

**UPPER TOWNSHIP PLANNING BOARD  
STRATHMERE DEANNEXATION MEETING MINUTES**

**JUNE 17, 2008**

The regular meeting of the Upper Township Planning Board was held at Township Hall, 2100 Tuckahoe Road, Petersburg, New Jersey at 7:30 p.m.

**CALL TO ORDER**

**SUNSHINE ANNOUNCEMENT**

**SALUTE TO THE FLAG**

**ROLL CALL**

Present: William Brown, James Kelly, Curtis Corson, James Schroder, Donald Kissling, Duane Terwilliger, Susan Ragan, Mayor Richard Palombo and Chair Renee Scrocca.

Absent: Daniel Bready and Donald Kissling.

Also in attendance were Dean Marcolongo, Board Solicitor; Stuart Wiser, Professional Planner and Shelley Lea, Board Secretary.

**STUART WISER SWORN IN**

Lieutenant Robert Watkins, of the New Jersey State Police, was sworn. He testified that he has read transcripts of previous meetings and newspaper articles. On behalf of the troopers at the Woodbine barracks he wanted to clarify some issues in regards to the services they provide to Upper Township, Dennis Township and Woodbine.

Lt. Watkins commented that many of the calls that have been referred to were for false alarms. They do not respond if the security company verifies that it is a false alarm. He believes this is the misconception in stating there are long response times.

Lt. Watkins testified that in regards to the noise complaints Upper Township does not have a noise ordinance. Their hands are tied if the complaint is something they cannot actually enforce.

In regards to testimony given by Mr. Kirschenbaum, Lt. Watkins commented that there is a police presence in Strathmere. There is as much police presence in Strathmere than in Upper, Dennis and Woodbine. He questioned the response times testified to by Lt. D'Intino of the Sea Isle City Police Department. He also questioned the report by Major Fallen in regards to response times. The computer aided dispatch system they use is very complex and he doesn't expect Maj. Fallen to know how the information is gained. He

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stated that when there is a zero response time it usually means the trooper called that job in.

Lt. Watkins testified that he read comments that they are a reactionary police department. He stated that this is the furthest thing from the truth. They are a proactive police department and base and pride themselves on being aggressive. Their job is to prevent crime and they want to be seen. Currently there are 39 personnel and after they receive their summer help this will be increased to 51. During the last 2 summers there has been a Tac Pac of four men assigned to the Woodbine station in the evenings and on weekends. Their primary job is to aggressively control traffic violators and drinking drivers. There are also DWI patrols that are normally out on the weekends from 10 p.m. until 4 a.m. There are a lot more troopers out there than it appears.

Lt. Watkins testified that last year the total calls for service at the Woodbine station was 8,704. This includes all 3 townships they cover. He stated that Upper Township is one of the busier areas. There were 937 calls for alarms. Their total investigation reports were 1,178 and operation reports were 2,100. Any type of serious crime gets an investigation report and any other type of incident gets an operation report. Their investigation arrests were 216. They handled 536 motor vehicle accidents and arrested 42 people for drunk driving that were involved in accidents. They cover roughly 139 square miles. Last year they had 2,968 property checks and troopers stopped 8,820 vehicles. These were self-initiated stops. Out of these stops they issued 2,827 hazardous summonses and 2,494 non-hazardous summons and wrote 5,710 warnings. There were 401 people arrested last year as a result of aggressive police work. The patrols are out there actively preventing crime.

Lt. Watkins has been in the State Police for 29 years. He does not know of another department with the resources that they have. He has no personal opinion and is not taking either side. He knows for a fact that during the Hugo storm there were 100 troopers in Strathmere, including himself. There was looting going on in other townships but not in Strathmere.

Currently there is a program in place where they have rapid responders. Each station in Troop A and all the specialty units have to have their gear in their trunks and be ready at any time. When the parking garage in Atlantic City collapsed there were 78 troopers there within 40 minutes. He is proud of the job that the Woodbine barracks is doing.

Lt. Watkins submitted a 3-page document that Solicitor Marcolongo marked as Exhibit P-5. He testified these are crime reports provided by the FBI on a nationwide system available on the internet. The statistics used are from 2006 and show violent crimes and non-violent crimes in several municipalities including Belmar and Avon-By-The-Sea.

Lt. Watkins stated that response time numbers is a report that gives a rough idea how long its taking troopers to get to the jobs. Those numbers are not always accurate. He described the protocol used from the time the troopers are dispatched. If there is

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someone on the radio when the trooper gets to a job he is not given an arrival time until he gets back into the car. Any job that takes over 20 minutes is pulled to see why it took that long. He stated that 99.9 percent of the time there is a reason for it. He gave an example of a call with 36 minutes response time that actually should have shown only 5 minutes. These errors are common and happen every month. In August 2007, the busiest month in the year, the average response time for the entire station was 10 minutes and 21 seconds. The average response time in December was 8 minutes 40 seconds. He testified they are capable of handling more than one situation at a time.

Lt. Watkins described how the cars are dispatched. He stated that there are no areas with higher priority than others. Each area is covered at the same level. At this time Upper Township is at 16.5-crime rate per 1,000 residents and is substantially lower than other communities on the barrier islands.

Lt. Watkins stated that after midnight there is 2 troopers in 1 car. He sees no negative impact by doing this. Instead of 2 cars arriving on a scene there are 2 troopers in 1 car. They are mandated to respond to every call. It is very rare that the Woodbine station has to stack calls. He checked with the OPS and in the past 6 years they have not received any complaints from Strathmere. He disagrees with a statement made by Major Fallen that State Police protection is inadequate.

Lt. Watkins answered questions from the Board members. In response to a question by Solicitor Marcolongo he stated that every department, especially the resort police departments, have a problem with rotation of troopers and familiarity with the area. He discussed Class I and Class II troopers. They have changed their methods so now troopers are stationed in one area for 3 to 4 months then go to their permanent station so there is less of a turnover with new troopers.

During cross-examination by Ms. Bittner, Lt. Watkins again reviewed the uniform crime report that he submitted. The report does not include violations of ordinances, however the state police have the authority to write ordinance violations. There is a copy of the township ordinance on file at the Woodbine station. The dispatch process was reviewed. Lt. Watkins discussed a computer aided dispatch system that is tied throughout the State that allows the Sergeant to see where his troopers are located and available patrols. The Troopers enter Strathmere through Ocean City or Sea Isle depending on where they are located when they get a call. He noted that Troopers get to high priority calls as fast and as safe as they can without harming him or the public.

Lt. Watkins went on to explain how the calls are prioritized.

There was a 5-minute break at this time.

Lt. Watkins agreed that more troopers in any area would be a deterrent. He was not involved in any of the conversations in regards to the request for a trooper being present on the weekends in Strathmere, however he was told the trooper was for additional

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presence. He believes there was not a need for additional presence, however if they want coverage they will provide it.

There was discussion concerning the number of troopers on the road during a shift. Lt. Watkins stated that they do not respond to a call about a band being too loud since there is no noise ordinance and they have nothing to enforce. If someone complains about loud kids next door they would respond since it could be drunk and disorderly kids. They respond to any type of loud party complaint.

Lt. Watkins responded that during the 2 years that he has been station commander of Woodbine he has received correspondence from the Township notifying him of speeders in a certain area or other complaints but it is nothing that would effect their operations just basic awareness matters.

Lt. Watkins discussed the trooper's tenure at the Woodbine barracks. The majority of the troopers have been there for some time; he estimates the average trooper has over 5 years. When assigning a trooper to a permanent station they try to put them close to their residence.

Richard Cushinotto, Transportation Supervisor for Upper Township Board of Education, was sworn. He testified that he has been employed with Upper Township School District for 19 years. They transport approximately 2,800 kids. They also transfer the high school students to Ocean City and the technical students from Upper Township and Corbin City into Cape May County Technical School. They also transport to Cape May County Special Services.

Mr. Cushinotto testified that with efficiency they have successfully put the school bus routes together. Upper Township was ranked number 2 in the County for efficiency. They have been ranked within the top 100 school districts the past few years for efficiency.

Mr. Cushinotto testified that they receive complaints from parents throughout the township including Strathmere. The Strathmere complaints are the same as the others mostly road construction, flooding and other weather related issues.

Mr. Cushinotto testified that when Mr. Roash's child was left at the Primary School it was during the construction phase of the 34<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge. It is standard procedure during the construction phase to use alternative routes. He was not aware of Mr. Roash's child being left in Ocean City until he read it in the meeting minutes. He received complaints from Mr. & Mrs. Roash about their child not being picked up by a substitute. During construction they dropped him off at an alternative stop on the mainland so that he would be safe until his family could pick him up.

Mr. Cushinotto testified that the children from Steelmantown have just as long a ride as the children from Strathmere, depending on what school their going to. Strathmere

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children going to the Middle School have a 21-minute ride and 12.52 miles. The children from Steelmantown have a 16-minute ride and 8.71 miles. Going to the high school Strathmere children have a 5.82-mile ride that takes 18 minutes. Children from Steelmantown have an 18.9-mile ride that takes 36 minutes. Strathmere to the elementary school is 8 miles or 17 minutes. They currently have 2 children from Strathmere that go to either the primary or elementary school. He estimates that they are picked up between 7:55 a.m. and 8:00 a.m. and dropped off between 8:30 and 8:35 a.m.

During cross-examination Mr. Cushinotto testified that they always try to limit the number of children that they affect by changing the routes. If there is a negative effect they try to limit the effect and do the best situation for all the children.

Mr. Cushinotto submitted an efficiency study of his department vs. Sea Isle City. There are 8 districts in the county. Upper Township is rated number 2 for the past 7 years. They were not rated the first year that it started but the numbers show they were 4<sup>th</sup>. The first year Sea Isle City was number 3 and have been number 6 or lower since then. He explained how they are rated. The N.J. Bureau of Transportation has rated Upper within the top 125 districts in the State out of approximately 600 districts.

Solicitor Marcolongo marked a copy of the 1 page report as P-6.

Michael Garcia, 11 Coventry Lane, Palermo, NJ, was sworn. He testified that he works for Ford Scott as a CPA and Registered Municipal Accountant. A copy of a report by Mr. Garcia was marked as P-7.

Mr. Garcia testified that he has been the auditor for the Upper Township Board of Education for 9 years. The document he submitted is an analysis on the financial impact of removing Strathmere from Upper Township specifically as it relates to the Board of Education. The report includes the 2007 / 2008 school district budget. In 2007/2008 the tuition to Ocean City High School was \$13,798,405. This represents more than 40 percent of the total budget. This is a significant financial item that the district deals with every year. The appropriations for the district are shown as 34,286,426 for 07/08. The total revenues other than taxes were 13 million. That leaves \$21,169,226 of the budget is funded by property taxes. The net valuation taxable for the township is over 2 billion dollars and comes directly from the Cape May County Abstract of Ratables. This gives a school tax rate of 94 and 4/10ths cents for 07/08. If Strathmere were to leave Upper the tuition would be reduced by \$15,115 since there is currently one high school student that Upper is paying for. There would also be a savings of \$4,400 in transportation costs. His expenditures show the school budget would be reduced by \$19,515 a year if Strathmere were to deannex.

Mr. Garcia explained that in 2007 /2008 the district received \$10,727,234 in the form of State Aid. He sent a letter to the State asking them to run state aid numbers for Upper without Strathmere and they sent him an email back. Currently Upper receives 5.5 million dollars in Equalization Aid. Upper also receives Special Education Aid in the

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amount of \$1,107,000 which will not change even if Strathmere were to deannex. There is also Security Aid in the amount of \$156,872.00 and Transportation Aid in the amount of \$1,129,000 that also will not change.

There is also a column which includes \$3,046,070.00 is a newly created category called Adjustment Aid. He described how adjustment aid works. The State verified that Adjustment Aid would not go away in 3 years. The only way the Adjustment Aid would decrease is if there is a decline in enrollment in excess of 5%.

He reviewed a document obtained from the Dept. of Educations Office of School Funding. This document shows that if Strathmere were to leave Upper Township would be eligible for \$8,569,909 in Equalization Aid an increase of \$3,059,000. The Adjustment Aid would be lost since the total State Aid package with the Equalization Aid is equal to the 07/08 numbers. The impact includes increase in revenue of \$13,499.00 and decreases in expenditures in the amount of \$19,515,000. This results in a total savings to the District of \$33,014,000 by removing Strathmere. This takes what was a tax levy of \$21,169,226 and reduces it to \$21,136,212. He estimates that property taxes would go down by \$33,014.00 resulting in a new levy of \$21,136,000.00 but there would be a loss of ratables in the amount of \$393,461,300. When the ratables are applied to the reduced tax levy there would be a new tax rate of \$1.14

In response to the comments that the school district spends money unwisely he went to the State Dept. of Education's Comparison Spending Guide. The graft shows that the per pupil cost for NJ average K to 8 school district that goes as far back as 98/99 shows the State average is \$7,129 and Upper Township's is \$6,020.00. This is well below the State average. The 07/08 per pupil cost for Sea Isle City School District is \$35,209.00.

Another graft represents the contributions that the Upper Township School District had received from the Township municipal surplus over the years. The Township can no longer do this due to their financial condition. Another graft shows the tuition expenditures that the district makes. In 98/99 it was about 6.8 million dollars and has gone up steadily. The total tuition bill that the school currently pays is \$14,710,000 every year.

In summary he stated that the tax base available to fund the Upper Township School District would decrease \$393,461,300.00 a 171 1/2% reduction in the tax base. This would be a tremendous impact to the school. Everything that the school would attempt to do in the future would now cost 18% more. Removing the ratables would be removing a tremendous portion of the tax base and the ability to fund the school district. The resulting tax increase to the remaining Upper Township taxpayers would be 19.7 cents added to the current rate. There would be significant tax increase. The reduction in expenses to the school district would be minimal. There would be an insignificant increase in State Aid. Under the State School Funding Formula there would be no negative impact if Strathmere were to remain as part of Upper Township. Mr. Garcia stated that the district has already been impacted by the elimination of the annual

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municipal contribution to help fund the district and the high increases in tuition. The District already spends on average \$195 less per pupil in the K to 8 programs than the State average. The essentially flat State Aid has made an impact on the school district. Based on all these items it is clear that removing Strathmere from Upper Township would have a severe negative impact on the finances of the Upper Township School District.

**NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting is scheduled for July 21, 2008 from 6 p.m. until 9 p.m.

**ADJOURNMENT**

The meeting was adjourned at 9 p.m.

Submitted by,

Shelley Lea