

MINUTES... REGULAR MEETING... APRIL 10, 2023

The members of the Bethlehem Housing Authority met in a regular session Monday, April 10, 2023, at 4:00 P.M. (IN PERSON MEETING). Those present and absent were as follows:

PRESENT

Mrs. Iris Linares, Chairperson
Mrs. Valerie McLendon, Vice Chairperson
Mrs. Lindsey A Clifton
Mr. Rogelio Ortiz
Mr. J. Marc Rittle

ABSENT

Also present were: William W. Matz, Jr., Esq., Solicitor; John Ritter, Secretary-Treasurer; Diana Moreno, Assistant Secretary; Staff Members and members of the general public.

The Minutes of the Regular Meeting of March 13, 2023 were presented. Mrs. Clifton made a motion to accept the minutes of March 13, 2023. Mr. Rittle seconded the motion.

The Minutes of the Special Meeting of March 27, 2023 were presented. Mrs. Clifton made a motion to accept the minutes of March 27, 2023. Mr. Ortiz seconded the motion.

Roll Call: Ayes - Clifton/Rittle/Ortiz/McLendon/Linares; Nays - None

Under the monthly bills Mr. Rittle questioned the Boys and Girls Club payment. Mr. Ritter clarified that we have two students that help out and they get paid. Mr. Rittle responded that is wonderful. On the eviction line item, he asked about the eviction process. Ms. Rodriguez explained the lease violation and criminal process. Attorney Matz stated the fees are for counsel, general counsel and office services. And that many times those which are higher are result of either the replies, responses or the defenses raised to the questions relating to the eviction.

Mrs. McLendon asked about the First Tee Apartment Conversion expense, have we started the process yet. Mr. Kichline stated that's the expense for the architect design work. Mrs. Linares said we're still waiting for HUD to start the process.

Mr. Ortiz reported that a lot of residents are asking if they can pay their rent on-line, instead of waiting for the rent receipt and having to mail the check out. Mr. Snyder stated that we've looked into it, but it's not feasible to do it with the bank we have. It's complicated, we would have to issue a debit card. Perhaps, if we switch vendors for our software, it could be possible.

Mr. Rittle asked if we were to switch vendors should they need board approval. Mr. Snyder replied that's a major expense and the board would have to approve it, but it may be years down the road. The Authority has looked into it but at this point it won't work for us. Mr. Ritter stated that we did meet with a different operating system last week, which they are on board with direct deposits, so maybe down the road. Mr. Linares indicated that a lot of our residents are elderly and are not computer savvy, and they may have to be educated. But we should look into it.

Mrs. Clifton made a motion to approve the monthly bills (check register) for March 2023. Mrs. McLendon seconded the motion.

Roll Call: Ayes - Clifton/Rittle/Ortiz/McLendon/Linares; Nays - None

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Under the financial report Mr. Rittle asked what the difference between the Scholarship Reconciliation and the Affordable Housing Reconciliation. Mr. Snyder replied that the scholarship is an account that we use to award scholarships to our 8th and 12th graders every year. For the 8th grade scholarship, we put aside \$1,000, and if they keep a GPA of 2.50 or above until their senior year, they can be awarded up to a \$5,000 scholarship. In addition, we offer two H.S. and one vo-tech scholarships which can range between \$1000 to \$5,000. Currently, we have about \$40,000 in cash, \$100,000 in CDs and about \$25,000 of that is promised out.

Secondly, the Affordable Housing Reconciliation, was set up a long time ago, and they're using that to offset the cost of our Atlantic Street property. Currently, we have cash of \$28,000 minus \$5,600 that is owed to central office because we use one checking account to pay for all the bills and to put a new roof on Atlantic Street. We also have a CD worth \$50,000, that would be for the start of the RAD conversion (12 units), if HUD approves it. It's called affordable housing, that's the name that was given to it by the authority. Right now, it's only for Atlantic Street. We also used that money several years ago to help Habitat for Humanity. There were several residents in our Family Self Sufficiency program (FSS) who bought houses and we took some of that money, loaned some of it to habitat they paid back a portion, and the difference went to help the resident get an affordable home. Mr. Rittle asked where the money came from. Mr. Snyder replied it was donated, that it may be from Bethlehem Homes Inc. that goes way back.

Mr. Rittle asked about the income and expense report, the final column of voucher payments. If this a total of the income and expenses. Mr. Snyder said it does not include payments to landlords. We get the money from HUD, and we pass it on. It's an income and expense statement strictly for the administration portion, which consists of two separate fundings, the HAP and the administration.

Mr. Rittle made a motion to approve the Financial Report.
Mrs. Clifton seconded the motion.

Roll Call: Ayes - Clifton/Rittle/Ortiz/McLendon/Linares; Nays - None

Under Courtesy of the floor, Agenda Items only, there was an open public discussion of the mission and vision of the authority and the Executive Director's job description.

Monocacy Tower residents addressed the board regarding the Executive Directors' position. A petition of letters and signatures were collected from tenants to keep Mr. Ritter as the Executive Director of BHA. They support Mr. Ritter and truly respect him as well as Ms. Zulma Rodriguez the Property Manager of Monocacy. They said he's very connected with the tenants and very knowledgeable. In addition, they voiced their concerns about hiring someone from the outside as they often lack knowledge of in-house procedures. Mr. Ritter and Ms. Rodriguez thanked the tenants. Mr. Ortiz added Mr. Ritter is very connected with the community and that is important.

Mayor William Reynolds of the City of Bethlehem, introduce himself, along with Ms. Laura Collins, the Director of Community Economic Development as well as two of their attorneys who are working on a lot of housing related issues in the city. He addressed the affordable housing issue we're facing in the city. He feels there has been a lack of interaction with previous Mayors and administration where we have missed the opportunity to build our affordable housing initiatives throughout the City of Bethlehem. And since his time in office, the most important thing the City Administration has focused on is the housing situation in the City of Bethlehem.

The city is working on change as well as a lot of people in the non-profit community. Last year, they kicked off their affordable housing strategy study. They received a lot of money from the American Rescue Plan, and they needed to come up with a comprehensive plan. They used a consultant, someone with the expertise to get the most creative way to make the biggest impact with a certain amount of money. He stated that one of the things that the affordable housing strategy study has showed for the past few years is that median sales price of a home within the city of Bethlehem has increased by over 50%. The price of a one-bedroom apartment throughout the 76,000 people living in the city has increased 57% and we have a housing crisis in the Lehigh Valley and in the City of Bethlehem. Second, it was determined that other cities in the country are addressing affordable housing issues.

Many cities are further along and they're partnering with housing authorities. And in talking about the mission and the vision of what the Bethlehem Housing Authority is, one of their affordable housing strategy reports is the housing authority and the city needs to be working together on initiatives. And the reason being is land is scarce, land is expensive, and people are after the same land. The city lost a bid against Lehigh University for some properties, that should have ended up in the city's hands to be able to build affordable housing but unfortunately that fell through. But he said we can continue to look for other opportunities in Lehigh Valley. There are housing authority's and city projects that are working together with shared funding sources, that are getting HUD money, that are using American Rescue Plan money, and using tax money to be able to make permanent affordable housing projects become a reality.

The mission and vision at City Hall coming into the administration office last January, was not only to be able to work with the housing authority and to maintain and provide their current high-quality housing, but also to work on being creative and in working in partnerships. And how that would look like going into the future to be able to maximize vouchers, to be able to maximize land, and to be able to get into HUD pilot programs. Also, to bring dollars together to go into the private sector, things that other cities and housing authorities have been doing in the past. This is an opportunity to bring the mission and vision conversation to life. As the city needs to be something different, the non-profit sector needs to be something different. We need to build the housing authority, not take away from what's currently going on, but to add to it.

Ms. Laura Collins, Director of the Department of Economy and Development addressed the board. She works with the City of Bethlehem, housing development, and community development block from HUD. She stated that the focus coming into this administration was recognizing how important housing is and just kind of seeing the wave all across the country since everybody is talking about housing right now. Mayor Reynolds changed the structure of the economy and development department. Ms. Sarah Satullo, who was hired by the mayor, is fully engaged in the department and she has written an amazing series of articles, in Lehigh Valley Live on housing in South Bethlehem. And bringing her expertise to City Hall has really demonstrated they're really putting the resources into this work. The mayor and city council helped put \$5 million in the city's budget to work on the housing issues. They started a comprehensive plan to make sure that they're spending it in the best way possible. They started six months ago working with the Reinvestment Fund who have done this work nationwide and they're almost halfway through. And she strongly believes partnering with local non-profits, partnering with the housing authority and institutions come up with one of the biggest ways to make a real impact on the overall housing system in the City of Bethlehem.

And there's so much opportunity in what they're hearing because the housing authority has done such great work in what they've been doing for so many years. But because HUD is changing, and providing more opportunities with infrastructure in place we have a lot of opportunity to expand. But not only to serve the residents in the housing authority but to expand the reach of the money that can be used together, between the city and the housing authority.

Mr. Ritter and Mr. Kichline have attended a couple of housing strategy committee meetings with the city. There are some potential funding opportunities with the Choice Neighborhoods grant, which is a project that City of Easton has pursued to take some of its old units and transition them to a mixed income and mixed housing type developments. These are just some of creative ways that other communities are using the partnership between the city and the housing authority to impact the entire housing ecosystem. This is just the start of what the overall mission and vision that they want to align with the housing authority. They want to create a model where they're able to work with the members of the housing authority on a regular basis, and she believes there is a lot of opportunity to continue that partnership.

The City of Bethlehem had a consultant do a study of the Bethlehem market, to look at what available land they have, and to see the different opportunities available. They want to partner with BHA. As a partnership, they need to have the mission and vision to tackle affordable housing in the most strategic way possible. It's a part of moving forward and should be tied to all the future staff decisions as well. As a community working in partnership with the city, the housing authority and people from the community can come together. The success with this study is the committees, to get people from all parts of society non-profits, citizens, tenants, people working with institutions, healthcare and networks. Chairperson Linares asked if the city has land.

Mayor Reynolds stated that they're in the process of trying to acquire land. It's in the process, conversations, agreements of sale those type of terms that they can't talk about publicly right now. But that the ability to get HUD funding, to be able to work with the housing authority, to be able to do programs throughout HUD or even the housing authority acquiring land in partnership with the city and affordable housing developers. There are some many different combinations of ways throughout America about how that's kind of worked out, some of it's been the city purchasing land, sometimes it's non-profit developers where you somehow guarantee a certain number of vouchers. The goal is to use the \$5 million and the other dollars that they have with American Rescue Plan purchasing property not just owning the property but being able to put a project there, to put 100/150 units of affordable housing. And he believes that requires partnerships with the housing authority for funding as well to make these projects become a reality.

Mr. Ritter stated that they're looking forward to partnering with the city to meet the needs of the community, however this is new territory for BHA as well. And that we need to learn to navigate the process. Mayor Reynolds said it's important that BHA start the mission-vision discussion with the city.

Mrs. McLendon stated that the housing authority has tried to acquire property before. The problem is finding property to buy because people don't want low-income housing in their community. They're afraid of low-income housing and what it comes with. Crime comes with it, you get deteriorating properties, and it's just a lot of stuff that comes with low-income housing. And they don't want it, so they're not going to sell it to us, we've made attempts in the past to try to get housing. Mrs. Linares said it's a stigma with low-income housing.

Mayor Reynolds stated that affordable housing and low-income housing are not the same thing. The problem is we have a housing shortage at every level low income, middle income and high income. He said one of the things to do is educate people. But when they talk about affordable housing, they're talking for everybody. Mrs. Clifton agreed with Mrs. McLendon. She advocates in educating community members about the need for affordable housing, about who lives in affordable housing and about benefits that it brings to all income levels.

Mr. Ritter said it's a misunderstanding for affordable housing as for public housing, it's just low to very low income. Mrs. McLendon stated that the mission and the role of the housing authority agency has always been to serve the needs of the low-income households and grow in our capacity to serve the needs of our community. What the housing authority does is take care of the people. They educate tenants to become self-sufficient and they actually get a job and are able to move out. But Her concern is the very, very low, there has to be somebody to care about them and to take care of our low low-income housing people. I mean there are all kinds of grants out there we can use to get houses. You know there's that Trust Fund grant, the CBBG grant, the Community Development Block grant, I mean they all have stuff that helps. But still you know we build these houses, and the poor people are still stuck in the poor area, they can't move into those homes because they can barely pay their rent now. I'm not saying that's not something to look at or for in the future, but our mission is to look after the poor. The low income the very low and we have got some very low people who are struggling even now to live.

Mr. Rittle replied that he would like to see a mission-vision that better reflects the entire community and the City of Bethlehem so that all low-income families are able to be supported. There is money from the post pandemic through the rescue plan now that was not available before, so we're in a really fortunate situation where we can actually look at the community. And that one organization cannot do it alone so working with other non-profits is the way to go. So, if new land is acquired it might not just be a partnership with the city but could also be with our other elected representatives even statewide. So, the focus is the new mission and vision that includes the partners, what are the opportunities, and what we're looking toward. These are all things of a community leadership, and that would lead to the BHA executive director job description.

Mrs. Clifton added that the existing mission-vision needs to reflect the current reality of the housing authority but that the language needs to include dignity, prosperity and partnership to sustained growth going forward. And it's necessary to work on the executive director's position description and move forward into a search process. As a board they need time together, and they're probably going to need some other partners to help them do the mission-vision work and the job description work as well.

In addition, if the city is willing to potentially financially support a proposal for a qualified consultant, then she thinks we would be remised in not taking that step. She feels legitimizing the results of the process, especially for the wider community feels really essential.

And just for the record that she and Mr. Rittle were talking about the reasons they feel a request for proposal and partnering with a professional consultant to help the board who is not super professionally qualified to do this process and do it well. This is not about Mr. Ritter not being the qualified candidate because in the end he may be the stellar candidate. But that we have the legitimacy going through a rigorous and comprehensive process. And that we have done the mission-vision work well, we've created a thorough forward-looking job description well and the candidate is the exact right person for the job. And all of those pieces are in alignment, but she is still wrestling with whether they as a board have the skills to do that process themselves without support.

Mr. Rittle commented that Attorney Matz did speak to one person about the consultant for the executive director position, and this is part of the process to take a look at what the commissioners and possibly the community is interested in in the shaping of a job description? Attorney Matz said correct. He stated that the starting point of consultants has typically been to move through the mission-vision of the organization, which may require some structural adjustments to fit that and then incorporate within that the direction for the search. Mr. Rittle added that today we have an offer from the city to help pay for the consultant, but that it's not about someone facilitating the process but the concern was about the expense.

Mrs. McLendon commented that she is just trying to get clarity and understanding so they would know how to intervene and work together. Mr. Rittle asked what would help that. Mrs. McLendon said she's not sure because the discussion was about financials, not the mission and vision. She is on the housing board because she cares about the people in housing. She has a personal investment with the people, the tenants and the employees of the housing authority. Mr. Ortiz added he's familiar with the public housing community. He cares about the community and works very well with everyone. And he doesn't agree that we need a consultant to help us.

Mr. Snyder reported how the funding of the Central Office Call Center - COCC, operates for the Executive Director's position, and eight other salaries that are paid through this fund. He stated we have limited funds for management fees that we get from the low-income public housing units, leased units. And if we don't lease the units, we don't have the funds. But extra costs like the consultant fee and any other expenses that may occur for the transition will affect BHA financially. And the other money that we have in the reserves belongs to low-income public housing, to those AMPs that money can be shared it can be used for other things as long as it fits HUDs program, but Central Office Call Center is its own entity. And once we run out of money we have to shut down because now we're taking money from another program to pay for salaries and other things. Unfortunately, this is the way it's structured with HUD.

Mayor Reynolds stated whether or not there's a decision to put out an RFP, the way an RFP works if you don't like what the responses are it doesn't cost us anything. The most important thing is the idea that we are together on the mission and vision everything else going forward. He added that Mr. Ortiz invited him to the board meeting, and it's about working together. Currently, we're working with the housing authority, First Tee project, with Ms. Collins and Ms. Satullo in assistance with grants and funding streams and so forth. "So, it's not like we're starting with something that's never been done before, it's what other cities and housing authorities are doing. We want to take as much time as anybody else needs. But the most important thing to get right is that mission and vision, which costs zero dollars and everything else beyond that can be brought up for conversation once we are aligned with what we are able to do together.

Mr. Ortiz said everyone needs to be open-minded and hear everybody out. Mrs. McLendon said we have to be transparent. Mr. Ortiz said he invited the mayor to the meeting because he cares. And he's trying really hard to get affordable housing, low-income housing into the city but he can only control so much. Mr. McLendon thanked Mayor Reynolds for coming.

Mayor Reynolds said the residents of the Bethlehem Housing Authority are not the responsibility of the Bethlehem Housing Authority, but everyone's responsibility in the City of Bethlehem. He said that Marvine, Pembroke and Parkridge developments were built on the corners of the city because people didn't want them in their neighborhoods. And that is not okay for them historically or presently. And they are concerned about internet access, food access, public education equity, all of those different responsibilities that go outside of housing. That they are committed to as well and we will keep showing up as long as there is a role for the city to play in helping out residents, not only with a safe, decent place to live but to be able to live a life of dignity. They are concerned about the homeless population. Their vacancy rate in the City of Bethlehem is under 2% as far as housing, a health vacancy rate is 5-6%. There's no place for people to move. Over at New Bethany there is no place for people to go that have jobs, and they're living in temporary transitional housing. And they're very passionate about the community and are here to work together.

Mrs. McLendon stated we can set up a meeting to discuss programs for people. HUD does pay for programs for people to educate them, so they don't have to stay a product of their environment. Mr. Ortiz said it's all about money. We need major corporations to help educate the young kids that are entering college, to learn a skill because not everybody is cut out for college. Mrs. Clifton thinks it starts with them as the board, but she doesn't think they're the only group who should be weighing in on the mission and vision work.

Mrs. Rodriguez said she agrees that the mission and vision needs to be updated because it really does not reflect what the housing is doing. We have a Family Self Sufficiency Program; we have had it for years. We have offered programs, we have good employees, educated employees and revising the mission is a good idea. She added that the mission-vision shouldn't interfere with the Interim Executive Director. He's a humble man, very respectable and listens to the staff and residents. We're all for affordable housing, low-income housing and being able to help the City of Bethlehem and see the City of Bethlehem prosper. So, all I'm here is to say that our Executive Director deserves an opportunity. Mr. Linares and Mrs. McLendon thanked Mrs. Rodriguez. They suggested setting up a meeting to discuss the mission and vision.

Under the Review the Draft for the Executive Directors job, Mrs. Clifton stated that in order to get the Executive Director search correct we have to have clarity on the mission and vision in order to create the position description that aligns with that. Mr. Rittle asked not to rush and tabled the mission and vision statement. They need guidance through the process to end up with a vision that everyone agrees on. Mrs. Clifton said either that or they may someone from another local authority who might be able to facilitate it. Mr. Rittle said that's a good suggestion. Attorney Matz stated that back in 2003 the housing authority used a company to help with the mission and vision process.

Under the GASB Post Health insurance, Mr. Snyder reported that the monthly cost of the health insurance plan over the last 7 years went up by like 4.28% per year average. So, if someone retires after twenty years at age 55, the authority will have to pay \$179,820 to insure that person even though they're employed anymore. Mr. Ritter proposed that if we make it twenty years but from ages 62-65. Mr. Snyder's counter proposal was eliminating it going forward, and anyone already here would be grandfathered. Another example is if we hired someone tomorrow, and they were 42 and retired at 62, it would cost \$107,000 for three years.

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Mr. Clifton said if there is consensus across the staff about the position now, then it's easier for them to settle on approving the recommendation, eliminate the benefit going forward. Attorney Matz stated a resolution would be consistent with that recommendation for all new hires that after April 1st or whatever date it may be that there will be no further offering of the extended medical coverage. Resolution tabled until the next board meeting.

Nothing reported under Chairman's Report.

Under the Interim Executive Directors' report, Mr. Ritter reported that our monthly meeting with the BHA Community Police Officer will be held on Wednesday April 12th at 9:00. At that time, they'll discuss any drug and criminal activities on our property. In addition, the RAD conversion for the First Tee is still on hold, as we're still waiting for HUD approval. On April 17th, Nan McKay is going to start working on the 509 re-exams and interims. Mrs. Clifton asked about the time frame to complete the re-exams. Mr. Ritter said it's a one-year contract with a possible one-year extension.

Scholarship, Finance and Personnel Committees, nothing to report for this meeting.

Under the Resident Advisory Board Mr. Ortiz reported that they had their Easter party last Friday. They fixed up their garden and they're ready to start planting. They're going to take the kids fishing at the Lehigh Canal. In addition, the next Resident Advisory Board Meeting will be held on August 17th at 1:00 PM at the Monocacy Community Center.

Mrs. Gwendolyn Flores, Family Self-Sufficiency Coordinator reported that besides Lynfield, they have three more active resident councils at Litzenberger House, Monocacy Tower and Bartholomew House. They're trying to replace some officers, it's working progress.

Mr. Rittle commented that he'd like to attend the Resident Advisory Board meetings. He has been a commissioner since November and in that short amount of time has heard from a lot of residents. People are very passionate about being residents and living in our community, not just at the housing authority but the City of Bethlehem and the Lehigh Valley. And we have a way to be able to participate and he thinks it's just a good opportunity. Mr. Ritter said he would definitely include him.

UNDER RESOLUTION - RESOLUTION NO. 2564 OF 2023 - APPROVING OF THE UPDATE TO THE PROCUREMENT POLICY.

NOTE: (Resolution is entered separately as a part of these minutes.)

Mrs. Clifton made a motion to approve the update to the procurement policy. Mr. Rittle seconded the motion.

Roll Call: Ayes - Lindsey/Rittle/Ortiz/Linares/McLendon; Nays - None

Mrs. Clifton asked what the current year's limit is. Mr. Ritter said the current year for purchases for not having to go out for bid is \$11,800. Purchases between \$11,800-\$21,900 require three bids, and anything over \$21,900 requires a formal bidding.

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Mr. Ritter stated that Resolution(b) Review and Approve the Contract to Purchase Three vehicles, Two SUV's and One Van, was tabled since there were no bids submitted. They're going to extend it for another month.

Nothing reported under New Business.

Under Miscellaneous Reports, Other Business – Board Members, Solicitors, and Staff, Mrs. Clifton extended an invitation to the board of commissioners to attend a commissioners' conference. Berks County and Northampton County's two housing authority's board of commissioners will be participating. The dates are April 26th & 27th from 9:00 A.M. to 3:00 P.M. She will be attending on her own as the other commissioners will not be available to participate.

Under Public Comments, a resident of the Northeast part of Bethlehem commented on affordable housing in the City of Bethlehem. How are we defining low income or affordable housing. It's not even affordable for the median income, most of the people can't afford rent. He commented that larger cities are using use the FDH investment trust, and FHA loans. He suggested looking into more support type housing in order for more people to afford homes or most of them are going to keep struggling like they are now.

Chairperson Linares noted that the next regular board meeting will be held on Monday, May 8, 2023, at 4:00 P.M. at the Monocacy Tower, community room.

There being no further business to transact, Chairperson Linares declared the meeting adjourned.

John Ritter

John Ritter
Interim Executive Director