

**Summit Hill Borough Council**  
**December 6, 2023, 7:00 p.m. Borough Hall**

The special meeting of the Summit Hill Borough Council was held at the above time and place with President Michael Kokinda presiding.

**Roll Call** – President Michael Kokinda, Vice President William O’Gurek, Karen Ruzicka, Alan Kruslicky, Joseph Weber, David Wargo and Mayor Jeffrey Szczecina were in attendance. Gino DeGiosio and Solicitor Robert Frycklund were absent.

**Floor** –

1. Joanie Morana, 104 East Ludlow Street, asked for someone to explain what the 2.75 mill increase is for and wanted to know if it has to do with adding a sixth full-time police officer. She stated that the town cannot afford this tax increase and that she was led to believe that this new officer was to replace an officer that was already in the budget not to create a 2-mill tax increase for the taxpayers. President Kokinda asked if Ms. Morana understands millage, what it generates for the borough and what it costs individual homeowners. Ms. Morana stated that she does understand but would like to hear from his standpoint how much she will have to pay. President Kokinda asked Councilwoman Ruzicka if she would like to explain it. Ms. Ruzicka said that she would not because she is not exactly sure how much per household it would go up. President Kokinda explained if you live in a \$50,000 home, your assessed value of that is \$25,000. Millage is then calculated at one tenth of one percent on the \$25,000. One mill of taxes would be \$25 to the property owner and 2.75 mills would come out to \$68.75 per year on top of what is already paid. Ms. Morana said this would be on top of everything else that people are paying for right now. People cannot feed their kids or heat their homes. President Kokinda said that he did not attend the budget meetings because he will not be here next year so he cannot explain it to her. Ms. Morana said she would like someone who was at the meeting to explain it to her. They do not need a police officer. What they do need is a code enforcement/code officer which is a hell of a lot cheaper than an \$80,000 police officer. President Kokinda asked if she has been to the grocery store lately or bought gas. Expenses go up. Ms. Morana said expenses do go up but not 2.75 mills. President Kokinda explained that the only way they have to generate revenue is to raise taxes or cut expenses. Everyone wants rats taken care of, police protection, streets plowed, code enforcement, zoning, etc. Where do they think the money comes from for all of it.

Councilman Weber stated that what he is hearing is that we do not need 24/7 police coverage. We need six full-time officers to have that kind of coverage, or you need part-time officers, for which we have no part-time availability. Ms. Morana asked how this was done before the officer was hired. Mayor Szczecina said they had part-time officers, but they do not exist anymore. There was a handful of part-time officers that they could call and get to work. He asked Ms. Morana how many part-time officers she thinks are needed. Ms. Morana said she does not know but it would be cheaper than \$80,000 a year. Mayor Szczecina asked how many hours are in a year that they need 24/7 coverage. The last part-time officer that was hired was in March. He was fresh out of the academy and was only there for three months because Lehighton called him and said now that he is trained he can come work for them. If you know anything about public service right now because of the negative attitude towards police officers, which is often expressed in this building, it is hard to get police officers. People do not want to be police officers anymore because of the nonsense that they put up with when doing the job. Because of this, the field is incredibly low. They tried it last year by hiring a part-time officer and Council granting that officer 32 hours a week to try and keep him in Summit Hill. Within three months, after Chief Woodward spent the three months training him, he immediately left and went to Lehighton. There is a consortium test. This is a test where multiple municipalities come together and pay the fees for one test. Consortium tests used to bring in 40-60 applicants. The last time Jim Thorpe did a consortium test, they got 6 applicants. The idea was to have 24/7-365 coverage, which is 8,760 hours in a year. If there are four police officers how many hours does that give us; not enough to cover 8,760 hours. Ms. Morana asked if there is ever more than one police

officer on at a time. Mayor Szczecina explained that there is because they do a cover shift. The cover shift is a 6pm to 2am shift. The reason for the flexible shift is because the worst time for being a police officer is in the evening, typically during the hours of 6-2. Having this shift, if the police officer working 2-10 has to call off, they will bring the other officer down from the 6-2 shift and they will now work the 2-10 shift. On the other hand, if for some reason the officer calls off the midnight shift, they take the officer from the 6-2 shift and have them work the 10-6 shift. Additionally, they do have to follow the contract. The contract says that an officer's work week shall be five consecutive 8-hour shifts and the officer is entitled to two consecutive days off in any seven-day period. Typically, they would want the officer working Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, which are the typical busiest days. To be able to do that, they would need to bring them in on Wednesday because they need to work five consecutive days. Additionally, the contract states that every fourth weekend a full-time police officer is entitled to four consecutive days off to be included into a weekend. So now that needs to be worked into the schedule. Four years ago, that was pretty easy because you could pick up the phone and call one of the 8 part-time officers and see what to do. Unfortunately, because of the environment that we live in now, we do not have that luxury. They just accepted a resignation last week from a part-time time police officer. Chief Woodward is going out of his way begging people to come in and cover shifts for us. They had two shifts where they did not have 24/7 coverage and the state police had to handle one incident. His phone blew up, the internet blew up, Facebook blew up asking why Summit Hill does not have 24/7 coverage. That is why they tried to brainstorm to come up with ideas. The idea was to bring on another police officer, who can serve as a police officer, so if something does happen they can respond to calls and incorporate that into a zoning officer, train the person in zoning so that when they do have extra people working on a shift they can have that. If you look at the zoning, it has not been really good lately. They have had issues with zoning, and it was brought up in the meeting. Additionally, and he does not want to pick on specific boroughs, Lansford does not have 24/7 coverage. Mahoning, the other neighbor, does not have 24/7 coverage. Now they are putting our police officers out there with the nearest backup being Coaldale, who does not have 24/7 coverage. The next backup department is Nesquehoning and then the next to them is Jim Thorpe. Hopefully, Jim Thorpe is not up the mountain somewhere. They try to pick the days where they are going officer safety issues. Now they have to incorporate that into training. Legal issues this year was a 12-hour online course and every officer had to sit at a computer for 12 hours and get legal updates. Additionally, they go to the range and qualify at the range. They do get paid for it, not on overtime, but on their regularly scheduled shift. First aid and safety are required yearly, and they have to go through it. You calculate those hours and just have one officer on 24 hours a day, which gives them 480 hours extra. One officer a day 24/7. Now to do the coverage, which he just explained, would be 3 days of 8-hour coverage overlap at 52 weeks is another 1,248 hours, which leaves them at a negative 764 hours on a 5-person week. They do not have 764 hours part-time coverage.

Ms. Morana asked who the Sergeant is; Mayor Szczecina stated it is Jeff Ohl. Ms. Morana asked if he patrols because she has never met him, so she does not know who he is. Mayor Szczecina said he does patrol and has been with the borough for about 10 years. He used to come to the Council meetings when he was the officer in charge. He was the officer in charge when Chief Fittos was off. Ms. Morana said she does appreciate what he said because no one has ever explained it. Mayor Szczecina stated that he does not think that she feels they sit in the back room and conspire on how to rip off the taxpayers. Ms. Morana said obviously there are people who do feel this way. Mayor Szczecina said these are the uninformed people. He asked Ms. Morana if she had ever asked before or has she ever picked up the phone and asked if he would be willing to talk to her for a half hour. Ms. Morana said the question is asked all the time as to what the police officer do, and he refused to say. Mayor Szczecina said he can tell her that, but he has never been asked and he has never refused information. However, he is not going to talk about personnel matters in a public meeting. She can ask the solicitor because they are not permitted to ask personnel questions at a meeting. They are not going to talk about individual officers in a public meeting. If it is a personnel issue, it is a public safety issue to talk about officers and it is an operational issue. None of it is public information. Ms. Morana said she is not asking for specifics, but they can say that this officer did this or that. Mayor Szczecina explained that they are not going to discuss any of it because it is a personnel

issue. Ms. Morana stated that she does not have a right to know what officers are writing tickets and what officers are doing their job. Mayor Szczecina said that she is correct because it is operational. Ms. Morana said that she will see about that because she is a taxpayer and has a right to know. Mayor Szczecina asked where the right is written. Ms. Morana stated that they can sit in the office for 8 hours and she does not have a right to know this information. Mayor Szczecina said that he is so tired of hearing that they sit in the office for 8 hours. Where is she getting this information. He comes into the office frequently and they are not sitting in there doing nothing. If they are sitting in the office doing nothing, it will be addressed by either him or the Police Chief. Like it was said in the last council meeting, when a person questioned their patrol. President Kokinda added that she does not know who these officers are, you have never seen them before, but you know they are sitting in the office for 8 hours doing nothing. Mayor Szczecina stated that if she is asking a hypothetical question, it does not exist. Ms. Morana again said that she has a right to know as a taxpayer. Mayor Szczecina said he can go next door and get the patrol log and the mileage log. At the beginning of each officers shift, they are required to write down what car they drive, the starting mileage and the miles they put on during their shift. He goes into the office unannounced all the time unless he needs a meeting with the police chief. Then he will call to see if he is in the office. 99% of the other time he goes into the office unannounced and if they are not eating lunch, they are sitting doing paperwork or on the computer. He will go into the office and read the reports. He does not know why the residents of this town have such a beef with our police department. We have a dedicated group of police officers and has said it in the past. During COVID they stepped up when they did not have a chief, Jeff Ohl was the officer in charge, and they covered shifts. In September, when an officer was injured, an officer cancelled his vacation just to cover shifts. He does not know why people in this room have a problem with our police department. He has not had one complaint in the two years that he has been Mayor that he called the police, and they did not show up or do their job. There was an incident two weeks ago where a resident was victimized. They work with a councilman, and they went to that councilman asking the status since it has been two weeks. That councilman came to his house and asked if he could talk to him about the incident. They called the officer on the phone, they listened to what was going on, the officer told them the status of the investigation, the process of the investigation and how it was going to go. He told the Councilman that everything they talked about was fine to tell the victim because he is the victim and can be told what is going on. Councilman Wargo called him at home at 9:45 p.m. last week asking if he was awake because his neighbor had a situation and he wanted to give him a head up on it to let an officer know about it. We are available and the officers do their job. There was a person at the meeting two months ago complaining about the police picking on their son, they do not do their job, they do not patrol but they just came after my son and yelled at him for working on the car. He personally watched the body cam footage and the person that was complaining was the only person using the F word and the only person screaming at the police officer, who one a scale from 1-10 handling it professionally he was an 11 because he maintained his composure and he should have arrested her for disorderly conduct. After he watched the footage, the officer asked him if he should arrest her for disorderly conduct. He told her no because he was in the right, and it was just another person coming to a council meeting to complain about the police. After 25 years as a State Trooper and 2 years as the Mayor, he is tired of the negativity towards our police officers. The lady who spoke negatively about the police officers at the last meeting he interviewed last week for 45 minutes. He will report on those findings at the next meeting. Ms. Morana said she cannot speak for the others, and she never said the police do not do anything. President Kokinda stated that she never said it our right, but she has insinuated it and enough is enough already. He told her she has a right to run for office too. If she is so concerned about what goes on up at the table, put her name on a ballot and run because they obviously voted for change. Ms. Morana said she would never get on. Councilman Kruslicky told her that she can write a letter of interest for the open seat in January. Vice President O’Gurek said he looks forward to seeing her letter. Ms. Morana said he would never vote for her; he stated that she already knows the answers to that. Ms. Morana stated that she did not vote for him either and he lost. Vice President O’Gurek said that this Council could cure cancer and she would show up the next month and say what took you so long. This is what it comes down to. Councilman Weber stated that when they got rid of the last zoning officer she was the first one bitching that we got rid of that person on the record. You give one show and then give an exact opposite show. Ms. Morana stated that it is her

right to know why he was let go. President Kokinda said it is none of her business why he was let go. He was let go for performance issues. Ms. Morana insisted that it is her right to know. Councilman Weber stated that once again they cannot share that information because it is a personnel issue. Ms. Morana said this is why people do not come to the meetings. Councilman Weber expressed that they cannot share the information. President Kokinda said it is no different than him going to her boss and asking why they fired you. They cannot tell him because it is against the law. Ms. Morana said well I do not get fired.

Joanie Morana said that there has to be somewhere they can cut the costs in the budget. She asked what \$57,000 was for street and Christmas lighting. President Kokinda said it is the streetlights that are on, what else would she think it would be. Ms. Morana raised her voice and said this is the kind of shit that she puts up with. President Kokinda expressed that he has been putting up with hers for months, he is tired of it and that he lost the election because of it, which is fine. Ms. Morana asked if he thought he lost the election because of her. He said yes and her group and other people at the table, but he will let that go and move on.

2. Joseph Bohovich, 334 West White Street, asked a question about the budget and was wondering what \$949,600 is for real estate tax. Vice President O’Gurek explained that it is 100% of the assessed value of the properties in town.

Councilman Wargo added that they never do get 100%. They only get about 90% and every year on top of that, there is a per capita and an occupation tax. There is a good chance that someone in the room is delinquent on the per capita taxes or delinquent on the occupation taxes because people choose not to pay them. Every year he looks at 15 pages of people who choose not to pay their taxes. Between the 15 pages of delinquent per capita taxes and the delinquent real estate taxes, they are missing a mill of revenue because you have 10% of the residents who do not pay their property taxes. There are about 300-400 people who do not pay their per capita taxes because they do not feel they need to. If you take \$5 a person times 300 people, it is another \$1,500. Then there are other people who do not pay their occupational taxes, which is another 8-9 pages. They skirt the system because it is cheaper for them to keep the money in the bank and make interest on it than it is to do the obligation that most people in the room do. They pay enough real estate tax every year to avoid having a Sheriff sale on their property because to them it is cheaper to pay the delinquent fee. This is why taxes continue to go up and why they hired Portnoff to collect the delinquent taxes. The Tax Claim Bureau has a turnaround of 36 months and Portnoff has a turnaround of 12 months. This is the reason they do not have the revenue they should have. Both Lacey and Marlene can explain it to them because they were both at the budget meeting when they discussed it. President Kokinda added that it has been an issue for years. About 4-5 years ago there was a budget shortfall, and they went over the budget. The problem was not overspending, it was not collecting what was anticipated.

Mayor Szczecina asked what the mileage increase would be over the past few years if they did not have the COVID funds, considering they used several hundred thousand dollars on improvements. They would not have been able to go the past few years without gradually raising taxes without the COVID money. It was money that was spent on the HVAC system, a lot of things for the police department and salaries. For three years they have been using the money from the state to offset the differences and the money is now gone. President Kokinda stated that a budget is a guessing game. You have no idea what gas is going to cost, heating oil for the borough garage, the cost of propane, how much overtime, how much snow are they going to get, how much overtime they might have to pay to plow the streets, insurances. It is their best shot of trying to come up with the framework of something that they can work with because there are so many unknowns. Councilman Weber said things can decrease too. When he first got on Council the Cable Franchise fee was close to \$100,000, now it is like \$40,000. That is around a quarter mill a year which is not being replaced with internet fees.

Councilman Wargo added that 2 mills of the tax increase is going straight to Workers Comp, Liability Insurance because they needed to buy a new fire truck so they can deliver water where it needs to go and employee health insurance. Employee health costs have gone up for everyone. This is where 2 mills of the increase is going directly. As far as the police officer goes, that is not a factor as to why the budget went up. In fact, the starting salary of a patrolman is \$71,000. The first year of hire, they are making 75% of that salary, which is \$53,250. In 2022, the part-time police officers' salaries were \$36,000 and the zoning officer's salary was \$8,500 and there was an operating reserve of \$57,752. When the 6th officer was hired, they realized they would not need the part-time officers, so they left enough to cover 50 cover shifts. They took \$26,000 from the part-time salaries, took the \$8,500 from zoning payroll and \$23,000 from the operating reserve. When you add the three figures up it comes to \$57,500, which covers most of the officers salary plus a good part of their health insurance. This officer is also paying a co-pay on her medical insurance, which is 2.5% co-pay on every paycheck. If everything had stayed constant, they would not have had to raise taxes at all. The problem is it does not stay constant. There are salary increases that are contractual, the rising cost of health insurance, the rising cost of liability insurance and the rising cost of Workman's Comp. They went through the budget two weeks ago and cut out as much as they could. They were able to cut \$11,000, they cut several line items, they reduced the amount of money they were going to invest in the capital funds, and they still ended up with 2 mills because of the outside factors they do not have control over. They lost \$7,000 in the past year on Cable Franchise taxes. Lacey did find where we may have underestimated some income with the EIT taxes so that \$15,000 offset things too, but it did not amount to 2.75 mills. He would not want to run his house with a \$10,000 deficit because he would have to borrow the money from somewhere. They could not raise taxes but then would have to borrow \$100,000 because they still have the expenditures. Now you are paying interest on the money you borrowed because you borrowed it from the bank, which means you owe about \$5,000 more in next year's budget and things will start to snowball. For 20 years Councils did that. They took out tax anticipation loans out and had to pay interest on top of it just because they did not want to tell the taxpayers they had to be responsible and raise taxes. This is how they can justify the increase and none of it has to do with adding a 6th police officer. President Kokinda added that part of being fiscally responsible is also being able to pay your bills. They have people depending on them too. Police officers and borough workers have families and mortgages so they need to make sure they can make payroll each week. You cannot expect them to come in and say that they did not want to raise taxes, so you are not getting paid this week. Mary Ann Szczecina asked if there was something that could be done to those that do not pay their taxes. Councilman Wargo explained that is why they hired Portnoff to start collecting the taxes in a more efficient way but there is no way to force people to pay their taxes. They can be put into collections, but it is a 12-month turnaround, and they will not see the money until next year. He explained how the process works when people do not pay their real estate taxes. They cannot publish the names because of legalities but you would be amazed who the people are that do not pay. They will not pay their taxes but yet they go on vacations, buy cars, they do things that he cannot afford to do but they cannot pay their obligation to the borough because they want to be a property owner. He added to feel free to take a look at the budget and tell them where they can cut expenses. If it is responsible, they will look at it. They spent 3 hours going through the budget, it is down as far as they can take it and still be responsible to all of them without jeopardizing their safety or health. The abatement program is in the budget. They added it because all they heard for 10 months was how bad the quality-of-life issues are so money is allocated for it.

Marlene Basiago, 20 West Walter Street, asked questions about the large cost to run the Fire Co and Community Center compared to the borough building. You would think that the borough building would be more since it is more operational. President Kokinda explained that the Fire Co/Community Center building runs mainly on electric heat. There are five electric heaters in the firehouse and there is an air handler/heat pump, heat/air conditioning and an electric element. When it gets really cold and the heat pump is not efficient, the electric heat kicks on. The electric bills should come down substantially due to the recent upgrade that was made to the units at the building. But what are they going to pay for propane. Nothing is more efficient than electric heat because every penny you put in you are getting out in heat. Propane is about 95% efficient but yet it is a better heat and a faster heat. Where they will really see the

savings is the makeup time. Councilman Kruslicky added that today's heat pumps have become more efficient over the past 15 years. If you can heat your house with a heat pump when it is 32 degrees, it is the best bang for your buck. The firehouse has 5 electric elements and that is the worst way to heat anywhere.

**New Business** –

1. **Motion was made by William O’Gurek and seconded by David Wargo to tentatively adopt and advertise the 2024 budget with a 2.75 mill increase with the income and expenses totaling \$1,622,045.** Motion was opened for comment; none made. Motion carried unanimously by Council.
2. Part-time Assistant Secretary Position - Councilwoman Ruzicka said the interview went very well and feels they should move forward with hiring the applicant. **Motion was made by Karen Ruzicka and seconded by David Wargo to hire Samantha Jones as the new Assistant Secretary.** Motion was opened for comment; none made. Motion carried unanimously by Council.
3. Kira Steber asked Council if they would be willing to keep Mary Ann Eickhoff on to help train Samantha because the end of the year and beginning of the year is a really tough time for her with all the reports and everything else that needs to be completed. Plus, January is the 1st quarter billing for garbage. It does not have to be 5 days a week and could adjust her hours around the work that is taking place at that time. The next 2-3 months are extremely busy for her and feels that Mary Ann can devote her time to training while she can focus on her own job. Ms. Gonzalez added that the money to pay Mary Ann will come out of the sanitation account and not the general fund. Ms. Steber stated that 90% of the salary comes from sanitation and the other 10% is out of the general fund. A brief discussion took place on the number of hours for training. **Motion was made by David Wargo and seconded by Alan Kruslicky to allow Mary Ann Eickhoff up to 150 hours for training the new Assistant Secretary with 90% coming out of the Sanitation Fund and the other 10% coming out of the unused training budget for this year.** Motion was opened for comment; none made. Motion carried unanimously by Council.

**Motion was made by David Wargo and seconded by William O’Gurek to adjourn at 7:46 p.m. until the next regular meeting of the Summit Hill Borough on December 12, 2023.** Motion was opened for comment; none made. Motion carried unanimously by Council.

Michael Kokinda  
Council President

Kira Steber  
Secretary/Treasurer