

TOWN OF ELSMERE
SPECIAL COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES
April 8, 2024
6:30 p.m.

CALL TO ORDER: Mayor Thompson called the meeting to order at 6:30 p.m.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE:

MOMENT OF SILENCE:

ROLL CALL:

MAYOR	ERIC SCOTT THOMPSON	PRESENT
1 ST DISTRICT	VACANT	
2 ND DISTRICT	SALLY JENSEN	PRESENT
3 RD DISTRICT	MARY STEPPI	PRESENT
4 TH DISTRICT	CHARLES MCKEWEN	PRESENT
5 TH DISTRICT	JOANN I. PERSONTI	PRESENT
6 TH DISTRICT	DAWN DIBIASO	PRESENT

Town Solicitor, James McMackin – Present
Chief of Police, Laura Giles – Present
Town Manager, Steven Martin – Present
Finance Director, Valarie Strzempa - Present

PUBLIC COMMENT: NONE

New Business:

Discussion regarding retention and recruitment of police officers, bonus pay, new pay scale and potential tax increase.

Elsmere Police Chief Laura Giles expressed the reason for this meeting which is due to a staffing crisis with the police department. Chief Giles stated she has already had one officer resign in order to go to another police department who is offering a higher salary, and she just learned that she has 3 additional officers doing the same thing, which will leave her with only 7 officers in the department. Chief Giles expressed that something needs to be done to be able to attract and hire new officers and be able to retain her current, long-term officers. Chief Giles presented an extensive power point which showed numerous breakdowns of the police departments current staffing level, approved budget, new proposed budget, proposed pay scale, comparison of salaries between other departments across the State, highlights of the departments impact in the community, and revenue.

Chief Giles explained that with the current approved pay scale, having a 12-officer department, in FY 24/25 she calculated with only salaries, her budget would be \$954,086.00. Adding in healthcare costs would then total to \$1,148,783.00.

Chief Giles then presented her new proposed pay scale, which budgets for an 11-officer department, in FY 24/25 her salary line item would be \$977,200.00. Healthcare costs for the year would be \$167,679.00, altogether totaling \$1,144,879.00. This ultimately shows a reduction of roughly \$3,900. Chief's presentation showed a projection of the next few fiscal years in 2 scenarios. One scenario shows projections if the officers leave and the other showing if the officers stay. The results showed there is a significant savings if she can keep her current officers from leaving rather than hire new.

Mayor Thompson asked Chief Giles to clarify that if we keep our current officers, we save money then if they leave.

Chief Giles answered yes, due to having new salaries, new pensions, and healthcare costs. Chief went on to show the number of officers from the last 10 years which averages to 11. Chief then showed insight as to what types of crimes police officers handle, such as 15 sexual assaults in child abuse cases, since 2018, they handled 309 search warrants, seized 64 guns and had 25 saves using Narcan. From 2006 to 2019 (13 years) there were 3 homicides, and then from 2020 to 2022, there were 3 homicides. In 2023 alone, there were 3 homicides, 2 attempted homicides and an armed robbery.

Chief Giles then presented statistics which included officers to resident ratios. This displayed Elsmere has the highest ratio with 11 officers for every 519 residents, Middletown has 46 for every 504 residents, New Castle City has 17 for every 397, Newark has 72 for every 425 and Newport with 7 for every 182 residents.

Next, salary comparisons were displayed, showing that currently, a recruit for Elsmere enters the academy at \$50,000 and earns \$55,000 after completion. Chief Giles then stated she is proposing a new pay scale to pay officers \$65,000 to enter the academy and \$70,000 upon completion. This would then bring the Town up to the average among other departments.

Chief Giles then went on to address the tax increase issue, determining that over the last 9 years, there had been no increase until just last year. Then, showing the cost of living index from 2013 to 2023 which added to roughly 28%, versus Elsmere tax increases which was \$1.89 during that same time period. Chief Giles showed grant funding the department was able to secure from 2014 to 2024. These grants were used to supplement departmental upgrades, compliancy, vehicles, firearms, State computers among many other items. The largest one being the COSSUP Grant for Impact Life, the tenant now occupying the first floor of Town Hall, which is \$7,500 a month in Town revenue.

Chief Giles then explained that the cost for a new recruit is extreme and Elsmere is notorious for sending a new recruit to the academy and not long after completion, they are resigning to go to another higher paying department. The academy cost for 30 weeks is \$28,846.15, then paying for 8 weeks of field training \$13,031. Then adding in healthcare, pension, uniforms, reimbursement for academy uniforms, pre-employment costs, bulletproof vests. Concluding that in total to hire a

new recruit, the true expense is \$67,500. If the Chief has to replace 3 officers, the costs for 3 new recruits will be roughly \$202,000.00.

The 3 officers that potentially could be leaving have a combined total of 23 years of service in Elsmere.

Some accomplishments of the department include becoming an accredited agency, establishing the Voluntary Assessment Center, securing Impact Life as a tenant in Town Hall, securing a grant to have 2 clinicians ride with officers, one being bilingual, and the other is a physician.

Councilwoman DiBiasco asked Chief Giles since some of the future projection slides, specifically the one scenario if the 3 officers stay, that there is a savings, how does this impact the residents tax increase?

Chief Giles answered that she does not see the immediate need for a tax increase, but there would have been no way to know that until she ran all the numbers. The biggest unknown from year to year is mainly healthcare costs.

Councilwoman DiBiasco then asked that if Chief drops down to an 11-officer department, which still shows a savings, can't we just bank the extra funds for future healthcare costs?

Councilwoman Personti explained her interpretation of the savings, which she understood it as that much less of an increase, understanding there will still be salary increases, but that much less.

Councilwoman DiBiasco asked aren't yearly increases already budgeted for?

Councilwoman Personti answered that we don't have proposed budgets from any other departments yet to see what other increases could be proposed.

Chief Giles stated she is showing what the proposed budget would be for salaries with 12 officers and with 11 officers. Cutting out one entire salary, pension, healthcare, of course it will be less.

Councilman McKewen asked how can we guarantee these officers are going to stay?

Chief Giles answered that we can't, they still could leave but regardless, she would still need the money to attract new officers to replace them. Even getting applicants to apply is hard. Over the last 12 months, she only had 5 applicants. Out of those, only 1 of them was a suitable applicant. Chief fears that if these potential 3 officers leave, there will only be 7 officers on the street, leaving her to have to find a way to still be able to consider those officers physical and mental health and try to cover vacations without burning them out.

Councilman McKewen stated we just did a pay scale increase last year and the officers are still leaving.

Chief stated yes, the increase was only \$5,000.

Mayor Thompson added that the \$5,000 was for a recruit, but it was a 17% increase for a lieutenant.

Chief Giles stated that her Lieutenant has 19 years in the department and he is only just now hitting a 6 digit salary. Chief stated she has been here for 33 years and is only \$5,000 higher than the Lieutenant.

Mayor Thompson interjected, stating the salary is not the point, the point he was making was that this conversation was had just last year, where the recruit and patrolman had the lowest increases and how this would impact recruitment. The answer he received then was the focus was on retention at that time, yet here we are. As a whole, the Elsmere Police Department is a department of the Town of Elsmere, where does this fit into the budget in its entirety? We cannot just isolate one budget from the rest. Recently he obtained a 5-year budget projection and based on the numbers given now, if they were to approve it, there would still be \$48,560 needed to have a fully balanced budget.

Chief Giles asked if that amount was 5 years from now?

Mayor Thompson stated, no this is for this year and then goes up according to the projection.

Chief Giles asked what costs went up?

Mayor Thompson stated we don't know exactly, since the budget isn't reviewed until June and they have only had 2.5 weeks to look over Chief's proposed pay scale ahead of the budget.

Chief Giles stated that she understands, however, there must be a decision. The department has done everything possible to be competitive, but they are not. If the Council does not do something, she fears all her officers could find better jobs within a month. This is time sensitive and stressed that these 3 officers are already in the hiring process for other departments.

Mayor Thompson stated he wants to move off the topic of "it's us verses them" or "them verses us" but rather discussing a solution that is nationwide and affecting numerous municipalities in Delaware. This should be the starting point for a conversation to find a solution.

Chief Giles stated that this is her job, to approach Mayor and Council, informing them of the crisis and how it is now affecting the Town. She has been informed that these officers could be leaving as soon as the end of May.

Councilwoman Dibiaso asked what part of that \$48,560 that is in the negative this year is from the police department when based off the Chief's presentation, there is a savings? Where is the negative \$48,560 from?

Town Manager Steven Martin answered this is aggregately over numerous lines from all departments combined.

Councilwoman Dibiaso stated that tonight we are here to discuss the police department and she does not see where the police are affecting the budget.

Councilwoman Steppi commented that on one of the slides, the healthcare cost is increasing this year, but static in others.

Chief Giles stated she does not know those future costs but knows they will increase whether there are 11 or 12 officers.

Councilwoman Steppi stated that healthcare has gone up dramatically, but to display this as a savings might not be accurate. Especially if you add in overtime rates, payroll taxes, holiday pay, workman's compensation and other factors that, across other line items, there will not be a savings. She then asked, with having 12 officers verses 11, what rank is that?

Chief Giles replied she is not sure, but if she loses someone else and an already certified officer wanted to come here, she is going to determine how many years they have in order to pay them accordingly, as opposed to a recruit. If she can put boots on the ground without having to expend \$68,000 for new recruit costs, she will do whatever she can to pay them at least as a Senior Corporal or Corporal 3rd. In the long run, this will still save money.

Councilwoman Steppi asked if we have ever done this in the past?

Chief Giles replied that in her 13 years as Chief, only 1 officer has wanted to leave a department specifically to come to Elsmere.

Mayor Thompson stated that since he has been Mayor, there has always been a strive to have a 13 officer department, but were always satisfied with 12, and when we hit 11, we try to hire to get back to 12. Now Chief is proposing to go down to 11 even though that consistently puts stress on the department, how is that the solution?

Chief Giles stated that they have steadily had 11 officers on average, and they can function. The department would love to have 13 or even 12, but to be financially responsible to the residents, then the compromise would be to be able to keep those 11. She spoke to the 3 officers that could be potentially leaving, saying that if she can request \$10,000 retention bonuses from ARPA Funds by May 15th, she might have them agree to sign a commitment to stay here for 2 years.

Councilwoman Jensen stated that Elsmere is a small department and there is no way we can meet the same pay as the State or County or other municipalities with abilities to annex or increase their tax base when we don't. It is apparent that we can't keep up, even with last years increase or the bonus pay given out a few years ago, officers still left.

Chief Giles clarified that the bonus pay was not meant for retention but rather hazard pay through ARPA funds for working through the COVID-19 pandemic. We also have parkland we could sell and there is land we could annex.

Mayor Thompson stated there are all kinds of ideas and it all comes down to what the residents want. This should be a kickoff meeting to see where the comfort level is with residents. They have only had 2.5 weeks with this proposal and it is not in context with the rest of the budget.

Chief Giles stated she understands but stressed that this is a crisis and we may have officers walk out.

Councilwoman Jensen asked what do other department do when they are down on officers?

Chief Giles replied that often times, they empty out their special units and have them patrol. Chief stated that if no solution is found, the department can function, but not function well. The residents will not get the service they are used to. The department brings in \$300,000 in Voluntary Assessment fines and if they don't have the officers, that will not be met either.

Councilwoman DiBiaso stated that the question tonight is, do we give the Elsmere Police Department a raise? Do we up their salaries? Based on the information given tonight, she is not seeing where this directly affects the budget.

Resident Stephanie Garcia of 1119 Kirkwood Highway asked if she could state her public comment since she has to leave for a family emergency before that part of the agenda.

Mayor Thompson agreed.

Stephanie stated she is a resident of Elsmere, works in Elsmere, is a mother and has family in law enforcement. Knowing we could be going to 7 officers and having worked at the bank that was once robbed, the Elsmere Police handled the robbery with such diligence and speed, they were able to detain the perpetrator the very next day. If we go down to 7 officers, crime will increase. With schools and many children in Town, how long will we have to wait for police to arrive if something happens? This will affect kids, businesses and all residents. She does not object to any increases for police salaries.

Councilwoman Personti recalled a prior Chief proposing to cap the number of officers to 10 or 11 in order to obtain raises. But about a year later stated they needed the additional officers because they could not function. There used to be discrepancies in how statistics were reported as well. An example was given where a police officer responds to call and the person ends up with 3 charges for one police response. Giving the appearance of having responded to 3 calls. Councilwoman Personti clarified that this predates Chief Giles, but when the reporting method was corrected, they saw a significant decrease in the numbers.

Chief Giles recalled the situation, stating this was when statistics were done by hand, but they obtained a computer program from the National Guard which modernized and reported incidents correctly. Chief Giles referred back to the slide show that showed where the department averages 11 officers.

Councilwoman Steppi stated that this slide also reflects that the department is in fact able to hire then.

Chief Giles stated years ago, if she lost an officer, she would have 20 applicants eager to test and apply. But not now, policing is different in today's society. She believes that the police are viewed as the reason for everyone's plight in life and who wants to have that job anymore. We cannot arrest our way out of anything anymore, which is why having clinicians ride with the officers is critical now in order to make a difference. Chief admitted she is to the point where she is struggling to find a solution aside from a new pay scale and bonus pay. She acknowledged that Council and public live in the Town, stating that this is your Town, but she sent her kids to school here and has family in Town and has spent 33 years working here. This is her life too. All Mayor and Councils have been diligent regarding expenses and tax raises. Over the last 10 years, only having raised taxes by \$17.95. Yes, we are a small Town and we give small Town services, State and County will not do any of that. She has residents that call her to ask if they can simply visit her to talk and she has always been available, that's what we are all about. We are a small Town, but we have big city problems.

Mayor Thompson stated he has no problem increasing pay scales or needing to increase taxes. The issues he has is being asked to approve this without consideration to the entire Town budget due to the time crunch. If the public all voiced their opinion and are in agreeance with one belief or another, that's what Council will do since they represent the residents. But let's brainstorm what options there are.

Councilwoman Steppi added that over the decade of not raising taxes, our streets are a mess, there is a stormwater project, the playgrounds were a danger and could have been shut down if we did not replace them with ARPA funds. By not raising taxes, we have failing infrastructure. The tax increase last year primarily went to police officers pay scale increase and the large trash service increase. No funding went to streets and if we don't allocate funds, we will still be in the decline in our infrastructure.

Councilwoman Personti asked Representative DeShanna Neal who was present in the crowd if she had any idea when the New Castle County tax reassessment will be done?

Rep. Neal stated Tyler Technologies was still performing the assessment throughout the entire State and she believes it will be completed by the end of the year. Tyler Technologies does have a website the public can check for updates that she will give out. Also, there is new legislature requiring assessments to be done every 5 years.

Councilwoman Jensen added that she was informed she will not be forced to pay a lump sum all at once and more information could be found on New Castle County's website as well.

Councilwoman Personti added that this is part of her concern as well since no one knows how this will affect us, especially since we adopt these numbers for our assessment as well. Additionally, Delmarva, starting in June will increase bills by \$24 per month. The concern lies with all of us, especially those on fixed incomes who may or may not be exempt from Town taxes.

Town Manager Steven Martin added that he believes the tax assessments will be coming out in 2025.

Rep. Neal stated on newcastlecounty.gov, residents can find information about their properties tax assessment by doing a parcel search.

Chief Giles addressed Mayor Thompson regarding the comments about the Lieutenants increase. Explaining that when broken down over the course of 9 years, it only adds up to an additional \$8.69 per hour. She understands that 17% sounds like a giant leap, but for a 19-year veteran, only \$8.69 more per hour isn't as large as it could seem.

Mayor Thompson stated that again, the Lieutenants increase was not the point.

Councilwoman Steppi asked how can we compete with New Castle County offering \$25,000 sign on bonuses?

Chief Giles stated that we can't. That's why she is only requesting \$10,000.

Councilwoman Personti stated she believes that once officers reach 5-7 years, they have no room to advance since there is no turn over in the high ranking officers for them to be able to advance.

So what suggestions do we have to keep an officer here who doesn't see the potential for growth?

Chief Giles replied that's not accurate because officers that are leaving, are going back to patrolling, only for more money. Doing the exact same job, but with more pay.

Mayor Thompson asked if exit interviews are done?

Chief Giles replied yes, to which they all said they enjoy working for the Town, but they would be making more money. Chief Giles then stated that if this is just an informational meeting, she apologizes to her officers, she has tried her best to get them what they need. They are the best group she has ever worked with and she thanked them for their support.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

Rob Anderson of 107 Northern Avenue asked how long Mayor and Council plan to sit on this? Does this take a month, 2 months? 6 Months? Waiting until half the police force is gone? He does not want to pay any more taxes than the next person, but something must be done, we cannot wait.

Mayor Thompson replied that this is only the first meeting, there will be more.

Mr. Anderson asked if they could at least give the officers a time frame such as 30 days or even some proposal to give them something to think about?

Councilwoman Jensen stated if this is a brainstorm session, the decision would be based on a group, not just for Council. She does not believe it is her job to find the money, which is the reason for the Finance Department and Town Manager.

Theresa Jaremchuk of 300 Southern Rd stated that as a security guard at Christiana Hospital, she makes more money than an Elsmere Police Officer. Chief Giles is the only one who brought any solutions to the table. This is a nationwide problem, but a major Elsmere problem because they do more for us, such as mental health, narcotics, ect. They go out of their way every day to do something that is probably outside of their job description. Meanwhile, in 4 years at Christiana Hospital they can make \$100,000 per year. Additionally, most of the officers that stay, are staying because they love the Town and care.

Dorothy Jaremchuk of 300 Southern Rd stated Chief Giles would have had no idea this catastrophe would happen prior to the budget review. Chief knows that as of the end of May, she will be in a desperate situation. Secondly, this increase has proven not to cost the Town anything, so what does that have to do with streets and highways?

Annette Doyle on Washington Avenue stated she has two nephews that are in law enforcement. She then stated there are certain buzz words being used, such as "uncertainty", which is correct but if we lose 2 officers, what is the uncertainty of response times for police? If we are brainstorming, how about when we have events, do we really need to have fireworks? How much do they cost? We hear fireworks on any given night during the summer.

Town Manager Steven Martin answered roughly \$15,000.00.

Annette said lets cut out the fireworks as they are bad for the birds, environment, and people who suffer from PTSD. She appreciates the events, but fireworks can be cut. Annette stated Hazard Pay should not have been given to Town Staff.

Previous Police Chief Neal Strauss [ADDRESS REDACTED FOR OFFICER SAFETY] stated while he is not a resident of the Town, he was employed here for 21 years and served as Police Chief from 2002 to 2008. He recalled this same situation occurring in 1986 and Delaware State Police had to come in and work midnight shifts in Town. The service was poor all due to not addressing this same situation ahead of time. Chief Strauss remembers coming in for his shift after the State had covered the night before to find crime had occurred in the night because the State does not patrol. Also, he pointed out that typically, all departments review their contracts around this time of year, which explains why starting salaries are jumping all around us. Chief Strauss recalled his time as Chief of Police where he would preach that the public should want a 10-15 veteran patrolling the Town, because they could notice anyone in your garage and be able to immediately know that person shouldn't be there. Chief Strauss loved working here and enjoyed the small Town, the only reason he left was due to pension. He stated if he were to leave his current department, he would come back to Elsmere in a heartbeat. Chief Strauss began speaking about back-up before the 3-minute timer indicated his public comment was over.

John Jaremchuk of 300 Southern Rd informed Mayor and Council of his resignation as Chairman of the Planning Commission effective tomorrow, April 9, 2024. He then yielded the balance of his 3 minute public comment back to Chief Strauss.

Chief Neal Strauss reapproached the podium and resumed describing the lack of back up being provided by the County since they are so tied up. This is a national problem, and it needs addressing. The one act we can do is make it more enticing by increasing the pay. The main goal for Elsmere should be keeping the officers we have. When you have officers doing small Town policing, they do it because they enjoy it. We will continue to lose officers if we don't raise salaries. Chief Giles showed no reason for a tax increase. They do not want a repeat of 1986.

Fred Carlson of 104 Western Avenue stated he thinks we should not consider selling any parks. The State and New Castle County are always looking to put in community centers, we already have this and you can walk anywhere in Elsmere right now. He recalled a time long ago when police only carried a night stick and handcuffs, but now they are required by the federal government to carry much more equipment and believes the public should petition to get state and federal assistance for much more than they offer now. Mr. Carlson questioned that if the officers receive a retention bonus, they must sign it, agreeing to stay for 2 years?

Chief Giles confirmed yes, that is what she is proposing, but for the State, it is 4 years. However, she is finding that if another department is poaching an officer, that department is now willing to buy them out of their agreement.

Susan of 1301 Spruce Avenue stated she is a small business owner, and she can empathize with trying to find employees and trying to retain them. If we have good police officers, we need to retain them and not wait until we lose those 3 officers. Who is going to respond if she needed to call 911? We cannot wait and brainstorm this. The street conditions are not an issue if someone's life is at hand in an emergency. As a resident, she wants to be protected. She stated the government seems to find money to give to people who do not pay

taxes, but we are tax paying citizens who are carrying this burden. We must climb the ladder and reach out to our representatives and legislature for assistance. We cannot depend on local governments to fix a problem the federal government created, and we must do it fast to keep our police officers. Brainstorms will not help in an emergency. She would rather deal with a pothole than to ever need to dial 911.

Stevie Keeley of 1356 Maple Avenue stated the average police response time is currently around 2 minutes. The few times she needed to dial 911, if another 60 seconds had gone by, the situation would have been much worse. She stated that it once took New Castle County Police nearly 10 minutes to respond to her sister out of Town. If we lose these officers, we are in big trouble and the problem will fall on Council's desks. Would Council risk their lives everyday for \$25 - \$35 per hour? She demanded Council to give the police department what they need to keep our officers from leaving before the Town of Elsmere turns into a city like Philadelphia where officers are fleeing. Philadelphia cannot find any new officers and have resulted to making concessions to their exams. She would rather drive over potholes then to have anyone get hurt or even killed.

Councilwoman Personti wanted to address that she keeps hearing this was supposed to be a brainstorm session, but last month, Council decided they would discuss this once all the budget was prepared. Once all the facts were in front of them, only then they would brainstorm. This is the first time in 21 years that a department head called for a special meeting. Most Council had hardly any notice or input. She believed this meeting was going to be held in mid-May once the budget was sent out.

At this time, there was public outcry, shouting that there is no time to wait. The 3 officers could be leaving by then. Council does not have time to brainstorm, we are in crisis mode and Council must figure this out right now.

Chief Giles explained that she also never faced this before which is the reason she asked for a special meeting. She knew she was losing one officer, but then all in one week, 3 more informed her of their potential resignation which is when she knew this was an emergency and needed Mayor and Council to meet to resolve this immediately. She cannot guarantee those officers will stay, but even if she can get one to stay, she will take it. This is a crisis and she is hoping that Council will decide tonight. Once again, she is asking for retention bonuses and make them stay for 2 years and also to help recruit new people. Chief Giles stated she would like to see Council at least make a motion to see where each of them stand on this.

Mayor Thompson stated that new business has concluded and we are on public comment. No motion was made during new business.

There was a question from the public asking what is the Mayor's solution?

Mayor Thompson replied that he has only had 2.5 weeks to review. He stated there is a lot of interest in this and suggested another session with anyone who wanted to assist. He stated we can meet every day of the week if need be.

A member of the public exclaimed that those officers are leaving and if they are not getting support from Council, why would they stay?

At this time, there were numerous conversations among Councilmembers and the public disputing the time that these officers may be leaving and when the budget gets reviewed and how much time they may or may not have to resolve this.

Mayor Thompson interjected, asking if there were any more public comments. Hearing none, he moved on to the next agenda item.

STATEMENTS BY THE MAYOR AND COUNCIL: NONE

ADJOURNMENT:

ACTION: A motion was made by Mayor Thompson to adjourn. The motion was seconded by Councilwoman Personti.

VOTE: 6-0 with 1 Vacant All-in-Favor Motion Carried

These minutes summarize the agenda and other issues discussed at this Council Meeting. Votes are recorded accurately. The audio recording of this meeting will be available at Town Hall for a period of two years from the date these minutes are approved. The audio recording may be reviewed at Town Hall by appointment and in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act.



**ERIC THOMPSON
MAYOR**



**SALLY JENSEN
SECRETARY**