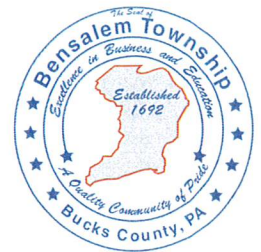


Township of Bensalem



Joseph DiGirolamo
Mayor

2024 BUDGET MESSAGE

To: Township Council
From: Mayor Joseph DiGirolamo
Date: December 4, 2023

Pursuant to Section 2-24 of the Code of the Township of Bensalem, on November 9, 2023, I submitted to you my proposed 2024 Municipal Budget. I now submit to you my accompanying Budget Message for my 2024 Municipal Budget.

As I prepare this Budget Message, I must again reflect first upon the challenges that have confronted our community during the past few years as we emerged from the Coronavirus Pandemic. Inflation, soaring prices, manpower shortages, rising interest rates, and supply-chain delays of many of the goods, materials and supplies we utilize, have presented challenges to our community that many of our residents, fortunately, had never previously had to endure. Regrettably, at the national level all of these conditions have continued, and in some cases have worsened, during the past year, and as a result, at the local level, our residents, our businesses, our schools, and our Township government continue to feel the devastating effects of the current national economy.

I am proud to say, however, that in spite of all of the challenges we have had to confront these past several years, our Township Government has nonetheless continued to operate and deliver essential services to our residents efficiently, responsively, and without delay or interruption.

As you know, I was a local business owner for many years before being elected Mayor, and I have always attempted to run Township government with the same sense of fiscal responsibility that I employed in operating our family business. No matter whether economic conditions are favorable or challenging, my Department Heads and I monitor the Township's financial position not just at budget time, but continuously, throughout the entire year, each and every year, as our normal operating procedure. As I have reminded you many times, this constant review and analysis of our revenues and expenditures, together with continuous analysis and vigilant research for opportunities to find savings and secure grants and other third-party funds, is not a unique response to the current economic times, but instead is the manner by which my Department Heads, our professionals, and I have conducted Township operations since the earliest days of my Administration.

Much has changed in Bensalem from the days when I worked alongside my Father on our family farm on Dunks Ferry Road. Over the course of the past century, Bensalem has grown to become one of the 10 largest communities in all of Pennsylvania, with over 60,000 people residing within the 21 square miles of our Township. Today we have a police force of over 100 officers, an infrastructure of over 144 miles of roads, and nearly 1,400 acres of open space, parks and playgrounds within our borders.

I am proud that during my time as your Mayor, our efforts have led to Bensalem becoming a destination for so many people throughout our region who seek to share in our community's prosperity and unparalleled quality of life, civic attributes that have led to Bensalem attaining national recognition as "1 of the 50 Best Places to Live in America," as "1 of the 100 Best Communities for Young People," and just this year as "1 of the 50 Best Places to Live for Families" in all of the United States, a recognition bestowed upon us by *Fortune* Magazine by virtue of all that our community has to offer to our residents of all ages, from children to senior citizens and everyone in between. Locally, the *Bucks County Courier Times* has lauded our community as a "Model for America". I am equally proud that our community continues, without exception, to welcome and embrace all who wish to be a part of, and to share in, all that Bensalem is and has to offer.

As I have stated many times, the safety of this community and its residents has always been my paramount concern. This is certainly reflected in our Bensalem Police, Fire and Emergency Management Services, all of which are the best equipped, most well trained, and most community active of any such departments or squads in the Commonwealth.

Our Police Department has earned both national and state accreditation, an accomplishment achieved by only a handful of the more than 1,200 Police Departments in all of Pennsylvania. This recognition is reflective of the professionalism, dedication, and hard work of our officers and command staff alike to assure that our policies, practices, and procedures meet the highest levels to which law enforcement officers and departments can be held.

Our Bensalem Rescue Squad, with a staff of 25 full-time and approximately 35 part-time personnel, is the most busy unit in the County. Their average response time to any location in our community with Advanced Life Support level of care in under 7 minutes, well exceeding the Commonwealth standards for both Basic and Advanced Life Support.

Our team of six volunteer fire companies continue their long history and tradition of service to this community. Through a combination of government funding and their own fund-raising efforts, these brave men and women continue to undergo the training, and to operate and maintain the equipment and facilities necessary, to safely protect and save lives and property throughout our Township. Our Township also employs a complement of full-time firefighters as part of our Bensalem Fire Rescue, all of whom are available to respond to emergency calls anywhere in the Township during those daytime hours when our volunteer companies may not have the manpower available to fully respond to a call.

We continue to operate and maintain our own Township Fire and Emergency Training Facility, right here in Bensalem, constructed so that all of our First Responders would have the ability and

facilities to train locally, and to also coordinate training among our Firefighters, Police and EMS for all possible emergencies within the Township.

The service every one of our First Responders provide to this community is the foundation of our success in making and keeping Bensalem a desirable place to live and work.

While we all certainly recognize the importance of Philadelphia to the economy of the region, for a community like Bensalem, located right along the city's border, our proximity to the city also results in great economic challenges to our community, particularly in the areas of law enforcement and crime prevention. Roughly 80% of the individuals arrested in Bensalem are not, in fact, residents of Bensalem. They have travelled into our community from other places, mostly from Philadelphia, to traffic in drugs or to commit other crimes. A tremendous amount of our Police resources is spent simply to prevent crime, and to arrest criminals, that come into Bensalem from across our border with Philadelphia.

Maintaining the safety of this community and its residents does come at a cost, a cost that represents 65% of our overall 2024 Township Budget. As I indicated above, our Bensalem Rescue Squad is the busiest unit in the County, and in order to maintain the level of service necessary and expected for our community, our Bensalem voters just last month approved an increase in the tax millage collected specifically to fund emergency medical operations within our Township. This additional tax revenue will allow the Rescue Squad to hire and retain the best trained Emergency Medical Personnel and to continue to operate and maintain state of the art Emergency Medical Equipment for years to come. I am therefore pleased to report that as a result of the decisions and policies of my administration, together with this additional taxpayer-approved funding, in 2024 we will be able to fund and maintain our Police, Fire and Emergency Medical Services at their current levels of service, levels that must be maintained, and even expanded upon, if we are to maintain the safety and quality of life we enjoy in our community.

I am proud to say that the quality of life we enjoy today, and the quality of governmental services that the Township delivers to its residents, have greatly improved over the past quarter century. During that time, the Township undertook major capital improvement projects to improve our system of roads and improve the flow of traffic throughout the Township. Every Township road was repaved at a total cost of \$27 million, and eight different intersections involving State Highways were enlarged and improved at a cost to the Township of \$8.5 million.

More recently, in our continued efforts to improve traffic flow and traffic safety throughout the Township, we have undertaken the installation of an Adaptive Traffic Signal System along Street Road, Hulmeville Road, Rockhill Road, and Bristol Pike. This 21st century technology adjusts and changes the timing and phasing of the traffic signals along these roadways, based upon the real time traffic volumes and conditions at each of the improved intersections, to respond to the actual traffic conditions that arise throughout the day. My 2024 Budget includes continued funding for these efforts along Hulmeville Road and along Bristol Pike as we near completion of this project.

During my time as Mayor, the Township has also embarked on a number of projects and initiatives aimed at improving the quality of life in our community. Many of these projects and initiatives

have been focused on our Parks and Recreation Facilities, a crucial element to the quality of life we enjoy in Bensalem.

We built, expanded and developed our Bensalem Central Park, including the construction of our Amphitheater that today serves as the centerpiece of our Summer Concert Series and our Fall Festival Community Pride Celebration.

We rebuilt neighborhood playgrounds and constructed the Bensalem Community Park, the Firefighters' Field Complex, and, most recently, our First Responders Field, to provide much needed sports and recreation opportunities to our residents, especially our youth. Within the past few years we also performed extensive repairs and a rebuild of our Imaginationland Playground. Imaginationland, built through a partnership with the Bensalem Kiwanis, provides recreation opportunities to children of all abilities within our community.

Well over 200 acres of open space have been preserved by and through the Township during my time as your Mayor, increasing the total Township Open Space to well over 1,400 acres in 2023. A significant portion of this Open Space also provides passive recreation opportunities to our residents throughout the Township.

The demand for new and expanded recreation facilities and opportunities has been continuous since the earliest days of my Administration, and in recent years, that demand for both active and passive recreation opportunities within the Township has become even greater.

With the addition of the First Responders Field Complex in 2021, and playground in Springdale in 2023, Bensalem now has almost 300 acres of parks, playgrounds, and athletic facilities available to our residents. These parks, playgrounds and athletic facilities, together with the over 1,400 acres of preserved open space, are all maintained by the Township at a significant annual cost. These costs are in addition to our Park and Recreation Department manpower that includes Park and Recreation Staff, Park Rangers, Camp Counselors, and Field and Facility Maintenance Personnel and Contractors.

Playground maintenance has become increasingly cumbersome and increasingly expensive in the last several years. Many of our playgrounds have been in service for 20 years or more, and for both safety and liability purposes, when their 20-year service anniversary approaches, the Township must replace much, if not all, of the equipment and components that make up those playgrounds. These repairs and replacement projects must be undertaken if we are going to continue to provide safe neighborhood playground facilities for our community's youth. The supply-chain issues, together with the increased material and labor costs, that we have been experiencing for the past several years, have significantly impacted our playground maintenance efforts at our 30 Township playgrounds and parks.

For 2024, our \$2,000,000 First Responders Park Improvement Project will continue. These planned improvements to this nearly 18-acre recreation facility are well underway, and include a new synthetic turf soccer/field hockey field, existing turf field restoration, new field lighting, new irrigation systems, new bleachers, and the repaving of the parking areas.

For thirty years, we have continued to add and improve active and passive recreation facilities throughout our Township without raising Park & Recreation property taxes. As is true with all facets of Township Government, we have been able to continuously “do more with less.” Our families with young children want and expect neighborhood playgrounds, and our Imaginationland Playground continues to be a model facility and a destination for our community’s families with children of all abilities. The need and demand for facilities for our community’s youth sports groups has grown with the growth of these organizations as part of youth sports in the 21st century. Residents of all of ages are continuously asking for neighborhood basketball, tennis, and now pickleball courts throughout the Township, and our street hockey and skateboard facilities at Bensalem Community Park are in constant use. Accessible walking trails and other passive recreation facilities throughout the Township are in constant demand. Our Summer Recreation Program for children of all ages is full to capacity, and recreation programs throughout the year for residents of all ages provide both active and passive recreation and learning opportunities, with requests for more and different programs being made to the Township all the time.

As a result of all of these factors, the Township finds itself at a crossroads regarding the operation of our parks, recreation, and athletic facilities. For the first time in over 30 years, I am recommending that we increase the millage of the Township’s Parks & Recreation property tax by 1.5 mils. The alternative is to undertake significant cuts to facilities and programs at a time when the demand for these programs and facilities is at its highest.

You all know that I do not make this recommendation cavalierly. It pains me to suggest any tax increase for any reason. Now is not the time, however for us to begin to chip away at those aspects of our Township that make it a desirable place to live. Our public safety will always come first, and it is crucial to keeping our community a great place to live. The quality of our government services, particularly our parks, playgrounds, youth programs, and open space are also integral to keeping Bensalem a vibrant and desirable place live, work, and raise our children.

During my time in office, we also constructed a brand-new Senior Citizen Center, and we partnered in the construction of the Ashland Manor, Gravel Pike, Presbyterian Homes and Somerton Court Senior Housing Facilities that provide quality, affordable housing for our growing population of senior citizens. In 2021, we cut the ribbon on the Bensalem Veterans Residences on Mechanicsville Road. The Residences, constructed on land that was provided by the Township, provides affordable housing for age and income qualified Veterans of our Armed Forces, the first project of its kind in Bucks County and one that was long overdue for our Veterans.

Stormwater management continues to be at the forefront of our future capital projects. Since 2020, we were able to construct and place into operation the first phase of the Ogden Avenue/Cornwells Stormwater and Basin Project, improving and alleviating many stormwater management problems that have long plagued the Cornwells Heights and Eddington neighborhoods, two of the oldest neighborhoods in our Township. Last year we continued our efforts in these neighborhoods with the upgrade and replacement of concrete curb radii to further improve stormwater flow and reduce ponding and flooding in these neighborhoods.

My budget for 2024 includes \$8.9 million earmarked for storm sewer repairs utilizing the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA) funds provided by the Federal government. To that

end, our engineers continue to both to identify and implement plans and facilities throughout the Township, especially in light of the flooding experienced during the One Hundred Year Storm of July 2021. Chief among the targeted areas is the construction of new stormwater facilities on Hulmeville Road in the area of the Bensalem Country Club, as well as drainage improvements along Glendale Drive, Pasqualone Boulevard, Treeline Drive, Third Avenue, Grandview Avenue to name a few. As 2024 begins, engineering is well underway on these project which, when constructed, will function in concert with stormwater facility improvements that were recently constructed in that area to further alleviate stormwater issues for properties located around these areas.

All of these improvements and projects, both past and more recent, have all contributed to the development of an expanded and improved housing base within our community, a stronger business climate in Bensalem, a significant boost to our local and regional reputation, and a strong sense of community pride.

As a result of the fiscally responsible decisions and policies of my administration, heading into 2024 the Township's overall fiscal position is, and remains, strong and stable.

We have not only successfully weathered the economic challenges of the past that saw our nation experience some of the worst economic conditions since the Great Depression, but we are also successfully weathering the more recent challenges that have seen skyrocketing inflation, rising interest rates, continuously increasing material and equipment costs, and the overall downturn of our National and Global economies.

In the process, we have achieved and maintain both the short- and long-term financial stability necessary to maintain and improve our already strong credit rating of Aa1. Contributing to our financial stability and this strong credit rating are our conservative budgeting style, a tax base growth rate that is on an upward trend, a general fund balance that meets general accounting standards, and a Township liquidity that remains solid. Further, as I reminded you above, my Directors and I constantly study and analyze our operations to assure that we remain efficient, and, as always, we continue to look to find ways that our Township government can "do more with less."

My reluctance to raise property taxes is well documented, and any suggestion to increase your taxes comes with the belief that the it is not only absolutely necessary, but that it is the right thing to do, as well, for the long-term future of this community to which I have devoted so much of my life. The policies and practices of my administration not only have made and kept our financial position strong for over three decades, but they have also allowed us to provide all of the government services our residents continue to receive and enjoy, and to accomplish the many capital and community projects detailed above, without any increase in Township property taxes during the 30 years that I have been your Mayor.

I truly believe, as we head into 2024, that, as outlined above, it is necessary to increase the property tax millage that funds our Township's Parks and Recreation Fund. It is only after great consideration and deliberation with members of my administration that I make this recommendation, and I hope that you will understand and agree that this increase of 1.5 mills is

necessary to maintain the level of government services that our taxpayers expect and the quality of life that our citizens deserve.

While it is with reluctance that I propose increasing our Park and Recreation taxes, at the same time I am extremely pleased to report that I am proposing to continue the Homeowners' Assistance Grant for 2024 at \$300.00. As of the date of this Message, Bensalem will have returned over \$57 million dollars to its residents over the life of the Homeowners Assistance Grant Program, and with the funding I am proposing for 2024, that figure will increase to over \$58 million. I am proud to have fought in Harrisburg, alongside then Senator Tomlinson and then Representative DiGirolamo, for the inclusion of the Casino Host Fees in the State Gaming Laws, and I am proud that **Bensalem remains the only community in Pennsylvania that provides any Casino Host Fee monies directly to its residents.**

Bensalem is a proud, dynamic, diverse and vibrant community. While our strong financial position, the unparalleled services we provide, and the ambitious public works projects we pursue all contribute to our success as a community, our prosperity as a community is not dictated by just these factors alone. Ultimately, it is the people of this community that make it a great place to live, work, worship and raise family. The ongoing involvement, commitment and support of our residents and business partners are essential to Bensalem's continued success and our recognition as a strong and unified community.

In closing, I would like to once again thank my staff and our professionals for their hard work, support and dedication. Without them, the many successes we have accomplished for the people of Bensalem over the years would not have been possible, and certainly the Township's ability to continue to respond throughout the pandemic to previously unimaginable issues, and to maintain, without interruption, the exceptional levels of service that our residents and businesses both expect and deserve, is a testament to all of their dedication and hard work.

I must also take this opportunity to once again thank the members of Township Council, past and present, who have given me their support through the years, and especially to our current Township Council, all of whom have given me their counsel, cooperation and support throughout the Coronavirus crisis. I believe that together we have been successful in our efforts to make and keep Bensalem a community with quality of life of which we can all be proud.

Bensalem's future remains bright, and I am grateful to have the opportunity and the privilege to continue to lead this community into that bright future.

Thank you.