he said.

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