Township of Bensalem

Joseph DiGirolamo
Mayor

2022 BUDGET MESSAGE

To: Township Council

From: Mayor Joseph DiGirolamo

Date: December 3, 2021

Pursuant to Section 2-24 of the Code of the Township of Bensalem, on November 10, 2021, I submitted to you my proposed 2022 Municipal Budget. I now submit to you my accompanying Budget Message for my 2022 Municipal Budget.

As I prepare this Budget Message, I reflect upon the challenges our community confronted in 2021. The continuing effects and restrictions COVID-19 Coronavirus Pandemic, the natural disasters of the Summer, and increased costs, shortages, and supply-chain delays of many of the goods, materials and supplies we utilize, have presented challenges to our community that most of us have never before experienced in our lifetimes.

In confronting these challenges, I am proud to say that our Township Government has continued to operate and deliver essential services to our residents efficiently, and without delay or interruption.

In this regard, I am most proud of our Township's First Responders. Their training, experience and dedication to our community was on display in so many different ways in throughout 2021, particularly as our community endured record rainfalls and flooding from a One Hundred Year Storm, a near record wind storm, and an EF3 tornado, all within the span of less than a month. Our First Responders were called on to rescue citizens, secure property, perform search and rescue operations, and render life-saving medical assistance and first-aid, all while continuing to be ever mindful of the possible presence of COVID-19 among our population. As you know, the safety of this community has always been my first priority, and as I watched our brave First Responders in action, I was never more certain or proud of my commitment to supporting and funding all of our Public Safety Personnel.

Similarly, as I toured so many of our neighborhoods in the aftermath of these storms and events, I was equally proud of the efforts of our Public Works Personnel, who worked nearly around the clock to clean up storm debris, reopen roads, and keep our stormwater management facilities functioning, and our Building and Planning Personnel, who work with federal, state and local emergency management personnel to assess damage and who expedited permit applications and property inspections to help our displaced residents get back into their homes.

I could not be more proud of all of our Township Personnel and First Responders for the way that they have performed their duties during and under conditions unlike any they could have ever previously expected.

As is always the case, my Department Heads and I have been continuously monitoring the Township's financial position throughout the year. 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 pandemic or these natural disasters. Rather, it is the manner in which my Department Heads, our professionals, and I have conducted Township operations since the earliest days of my Administration. As you know, I was a successful local business owner 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. Our taxpayers deserve no less, and that is why I am proud to advise you that despite all of the challenges presented to the Township this year, my Budget for 2022 once again proposes no increase in any Township taxes.

As I have always said, 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," and as "1 of the 100 Best Communities for Young People." Locally, the *Bucks County Courier Times* 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 stated, above, 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 and achieved <u>both</u> national and state accreditation. Of the more than 1,100 Police Departments in all of Pennsylvania, only 14 Police Departments can make such a claim. 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 20 full-time and approximately 60 part-time personnel, is the most busy unit in the County, responding to 1 out of every 7 emergency calls

received by the County 911 Dispatch, with an 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. Nearly 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 68% of our overall 2022 Township Budget. I am pleased to report that as a result of the decisions and policies of my administration, in 2022 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. We must remain ever vigilant both today and into the future.

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. As I have shared with you in the past, when I was first sworn in as Mayor in 1994, the Township was in severe financial distress, facing a budget deficit, runaway expenditures, a significant tax increase, and poor revenue projections. Upon being sworn into office, I opened the budget and immediately rolled back the tax increase that had been put into place by the outgoing administration. I cut expenditures from that budget, and I instituted a strong financial management and investment policy for the future fiscal growth of the Township. I also instituted a plan to improve our decaying infrastructure through sound capital expenditures.

In the years that immediately followed, 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 $25 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 2022 Budget includes continued funding for these efforts along Hulmeville Road and along Bristol Pike as we near completion of this project.

As 2020 saw the completion of the second Township-Wide Road Repaving Project undertaken by the Township during my time as your Mayor, I can state with great confidence that few if any roads, have completed the repaving of their entire community twice in the span of 25 years! Furthermore, this past year saw us begin our third Township-Wide Road Repaving Project, as 11 miles of Township roads and streets were repaved, including Neshaminy Boulevard, Knights Road, Park Avenue, Hollandale Drive and Byberry Road.

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.

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 both the Bensalem Community Park and Firefighters' Field Complex to provide much needed sports and recreation opportunities to our residents, especially our youth. This past year we also performed extensive repairs and 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.

As I prepare this Message, we are preparing to dedicate the recently acquired Trifecta Sporting Club property as First Responders Field. The planned improvements to this nearly 18-acre Township recreation facility are well underway, including field restoration, new irrigation systems, new bleachers, and repaving of the parking areas. Upon completion, this facility will provide yet another recreation facility for the youth of Bensalem, and its preservation as open space in this residential area will maintain and enhance the quality of life for the Trevose neighborhood of our community for years to come.

During my time in office, we constructed a brand new Senior Citizen Center at a cost of $1.6 million, 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. This past year we cut the ribbon on the Bensalem Veterans Housing Residence on Mechanicsville Road. This facility, 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 is long overdue for our Veterans.

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 1,300 acres. I am proud to note that we just preserved another 8 acres of open space along Park Avenue that, as in the case of the Trifecta property, is land that had been earmarked for housing that, instead, has now been permanently preserved as Township Open Space.

Over the years, open space acquired by the Township has been used for active recreation, such as Firefighters' Field, Bensalem Community Park, for passive recreation such as Central Park and Newport Park, and for green belts along the Poquessing Creek, Neshaminy Creek and Delaware River. Most importantly, this land has been forever preserved from future development and will instead continue to contribute to the high quality of life we enjoy in Bensalem Township. Our Township Trail system, which includes the Bensalem Greenway in our Riverfront Renaissance District, and our recently completed Central Park Trail System that now connects Central Park directly with Hulmeville Road and Imaginationland, are also amenities that enhance the enjoyment of our community by so many of our residents.

This past year also saw the installation of lights at the Drew Hacker Memorial Softball Field in Bensalem Community Park, making this the first lighted athletic field in the Township designated exclusively for use as women's athletics facility.

As demand for new and expanded recreation facilities and opportunities continues, my budget for 2022 includes $100,000 earmarked to resurface the Bensalem Community Park Outdoor Hockey Rink, and $400,000 for the design and installation of a Spray Water Park within the community.

Stormwater management continues to be at the forefront of our future capital projects. In 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. As 2022 begins, the installation of new stormwater management facilities in and around Woodbine Avenue will take place, and as engineering and coordination with PennDOT and PECO are currently underway for the construction of new stormwater facilities in Hulmeville Road and in the area of the Bensalem Country Club, my budget includes monies earmarked for these improvements designed to alleviate stormwater issues along and near Hulmeville Road.

My budget for 2022 includes $4.7 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 this past July.

Chief among the targeted areas remains the State Road corridor, especially within our Delaware River Renaissance District, another area of the Township that has experienced repeated flooding problems for years. The stormwater management improvements made in the past two years have significantly reduced the road flooding problems on State Road near Street Road, and we are currently coordinating with PennDOT and private property owners to identify, design, engineer and construct additional stormwater facilities along State Road that will alleviate and remediate, to the extent possible, other ponding and flooding issues in that area during 2022 and beyond.

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 2022 the Township's 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 challenges brought on today by the effects of the continuing Coronavirus Pandemic.

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."

These policies and practices of my administration not only have made and kept our financial position strong, 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 28 years that I have been your Mayor. I am proud, once again, to report to you that this remains unchanged in the coming year, as my 2022 Budget proposes no increase in our Township property taxes.

The benefits of holding the line on property taxes are obvious for most Bensalem residents and businesses. As I have shared in the past, however, there are added benefits that may not be quite as obvious. For instance, by holding the line on property taxes, we have allowed the more senior members of our population, especially those on fixed incomes, to age in place without being taxed out of their homes. Furthermore, as we continue to weather the effects of the global pandemic, those members of our community hit hardest by the Governor's Orders, especially those on tight

budgets or enduring extended periods of unemployment, are able to focus their energies and priorities towards getting back on their feet without having to contend with the added burden of a Township property tax increase.

In that same regard, I am extremely pleased to report that I am proposing to continue the Homeowners' Assistance Grant for 2022 at $300.00. As of the date of this Message, Bensalem will have returned over $46 million dollars to its residents over the life of the Homeowners Assistance Grant Program, and with the funding I am proposing for 2022, that figure will increase to over $50 million. I am proud to have fought in Harrisburg, alongside 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 <u>only</u> community in Pennsylvania that provides <u>any</u> 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 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 though 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.