

# Coombs replaces Perry, Wareham joins Township Council

By RACHEL SHUBIN  
For the Star and Wave

VILLAS — A new Township Council was sworn in during its reorganization meeting Jan. 2, when Frank Sippel resumed his post as mayor, Kevin Coombs was named deputy mayor and Joseph Wareham was appointed to an open position.

Former deputy mayor David Perry attended his final meeting as a member of council on Dec. 18. He did not seek re-election.

“The New Jersey municipal vacancy law governs the process. In this case, Deputy Mayor, former council member Coombs, was appointed as an elected member of the Lower Township Regular Republican Party,” solicitor Robert Belasco said.

The Ward II council seat expires in December 2026, and Wareham will fill the term until the next general election in November.

“In light of the fact he was a nominee of the Republican Party and was elected as a member of the Republican Party when a vacancy occurs, the Lower Township Regular Republican Organization is given notice of that vacancy,” Belasco said. “Pursuant to the law they’re required to provide three names to council for consideration to fill that vacancy.”

Wareham will serve for the calendar year, and Belasco explained that he would have to run during the November general election to fill the unexpired term through 2026.

“If re-elected, they would have to run again to serve another regular full term,” Belasco added.

After being sworn in, Wareham thanked the council and the Lower Township



Rachel Shubin/For the STAR AND WAVE

Mayor Frank Sippel swears in Joseph Wareham as councilman for Ward II during the reorganization meeting Jan. 2.

GOP committee for supporting and endorsing him as a candidate.

“I appreciate the council deeply for giving me the opportunity and the vote of confidence in me to take this on,” Wareham said. “I’m in a very fortunate situation because this council is very experienced and has made many impactful changes to this community already. I’m looking forward to working collectively with them to continue to make Lower Township the best and the greatest place to live for future generations.”

The council presented a plaque to Perry to thank him for his many years of service.

“We asked him to come today to recognize all his work for the township,” Sippel

with a plaque to recognize his retirement and for being a “fierce and independent advocate and a voice for the people of Lower Township.”

“Dave, Mayor Sippel said it right. You always put Lower Township first, over and above everything else,” Bulakowski said. “I want to thank you and your family for allowing you to do so for all these years, and we want to wish you a happy and healthy retirement.”

Councilman Tom Conrad also spoke about Perry’s accomplishments, saying that he was needed on the council to move the township forward.

“Dave was a necessary breath of fresh air when he came on, and I’m sorry to see him go,” Conrad said. “I’ve known him for active fire service when I was EMS. We worked well together and we didn’t always agree, but we were civil and respectful, and we got along great because we could work things out. Dave, you were needed here more than you know.”

Conrad and Councilman Roland Roy welcomed Wareham and said they look forward to working with him.

“Happy new year, and congratulations and thanks to Dave Perry,” Coombs said. “I have some big shoes to fill and I’ll do my best. Congratulations to Joe Wareham.”

Sippel thanked the audience for attending the reorganization meeting and congratulated Wareham.

“I welcome our new councilman. Wareham has spent years as a volunteer on the Recreation Advisory Board and a member of the Lower Township GOP, and elected as a fire commissioner,” Sippel said. “Thank you for stepping up to serve. Public

service is not easy, but it’s so important.”

Sippel reiterated his support for the council working together and making Lower Township a better place to live.

“At the same time, we swore in Deputy Mayor Kevin Coombs, when Deputy Mayor Perry decided not to run for re-election, Kevin did not hesitate to express his interest in the position,” Sippel said. “We were able to fill the position with an experienced councilman. With

the addition of our newest councilman, and now new deputy mayor, there’s no doubt in my mind we will continue to work as a team.”

Sippel also thanked Lower Township Manager Mike Laffey, the Township Clerk’s Office and all the township employees.

“Last, I’d like to thank the residents who have placed us in office and trusted us over the years to do what’s right,” he said. “To be conservative to tax dollars, and always put the residents first.”

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## Whitman retires

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Nuessle Memorial Scholarship work-study program for graduating Cape May County high school students.

“We’ve done a lot of programs with that to help people understand landscaping for wildlife,” she said. “We host a native plant sale, which provides people of the region with wildlife-friendly, beneficial plants.”

The annual Catch of Cape May event is held in June to raise money for the Nature Center’s operations. Whitman said it’s one of the best parties of the summer.

### Good times, bad times

Directing a non-profit center has challenges, such as a shoestring budget and limited staffing.

“There were times in the recession of 2008 when our parent company, the New Jersey Audubon, had to make some tough decisions,” Whitman said. “[Almost] all the staff was let go except for me, and I worked here for six months [alone].”

Eventually, the Nature Center brought in another educator and rebuilt the programs.

“It was tough getting through those times, but we survived,” she said.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020, it was the first year the Nature Center did not offer summer camp. Instead, Whitman helped pivot toward offering virtual programs for the community. Throughout her career, it was the only summer the camp was not offered.

“The positive part of [the pandemic] was it gave us time to reflect on what we needed to do here, like cleaning and purging old materials,” Whitman said. “Our gardens looked great [that first] summer because we had more time to focus on it.”

Having enough volunteers is another critical challenge for the Nature Center.

“We’ve always struggled if we didn’t have the involvement of our volunteers,” Whitman said. “They’ve been critical to our

success, [since] we have a bare-bones staff of two and a half year-round employees and hire four to five educators for the summer.”

Whitman notes finding more volunteers is a difficulty for most non-profit organizations.

When reflecting on running her first capital campaign to raise money for the renovation of the building, Whitman said she felt out of her depth.

“I was so new in this job that I felt like it was a hard challenge [because] I’d never done anything like that before,” she said. “I didn’t study non-profit management, so this job has always been an on-the-job training experience.”

Whitman attended Rutgers University, earning a degree from the School of Environmental and Biological Sciences (previously called Cook College).

“I went to school to study biology and always thought about being a high school biology teacher,” she said. “But I took a little side deviation and worked as an environmental consultant at an engineering firm.”

After having her children, Chris and Nikki, Whitman cut back hours at the firm, at the same time the Nature Center was starting out.

“I began to work at the center when my kids were 3 and 7,” she said. “I really wanted to be involved and

have my family be a part of [it.]”

Working at the Nature Center became an integral part of Whitman’s life.

“I have lots of great memories of Chris and Nikki coming to work with me a lot during the earlier days,” she said. “The center was like their second home. My children are creative people and they grew up with unlimited art supplies, participated in the programs and had a lot of fun memories.”

Whitman met her current husband, Mark Allen, through her work at Harbor Fest. As part of her retirement, she hopes to be able to spend time with her family, including grandson Mason, cook more, take art classes and travel.

Allowing the next generation to take the lead is paramount to Whitman. She leaves the director position in the hands of Emily Reed, who acts as the current program director.

“That’s probably one of the reasons I’m retiring, because I know it’s time to pass it on to the next generation to be involved,” Whitman said. “I started here when I was 35 years old and Emily will be 35 when she takes over. I think you need young blood and families to be involved.”

Just because she is retiring does not mean Whitman will not be a familiar face on the campus. She hopes to be one of the much-needed vol-

unteers for the organization.

“I love tinkering in the garden, and we just renovated the front garden and my goal is to really see it thrive as a pollinator garden,” she said. “One of the programs I’ve [held] is ‘Beachcombing at the Cove,’ and I [will] probably continue to offer that. It’s a nice way to start a day.”

TIDES: Jan. 8-15, 2025				
DATE	HIGH		LOW	
	A.M.	P.M.	A.M.	P.M.
8	2:31	2:55	8:48	8:49
9	3:38	4:04	9:59	9:50
10	4:39	5:07	11:03	10:49
11	5:36	6:05	12:01	11:45
12	6:30	7:01		12:45
13	7:21	7:51	12:38	1:43
14	8:08	8:37	1:28	2:26
15	8:50	9:20	2:13	3:08

  

MOON PHASES	
Full moon:	Jan. 13

## Point

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Grant also provided the commission with an update on the Veterans Memorial.

“We are coming up with a different strategy, where we’re going to do the project in phases, as opposed to holistically,” he said. “That way, the first phase can [be completed].”

The other phases will be considered going forward.



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