



## Caper Tiger girls take on Ocean City in hoops action

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## House of the Week

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170th YEAR NO. 52 CAPE MAY, N.J. Serving America's National Historic Landmark City WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 25, 2024 \$1.00



Jack Fichter/CAPE MAY STAR AND WAVE

John Sheets, 87, of Lower Township, enjoys driving around in his red Mazda Miata convertible dressed in one of his four Santa Claus suits, handing out candy canes to children of all ages along the way.

## Vroom, vroom: No time for reindeer

### Santa Claus trades sleigh for Mazda Miata convertible

By JACK FICHTER  
Cape May Star and Wave

VILLAS — Here comes Santa Claus, here comes Santa Claus — driving down the parkway in his red Mazda Miata convertible.

Wait a minute, what happened to his sleigh? And is it really Santa in his red suit waving at cars?

He must be Santa Claus because the license tag on the red Mazda reads “Santa,” and if the state Motor Vehicle Commission says he’s Santa, then he must be Santa. It’s like the movie “Miracle on 34th Street” in the courtroom scene when bags of mail addressed to Kris Kringle are placed before the judge, who declares Kringle to be Santa since the U.S. Postal Service delivered children’s letter to him.

Our local Santa is actually John Sheets, a fifth-generation Lower Township resident. His long white beard is real, as is his jolly Santa laugh. We know Santa Claus has

been around for a while and so has Sheets, 87.

The “Santa” license plate convinced a non-believing older child that Santa Claus was real, Sheets said.

After growing a beard some years ago, Sheets found children began calling him “Santa.” His daughter confirmed the resemblance, and he began making appearance as the Jolly Old Elf.

“When I started doing it, I thought maybe I’ll get three or four people that will want me to come visit for Christmas and the first thing you know, I’m already booking for next year and I’m closed out for the rest of this year,” he said.

Sheets has appeared at a number of local restaurants. He said he enjoys riding along Beach Avenue in Cape May in his red convertible wearing his Santa suit.

“When children holler, if it’s safe, I’ll pull over and give them candy canes,” Sheets said.

He has had his car surrounded on Jackson Street by children and has given out as many as 100 candy canes in one day. Like Kris Kringle in “Miracle on 34th Street,” Sheets allows children to pull on his beard.

When visiting schools, Sheets tells the children a story with a moral.

Sheets said he owns four Santa suits including one with short pants and a short-sleeved jacket trimmed in fur for beach photos with a local photographer entitled “Surfing with Santa.”

Sheets retired from a career with a telephone company and served in the military for five decades.

“I served six years of active duty, and the remainder of my time was in the National Guard or the Coast Guard Reserve. I went in in 1954 and retired in 1991,” he said.

Sheets spent 45 months stationed in Germany, where he met his wife, a marriage that has lasted 67 years.

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## MTRAC: City should establish a policy on use of surplus funds

### Board recommends Cape May spend it to reduce debt service

By JACK FICHTER  
Cape May Star and Wave

CAPE MAY — The city’s Municipal Taxation and Revenue Advisory Committee (MTRAC) is recommending the city adopt a formal policy of how it uses its ever-growing surplus account.

At a Dec. 12 meeting, MTRAC Chairman Dennis Crowley said the city’s surplus has grown from \$4 million in 2016 to almost \$15 million currently. He said during that period, there has been significant growth in debt service and surplus.

Crowley said new revenues include property tax, occupancy tax, mercantile licenses and parking meter fees.

“Most of those revenues have come from recommendations that the council has accepted from MTRAC,” he said.

Property taxes have increased because a number of homes have been sold and reassessed at higher rates, and while the property tax rate has not changed over the past four years, the amounts upon which that rate is applied have generated increases in revenues, Crowley said.

Councilwoman Maureen McDade said the city is creating a digital tax map at a cost of \$200,000.

Crowley said the primary sources of new revenue for the city from 2008 to 2023 were room tax and parking

meters. He said the other driving factor with the surplus is a general unstated unofficial policy of conservative revenue estimates.

“These conservative revenues basically are a hedge against unanticipated costs, variable spending patterns, a routine cushion, a rainy-day fund,” he said.

The city budget for the past six years shows the pattern of actual revenue versus anticipated revenue is a very significant generator of surplus, Crowley said.

He said most of the city’s revenue is generated from sources other than property taxes, with the city relying on the commercial sector to generate revenue.

He said since 2018, the city exceeded revenue projections by from 9% to 19%.

Crowley said the city’s debt exists in the general fund, the water and sewer utility and the beach utility.

“Just looking at the general fund debt from 2019 to 2024, there has been an increase in the debt load from \$2.8 million to \$4.8 million,” he said, about a 40% increase.

The debt service portion of the budget from 2016 to 2023 increased by 47%. Crowley said the rising percentage of debt service needs to be examined.

“If you take a look at the debt load and forget the principal for a minute, the debt load of all three of our

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## LOWER TOWNSHIP 2024 YEAR IN REVIEW

## Township sees economic development, infrastructure, transportation projects

JANUARY

ERMA — A 60,000-square-foot air-domed sports complex was proposed for the grounds of the Cape May County Airport. Real estate agent and mortgage broker Bob Buglak and a partner planned to construct the facility in the vicinity of the Lower Township Municipal Utilities Authority water tower on the airport campus. Buglak cited Diamond Nation, a facility in Flemington, as an inspiration to plan a facility in Bensalem, Pa.

ERMA — Naval Air Station Wildwood (NASW) Aviation Museum announced a partnership with the Cape May Maritime Museum (CMMM) to display a fully restored USCG-36-foot series motor lifeboat. The boats were in service between 1940 and the 1970s and built in Curtis Bay, Md. The addition to the collection enhances NASW’s display of several Coast Guard air, maritime and land assets.

NORTH CAPE MAY — Aramark Sports and Entertainment took over food operations at the Cape May-Lewes Ferry as Exit Zero restaurant left the operation prematurely. A 10-year lease that



Jack Fichter/CAPE MAY STAR AND WAVE

A concrete pipe is a remnant of the magnesite factory that used to operate at the Higbee Beach Wildlife Management Area.

began March 1 was approved by the Delaware River and Bay Authority (DRBA) Board of Commissioners. The lease covers about 11,750 square feet of space inside the ferry terminal and 15,500

square feet of patio area. As part of the lease, Aramark was to make \$500,000 in capital improvements to the facility.

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## Local mayors share thoughts on DEP’s flood rule proposal

By JACK FICHTER  
Cape May Star and Wave

CAPE MAY COURT HOUSE — State Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) Commissioner Shawn LaTourette met Dec. 16 with all of the county’s mayors and County Commissioners concerning proposed new flood standards.

The DEP has proposed regulations known as Protection Against Climate Threat (PACT) and Resilient Environmental and Landscapes (REAL) that would affect the height of first floors in new construction and expand flood inundation zones.

The regulations would require new homes to be built 5 feet higher to address sea level rise; homeowners who make substantial improvements to their home exceeding 50% of the value of construction may be required

to raise their property as well.

Key components to the proposed regulations include adjusting coastal flood hazard areas to account for rising sea levels and storm surge, which would extend jurisdictional area further inland and require higher first-floor elevations or flood-proofing for buildings as well as elevated roadways.

Cape May Point Deputy Mayor Anita van Heeswyk said the meeting allowed representatives of local municipalities and the DEP to explain their points of view on the regulations.

“From their (DEP) point of view, they explained some misinformation that’s out there,” she said. “It was reassuring that there are some

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