

MINUTES... REGULAR MEETING... MAY 8, 2023

The members of the Bethlehem Housing Authority met in a regular session Monday, May 8, 2023, at 4:00 P.M. (IN PERSON MEETING). Those present and absent were as follows:

PRESENT

ABSENT

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

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 April 10, 2023 were presented. Mr. Ortiz made a motion to accept the minutes of April 10, 2023. Mr. Rittle seconded the motion.

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

Mrs. McLendon made a motion to approve the Treasurer's and financial reports for April 2023. Mrs. McLendon seconded the motion.

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

Nothing reported under Courtesy of the Floor, Agenda Items only.

Under Old Business, the Post Retirement Health Insurance. Attorney Matz reported that the personnel policy states that BHA will pay the health insurance cost up to age sixty-five (65) for an employee, with at least twenty (20) years of service, who chooses to retire at age fifty -five (55) or older. An actuarial study which was required by HUD was done and it was concluded that due to the financial impact this benefit will end effective June 1st for all new hires.

Under Old Business, First Tee Building Transitioning. Mr. Ritter reported that the plan for the first tee building was originally to make 12 Section 8 units, but since it's the first time ever being submitted through HUD, the process can take two to three years. If we convert them to Public Housing units instead of Section 8 units, we can start within a couple of months. After completion they can always be converted back to Section 8 units. Attorney Matz asked if there is any difference between the number of units between the Section 8 program and the public housing units? Mr. Ritter said it's the same footprint, 12 one-bedroom units and only two will be handicapped accessible. The cost remains the same. The maximum Public Housing is 1456, so we'll be up to the limit of Public Housing units allowable. We're now just waiting for HUD approval Attorney Matz said it's more to speed the process and from a legal perspective it makes sense to push along as quickly as you can. Mrs. Clifton asked if we need to submit an application to HUD around the conversion. Mr. Ritter said he doesn't think we have to, once we get the approval, we can switch them over to Section 8 RAD units.

Mr. Snyder said it would be beneficial to keep them as Public Housing units. That with the RAD conversion we'll get a subsidy from HUD, but no funding for the upkeep of the units. But if they're Public Housing units we'll get subsidies, capital fund money and the rental income. Mr. Ritter said it will lessen the burden on the staff if it's Public Housing, because we can maintain them like the rest of our buildings. If they're Section 8 units, we might have to get a property management company in to handle the 12 units. Mr. Rittle commented that the mix of Public Housing and Section 8 is really important for our community. And the new opportunity with the Choice Neighborhood Program would satisfy that.

Under Old Business, Bethlehem Housing's Mission and Vision Statement. Mr. Ritter presented a proposed mission and vision statement to the board for review. Mrs. Clifton commented that she is not quite ready to adopt the new mission and vision statement. She would like to complete the NAHRO Commissioners training. She said it's essential for the staff and the board to collaborate to get a shared strategic planning. That the right process is for the board to come to an agreement before adopting something permanently. She stated that there are NAHRO staff who can come to help them facilitate strategic planning and mission-vision sessions retreat style jointly with the board and staff. And that it would be a public meeting that would have to be announced like all other meetings. She would look into contract cost and scheduling time. Mr. Ritter agreed, it's just a proposed starting point.

Mr. Rittle commented that he really likes the proposed mission and vision. That one of the things added was to provide affordable housing for very low-income families and entering into creative partnerships with public and private collaborators. Secondly, promoting innovative housing communities and encouraging clients to achieve self-sufficiency is a vision we have discussed.

The board agreed to Mrs. Clifton's proposal to schedule a retreat with NAHRO, possibly on May 22nd along with the board members and managerial staff for the mission-vision work and strategic planning. It will be facilitated in a specific location. She will get the information from NAHRO and will forward it to Chairperson Linares and Mr. Ritter.

Mr. Rittle commended Mr. Ritter as the current leader of the organization. That he has been extremely helpful, and he's impressed by his leadership. That over the last six months as Interim he's been carrying a lot and he's been doing a great job, even without an assistant. He wanted to acknowledge him because it's important to due process, and he appreciates all the that he's done. Mr. Ritter thanked the board.

Under Old Business, Executive Director's position. Chairperson Linares and Vice Chairperson Mrs. McLendon stated that it's been six months working on the executive directors' search process. That there are important HUD documents and decisions they have been put on hold or become the responsibility of Chairperson Linares. And that Mr. Ritter has proven to be a great candidate and doing an excellent job as the interim executive director. They recommend and fully support the decision to appoint Mr. Ritter as the Executive Director.

Mr. Rittle asked if the resolution could be amended and to increase Mr. Ritter's salary, to acknowledge the important work as they work on the search process. Chairperson Linares said it's a matter of not being able to sign important paperwork. Mrs. McLendon said it's been almost six months and there are things we want to work together as a group to move forward to be innovative.

Mrs. Clifton stated that she opposes appointing Mr. Ritter at this time because an open process is integral to our call as commissioners. That at this point we have not done any search or have formed a position description, and this would be irresponsible with regard to public trust. That this has nothing to do with Mr. Ritter's performance, but that the board should be taking the appropriate steps of a search process for this level of leadership position. But as a board they should be willing to take a few more months in order to do the process correctly and to do it professionally and with integrity and public openness.

Chairperson Linares disagreed. She stated that the President of the Bethlehem Area District retired, and they hired the Assistant, and they did not go through a consultant. And Mr. Ritter has been doing the job, it would be the right thing to do. Mrs. Clifton said they are a different entity to what we are. Mr. Linares said they may be different, but they deal with the public and the school district.

Mrs. McLendon added that she respects Mrs. Clifton's opinion but disagrees. She highly recommends that we give Mr. Ritter the opportunity as he has a history with the Bethlehem Housing Authority and is familiar with HUD protocol and regulations as well as the daily operations of the housing authority. His work ethics and character are of the highest caliber and has done a phenomenal job. He's very involved with the community, he's well liked among the residents, and his peers. In addition, Mr. Ritter has been taking the executive directors' training sponsored by PHADA, the Public Housing Authority's Directors Association, and it's in partnership with The Center Government Services.

The training program covers Ethics, The Future of Affordable Housing, Financial Management, Legal Issues, Maintenance Management which he already has a few of these on here. Organizational Leadership, Personnel Management, Procurement and Contract Management, AHAS and CMAP and Communications. All of which are needed if we were to get somebody from the outside, they would have to have these skills. He's taking it a step further and he's not doing this for himself, for the housing authority, staff and everybody that's involved to be able to do a good job. And that he's done a good job already, what would it look like for him to do a great job for these eight months and then to fall back. A good leader is always looking to grow in their leadership.

Mrs. Clifton asked if there is contract with the terms, title and pay to approve. Attorney Matz replied he is not aware of BHA having a contract. Certainly, the HUD regulations have a profile which they've seen. So, that's the profile that exists for this job description. Ms. Moreno said that they are civil service employees. The positions are processed through civil service requirements for all new hires and promotions.

Mr. Rittle agreed that he would also like to have an interview process so the entire board of commissioners could fully approve the next executive director. He suggested that Mr. Ritter use some staff support and the volunteer Chairperson who has been working, and if in any way we could get around it legally, we could appoint another person to sign the papers. Attorney Matz said the regulation doesn't allow for that. It really defaults to the commissioners structurally. It's operating actually how it's supposed to. It's up to the commissioners to delegate authority forward. But under the regulations it falls to the Chairperson of the Commissioners and the Commissioners by regular vote.

Mr. Rittle requests to amend the motion until they meet or table the motion at this time and bring it back at the next meeting. In the meantime, hold a Board of Commissioners Executive Session discussion on the 22nd to discuss the executive directors' position and mission and vision. That he appreciates Mrs. McLendon's statement and comments, and he knows it's been six months, but he wants to process the new information and make sure the solution is the right one so that Mr. Ritter can get full support. He doesn't disagree but that we need more time to go through the process.

Mrs. Clifton agreed with Mr. Rittle. She feels frustration from the motion, and that there should be mutual respect across the board, but coming with the motion without any conversation or any even an attempt to get unanimous decision does not feel collaborative or respectful. She also agreed that they should meet on the 22nd with the staff to do the mission-vision work. And then have an Executive Session as a board to find some consensus. She stated the motion can be amended or we can vote on the motion certainly.

Mr. Rittle and Mrs. Clifton suggest having a dialogue as a group. First, dialogue is a short retreat. That would include the board members and staff leadership and then the public. And then the second is the Executive Session, with the staffing notes having the vision and job description down and that it might even look very similar to what Mr. Ritter proposed. And then come back to the public meeting and formally, unanimously bring Mr. Ritter in as Executive Director. And it's something that would give Mr. Ritter much more confidence in doing the job than voting on it today.

Mrs. McLendon stated it doesn't matter how it comes, he's doing the job and it doesn't make a difference. He's not going to stop his job, until we make up our minds about what's going to happen. The vision and mission should not put this on hold.

Mr. Ortiz agreed with Chairperson Linares and Vice Chairperson McLendon that the motion stands as it's been six months already.

APPROVING THE APPOINTMENT OF JOHN RITTER AS THE NEW EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR.

Mrs. McLendon made a motion to approve the appointment of Mr. Ritter as the new Executive Director. Mr. Ortiz seconded the motion.

Roll Call: Ayes - Ortiz/Linares/McLendon and Nays - Lindsey/Rittle

Mr. John Ritter was officially appointed as the new Executive Director for the Bethlehem Housing Authority with an annual salary of \$125,000.

Nothing reported under the Chairman's Report.

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Under the Interim Executive Directors' report, Mr. Ritter reported that our monthly meeting with the BHA Community Police Officer will be held on Wednesday May 19, at 9:00. At that time, they'll discuss any drug and criminal activities on our property. Secondly, he reported on the Choice Neighborhood Planning Grant. On April 26th, Mr. Kichline and Mr. Ritter met with officials from the city as well as Mr. Adam Rosa, the Principal and Founder of Collabo, an organization that specialized in the planning and revitalization of urban neighborhoods. The meeting took place at Pembroke Development, where a site tour was conducted regarding the land that is available to de-concentrate 196 units in the development.

Paula Johnson, the Director of the Northeast Community Center stated the future of the Marjorie Fink Building, which is currently the location of the Northeast Community Center in Pembroke. She commented that the housing crisis is not unique to the City of Bethlehem but that it's currently affecting the entire country and continues to be a growing issue. Bethlehem Housing Authority anticipates a partnership with the city as our common goal is to continue to increase housing opportunities for our residents in the near future, and that it's not only our mission but our responsibility as we continue to fulfill our role in improving the lives of our communities and the residents of the City of Bethlehem.

Mr. Rittle explained to the commissioners the impact of the Choice Neighborhood grant. He said it will double the capacity of the development and it will be turned into mixed income housing. He commended two members of the city and also Mr. Kichline and Mr. Ritter for working on this initiative. He said this is the type of collaborative leadership that he really likes to see.

Under Committee Reports, Scholarship Committee, Ms. Moreno reported that we received three senior applications, and the 8th grade applications are due by May 22nd. The applications will be reviewed by the committee and the scholarships awardees will be presented at the next board meeting. In addition, Ebony Gee, BHA resident, was the award recipient winner of the \$3,000 PAHRA, L. DeWitt Boosel Memorial Scholarship. She has a GPA of 4.8 and has been accepted to four different colleges. She'll be graduating from Liberty High School and will be attending Cedar Crest College in the Fall, majoring in Nuclear Medicine Technology. In addition to that they're considering her for two more scholarships, the MARC-NAHRO Scholarship for \$1,000 and the NAHRO Scholarship for up to \$12,000. So, congratulations to Ebony, well deserved.

Nothing reported under the Finance and Personnel Committees.

UNDER RESOLUTIONS - RESOLUTION NO. 2565 OF 2023 - APPROVING TO ELIMINATE THE POST RETIREMENT HEALTH INSURANCE BENEFIT.

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

Mrs. Clifton made a motion to eliminate the post-retirement health insurance benefit.

McLendon seconded the motion.

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

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RESOLUTION NO. 2566 OF 2023 -APPROVING THE PROJECT MODIFCIATION FOR THE FIRST TEE BUILDING.

Mr. Rittle made a motion to approve the project modification for the First Tee Building.

Mrs. Clifton seconded the motion.

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

RESOLUTION NO. 2567 OF 2023 - APPROVING THE AGREEMENT TO PARTNER WITH THE CITY OF BETHLEHEM CHOICE NEIGHBORHOODS PLANNING GRANT FOR THE MARVINE-PEMBROKE AREA.

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

Mrs. Clifton made a motion to approve the agreement to partner with the City of Bethlehem Choice Neighborhoods Planning Grant for the Marvine-Pembroke area.

Mrs. McLendon seconded the motion.

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

Under the Resident Advisory Board Mr. Ortiz reported that in attendance they average about 30-35 kids per day. They're doing many activities and they're having a great time. They are working on the Garden and also playing baseball at the Southside baseball fields.

Under New Business, Mr. Rosa stated that Collabo, is an organization based in Chicago, which spends a lot of their energy and effort on helping communities achieve success through the Choice Neighborhood program. He is on the team as the grant writer, but eventually he could be taking the role as the planning coordinator to help facilitate the process and help to create the plan.

They recently completed the Choice Neighborhoods plan in Easton for the West Ward Community. They're now moving into implementation and they're going to be going for the \$30-\$50 million dollar later this year. He has a lot of experience in the Lehigh Valley, is also on the team for the city's housing strategy plan and has been involved in the community over the last ten months for that process.

Mrs. Clifton commended both Mr. Rosa and the City for taking the initiative to invite the housing authority to work together on this vital work for the community. The Planning Grant is a HUD based initiative for reinvesting in Public Housing sites, with three core goals people, housing and neighborhoods. They're looking at the entire Stefko/Pembroke neighborhood as a community and other series of projects that would be created through the plan. HUD is looking to award up to twenty planning grants nationwide, and we feel good about the chances overall. And if successful, we would be winning a \$500,000 grant to conduct a two-year long planning process that will focus on community engagement and empowerment as we go through the process.

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In addition, we have an opportunity to apply for the Choice Neighborhood Implementation Grant which could be up to \$30-\$50 million dollars to implement our plan to rebuild Public Housing either on site, or elsewhere in the neighborhood, but doing it in a mixed income. They're in the middle of putting the grant application together. It will be submitted to HUD by June 6th and most likely we'll hear back in November or December on approval, which can get us started sometime in January 2024. The board thanked Mr. Rosa for his work and support.

Nothing to report under Miscellaneous Reports and Other Businesses, Board Member, Solicitor or Staff.

Under Public Comments, Mrs. Laura Collins, Director of Community and Economic Development for the City stated she received a letter from the city stating that the city is excited to be embarking on a new era of collaboration and partnership with the housing authority. She envisions a future, in an expanding partnership and would like to implement the mission and vision statement as a shared vision. Mrs. Clifton said that the mission- vision and strategic planning is critical to be aligned with the leadership decisions that have been made. She will reach out to NAHRO and get back to the board on the scheduled date.

Chairperson Linares stated the board meeting should go back to in person only. After discussion, it was decided by the Board to continue having hybrid board meetings.

Mrs. Linares asked Mr. Ritter about the status on the bids for the vehicles. Mr. Ritter reported that we did not receive any bids, and they're trying to put them out one by one to see if we could acquire them that way. If not, they'll just have to buy market price vehicles.

Chairperson Linares noted that the next regular board meeting will be held on Monday, June 12, 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
Executive Director