

Township Council amends fees for use of off-duty police

By RACHEL SHUBIN
Special to the Star and Wave

VILLAS — February is typically one of the quieter months in Lower Township, but a lot is happening behind the scenes.

During a meeting Feb. 3, Township Council introduced an ordinance amending the administrative fees for off-duty police services.

"In 2024, we enacted [a resolution] that increased the hourly rate that officers received when they worked extra duty contract, a contract when they're off-duty and not working for the department," solicitor Louis Belasco said. "The original rate was \$60 through contract negotiations. The new collective bargaining agreement that was executed with the police department increased that rate to \$85."

The \$25 increase is the only change in the ordinance. Belasco said that when Chief Financial Officer Lauren Read and the finance department ran the numbers, the \$5 administrative fee didn't cover the taxes the township would incur.

"We were essentially subsidizing those extra duty events," Belasco said. "In speaking with Lauren Read, she suggested that we increase the administrative rate from \$5 to \$7."

Belasco noted that Read also identified an issue with the charge imposed for ex-

tra duty events using Lower Township Police Department vehicles.

"Previously, it was indicated that these extra duty events would pay \$50 per day for the use of the township's vehicles," Belasco said. "That expense is actually covered by statute."

According to Belasco, there are state regulations based on the type of vehicle that should be charged.

"In this case, it increases the rate to \$22.91 an hour and Lauren's suggestion was to increase to \$23 an hour to be consistent with the requirements outlined in the state statute," Belasco said. "Even though a vehicle might not be driving, it's on while these officers are working these extra duty details. There is use incurred with these vehicles, so it's appropriate to increase that as well."

Belasco said the ordinance includes language noting that the township runs the program but council could choose to designate a third-party vendor.

"If you recall, we also went out to request for proposals to manage this program for the township," Belasco said. "That is set to be included in the bids and proposals we receive."

Currently, council can award a contract with a third-party vendor or reject the offers. The ordinance's second reading and public

hearing were scheduled for Feb. 19.

Fire district elections

In other news, Louis Conley Jr., secretary of Fire District II, spoke to the council regarding fire elections.

"Fire district elections are coming up, and I come here every year to remind everyone that the commissioners have a budget that has to be voted on every year by the public," Conley said.

The election is scheduled for 2 to 9 p.m. Feb. 14 at the fire district firehouse. Conley noted that the other two fire district elections in the township are held simultaneously at the firehouses.

"We have two questions on the ballot this year, to approve the budget, and the second is we need to buy another firetruck and that seems to be an unending story," Conley said. "We can do that without raising the taxes, which is outlined in the balance."

Councilman Tom Conrad asked Conley to clarify that Town Bank has no tax increase for 2025.

"If you want to be [really] technical, there is a hundredth of a cent increase purely by virtue of the way it works," Conley said. "If you turn that into \$100,000, that would be \$10."

Councilman Joe Wareham said he had the opportunity to attend the fire district swearing-in and award cer-

emony in January.

"We say all the time that the volunteers drive this community, but to be a volunteer firefighter you're volunteering your time and your first responder double duties," Wareham said. "It takes a unique person to do that and I want to thank all [three] fire districts for their services."

New police officer

Patrolman Austin Cushman was sworn in during the meeting by Mayor Frank Sippel. His wife, Anri Cushman, held the Bible and his cousin and fellow officer Michael Harkin pinned on his badge.

"Austin Cushman is a lifelong resident of Lower Township and a 2013 graduate from Lower Cape May Regional," Police Chief Kevin Lewis said. "He joined the U.S. Navy in January 2018 and graduated from Hospital Corpsman A school in December 2018."

Cushman also attended Dental Assisting C school, finishing basic dental laboratory technician school in September 2019.

"Patrolman Cushman was stationed at a naval hospital in Yokosuka, Japan from October 2019 to December 2023," Lewis said. "He separated honorably from the U.S. Navy in January 2024 and was hired as a full-time police officer by the Lower Township Police Department in August 2024."

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Cushman graduated from the basic force of police officer training at the Cape May County Police Academy in January.

Blackley retires

The council awarded a proclamation of retirement to Donna Blackley.

"Donna began her career with Lower Township Fire Bureau in 2000," Sippel said. "She became a secretary

to the fire bureau, and attended fire inspector school in 2003 and took the fire official course."

Blackley attended fire investigation school in 2013 and was named Lower Township fire official in February 2015.

"[We] congratulate Donna on a well-deserved retirement," Sippel said. "Thank you for your dedicated years of service and Lower Township wishes you success in all future endeavors."

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and Designs.

"We specialize in creating high-quality television programs, animated documentaries and feature-length films that explore the rich tapestry of human history," the Cherry Hill resident said.

He and assistant director Tom Coyle produced the project for the Lower Township Historic Preservation Committee, noting it was a team project but "I was the guy who knew how to make stuff."

"Better story than I could ever imagine"

Millaway said they were planning to make a simple film documenting the cemetery after meeting caretaker Rudy Von Coln, but a Facebook post drew the attention of four area women who are descendants of people laid to rest there.

"This project began with a simple encounter: a conversation with the caretaker of a neglected cemetery. Hearing his stories ignited a passion to document this forgotten corner of history," Millaway said. "However, a Facebook post unexpectedly brought forth descendants of those buried within, their voices adding a profound depth and urgency to the narrative."

He interviewed Janis Washington White and Wanda Wise Evelyn of Rio Grande, Emily Dempsey of West Cape May and Shirley R. Wilson of Wildwood.

"They were just fantastic," Millaway said. "Their personal stories revealed the remarkable impact of these forgotten heroes on their families and communities, underscoring the critical importance of preserving our shared African American history."

Millaway said he learned that important people in the Underground Railroad, such as Edward Turner, are buried in the cemetery.

"These are things that are not totally documented, because African American lives were not really documented well then," he said. "It turned about to be quite a stimulating story and ended up being a better story than I could ever imagine."

Millaway said the project is part of the committee's message of preservation.

"That's why we exist, to try to keep those things that are very important from being forgotten," he said. "Through this film, I aim to illuminate the interconnectedness of our past and inspire a deeper understanding of our collective heritage."

Others featured in the film, which was shot at the Fishing Creek Schoolhouse, are Pary Tell, chairwoman of the his-



David Nahan/CAPE MAY STAR AND WAVE

Caretaker Rudy Von Coln, Janis Washington White, filmmaker Tim Millaway and assistant producer Tom Coyle at the Union Bethel Civil War Veterans Cemetery.

torical committee; Paul Schulte of the Builder's Club; and Stephen Larsen, a playwright who

wrote "Other Side of the Jordan," a play about the Underground Railroad in Cape May.

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TIDES: Feb. 12-19, 2025

DATE	HIGH		LOW	
	A.M.	P.M.	A.M.	P.M.
12	7:49	8:14	1:12	2:00
13	8:27	8:51	1:54	2:36
14	9:02	9:27	2:34	3:09
15	9:37	10:03	3:12	3:42
16	10:12	10:40	3:51	4:14
17	10:48	11:19	4:33	4:48
18	11:26		5:18	5:23
19	12:01	12:07	6:06	6:01

MOON PHASES

Full moon: Feb. 12 - last quarter: Feb. 20

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