**March 29, 2017 Town Hall Meeting Report**

**(For Posting on City’s Website)**

**FIRST TOWN HALL MEETING A CLEAR SUCCESS!**

“Superb!”

“Breath of fresh air! Great job, well done.”

“Enjoyable and informative!”

“Sorry to leave before it’s over but my ride is leaving.”

“Professional.”

“Useful and illuminating.”

“A much needed change!”

These phrases are a sampling of the comments people made to describe Cape May’s first quarterly Town Hall meeting held on Wednesday, March 29, 2017.

Mayor Clarence “Chuck” Lear welcomed participants and reminded them of the promise he made in his State of the City address on January 1 — that it is important for City Council, the City Administration and the citizens to have open, honest exchanges on the City’s priorities: “…how we’ll tackle them and how we’ll deal with our challenges and champion our accomplishments.”

Town Hall Meetings are an integral part of those open, honest exchanges.

The Town Hall is considered a City Council meeting though the form is different from regular Council sessions.

During Town Hall sessions, participants are offered:

* Updates on City operations and events;
* A focus on one or more of the City’s departments or projects;
* A chance to recognize and celebrate community volunteers;
* Time and encouragement to raise questions and offer observations.

Mayor Lear noted that Town Hall meetings are intended to be less formal and more relaxed, saying: “We may engage contentious issues because we feel strongly about things that affect us **and** we will engage those issues in a reasonable, fair-minded way — the way a group of active, concerned citizens would do because we care about our City and we respect everyone’s point of view.”

The mayor said he expected everyone to be increasingly comfortable over time in bringing up issues or questions that make us unhappy or even angry while also acknowledging things that please and satisfy us. He said, “The point is we’re meeting with each other to share information and exchange ideas and opinions.”

Wednesday evening’s Town Hall agenda included updates on staff, Commission and Committee appointments and the status of the City Manager search.

Mayor Lear took time to explain Council’s recent decision to table the proposed Outdoor Seating ordinance because of pertinent questions and criticisms expressed about it at the most recent Planning Board and City Council meetings. Many people were expressing disappointment with tying outdoor seating to City parking problems.

Mayor Lear said, “No assumptions should be made that this City Council has earmarked those funds for demolishing buildings and erecting a parking garage. Nor is there any indication that was the intention of the prior Council. I assure you I would recommend the City Council take matters to a public referendum before making such major and far-reaching decisions without understanding the interests of our taxpayers.”

The Mayor went on to promote three grant development efforts:

* + The Garden Club has proposed beautifying the area surrounding the Madison Avenue water tower by removing vines and other over-growth and planting flowers and shrubs. Funding is being sought from the Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissions;
  + The Greater Cape May Historical Society requested City Council support in observing the 100th anniversary America’s entry into of World War I through cosmetic improvements to the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial at the triangular island at Columbia Avenue and Gurney Street. The U.S. World War One Centennial Commission will offer a matching grant of up to $2000 to 100 successful applicants for the restoration of World War One memorials. The Historical Society is applying for such a grant.
  + Another exciting initiative is back on track. The City and the Center for Community Arts (CCA) are collaborating to secure support to complete the renovation and restoration of the Franklin Street School and transform this historic building and the adjacent gymnasium into a community arts, history, cultural, recreation and senior center. CCA is in the process of revising and updating a concept plan — the first step in applying for funding.

Deputy Mayor Shaine Meier reported on capital improvements and City infrastructure projects. Dan Shustack, the City Purchasing agent who doubles as Information Technology guru, displayed power point slides of the various projects covered in Mr. Meier’s report. Included in the update were:

* Beach replenishment completion;
* Swimming Pool at Cape May Elementary School - completion scheduled for August 10;
* Phases I-IV of the Lafayette Street Park - Phase I complete
* Elmira Street sidewalk;
* Reconstruction of street surfaces and concrete curbing at Hughes Street and Stockton Place;
* Reconstruction of pavement on 1200 block of Missouri Avenue;
* Linkage to ParkMobile for use with electronic devices to pay parking meters.

Council Member Tricia Hendricks and Beach Safety Committee Chairman Dennis deSatnick reported on the Council resolution that officially established the Committee in January. They also offered an update on the improved public education plans and materials that will be available for this summer’s beach season. They asserted Cape May’s beaches are safe and the issue of deep concern is surf zone safety. Surf zone is that area in the ocean where the waves break and then, reduced in height, continue to approach the sloping front of the beach.

The Beach Safety Committee will underscore the importance of staying safe while on the beach or in the water, understanding the nature of the surf zone and injuries that may occur there and, finally, whether surf hazards and injuries are an unintended consequence of beach fill activity. Community residents were encouraged to attend the Committee’s meetings, held the last Monday of the month at 6 p.m. in the City Hall auditorium.

Council Member Bea Pesaggno had the happy responsibility of leading the Town Hall recognition of community volunteers. By the end of her presentation, several standing rounds of applause had been offered to Emily Dempsey and Annika Marks whose dedication and service to others were recognized by the City.

Emily Dempsey, a Cape May resident for all of her 80 years, was honored for her role in founding the Center for Community Arts (CCA), with 11 other Cape May women and her dedicated support to the restoration of the Franklin Street School, Cape May’s historically segregated school for African-American children that has fallen into disrepair. It is CCA’s intention to renovate the School and the adjoining gymnasium transforming them into a community center for art, history, cultural, recreational and senior activities. She is a dedicated historian and her commitment to preserving the area’s African-American history is a precious legacy. Mrs. Dempsey’s husband of 60 years, Eugene, was also greeted with warm applause by the audience.

The second honoree, Annika Marks, a student at Wildwood Catholic High School, offers her service as a volunteer in several areas: founding “Kids Kan” to help other kids; participating in “Soul for Sole” - a shoe drive for disaster survivors; fundraising to enable physically-challenged children attend summer camp; heading up a Christmas Parade drive for paper products to be used by area food banks; and supporting “Stomping Out Illiteracy One Book, One Child at a Time” — a program that delivers bi-lingual books to students in Cape May and Camden Counties. Warm expressions of appreciation were also shown to Annika’s mother and grandmother who were in attendance.

Mrs. Dempsey and Ms. Marks were each presented with an official City of Cape May Certificate of Recognition for Volunteer Service and a bouquet of flowers.

The Town Hall meeting then moved to a question and answer dialogue where City residents made comments, raised questions, and offered suggestions and support. Dr. Linda Wolf, a City resident, facilitated the session, encouraging participants to either come to the stationary microphone or submit their questions in writing. City Attorney Frank Carrodo cautioned the audience about avoiding legal issues since matters under litigation could not be discussed.

Q & A topics were wide-ranging and included such issues as:

* Abandoned boats in Cape May Harbor;
* Need for cosmetic improvements to Post Office, i.e., painting the front of the building and the lobby;
* Need for ramps and ADA compliance at the Post Office;
* Need to replace the Cape May Elementary School sign;
* Earth Day - April 18 - join volunteers at the Nature Center - maybe Earth Day volunteers could help with clearing abandoned boats in Cape May harbor;
* Plans for a kayak storage area near the Nature Center;
* Unleashed, unattended dogs that could endanger other dog-walkers, dogs and pedestrians;
* Need to enforce dog policy on the Mall where only service dogs are allowed;
* Ways to assure animals claimed to be service dogs are so registered or certified or otherwise authenticated;
* Forming a Bike committee and completing bike paths, especially connected to adjacent communities;
* See to clean up of the lot on Pittsburgh Avenue that has a broken fence and overgrown vegetation;
* Offer City, business and social information and transportation or related support to Coast Guard recruits who don’t know where to go or how to get around on their first weekend pass;
* Keeping the Anderson-Wise name for Lafayette Street Park;
* Provide information about basketball courts at Lafayette Street Park and notice of the hours Park is open and accessible;
* Is the Post Office a Federal building? Is it on Federal land?

A number of written questions and suggestions were submitted by audience members who were asked to provide contact information so appropriate City staff members can follow up with them where necessary.

City Marketing Director Laurie Taylor reported on the Summer Beach Concert series, noting tickets were on sale in the lobby. Brisk tickets sales demonstrate the popularity of this summer’s featured stars.

Mayor Lear reminded everyone the next Town Hall meeting is scheduled for Saturday, July 8 at 7 p.m. — on a weekend day rather than a weekday — to facilitate participation by season residents.

The Mayor also announced only 2 days remained to purchase 2017 Beach Tags at the discounted price. For the convenience of audience members, the tags were on sale in the lobby.

The Mayor also encouraged everyone to participate in the City’s Memorial Day observances and events.

After Mayor Lear wished everyone a pleasant evening, City Council took action to adjourn the Town Hall meeting.