

A special meeting of Bloomsburg Town Council was held Tuesday, November 27, 2018, beginning at 7:00p.m. in Council Chambers, Town Hall, 301 East Second Street, Bloomsburg, PA. Present were Mayor William Kreisher; Vice President Toni Bell; Council Members Fred Trump, James Huber, James Garman, Bonnie Crawford, and Vince DeMelfi; Town Manager/Secretary Lauren Martz; and Code Enforcement Officer Ralph Magill

### **CITIZENS TO BE HEARD**

Tom James spoke regarding his opposition to the two curative amendments on the special Council agenda for the evening. In addition, he submitted the following statement to Town Council:

Council does not have enough information to approve these two requests for curative amendments. The Applications themselves are misleading and bereft of facts and honesty. The public has been misled by the proposals that have been aired in the paper as well as in the application and in the developer's public comments, thus providing minimal transparency in this process.

Council is a group of good people trying to do what is best for the community. However, they are part-time and essentially volunteers. I admire the public service, commitment, and hard work. However, they have to rely on experts and professional guidance. I am not certain that that has sufficiently happened.

The notice to the public was misleading. Most people have no idea what the developer proposes. It has been made even worse tonight. Now that word is out in the community about what this project really is, this meeting is set on the night of the school Christmas concert when school personnel and parents and grandparent can't attend this meeting. The combination of so-called transitional housing and homeless shelter was advertised in two different notices. (See attached) It is really a community correctional facility. If people had come to your offices to review it, they would have known that. But the term "Transitional Housing", combined with Homeless Shelter in the notice was misleading. It is another prison inside of Bloomsburg likely funded, if ever, by the Department of Corrections. The occupants will likely be Megan's offenders and/or the mentally ill who can't find suitable housing on their own. There are other ways to help these people, not with housing of this scope in this location.

There are two curative amendment applications. The first and most troubling is the application to allow a Transitional Living Facility a block from the elementary school, about 4 blocks from the middle school and high school, and a block or two from the Bloomsburg Fairgrounds, 4 blocks from the YMCA, and right next to a wonderful residential living project under construction, on the edge of Bloomsburg's vaunted Historical District. This is a residential area. This Halloween, there were a thousand children trick or treating in this neighborhood. 90% said thank you. Into this neighborhood the developer wants to put a prison facility with minimum safety precautions. He wants to ship parolees in from other parts of the state – Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Harrisburg. It defies common sense and common decency as to why someone would want to do this and why council should allow it, at least without significant resistance.

We hear that the developer may have you over a barrel legally. People keep saying he has a good lawyer who knows his stuff. Fine. But he's an advocate and is advocating his client's position. Get a second opinion. Do some strong advocacy back. Build a record more than has been made. Get statistics. See how this has worked in other communities. Some on Council think that this will be an economic boon. It is really making a deal with the devil. The cost to this community will be enormous –

increased crime, endangerment to our kids, an increased police force, increased pressure on our social service agencies, which are already overburdened. More drug trafficking – near schools and the main residential district! The scope is astounding – 216 beds total. That’s almost twice the number of local county residents in our county jail a few blocks away. But they are in jail, not roaming the streets.

Look at the applications. They are misleading. They are asking this council to write them a blank check and trust them. But in the application, they are sugar coating a supposed need for this community. We do not need a Community Correctional Facility (which they call transitional housing). We don’t need a prison. We have one, several blocks away. It has been and could be used for this so-called transitional housing, but with more safeguards. It is not needed. The application says that “A Transitional Living Facility, although a distinct one, would be a natural fit among these already permitted uses.” How more disingenuous and untrue could that statement be. It is an unnatural fit. Get an expert opinion on that. Better yet, also use common sense. Make a higher court and/or the Department of Corrections and/or your State Representative and State Senator give their blessing to this use under these circumstances. They won’t.

The application says that “Transitional Living Facilities are not inherently objectionable and would be an important element in addressing this housing need.” They are inherently objectionable in this neighborhood context. And, where is the need? Is it Bloomsburg’s duty to cure the homeless problems for parolees in Philly or other parts of the state. There is no need such as this in Bloomsburg. The Columbia County Jail has between 100-120 local people in its prison at any one time. There is room for 220 easily. To be released on bail or parole, they must have a home plan, usually. That is seldom a problem except for some Megan Law offenders or people with mental illnesses. The system works hard to get home plans for those few people and eventually they find a place to live. But there are only a handful. Not 168 plus 48. That’s who will housed in these facilities. They will not be local people. Their proposal is to put people from out of the area into a long-term facility and to let them walk the streets unsupervised to look for jobs and housing. In the context of this small community, that is a destructive and absurd proposal with catastrophic consequences.

If the Department of Corrections wants to fund a community correctional facility for Bloomsburg residents or even Columbia County residents, they could easily use the jail. There is plenty of room in the jail. There is no need for this proposed use in this residential neighborhood. It is already available.

As to the Homeless shelter concept, there are many questions. Who is paying for it? Is it just an extension of the Transitional Housing, i.e., the same people who finish parole with no place to stay just go across the street? Follow the money to see what is proposed. What need is there in Bloomsburg? Statistics? Are people being imported from other parts of the state to stay here? The application sugarcoats the statistics (15,000 homeless) which essentially acknowledges that the people will be from all over the state. Once again, the strain on law enforcement and social services will be mindboggling in this small community. Once again, the danger to the community with this proposal as well as the prison proposal is palpable. Also, there are other shelters in Bloomsburg, e.g., The Women’s Center, arrangements for assistance through Agape and The Red Cross and various churches, apartments through the Justice Master Leasing Program, an initiative by the United Way. The shelter is not needed.

The bottom line for the residents of Bloomsburg is this. We want a safe and prosperous community. Disney commissioned a study years ago to build the perfect American town. It turns out that the town was a lot like Bloomsburg: a central residential area with a downtown with restaurants and shops

within walking distance. A larger shopping area on the outskirts and industry on the outskirts. Bloomsburg is largely like that town, with the addition of a wonderful university that gives us economic and intellectual vibrance. The health care system in the area is excellent.

But I can tell you for a fact that our social service system and law enforcement system are strained already. Our mental health system is strained tremendously. Local officials are trying to keep taxes down, understandably. This developer's proposal for a prison and companion homeless shelter in the midst of Town is not needed and is grossly incompatible with permitted uses and will be an economic disaster for taxpayers. Bloomsburg taxpayers will be paying for the exorbitant costs of additional additional law enforcement, social services, and infrastructure needs. Harrisburg and Philadelphia will not send a check to cover these costs.

It is suggested:

1. **That, the applications be denied for failing to carry the burden of proving their request.**
2. **That, application should be denied because is it so obviously detrimental to the health, safety, and welfare of the community. (The scope is horrendous and should not be used for a bargaining chip.)**
3. If necessary, that the record be supplemented with additional testimony, particularly since the residents have not had a fair chance to be informed and to comment appropriately.
4. That the Town seek out more information concerning these proposals.
5. That the town get a second opinion as to the legal issues.
6. That the Town secure a zoning expert to analyze the proposals.
7. That the Town seek input from the Bloomsburg Area School District.
8. That the Town seek input from the Columbia County Housing Authority/Columbia County Redevelopment Authority.
9. That the Town seek input from local and state police departments.
10. That the Town seek input from CMSU and Columbia County Children and Youth and the Columbia Montour Family Center.
11. That the Town seek input from the Columbia County Criminal Justice Advisory Board.
12. That the Town seek input from the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections.
13. That the Town seek input from the Department of Public Welfare.
14. That the Town seek input from the Bloomsburg Fair Board.
15. That the Town seek input from the County Commissioners as to the impact on the County criminal justice system and the county social service agencies.
16. That the applicant be required to more accurately and less vaguely define what he is going to build and what and who will be housed.
17. That the Town rezone the Town to cure any defect based on need and the health, safety, and welfare of the community.
18. That if necessary and as a very last resort, the Town put stringent conditions on so-called transitional housing and homeless shelters, i.e., that the size be limited to a manageable number of occupants that the neighborhood and Town can absorb socially and economically; that the facilities be limited to those who have been Bloomsburg residents for at least 6 months; that the residents have a record of no felonies within the last ten years; that in the homeless center, at least 1/3 of the residents be children.

Attached are the following that are relevant to this discussion:

1. A letter to the editor citing the problems with Community Correction Facilities.
2. An article on the problems with privately run prisons, i.e., Community Correction Facilities (euphemistically called Transitional Housing).
3. An article from the Reading Eagle about significant problems with Community Correctional Facilities.
4. A copy of the advertising notice for the 11-7-18 hearing for reference.

In closing, as a Council, please do what is right. And to the Town residents, support your Council members in this battle royale for the soul of the community. Do not be intimidated by this developer. Do not cower from baseless threats of suits. You have the great majority of the Town supporting what we know is the right decision to deny these applications. Please show us the wisdom, decency and common sense to stand up to this threat to our community. You are all good people who have the best interest of the Town at heart and the courage to fight these destructive applications.

Eric Bower spoke in opposition of the proposed curative amendments before Town Council and expressed his support of Town Council.

Steve Orlando spoke in opposition of the proposed curative amendments stating that he feared having these facilities near the school where his child goes.

Sylvia Costa spoke in opposition of the proposed curative amendments stating that her granddaughter was concerned for her safety and having these facilities in her Town.

Jim Garman stated that it seems that the applicants main concern is to have a drug rehab facility located in the Town of Bloomsburg regardless of what it would do to the Town.

Vince DeMelfi stated that he has known the applicant of these curative amendments for a very long time and he was shocked that he would consider locating them in the Town of Bloomsburg.

Bill Kreisher stated that the Council has 180 days after the adoption of the Resolutions to cure the ordinance and will work with Planning Experts and the Planning Commission to develop the Ordinance Amendment as determined appropriate.

Jim Huber spoke in opposition of the proposed curative amendments stating that there has not been enough research to confirm if anything like this is even needed in our region.

Steve Colodonato spoke in opposition of the proposed curative amendments stating that these types of facilities would drastically affect the Town of Bloomsburg similarly to the community issues that have arisen from other treatment facilities in the state. He also mentioned that this would not be benefitting Town of Bloomsburg residents, but would bring in people from larger metropolitan areas.

#### **APPROVAL OF RESOLUTION NO. 11-27-18.01 HOMELESS SHELTER**

On a motion by F. Trump, seconded by T. Bell, and voted on unanimously, Council approved Resolution No. 11-27-18.01 Homeless Shelter.

#### **APPROVAL OF RESOLUTION NO. 11-27-18.02 TRANSITIONAL LIVING FACILITY**

On a motion by F. Trump, seconded by T. Bell, and voted on unanimously, Council approved Resolution No. 11-27-18.02 Transitional Living Facility.

**APPROVAL OF RESOLUTION NO. 11-27-18.03 SIGNATORY DESIGNEE FOR TRAFFIC SIGNAL APPLICATION TO PENNDOT REGARDING VERIZON SMALL CELL SITES**

On a motion by T. Bell, seconded by J. Garman, and voted on unanimously, Council approved Resolution No. 11-27-18.03 Signatory designee for traffic signal application to PennDOT regarding Verizon small cell sites.

**APPROVAL OF RE-ADVERTISING FOR THE DIRECTOR OF CODE ENFORCEMENT/ZONING/FLOODPLAIN MANAGEMENT POSITION**

On a motion by T. Bell, seconded by B. Crawford, and voted on 5 'yes' votes and 2 'no' votes by J. Huber and V. DeMelfi, Council approved re-advertising for the Director of Code Enforcement/Zoning/Floodplain Management Position.

Being no further business Council adjourned at 8:23 pm.

Lauren Martz  
Town Manager/Secretary