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The Montclair Township Council

The Montclair Township Council took only an hour or so to vote on three ordinances and five resolutions in its final regular meeting for 2014 on December 9, with only the annual year-end finance meeting ahead before the holidays. The meeting was, appropriately for the Christmas season, haunted by the ghosts of Montclair past; Mayor Robert Jackson's three immediate predecessors were all in attendance (including Deputy Mayor Robert Russo), an earlier mayor was celebrated by proclamation, and former Fire Chief Kevin Allen was also so honored.

Affordable Housing

Both former mayors who attended as private citizens rose to express support for the resolution authorizing the release of funds from the Montclair Housing Trust Fund for HOME Corp's purchase and construction of six affordable housing units at 127 Valley Road. Jerry Fried, mayor of Montclair from 2008 to 2012, called it a "really rare, historic opportunity" to provide affordable housing, citing broad support from the Affordable Housing Commission and the Planning Board. Ed Remsen, mayor of Montclair from 2004 to 2008 and the Second Ward's councilor from 2000 to 2004, added that this resolution allowed for affordable housing to be shared more equally by the town by building the 127 Valley Road project in the Second Ward.

"The challenge in affordable housing has been, the town's overall income is so high that it makes it impossible for the town to attract the kind of dollars that other non-profits in other municipalities attract to affordable housing," Remsen added. "HOME Corp and the municipality have had to be very creative over the years in finding ways to allow

HOME Corp or the municipality itself to directly subsidize units or build or renovate units.” He pointed out that Montclair had stopped using money from the Regional Contribution Agreements (RCAs) that had been passed over by other Essex County municipalities until the council decided to stop receiving such money because it was letting too many other towns shirk their affordable housing responsibilities. The \$225,000 in the Housing Trust Fund authorized by this resolution, was all Montclair’s own funds, and the project had been thoroughly vetted.

Montclair Planning Board member Peg Seip and her husband, former Montclair Housing Commission member Tony Schuman also lobbied for the project, but the council needed little if any convincing, as the housing resolution was the predominant resolution on the consent agenda. In fact, it was the *only* resolution on the consent agenda. The council broke precedent by voting on it, despite the fact consent agenda items are pre-approved, and it (like everything else on the evening’s agenda passed unanimously.)

Community Development Block Grants

Also unanimously approved was a resolution authorizing community development block grant (CDBG) applications for 2015 totaling \$583,552.98, forwarding all ten applications from the December 2 CDBG hearing along with \$155,000 in improvements along the streetscape of Orange Road and \$26,000 for the shelter house in Edgemont Park, including improvements under the Americans with Disabilities Act. Deputy Mayor Russo noted that the CDBG program has long been successful but that federal budget cuts have reduced it dramatically, down to \$3 billion, which is half of what the government used to spend on it. He said he spoke with U.S. Representative Rodney Frelinghuysen (R-NJ-11) about the need for the program, noting the congressman’s standing as a member of the Republican House majority, and he urged Montclair residents to contact members of Congress on the issue.

PropertyPilot Software

In public comment, Sandy Sorkin revisited the issue of software purchased from PropertyPilot and asked if there was a contract indicating what the firm would be doing before delivering the product. Councilor-At-Large Rich McMahon and Acting Township Manager Timothy Stafford said that they had met with PropertyPilot and its presentation was very well received. Councilor McMahon said that Montclair Communications Director Katya Wowk could fill Sorkin in on the particulars, and they were looking into using Public Stuff for constituent relations. Sorkin re-iterated the need for a contract that specifies what the software vendor will do.

“All I’m trying to do is offer...to put together test plans and help you with the contract,” Sorkin, a member of the Communications Advisory Committee, said. Councilor McMahon promised further discussions on the matter.

Sorkin also asked about the \$1,932 in the bills list to repair the senior citizens’ bus despite the fact that a new bus is being delivered. Mayor Jackson said that repairs were needed on the old bus to keep it going until the new bus arrives and is put into service.

Assisted Living Project

Township Attorney Ira Karasick reported on developer Dick Grabowsky’s case against Montclair for allowing the Kensington assisted living project to proceed, currently being argued in the New Jersey State Supreme Court. He said that the Court seemed disturbed by the fact that trial court, without any notice to the parties involved, dismissed the case and failed to give Grabowsky a chance to present arguments against a dismissal.

“It seemed like the Court was not going to let the decision stand, and they were going to send it back,” Karasick added, “but second-guessing these things is never a great idea.” The time frame for a decision on the case is still unknown.

Proclamations

Proclamations issued by the council honored the Matthew G. Carter Apartments (named for the town’s first Black

mayor and a staunch advocate for affordable housing) on the complex's 35th anniversary, the Montclair High School girls' soccer team for winning their first Group IV state title, and the Sickle Cell Association of New Jersey. Former Fire Chief Allen, who retired in February 2014 after a 34-year career with the Montclair Fire Department — including nine years beginning in 2005 as the town's first Black fire chief — was joined by family members in receiving his proclamation from Third Ward Councilor Sean Spiller. Mayor Jackson called him a gentleman and said he was proud to call him a friend.

"You feel funny," Allen told the council and the gallery, "when you're doing something that you love and you get an award for it."



Montclair Third Ward Councilor Sean Spiller presents a proclamation honoring retired Fire Chief Kevin Allen (right). Allen was joined by family members, including his father, Harrison Allen (second from right).