

**TOWN OF ELSMERE
COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES
January 9, 2025
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	JANE MCDANIEL	PRESENT
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

APPROVAL OF MINUTES:

Minutes of the December 12, 2024, Council Meeting.

ACTION: A motion was made by Councilwoman Personti to approve the minutes of the December 12, 2024, Council Meeting with no corrections. The motion was seconded by Councilman McKewen.

VOTE: 7-0 All in Favor Motion Carried

OLD BUSINESS: None

NEW BUSINESS:

Representatives from New Castle County to answer questions and hold discussion on the recent tax reassessment performed County-wide.

At this time, Mayor Thompson announced that this will be a question-and-answer session about the recent tax assessment that was performed County-wide by Tyler Technologies on behalf of New

Castle County.

Representative Denny Hardman, who is the Assessment Manager for New Castle County, was present and gave a brief overview of the assessment that was performed, including the informal and formal appeal process for those individuals who believe their assessments were done incorrectly or improperly.

Mr. Hardman explained that right now, Tyler Technologies are performing informal appeals and are nearly completed. Anybody can continue to schedule an informal appeal meeting online, however tomorrow is the last day to schedule. They will finish the informal appeals at the end of the month and make all their changes and send any notices out where changes in the assessment were made based on the informal appeals. Then, they will present the final numbers to New Castle County around the third week of February. Once the County has them approved by the Board of Assessment Review, the County will get a final list and new assessments will be sent to all the jurisdictions. Anyone that is still unhappy with the amount after their informal appeals can file a formal appeal with the Board of Assessment Review through the County up to March 14th. However, depending on the amount of formal appeals the County receives, which could be anywhere from 10,000 to 22,000, they may not be done by July 1st. Mr. Hardman further explained that there will still be assessment at risk when you get the final numbers to do tax billings, and they intend to inform the public of what is at risk.

Mayor Thompson asked if Mr. Hardman can explain assessment at risk?

Mr. Hardman answered that essentially, anyone that files a formal appeal has a chance to state their case in front of the Board of Assessment Review. If their assessed value is, for example, \$400,000 and they believe it should be \$300,000, then the \$100,000 difference is now at risk, but will remain at \$400,000 until the Board makes a ruling. If the Board hasn't ruled by the time tax bills go out, there is a possibility that the tax bill that went out for \$400,000 of assessed value could need to be changed to \$300,000 based on the Board's ruling, which would be the maximum at-risk amount.

Councilwoman Personti asked that for those who may miss the informal appeal period, can they still do a formal appeal to the Board of Assessment?

Mr. Hardman replied yes, anyone can file a formal appeal every year, regardless of whether it is a reassessment year or not.

Councilwoman Personti clarified that if we get a call from a resident stating that they missed the informal appeal period with Tyler Technologies, it is not a problem since they can still file for a formal appeal?

Mr. Hardman replied yes, but the deadline for formal appeals is March 14th by State law.

Councilwoman Jensen asked how long they have before they answer the property owner as to whether it is being adjusted or not?

Mr. Hardman replied that the schedule is to mail the results between February 1st and 15th, so you should get it by the third week of February.

Councilwoman Steppi stated that she sent back the data from the first mailing because it was incorrect but heard no reply as to whether it was corrected. She then scheduled an informal hearing because Tyler Technologies does not let you know whether they corrected it or not. Only at the hearing did they state that it had been corrected, but she was in limbo until her hearing. However, she asked if she should be receiving a correction of everything in February from the original?

Mr. Hardman replied that she will receive a notice either way since she had an informal appeal, however, just because she had an informal appeal does not mean they are going to lower it.

Councilwoman Steppi reiterated that they had lowered it already but was unaware they lowered it except for looking it up on the parcel search. Essentially, based on the data mailer they sent, an extra story and 500 square feet based on AI technology was added to her home. Therefore, she went to the informal meeting to ensure these corrections were made and didn't have to prove anything because she was told it was already lowered, but she was unaware that it was already lowered because she was left in limbo without any communication.

Mr. Hardman stated that if corrections were made on the mailer that was sent out over the summer, Tyler Technologies should have corrected them over the summer. Whatever adjustments they made should have been included on the number that is now out on the New Castle County website under parcel search.

Councilwoman Personti stated to avoid confusion, we are referring to two separate appeals. There were two documents that came out. The first was the characteristics of the house which, that is one that if there was an issue, we were supposed to report if it didn't match our house. The second was the December letter that was a tentative assessment. Councilwoman Personti stated she had more concerns regarding the December mailing, so she filed an informal appeal and recalls being told that those who went through that informal appeal process on the amount should be notified in writing by mid-February.

Councilwoman McDaniel asked if the reassessments are not done by June 30th when the new tax bills come out, what happens at that point? When does it go into effect?

Mr. Hardman stated that it goes into effect on July 1st, the only thing that might not be done is the formal appeals. New Castle County will send bills based on the reassessment tentative values. If the Board rules in their favor and it is reduced, then those bills will have to be adjusted retroactively.

At this time, a member of the public, Jessica, addressed Mr. Hardman directly. Jessica stated she is frustrated with how Tyler Technologies completed the reassessment and how she has called them numerous times and has not received a call back for the assistance she needs, particularly after she was told someone would visit her house but no one showed up. Jessica explained that she works from home, takes care of her mother, and feels overwhelmed by the process with no guidance. She doesn't understand where the numbers Tyler Technologies released are coming from and expressed confusion about how to navigate it. Jessica stated she feels like she is being expected to manage complex financial matters without any support, especially as she is nearing retirement and trying to make sense of her financial situation.

Mr. Hardman stated that if Jessica would provide him with her phone number, he would see to it that someone from Tyler Technologies calls her. Mr. Hardman also explained to Jessica that Tyler Technologies was charged with creating an amount that equals the market value of your homes on July 1, 2024. If you choose to make the argument to Tyler or to the Board by filing a formal appeal, that is the argument you have to make. You must prove that you could not have sold your property for that amount on July 1, 2024. One way to do that is to pull comparable homes that they can look at around you which seems to give more leeway. However, if you are not happy with that and choose to go to the Board of Assessment review, that is a formal appeal, you then must follow the Board of Assessment's rules. One of their rules is you must have at least three comps, but the comps have to be sales. For example, if there are five houses around you, you can't use them and say this is their assessed value. You must find where these homes were sold. Mr. Hardman further explained the system that Tyler Technologies used and the difference between a mass appraisal and a fee appraisal. Mr. Hardman clarified that a mass appraisal is used for assessing many properties, like the 215,000 parcels being reviewed in this case, and is not as precise as an appraisal for a single property. In a mass appraisal, they use comparisons to similar properties, and sometimes errors can be found after reviews, as

happened with one neighborhood where one incorrect factor was affecting the entire subdivision's assessment. Additionally, the last property reassessment in Delaware was done 40 years ago, so many homeowners are unfamiliar with the process. Going forward, reassessments will happen every five years, which will help people better understand the process. The current reassessment relies on outdated data, and if a home hasn't been updated in 40 years, the records may be inaccurate. Since the assessors do not enter homes, they rely on external observations, which is why mailers asking homeowners to verify their property details are important.

Councilwoman Steppi stated she saw a statement that the average increase was 511 percent in the County. Is that correct?

Mr. Hardman replied that the last time he checked it was 4.8. But that was two months ago before any informal appeals began, so that is constantly changing as Tyler adjusts their accounts. Mr. Hardman also warned that there are going to be subdivisions that massive increases happen to, which is the reason the court ordered the County to perform the reassessment. There are properties in the County that are ten times more valuable now than they were in 1983, and there are properties in the County that are worth the same amount now as they were in 1983. So, there are going to be properties that see large tax increases even if everybody is revenue neutral, but there are also going to be properties that see large decreases even with revenue neutral. The whole purpose of a reassessment has nothing to do with raising money or revenue. It is to redistribute the tax base for the properties that have not been taxed fairly for the last 20 years. But the Delaware law states every jurisdiction must roll the tax rate back to a revenue neutral rate and they have to advertise that. New Castle County Council has been permitted to raise 15% to cover the cost of Tyler Technologies but our County Council has already voted not to do that. Mr. Hardman explained that the County's rate will go to County Council at the end of March and usually is not approved until June. The school districts on your County bill is roughly 80% of your bill. The school districts have until the second Thursday of July to set their rate and is often not passed onto the County until July 13th or 14th.

A member of the public stated there was a website that you could go to and it would give you the assessment of your house.

Mr. Hardman replied he is aware of two websites that are doing that, however they are not affiliated with New Castle County and he is not sure who is hosting those sites, and should not be trusted.

Jessica then expressed a feeling of being scammed by the County and further expressed her frustration with the lack of clear guidance or support in dealing with the situation. Jessica stated she does not mind paying taxes and has encouraged others to stay calm, but feels the process is being mishandled and that the public is expected to do someone else's job without the proper tools or instructions. Despite her education and self-starting nature, she feels she is being misled or "gaslit" by Tyler Technologies.

Mr. Hardman reiterated that while everybody's concern is taxes, the reassessment does not set taxes. The reassessment has one purpose which is to come up with the value of your property as of July 1, 2024. The only thing that anybody can argue or disagree with is the value that you received on that notice.

Another member of the public asked how they are calculating the value? Does he then have to raise his homeowner's insurance for the protection he has on his home based on the arbitrary number, or is it still based on the cost of reconstructing the structure in the event of a fire or something similar?

Mr. Hardman replied that it would be a question for the insurance company, but he does not know of any insurance companies that use assessed value since assessment is not an appraisal.

Jessica's husband then spoke out, expressing frustration that homeowners are expected to pay for

private appraisers to challenge the assessments, which requires significant time and money. He feels it is unfair, especially since public tax dollars were used to pay for the original assessments.

Jessica then added that having worked in quality assurance, she finds the situation unacceptable and believes it goes beyond simple human error.

Mr. Hardman replied that for the informal process, an appraisal is not needed. Simply obtaining comparable homes that sold over the last three or four years is all that is needed. For the formal appeal, you can also do that with just comps or you can get an appraisal, but it is the homeowners choice. He also reminded that they do not go inside of your homes and recommended to take photos to present.

Councilwoman Jensen asked if this will have any effect on the senior exemptions?

Mr. Hardman replied yes, the County Council just passed an ordinance to raise all the senior exempt amounts to \$73,000.

Councilwoman McDaniel asked if there is any way the County can put something on their website to calm people's fears?

Mr. Hardman replied that it is and has been on the County's website for four years. There is also a presentation on there that has every subject covered here tonight. There were also six public presentations when the project started and the presentation that we used is online. Mr. Hardman then concluded by stating that the County Council's rate will be introduced by the County Executive with the budget in March. But since a resolution has already been passed stating that whatever the rollback rate is, that's what they will accept, so whatever that rate is that comes out in the New Castle County budget, may be passed by County Council. As for the school districts, we will not know that until July. Mr. Hardman reminded that tomorrow is the last day to set an appointment for an informal appeal

Introduction of First and Second reading of Ordinance 676.

An Ordinance amending Chapter 145 of the Code of the Town of Elsmere.

Councilwoman Steppi stated that the ordinance has not been frequently enforced but serves as a tool for dealing with problematic rental properties. Small language changes were suggested by the Town Solicitor to clarify vague terms and to align the ordinance with updated codes, particularly adding a reference to Chapter 143, Section 3B, related to noise. The overall purpose of the amendments is to refine the language without altering the core principles of the original ordinance.

ACTION: A motion was made by Councilwoman Steppi to approve the Introduction of First and Second reading of Ordinance 676. The motion was seconded by Councilwoman Jensen.

VOTE: 7-0 All-in-Favor Motion Carried

Consideration of awarding a contract in response to RFP 24-06 – Maple Avenue Park Improvements.

Town Manager Steven Martin presented the Mayor and Council with the bid tabulations and stated that we have received \$130,000 to revitalize the Maple Park parking lot and basketball court. We sent out RFP 24-06 and received three bids and they are as follows: the total bid for Paoli Services would be \$114,000, Eastern State would be \$134,000 and Green Paving would be \$176,000. The letter received from our engineer at Vandemark & Lynch recommends that we award this RFP to Paoli

Services.

Councilwoman Steppi questioned the amount on the bid from Paoli, stating that \$11,000 for four trashcans is absurd.

Town Manager Steven Martin replied those are add-ons and can be negotiated.

Councilwoman Steppi then stated that on the contract, the start date must be changed as to not have a project start date in the winter.

Town Manager Steven Martin replied that the official start date will be put on the contract, which will also be reviewed by the Town Solicitor prior to signing.

ACTION: A motion was made by Mayor Thompson to award a contract in response to RFP 24-06 – Maple Avenue Park Improvements to Paoli Services. The motion was seconded by Councilman McKewen.

VOTE: 7-0 All-in-Favor Motion Carried

Consideration of approving the 2025 Event Calendar.

Town Manager Steven Martin presented the 2025 Event Calendar, stating that the dates for the Easter Egg Hunt and Town Clean Up Day will be switched. The Town Clean Up Day will be on April 5th Town Easter Egg Hunt will be April 12th.

ACTION: A motion was made by Mayor Thompson to approve the 2025 Events Calendar. The motion was seconded by Councilwoman DiBiaso.

Councilwoman Personti asked that since the Holiday Parade will be held on Sunday, December 14th, does anyone else think that the Best Decorated House dates should be changed to the 15th and 16th?

All Council members agreed this is better suited to do this later in the month.

ACTION: A motion was made by Councilwoman Personti to approve the 2025 Events Calendar as amended. The motion was seconded by Councilwoman DiBiaso.

VOTE: 7-0 All-in-Favor Motion Carried

Consideration of authorizing the Mayor and Secretary to sign a tribute honoring Mr. Ronald Russo on his service to the Town of Elsmere.

Mayor Thomspon explained that Mr. Russo served on the Planning Commission, Board of Adjustment, and the Finance Committee for several years and recently passed away. Mayor Thompson then read the tribute to be placed on the record which read as follows:

HONORING MR. RONALD R. RUSSO FOR HIS YEARS OF SERVICE TO THE TOWN OF ELSMERE

WHEREAS, Ronald Russo has called Elsmere home since 2006; and

WHEREAS, Ronald Russo was a dedicated educator, with over four decades in teaching, including 18 years as Principal of St. Mark's High School and 14 years as the founding President of The Charter School of Wilmington, directly impacting the educational landscape in Elsmere and the surrounding areas; and

WHEREAS, Ronald Russo quickly became a leader in academics, and was not only committed to the growth of his students, but also to the advancement of the broader community; and

WHEREAS, in addition to his work in education, Ronald Russo was a longtime member of many local organizations both in and out of the Town of Elsmere, such President of the Corpus Christi Parish Council, the Catholic Board of Education, DAPI, and the Governor's Advisory Council for Exceptional Citizens, the Wood Creek Civic Association, and the Dogwood Hollow Maintenance Corporation; and

WHEREAS, Ronald Russo was appointed to both the Town of Elsmere's Planning Commission and Finance Committee in 2009, later, he then was appointed to the Board of Adjustment in 2014 where he dedicated his time and leadership to bettering the Town's infrastructure and the lives of its residents; and

WHEREAS, Ronald Russo showcased his dedication to making a difference locally and beyond by serving as a community advocate for 15 years, working tirelessly for the improvement of Elsmere's future generations; and

WHEREAS, that the Mayor and Council of the Town of Elsmere wish to extend their heartfelt gratitude to Mr. Ronald R. Russo for his lifelong dedication to improving the lives of others and pledge to continue to uphold the values of community, integrity, and education that he so dearly championed.

NOW, THEREFORE, this tribute shall be placed upon the official minutes of the Council and a copy be provided to Mr. Russo's family as a token of our deepest appreciation for his service and dedication.

HONORED BY THE MAYOR AND COUNCIL OF THE TOWN OF ELSMERE, THIS 9th DAY OF JANUARY 2025.

ACTION: A motion was made by Councilwoman DiBiasco to authorize the Mayor and Secretary to sign a tribute honoring Mr. Ronald Russo on his service to the Town of Elsmere. The motion was seconded by Councilwoman Personti.

VOTE: 7-0 All-in-Favor Motion Carried

DEPARTMENTAL REPORTS:

Code Enforcement

Town Manager Steven Martin gave a brief overview of the Code Enforcement Report on behalf of Code Enforcement Officer Nicole Facciolo:

- Councilwoman Steppi expressed concern about snow removal, particularly in her district's commercial areas along Kirkwood Highway where sidewalks are not being cleared at all. She believes this is a safety issue, as it affects school buses, public transportation access, and pedestrian safety. She asked that the priority be on these properties first when it comes to issuing snow removal citations.

Finance Department

Finance Director Valarie Strzempa gave a brief overview of the Finance Department Report:

- Finance Director Valarie Strzempa reported that tax revenue is beginning to dwindle.
- The auditors have over 90% of the files needed to complete the audit, we are simply waiting for their schedule to open up so they can begin.
- Finance Director Valarie Strzempa also provided a quarterly analysis of the VAC which shows the net revenue.
- Chief Giles asked Finance Director Valarie Strzempa about the pension checks.
- Finance Director Valarie Strzempa replied that she has not heard back from numerous outlets and has sent an email to the State Treasurer.

Public Safety

Police Chief Laura Giles gave a brief overview of Public Safety:

- Chief Giles reported that she has spoken to Impact Life regarding their return to Town Hall in February, to which they have requested a meeting with the Town Manager and that has been scheduled.
- Chief Giles also announced that raffle tickets for the Police Chief's annual AFC NFC Playoff Extravaganza are available.

Public Works

Public Works Supervisor Leon Joseph gave a brief overview:

- Councilwoman Personti said the department did a good job plowing during the recent snow event.
- Councilwoman Steppi asked the status of a few missing street signs.
- Public Works Supervisor Leon Joseph replied they heard that DelDot never replaced them after doing work on some of the crosswalks.

Town Manager

Town Manager Steven Martin gave a brief overview of the Town Manager's report:

- Update on CDS funding: Representative Lisa Blunt Rochester's office secured \$1.1 million for the project through a House bill, although the original request was for \$3 million. This is the first time a Delaware City municipality has received such funding, which is seen as a significant achievement. However, there has been some uncertainty due to changes in congressional leadership, and the funding may not be finalized until the government funding bill is passed, hopefully by March.
- Planning to apply to DEMA's BRIC grant which is due the end of February and we'll apply for the remaining balance from the shortfall in the CDS funding.
- Discussion regarding the stormwater project: Town Manager Steven Martin stated that the bids for this project are due by January 27th. There have been challenges with the engineering work and cost estimates since this is such a large, extensive project. There was discussion regarding the ARPA funding deadline in 2026.

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**