

MINUTES... REGULAR MEETING... FEBRUARY 12, 2024

The members of the Bethlehem Housing Authority met in a regular session February 12, 2024, at 4:00 P.M. (IN PERSON MEETING). Those present and absent were as follows:

PRESENT

ABSENT

Mrs. Iris Linares, Chairperson
Mrs. Valerie McLendon
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 January 8, 2024 were presented and approved with the amended notations. Mrs. McLendon made a motion to accept the minutes of January 8, 2024. Mr. Rittle seconded the motion.

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

Chairperson Clifton noted two minor clarifications on the January 8th, 2024, minutes. Noted the middle paragraph of page 10, Martha's name was incorrect. For the record, the name was spelled correctly, she's aka Malta. On page 11, the last paragraph name was revised to Chairperson Clifton.

Mrs. Linares made a motion to approve the Treasurer's report for January 2024.
Mr. Ortiz seconded the motion.

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

Under the check register, Mr. Rittle asked about the Yardi software conversion. Shawn responded that right now we're in the initial stages. Mr. Snyder added that we had to make an initial payment before getting started.

Under the financial report, Chairperson Clifton questioned the number of leased Section 8 units. Mr. Snyder responded there are 405 leased and 404 available. On two portability units the rents went up. A portability voucher allows a person to move from one state to another and unless another housing authority absorbs them it becomes our cost. And we got several of them, two of them the rents went up late in the year, the other two we got in January. So, our port outs went from \$4,000 a month to \$6,000 a month. So, he had to adjust twenty plus thousand in expenses than what we were expecting. In addition, on the CDs, they'll be moving eight and half million to T-Bills by March 31st. They're also purchasing CDs that are FDIC insured. Another million comes due in June, then they'll move that one over as well. Chairperson Clifton asked if we're signing off on with TD Bank today the permission to do the T-Bills. And another question on the year-to-date actual income is significantly higher than our year-to-date budget income, which is good. It looks like we're potentially at the end of quarter three and looking at that being favorable to tune of over a million dollars and she just wants to make sure that's correct. Mr. Snyder agreed.

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Chairperson Clifton stated that by the time we get to the end of the fourth quarter we can expect a surplus, should we expect that one million to be used up significantly? Mr. Snyder replied he would expect to use about \$388,000 on utility bills.

Mr. Rittle made a motion to approve the Financial Report for December 2023.
Mrs. McLendon seconded the motion.

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

Nothing reported under Courtesy of the Floor.

Under Executive Directors' report, Mr. Ritter reported on the status of the deputy directors' position. He stated that the required requisition information was sent to PA state civil service commission and we're waiting on the next steps to begin the hiring process. Chairperson Clifton asked where the position will be posted. Mr. Ritter responded on the civil service website. Ms. Moreno explained the civil service process on posting a vacated position. Mrs. Clifton asks for supplemental advertising beyond civil service. Ms. Moreno said we can post it on the BHA website, the position will be listed on the civil service employment.pa.gov website and we post it in house for any staff members who may be interested in applying. Mr. Ritter suggested we can also post it on Facebook. Mr. Rittle suggested that we post all positions for the organization public, it would be helpful as we might get a wider group of people applying for the position. Mrs. Clifton agreed as she would like to see all the candidates reviewed and screened, and some of that conversation can happen internally among Mr. Rittle, Mrs. Linares and Mr. Ritter.

Ms. Moreno stated that interested candidates can apply at the civil service website at employment.pa.gov and follow the application and exam criteria. Once the position is closed, then civil service will send us the list of five top candidates to interview. Chairperson Clifton asked is there an internal metric by which they allocate points. Mrs. Moreno replied yes. Mrs. Clifton commented and "you're going to keep us posted on when you get confirmation from them because in thinking about partnership and sharing more widely, she knows of some community partners who both either were interested potentially in considering it or interested in sharing it sort of cast the net widely in terms of getting good engagements."

Under Chairperson Report, Chairperson Clifton gave an update on the meeting with Senator Casey's office. In the last meeting, Mr. Ritter stated that we had received a letter from Senator Casey's office asking for a follow up meeting and that a follow up meeting was held on January 18th. In attendance was Mr. Ritter, Attorney Matz, Mr. Ortiz and Chairperson Clifton and several of Senator Casey's staff members, both from the region and from D.C. They named four concerns in their letter, Administration of Housing Choice Voucher's program, tenant's concerns about not getting sufficient support in resources for securing and maintaining vouchers, calculation issues resulting in overpayments and a sort of general management practice concern. They addressed each of these concerns and heard a little bit more. Some of the discussion was about a particular case which they cannot talk about publicly, but they did indicate that their office had received sufficient feedback about additional cases with similar concerns, to warrant reaching out to the housing authority. And the language they used was to workshop a solution to the challenges, and to improve delivery of these client services.

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They did raise some questions about funds that were called back. Initially, Mr. Ritter didn't recall funds being called back, but on the November 23 Board meeting notes indicated that about 300,000 had been recaptured in 2022. Mr. Ritter and his team looked at that, the number was 323,473 that had been recaptured. That number is less than 2 local housing authorities, but Senator Casey's staff were also going to look at the particulars of whether those were COVID relief dollars or voucher dollars, because that was not totally clear. Mr. Snyder reported that those were all voucher dollars. Mrs. Clifton replied thank you for the clarification, because we have not heard back from them about that so that's helpful. Mr. Ritter stated that he sent an email to Senator Casey's office on both of those items, right after their meeting and he has not heard back from them.

Chairperson Clifton said right now it's an uncertain state. And Mr. Ritter shared in the meeting that in April 2023, BHA was contacted by HUD about being placed on a hotlist for issuing too few vouchers. The housing authority sort of immediately responded and in May of 2023 they started issuing twenty vouchers a month instead of six vouchers a month, so there was a quick correction on that. She appreciates the quickness of that response. In addition, she expressed her concerns about the Board not being informed of that notification from HUD and she asked that they be kept informed of those kinds of notifications going forward, which Mr. Ritter was supportive of. And the other update was about the Lynfield Community Center, community concerns that were shared at last month's meeting. On January the 29th Attorney Matz, Mr. Ritter, Mrs. Flores, and Chairperson Clifton met to discuss some of the potential parameters to create a lease with Lynfield Community Centers 501C3. The group is going to have another internal meeting later this week, to look at a draft. Mr. Ortiz and the community center's community partners have been notified about the progress and the timeline, and they'll be meeting with them as soon as they have a draft to share.

They're working on the Second Harvest agreement draft and they're making some progress. They are not there yet to address the concerns from the last meeting, but they are working on it, and they hope to have that lease in place by the end of the month.

Choice Neighborhood update, HUD is making its first site visit on March the 14th, and she will join that group lunch to meet the HUD team. Then the next Steering Committee meeting is on March 15th, which they are going to go every other month rhythm for the Steering Committee meetings, on the second Thursdays starting May the 9th, and some will be online and some in person. And then on January the 26th, Mr. Ritter and Chairperson Clifton had a meeting to talk about the roles and responsibilities of the Board Chairperson position. She asked about possibly doing some coaching with Mr. Cliff Martin, the NAHRO consultant who came and facilitated leadership, mission-vision work with the team last year with the staff and the board, and he is supportive of that. So, Chairperson Clifton reached out to Mr. Martin for some information, she's new to this role and she wants to make sure that she's doing it as effectively as she can, and we have some training funds to cover that. So, there is no definitive plan yet, but she's waiting to hear back from Mr. Martin with more information. And finally, a note for the board that they need to schedule an Executive Session meeting to start working on some proposed changes to the bylaws, revisions, and amendments with the guidance from Attorney Matz.

Under the Executive Directors' report, Mr. Ritter reported that he contacted HUD and they're willing to send some people out to do training. He's waiting for some dates, and we'll notify the Board of Commissioners. Mr. Rittle asked if this is for Chairperson training or Board training. Mr. Ritter replied to the whole board. Secondly, we have a bi-monthly check-in call with HUD on March 12th for the Choice Neighborhood Planning grant. March 14th HUD representative will be visiting to discuss the Choice Neighborhood program and there will also be a tour of the site. The Choice Neighborhood Steering Committee meeting is scheduled for March 15th from 9:00 AM-10:30 AM, and the Drug and Criminal monthly meeting for February is cancelled.

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Under Committee Reports, Scholarship committee, Ms. Moreno reported that she will be reaching out to the Bethlehem Area School District to obtain a list of the 2024 eighth graders and 12th grade BHA graduating students to send out the BHA scholarship mailing.

Under Committee Reports, Resident Advisory committee, Mr. Ortiz reported that the baseball season starts March 16th and goes on until mid-November. And they have linked up with Fountain Hill so Southside kids, ECTB, can also participate in the Little League until the end of June. They continue with the food bank and have served over two hundred families. He scheduled a meeting on February 21st at 8:30 A.M. with Dr. Silva, superintendent for the Bethlehem Area School District. They will have a presentation and discussion for the BASD students to get involved in sports such as baseball, basketball, can get a scholarship for four years if any college coaches select them to play for their college/university. Scholarships are offered to players who excel in sports and are eligible to receive a four-year scholarship from Lehigh University, Penn State or Kutztown University. They had four players the first year and three the last year, and with the academy, the registration, paying for uniforms they have already spent \$1,130,000 in two years. All free of charge. This is why we are meeting with BASD to discuss the scholarship opportunities out there. Last year, we had one student awarded a full scholarship to Rutgers University. They are also getting a food truck for the center, to use for the league during the summer. They want to use the food truck to cook outside the center to serve the kids. He hopes this will resolve the issue of cooking in the building. Lastly, the next Resident Advisory Board meeting is scheduled for Thursday, March 14, 2024, at 1:00 PM.

Under Resident Council, Mrs. Flores took the opportunity to remind tenant council members in attendance that they should inform the Family Self Sufficiency Department of any changes in the schedule of council meetings as she needs to notify others at BHA. The high rises Monocacy Tower, Bartholomew and Litzenberger councils are doing well. She is now working on the Bodder House Council, she had a meeting with them on January 31st. They met with six residents who are interested so she will be posting notifications of the community meeting on the 28th of February. And the meeting is scheduled for March 27th and after that she will be working on the nominations and election process, so it's a working progress. In addition, Parkridge has been in the works for a couple of months. And she is working along with Mr. Robinson and Mrs. McLendon and Northeast Community Center pending on approval. She is confident it will happen to see if they can come up with something to get them rolling to get them encouraged to have counsel.

RESOLUTION NO. 2584 - APPROVING THE OPERATING BUDGET FOR FISCAL YEAR ENDING 3/31/2025. (Resolution is entered separately as a part of these minutes.)

Mr. Rittle made a motion to approve the operating budget for the fiscal year ending 3/31/2024.
Mr. Ortiz seconded the motion.

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

The budget was reviewed and approved. Chairperson Clifton suggested a formal end of year comprehensive report in April or May for the fiscal year to show how we ended the year in terms of comparing the actual. We're projecting a surplus. Mr. Snyder agreed, and he will work on the report. Chairperson Clifton thanked Mr. Snyder.

Under New Business, Conflict of Interest policy, Attorney Matz reported that he prepared a draft and forwarded to Chairperson Clifton on January 30th with a recommendation to the board to adopt a Conflict-of-Interest policy. There is one that has been circulating amongst staff, and they are also exposed to an Annual Report which is a State Fund Ethics Commission matter. Increasingly it's become apparent to him that certainly this needs to be something serious to consider to be part of our organization, in the policy governs conflicts of interest that are perhaps most important for the board as they proceed in the role. Policy and conflict should be one that required for those with conflict or who think they may have conflicts to disclose those conflict or potential conflicts openly to the board and to the public.

Second, is to prohibit commissioners, staff, or employees from participating in anything that may be part of a conflict, which involves their interest. There are two basic concerns here, one of which is a financial interest which principally the ethics board takes care of in which we provide, but there's also what we call duality of conflicts which occurs where you may have an interest in a decision which may not have a financial benefit, but you may have organizational differences. So, the intent to note here is that they exist and for the commissioners and if they adopt this, then we will disclose it, discuss it, become transparent if there's such an interest that there may be a conflict so that that doesn't create other issues relating to it. The concerns he has for the board and for the authority sometimes have to deal with where they are, conflicts which are not disclosed which may expose the group, the organization or the individual to penalties. And in this case the suggestion is with the disclosure, adoption, or discussion of what may be done with the board itself on an open basis.

As sometimes people are not aware of the conflicts and sometimes it's an educational thing, it's not necessary an intentional thing, but again that's where his assistance or otherwise open, disclosure and discussion might be to get it out to help do that. And basic intent is to create a culture of candor, so there is an openness to those disclosures among everyone. On an annual basis there is a questionnaire attached there so on each year if you know something advance that may be a conflict to your interest in serving or in the decision you make as a commissioner or otherwise a staff or employee that you would be noting those in advance. And if they arise as the future proceeds, you will also bring them to the attention of the board, the commissioners so that there is an open, transparent discussion on the effect if any on the situation. It is similar to what's drafted with most non-profits, in this case dealing with the authority itself. And he thinks the issue of addressing it is on a public scale based on our service to the community, the openness of our discussion and these areas is appropriate to decision making and to the public.

Chairperson Clifton added for clarification that there are a couple of potential examples that surfaced that are related to this policy. For example, Mr. Ortiz has a separate 501C3 that is looking at negotiating a lease with the housing authority and then that would be a matter that is brought to the board for voting. Mr. Rittle is working on some potential New Bethany vouchers with BHA so because there's some ongoing overlap having some clarity in writing about how we talk about those things is really the intention and the impetus for this. Mr. Rittle said especially since we entered the Choice Neighborhood work as well, we find increased integration with community members. Attorney Matz agreed and stakeholders and partnerships and other relationships, which are obviously in front of us and among us as it relates to the advanced discussions on the needs for the community and affordable housing. So, the policy will be further reviewed by the board for any changes or revisions, and we will take it up at our next meeting for approval.

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Under Miscellaneous Reports and Other Businesses, Board Member, Solicitor and Staff, nothing to report.

Under Public Comments, Mrs. McLendon stated that she served on the BHA Board for 11 years, and after attending many meetings over the years with PHADA and NAHRO, and hearing a lot of horror stories, she thanked God for the creditability of the BHA staff. Especially Mr. Snyder, Director of Finance, because he is always on point. Our job as commissioners is to hold the housing authority accountable, especially in the area of finance. And they have never had any problems, so she is proud to serve on the board for the housing authority as they have proven to be very credible, knowledgeable, and very professional. "I'm proud of you Richard, when you stand up and you give an account, I mean you're never loss for words you always have an answer for any financial question and that makes me proud to sit on this board." Thank you all, you all are amazing. Mr. Ritter thanked Mrs. McLendon.

Chairperson Clifton noted that the next regular board meeting will be held on Monday, March 11, 2024, at 4:00 P.M. at the Monocacy Tower, community room. There being no further business to transact, Chairperson Clifton declared the meeting adjourned.

John Ritter

John Ritter
Executive Director