

MINUTES . . . REGULAR MEETING . . . SEPTEMBER 9, 2024

The members of the Bethlehem Housing Authority met in a regular session on September 9, 2024 at 4:00 P.M. (IN PERSON MEETING). Those present and absent were as follows:

PRESENT

ABSENT

Mrs. Lindsey A. Clifton, Chairperson
Mr. Rogelio Ortiz, Vice Chairperson
Mrs. Iris Linares
Ms. Rachel Leon
Mr. J. Marc Rittle

Also present were: William W. Matz, Jr., Esq., Solicitor; John Ritter, Secretary-Treasurer; Diana Moreno, Assistant Secretary; Staff Members and members of the general public.

The Minutes of the Regular Meeting of August 12, 2024, were presented and approved. Mr. Rittle made a motion to accept the minutes of August 12, 2024. Mrs. Linares seconded the motion.

Roll Call: Ayes - Ortiz/Linares/Rittle/Leon/Clifton; Nays - None

Under the Treasurer's report, Chairperson Clifton inquired about the services provided by Wise Consulting Services. Mr. Ritter responded that they are assisting with the Yardi conversion.

Mr. Rittle commented that Field Day looked like fun based on the line items and expressed regret for not attending. Mr. Ritter mentioned that inclement weather forced an early conclusion.

Mrs. Linares inquired about the asbestos testing. Mr. Kichline explained that during renovations at the Pembroke buildings, the floors, which dated back to the 1940s, were tested and found to contain asbestos tile. A specialized contractor performed the asbestos abatement, as the general contractor was not qualified. Out of eight units tested, five contained asbestos. The contractor removed the asbestos, set up fans for air quality testing, and once the tests were passed, the work could proceed. Mr. Ritter clarified that the asbestos was found only in the kitchen floor tiles of certain units, and some tiles had already been removed over the years.

Mrs. Linares made a motion to approve the Treasurer's report for August Listing 2024. Ms. Leon seconded the motion.

Roll Call: Ayes - Ortiz/Linares/Rittle/Leon/Clifton; Nays - None

Under the Financial report, Mr. Snyder reported that cash is up by approximately \$300,000 this month, primarily because we drew down Capital Fund money to cover salaries for Mr. Kichline and himself, and related expenses. He prorates the income each month, which is why the cash balance is higher. Investments are down slightly because we sold a CD, but we reinvested the extra cash into a new CD at a higher rate. The operating funds are up due to the interest received and the difference in the CD rate. Overall, expenses and income are as expected, with favorable results, particularly for expenses at around \$652,000. However, we haven't yet entered the heating season or incurred significant maintenance costs, so these numbers are typical for this time of year.

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Regarding the Section 8 shortfall, as mentioned before, HUD is facing a budget shortfall—about \$20 million due to higher demand than expected. HUD plans to recapture funds from those with surpluses and redistribute them to those in need. Prices are continuing to rise slightly. They had a meeting with HUD last month and will have another at the end of this month with the shortfall team. They're not allowed to issue new vouchers until they're out of shortfall, except for VAWA cases or porting from one area to another, but they cannot absorb any new participants.

Mr. Rittle made a motion to approve the Financial Report for September 2024.

Mr. Ortiz seconded the motion.

Roll Call: Ayes - Ortiz/Linares/Rittle/Leon/Clifton; Nays - None

Under Courtesy of the Floor, Mr. Rittle expressed confusion about when board members are allowed to make comments, asking if they should use Courtesy of the Floor or engage during reports. Chairperson Clifton responded, stating that they can ask questions as they go through the agenda items. Attorney Matz clarified that Courtesy of the Floor is meant for public comments on agenda items.

Under Old Business, Deputy Executive Director's position, Mr. Ritter explained that the Deputy Director position opened on August 16th and will close on September 14th at 11:59 PM. Once closed, candidates will be selected based on a "rule of 5," but if there are multiple candidates with the same score, all must be interviewed. Interviews will begin once the list is received from Civil Service, with former Executive Director Eugene Gonzalez sitting in due to his extensive experience in housing. A committee, including Mr. Snyder, Mr. Kichline, Mr. Gonzalez, and Mr. Ritter, will make the final decision.

Chairperson Clifton confirmed that the two Personnel board members, Mr. Rittle and Mrs. Linares, will also be included in the process by board resolution. She reminded everyone that the board had unanimously passed a resolution for their inclusion, though the final hiring decision remains with Mr. Ritter. Mr. Rittle expressed uncertainty about the specifics of the resolution, but Chairperson Clifton clarified that it pertains to their involvement in the interview process, not overriding the hiring authority. He said normally, the personnel committee never gets involved in the hiring of anybody. Chairperson Clifton emphasized the importance of honoring the resolution that includes the two Personnel board members in the hiring process. She acknowledged the array of trusted individuals already involved but wanted to ensure the board's previous action was respected as part of the process. Mr. Rittle mentioned needing to review the resolution, noting that the term "process" could be interpreted in several ways. Chairperson Clifton agreed, while Rittle questioned if the resolution specifically referred to the interview process. Mr. Ritter recalled that the issue might have been raised during a meeting with HUD, and Chairperson Clifton said she would check for the resolution.

Mr. Ritter suggested that HUD might need to clarify the situation, and Mr. Rittle emphasized having the resolution in hand before asking HUD, to ensure nothing overrides the established process. Chairperson Clifton clarified that the resolution doesn't override Mr. Ritter's authority to make the final hiring decision but simply involves the two Personnel board members in the process. And that now that we have other staff and community leaders involved, I believe it is reasonable. The board unanimously approved the action. Mr. Rittle agreed, and Chairperson Clifton said she would review the resolution. Ms. Leon requested clarification before the next meeting, considering the job posting's closing date.

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Chairperson Clifton reviewed the resolution concerning the Deputy Director position, stating that it explicitly involves the Personnel Committee in forming the position description, conducting the search, reviewing resumes, participating in interviews, and recommending a final candidate. However, the Executive Director retains full discretion over the final hiring decision, as per the resolution passed by the board. And emphasized the importance of including the two board members in the interview process, as it was a unanimous decision.

Mr. Ritter agreed to follow up with HUD for clarification, particularly regarding any policy that may affect board involvement. Chairperson Clifton reiterated that the HUD training confirmed the Executive Director's sole discretion in hiring but did not suggest that board participation would be precluded. She further highlighted that the board's unanimous decision supports including board members in the process alongside other staff members. Mr. Ritter confirmed there was no issue with board participation and would ensure compliance with HUD guidance.

Under Old Business, Lynfield Community Center Lease, Attorney Matz mentioned that the draft lease is nearly complete but needs further review due to changes in the building's usage since the initial stages. Chairperson Clifton clarified that they are waiting for updates and that the internal team and the Lynfield Community Center team need to address the expanded use before finalizing the lease. Mr. Ortiz expressed frustration with the delay, stating that they had been waiting for the lease to finalize the use of the kitchen for the food bank and the community room for activities. Attorney Matz raised concerns about the expanded use of the Lynfield Community Center property beyond the original agreement with Second Harvest, noting that the usage now appears to involve additional activities not previously discussed. And they had requested a programming schedule from the organization but had not received it, leading the board to proceed based on the original resolution. Chairperson Clifton suggested that the next steps involve gathering a clear program list from the Lynfield Community Center and Mr. Ortiz's 501C3 organization to ensure all activities are accurately reflected in the lease. Mr. Ortiz agreed to coordinate with his partners to provide the updated list. Attorney Matz confirmed he would send the scheduling email to all parties involved to set up a meeting to finalize the lease details.

Under the Chairman's report, Chairperson Clifton acknowledged that there is no formal Chairman's report for this meeting due to her absence from the previous meeting and personal circumstances. She expressed gratitude for the board's understanding and assured them that regular updates will resume at the next meeting.

Under the Executive Director's report, Mr. Ritter reported that the NSPIRE inspection is scheduled for September 20th for the Parkridge and Lynfield developments, covering three hundred units with thirty-five randomly selected for inspection. Union negotiations with Teamsters Local #773 for maintenance staff will commence on September 16th. The current contract expires on December 30th, 2024. On September 13th, some staff and board members will attend the 33rd Souper Day at Art Quest, focusing on housing insecurity, economic justice, and food stability. Also on September 13th, there will be a Choice Neighborhood, bi-monthly meeting with HUD. As of today, eighty-three surveys from Pembroke residents have been completed, with seventy-eight, twenty dollar paid checks issued. An additional ten checks will be sent out next week. The Field Day, held on September 7th, experienced a strong turnout until inclement weather forced an early conclusion. Mr. Ritter expressed appreciation for the staff who managed the set-up and breakdown under difficult conditions. The Boys and Girls Club will hold a fundraiser at Wind Creek on October 18th at 5:30 PM, and several board members plan to attend.

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The board will reschedule its November meeting to Tuesday, November 12th, in accordance with the bylaws, due to Veteran's Day on November 11th.

In addition, Mr. Ritter addressed concerns regarding a recent City Council meeting, emphasizing that criticisms directed toward BHA staff are unjustified. He expressed disappointment that issues previously resolved are being revisited in public forums, which undermine staff morale and effectiveness.

Ms. Leon expressed concern over how her appointment has impacted both the City Council and Bethlehem Housing Authority (BHA) dynamics. She stated, "It's puzzling how a non-political matter has become so contentious. I regret the division it has caused, as the 77,000 residents of Bethlehem have more pressing concerns than which board I serve on." Ms. Leon emphasized her role is to serve, holding others accountable, advocating for BHA and its residents, and fostering unity. We are a unified community, and there will be challenges. She hopes this situation is just a temporary hesitation before positive changes occur, and she believes that change comes with new appointments. She wishes everyone to move past the negativity and work towards what is best for the residents of Bethlehem, our BHA staff, and the community members who reside in our housing. And it's essential that we work together to reduce tensions and foster collaboration moving forward.

Mr. Ritter clarified that his concerns were not directed at Ms. Leon personally and welcomed her to the board, but rather at the way certain issues were raised publicly, reiterating the need for professionalism and respect for the work of BHA staff. Ms. Leon acknowledged his sentiments, expressing her understanding and hope for a collaborative future without animosity regarding past events. Mr. Ritter noted that while many issues were addressed in previous board meetings, they continue to be raised in different contexts, which he believes is not conducive to a positive environment.

Mr. Rittle stated that while his comment was not related to the recent appointment, it did concern a letter, which was unrelated to Councilwoman Rachel Leon's remarks. He expressed respect for the Councilwoman's comments, having watched the entire City Council meeting on YouTube. Mr. Rittle then addressed the letter written by Mr. Ritter regarding the community leader in question, noting that he had written down his thoughts to better articulate his position. He asked for permission to read through his remarks. He stated that he had prepared his comments in advance and would not be making any changes. He thanked Mr. Ritter for addressing the issue rather than ignoring it, noting that it was important to engage in concerns brought up in public forums. He mentioned that he had watched the full City Council meeting in question and reviewed the statement provided by Mr. Ritter, comparing it to the remarks made by the community leader. He highlighted that the community leader, whose role is to listen to residents and take action for their safety, raised concerns about funds being returned to HUD.

In addition, he noted that while Mr. Ritter disputed the accuracy of this claim, board meeting minutes from November 2023 and January 2024 reflected over \$300,000 being recaptured, as also mentioned in the Finance Report and they were all voucher dollars. While Mr. Ritter indicated this was standard practice, Mr. Rittle argued that the community leader was justified in being unsettled by the return of such significant funds, particularly given the ongoing shortfall and the closure of the Section 8 list due to a lack of funds from HUD. Mr. Rittle concluded that it was valid for the community leader to raise these concerns in a public forum.

Mr. Ritter explained that the funds being reclaimed were standard practice by HUD, emphasizing that this is not due to any fault of the housing authority. He clarified that every housing authority experiences this process, and it does not imply incompetence on the part of the staff. In addition, he noted that in the current year, there would be no reclaimed funds due to the housing authority being in shortfall, meaning HUD would provide additional funds as needed. Mr. Ritter responded by questioning how long it would take for the authority to face financial difficulties if all voucher dollars were fully leased up.

Mr. Rittle expressed his desire to address the contents of a recent letter. He emphasized that the board, especially as a new group, should strive to understand ongoing issues over time. He noted the significant amount of money involved, specifically \$300,000, and the board's continued inability to provide Section 8 vouchers, highlighting the necessity for clarity on these matters. He raised concerns about previous claims regarding incorrect rent payments, stating that while these claims were dismissed as false, the lack of supporting data from Senator Casey's office does not definitively prove their falsehood. He urged the executive director to conduct an independent investigation into rental payments to hold staff accountable.

Mr. Rittle referred to statements from community leaders who claimed that their attempts to reach the agency went unanswered. He pointed out that the inclusion of an email in the board packet reminding staff to respond to inquiries suggests a potential lack of responsiveness. He recommended more proactive communication between agency leaders and community representatives to address residents' concerns effectively. He suggested that we have regular meetings with the residents to address issues. He has met professionally and spoken to Mr. Ritter personally, and he believes all the staff are great. He clarified that he sees no falsehoods in the community leaders' remarks and differentiated between belittling staff and holding a public agency accountable. Mr. Rittle expressed his ongoing support for the agency while also emphasizing the responsibility of commissioners to hold it accountable. He concluded by highlighting the importance of understanding the issues at hand and indicated that he would continue to raise these topics in future meetings.

Mrs. Linares inquired about the community leader attending our meetings. Mr. Rittle explained that she regularly attends but had a scheduling conflict today. Chairperson Clifton noted that, for transparency, the individual in question had emailed the board with additional context and a copy of her remarks to clarify her statements. Mr. Rittle added that she had also made the same statements during previous board meetings.

Chairperson Clifton acknowledged that in any resident/client-serving agency, there will always be residents whose needs are met seamlessly through established procedures, allowing them to move smoothly into stable living conditions. However, she acknowledged that there will inevitably be some for whom the process does not go as smoothly, resulting in challenges. And pointed out that mistakes are bound to happen because the agency is staffed by humans. She feels that when concerns are raised publicly, the agency's immediate response tends to be defensive, rather than acknowledging areas for improvement. While she appreciates the financial stability of the housing authority, she believes that there is always room for growth and improvement. Chairperson Clifton echoed Mr. Rittle's suggestion to foster a deeper connection with Mrs. Anna Smith, the community leader, and to focus on partnership and problem-solving rather than deflecting critique.

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Mr. Ritter expressed dissatisfaction with public criticism, emphasizing that any concerns should be communicated directly via phone or email rather than in public forums. He highlighted the importance of maintaining a positive working relationship, noting that repeated public critiques make collaboration difficult. He defended the agency's dedication to its tenants and adherence to HUD regulations, asserting that the staff is doing a commendable job. Mr. Ritter responded that the community leader should also extend an olive branch to facilitate better relations. Mr. Rittle mentioned that the community leader may have already attempted to reach out, but this was not reciprocated. Mr. Ritter responded that she had not reached out to him.

Under Committee Reports, Resident Advisory Committee, Mr. Ortiz reported on the successful completion of the summer program and announced the upcoming opening of the homework club in the next two weeks. He mentioned ongoing baseball activities, including recruiting local children to join the newly formed Southside Jr. Sluggers team. He clarified a previous statement regarding Matt Swarmer, who was signed by the Chicago Cubs last year, highlighting his involvement in the ECTB baseball program.

Mr. Ortiz expressed gratitude to Grace Church for their generous donation of 150 bags of groceries, emphasizing their continued support for the community. He also noted that baseball activities commenced last weekend and will continue until November 15th. Additionally, he shared that he and his wife were invited to meet Governor's Josh Shapiro residence next Monday, where he hopes to discuss resources for the community.

Mrs. Flores expressed gratitude for the success of the Community Day held at Parkridge on Saturday, August 24th. She thanked all staff members, including those from maintenance, IT, and the Executive Director, for their participation and support. She also acknowledged the community's efforts in making the event a success. The board thanked Mrs. Flores.

Mr. Ritter reported that Capital Blue has successfully negotiated a reduction in insurance expenses to 2% less than last year, which includes a rebate. Ms. Moreno confirmed the figure of 178,000. Chairperson Clifton noted that a reduction in insurance costs for the same coverage is uncommon and expresses gratitude to McGriff Insurance Services for their efforts on behalf of the Bethlehem Housing Authority. Mrs. Linares asked if this reduction applies to all employees, including those in the Union, Maintenance, and Civil Service. Mr. Ritter said yes.

RESOLUTION NO. 2597 - APPROVING THE EMPLOYEE HEALTH INSURANCE RENEWAL FOR OCTOBER 1, 2024, THROUGH SEPTEMBER 30, 2025.

Mr. Ortiz made a motion to approve the Employee Health Insurance Renewal.
Ms. Leon seconded the motion.

Roll Call: Ayes - Ortiz/Linares/Rittle/Leon/Clifton; Nays - None

RESOLUTION NO. 2598 - APPROVING THE VACATED TENANTS ACCOUNTS WRITE-OFF.

Mr. Rittle made a motion to approve the vacated tenants accounts write-off.
Ms. Linares seconded the motion.

Roll Call: Ayes - Ortiz/Linares/Rittle/Leon/Clifton; Nays - None

Chairperson Clifton expressed satisfaction in seeing the write-offs return to a typical range.

**RESOLUTION NO. 2599 - APPROVING THE HVAC PREVENTIVE MAINTENANCE CONTRACT.
(Resolution is entered separately as a part of these minutes.)**

**Mrs. Linares made a motion to approve the HVAC preventive maintenance contract.
Mr. Ortiz seconded the motion.**

Roll Call: Ayes – Linares/Rittle/Leon/Ortiz; Nays – None

Ms. Leon raised a question regarding the notation that the bid was the lowest and only bid, asking if it is common to receive only one bid for contracts. Mr. Ritter acknowledged that this occasionally occurs, citing the last instance as the garbage contract. He noted that Air Professionals have provided service for the Bethlehem Housing Authority for approximately 15 to 20 years, consistently delivering good service, and indicated that the annual increase for preventative maintenance is only \$1,500, which he deemed reasonable. Chairperson Clifton agreed with this assessment.

Nothing reported under New Business.

Under Miscellaneous Reports and Other Business or Public Comments, Mr. Ortiz announced plans to visit Patriot's Park in Allentown this Thursday to explore the possibility of starting a new baseball league there, following a recent inquiry about taking over the park. He clarified that the park is located at the intersection of 10th and St. John's Streets. He mentioned that the league he is involved with, ECTV, has previously played at that location, and although it requires some improvements, he has access to resources for renovations through local contacts in construction.

Mrs. Linares added that she had also heard that Muhlenberg was interested in the park but believed they may no longer be pursuing it. Mr. Ortiz confirmed that he would assess the site during his visit. Mrs. Linares further reported that she had spoken with Mr. Long, a passionate baseball enthusiast, who provided Mr. Ortiz with materials related to the league and was doing well following his battle with cancer.

Under Public Comments, Ms. Zulma Rodriguez, BHA Property Manager, emphasized the importance of addressing tenant complaints effectively. With 30 years in housing management, she expressed frustration over receiving anonymous complaints about rent issues without specific tenant information, making it difficult to follow up. She highlighted the need for open communication and transparency, particularly when community leaders relay concerns. She mentioned the strong collaboration with Representative Samuelson's office, where they receive lists of tenants and their complaints for prompt follow-up. The importance of receiving specific names and addresses from tenants when complaints are made. Ms. Rodriguez pointed out that while mistakes happen, they follow federal guidelines and aim to maintain transparency. She acknowledged the frustrations faced by Mr. Ritter and assured us that they strive to address tenant concerns promptly. She reassured the board of their commitment to quality control, noting that errors in rent computations are corrected, and tenants are informed. Ms. Rodriguez advocated harmony between the board and staff to better serve the community, acknowledging that while they strive for perfection, they are also human and occasionally face challenges.

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Mr. Ritter stated, "Well, my comments weren't directed at you." He expressed respect for Ms. Rodriguez's work, acknowledging its challenges and thanking her for her efforts. Mr. Rodriguez thanked the board.

Chairperson Clifton acknowledges the challenges of dealing with anonymous feedback, particularly in community settings, where people often share concerns in informal conversations. She noted that some residents may feel hesitant or fearful about sharing their names, which complicates addressing their issues. And empathizes with the difficulties this creates and suggests exploring ways to encourage resident feedback within HUD guidelines to help alleviate their concerns. Mr. Rittle supports the idea of making public statements, emphasizing that such statements can promote accountability. Chairperson Clifton clarified that she does not believe these statements were intended to be demeaning; instead, they reflect genuine concerns from community members about disconnects within the organization.

Chairperson Clifton noted that the next regular board meeting will be held on Monday, October 14, 2024, at 4:00 P.M. at the Monocacy Tower, community room. There being no further business to transact, Chairperson Clifton declared the meeting adjourned.

John Ritter

Executive Director