Minutes

Mayor and Municipal Special Meeting
of the Township of Belleville at Council Chambers – Town Hall
152 Washington Avenue, Belleville, New Jersey,
Tuesday, September 29, 2026, at 6:00 p.m.

Call to Order:
By Mayor Velez at 6:00pm

Members Present:
Council Members Cozzarelli, Graziano, Guardabasco, Muldrow, Rodriguez, Wells and Mayor Velez

Also Present:
Township Attorney Mark DiPisa, Township Manager Brian Banda, Chief Financial Officer, Frank DiMaria and Municipal Clerk Jacqueline Guaman

Pledge of Allegiance:
By Mayor Velez

Sunshine Law:
By Clerk Jacqueline Guaman

Pursuant to the requirements of the Open Public Meetings Act (Chapter 231, P.L. 1975) known as the Sunshine Law, notice of this meeting was published in the September 24, 2026, NJ Legal Ads. A copy of the annual meeting notice has been posted on the Township website and Town Hall Bulletin Board.

Special Hearing:

A. Hearing on Amendment to 2026 Municipal Budget

Motion by Councilwoman Wells; Seconded by Councilwoman Guardabasco.
Ayes: Cozzarelli, Graziano, Guardabasco, Muldrow, Rodriguez, Wells and Mayor Velez.
Nays: None Absent: None Abstain: None **Motion Carries**

Public Comments:
Michael Sheldon – 47 Floyd St.

- What is this amendment? What are the changes since the introduction on July 14th? Where are the publications?
- Amendments to the budget are only allowed if there is a new item of appropriation by 1%, an increase in the amount to be raised by taxes by more than 5%, and an increase or decrease in any item of appropriation by more than 10%, so are any of these triggers relevant?

CFO DiMaria:

- Adding approximately 41 grants to the budget, requiring a public hearing on the amendment.
- Notes the amendment has been posted on the Township website for one week.
- Confirms there are no changes to the tax levy or water budget appropriations.
- Advise that the publication is available on the Township website under Legal Ads and it's been available for a week prior to this meeting.

Motion to Close Public Comments by Councilwoman Muldrow; Seconded by Councilwoman Wells.
Ayes: Cozzarelli, Graziano, Guardabasco, Muldrow, Rodriguez, Wells and Mayor Velez.
Nays: None Absent: None Abstain: None **Motion Carries**

Council Remarks:
Councilman Graziano:

- Asks how the findings outlined in the 13-page report were discovered.
- Inquires whether the findings involve multiple departments.
- Seeks confirmation that the corrective actions will resolve past discrepancies.
- Asks what would have happened if the unaccounted-for funds had not been discovered.
- Requests clarification on the implications of the findings.

CFO DiMaria:

- States that financial records should be reconciled with the audit report using audited balances.
- Claims the Township's financial system has not been reconciled with audit reports in 25 years, including grant balances, reserves, receivables, and improvement authorizations.
- Notes that prior audit changes and adjustments were not reflected in the financial system.
- Explains that records were scattered across various accounts and required extensive research, dating back to approximately 2017–2018.
- Notes that audit records and state guidance can be used to identify allowable costs and notify departments.
- States that the funds are now being appropriated and incorporated into the budget for use.
- Explains that remaining funds would ultimately flow into the current fund surplus or be recorded as miscellaneous revenue not anticipated when operations close.
- Recommends reconciling all 22 accounts monthly to identify unposted or unrecorded items.
- Emphasizes the need for a qualified CFO on departmental budgeting and the proper classification of miscellaneous revenue, grants, and surplus funds.

Mayor Velez:

- Seeks clarification on whether the grants and other items described as nonexistent had no corresponding records.
- Asks how long an item has remained unappropriated.
- Inquires about safeguards being implemented to prevent similar discrepancies in the future.

Public Comments;

Motion to Open Public Comments by Councilwoman Guardabasco; Seconded by Councilman Graziano.

Ayes: Cozzarelli, Graziano, Guardabasco, Muldrow, Rodriguez, Wells and Mayor Velez.
Nays: None Absent: None Abstain: None **Motion Carries**

Michael Sheldon – 47 Floyd St.

- Raises concerns about potential state fines for municipalities that fail to adopt their budgets on time and asks whether the Township has received any such warnings.
- Asks about the expiration dates of the grants identified.
- Expresses concern over the lack of grant tracking despite grants being presented to the governing body, noting the potential for corruption.
- Asks whether officials are familiar with West Orange's property tax relief program.
- Recommends that Belleville consider implementing a similar program to provide tax relief to residents.

Mayor Velez:

- Expresses support for exploring West Orange's property tax relief program and plans to contact its mayor to determine whether a similar program would be suitable for Belleville.
- Notes that grants have expiration dates and that, prior to the current Township Manager's tenure, some grants were at risk of expiring due to nonuse but were recovered before the funds were lost.
- States that the Township is working to strengthen its grant-writing and acquisition efforts to better compete with neighboring municipalities.

Mario Drodz – 95 Bell St.

- Questions the changes in PILOT revenue listed on pages 10A, 15A, and 24, including the decrease for 11 Franklin Extra Space, the stagnant $100,000 payment for 78–102 Washington Avenue, and the $104,000 payment from Premiere Builders.
- Asks why two business PILOT payments have remained unchanged.
- Inquires about the budget's total dollar increase and its estimated impact on the average property tax assessment.
- Seeks confirmation that the budget has increased by approximately $4 million.
- Asks how much the proposed budget increase would raise property taxes per household.

CFO DiMaria:

- Clarifies that the budget increase does not directly determine the tax increase; the tax levy is the relevant figure.
- Reports a tax levy increase from $89,237,854 in 2025 to $93,848,541.03 in 2026, an increase of $4,610,687.03.
- States that the estimated tax increase is approximately $175 per household.
- 2026 total appropriations amended = $93,848,541.03 (grants included in this number)
- Total grants received for 2026 = $2,693,485.95
- 2026 total appropriations excluding grants = $91,155,055.08
- Explains that grants are excluded when calculating annual budget increases or decreases because grant funding fluctuates from year to year and is not a fixed revenue source.

- 2025 total modified budget = $89,237,854 (grants included in this number)
- Total grants received for 2025 = $1,220,622
- 2025 total appropriations excluding grants = $88,017,232
- Clarifies that annual budget increases or decreases should be calculated by comparing budgets excluding grant funding, as grant amounts fluctuate from year to year.
- Identified group health insurance as the largest expense in the budget.
- The town's debt service is less than 6% of the total spending in 2025 and 2026.
- Reports that group health insurance costs are projected to increase by approximately 20%–23%; absent any individual high-cost claims, the increase is still expected to be around 20% as of January 1st.

Councilman Graziano:

- Asks when the Township plans to begin implementing a rent roster process through Town Hall under a new ordinance, noting that the request has been pending for two years.
- Asked what factors contributed to the approximately $4 million increase in the Township's 2026 budget.
- Asked what factors contributed to the budget increase from approximately $88 million to $90 million, excluding grant funding.
- Asked whether projections are available for the Township's group's health insurance costs in the 2027 budget.

Manager Brian:

- States that the Township Attorney and Code Official have been contacted to begin working on the rent roster process.

Jerry Delgercio – 8 Grove St.

- Asks for the difference in medical costs between 2025 and 2026 and the total group insurance appropriation.
- Seeks confirmation of an approximately $2.5 million increase in group insurance costs.
- Questions whether the budget accounts for potentially improper benefit payments to 19 deceased individuals and other ineligible recipients, including the total costs and number of years involved.
- Notes that PILOT revenue may decrease when apartment units are vacant and question the financial impact on the Township.
- Explains the distinction between redevelopment PILOT agreements and five-year rehabilitation programs, including how each is taxed.
- Raises concerns that current PILOT agreements generate payments based on a percentage of rental income, while traditional multifamily property owners pay property taxes regardless of occupancy.
- Questions whether the current PILOT agreements provide a fair return to the Township compared with conventional property taxation.

CFO DiMaria:

- Clarifies that the medical cost figures are not currently available, but the group insurance appropriation increased from $17,582,500 to $20,885,000.
- Confirms an increase of approximately $3.3 million.

- Explains that HIPAA privacy protections limit access to deceased individuals' personal information and that available records primarily contain service or administrative codes.
- Emphasizes prioritizing the removal of ineligible individuals from benefit rolls, noting that researching historical payment details would require extensive effort.
- Raises concern about a projected 20% increase in group insurance costs on a $20 million base effective January 1.
- Notes that retirees currently account for approximately 60% of the insured population compared with 40% of active employees, expressing concern that costs will continue to rise.
- Extra Space Storage generated less.
- Notes that the submitted audits reflect PILOT payments of 10% of rental income, with lower revenue reported.
- Explains that a miscommunication between the seller and property owner resulted in missed payments, which the owner agreed to pay by October 15.

Councilwoman Wells:

- Health insurance regarding the decedent, can we estimate what that cost would be?

Manager Brian:

- Asked which PILOT agreement generated less revenue and the reason for the decrease.
- Inquires whether the 78–102 Washington Avenue PILOT is generating revenue yet.
- Inquired about the total current pilot revenue.
- No, it's for the year.

Patricia Wells – 8 Beech St.

- Asks whether the estimated $175 property tax increase for homeowners is per quarter.
- Expresses concern that rising property taxes are making it difficult for seniors to remain in town and urges the Council to consider whose more valuable.

Motion to Close Public Comments by Councilwoman Muldrow; Seconded by Councilwoman Guardabasco.

Ayes: Cozzarelli, Graziano, Guardabasco, Muldrow, Rodriguez, Wells and Mayor Velez.
Nays: None Absent: None Abstain: None **Motion Carries**

Resolutions:

RESOLUTION #303-2026 RESOLUTION RATIFYING AND APPROVING MUNICIPAL BUDGET APPROPRIATION TRANSFERS

Motion by Councilwoman Muldrow; Seconded by Councilwoman Wells.

Ayes: Cozzarelli, Graziano, Guardabasco, Muldrow, Rodriguez, Wells and Mayor Velez.
Nays: None Absent: None Abstain: None **Motion Carries**

RESOLUTION #304-2026 RESOLUTION ADOPTING THE 2026 MUNICIPAL BUDGET

Motion to TABLED by Councilwoman Guardabasco; Seconded by Councilman Graziano.

Ayes: Cozzarelli, Graziano, Guardabasco, Muldrow, Rodriguez, Wells and Mayor Velez.
Nays: None Absent: None Abstain: None **TABLED**

Comments:
Councilwoman Wells:

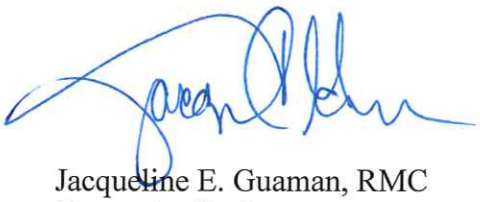
- Urge residents to recognize that meaningful change takes time and does not happen overnight.
- Emphasizes that the Council hears residents' concerns and is taking their feedback into consideration.

Mayor Velez:

- Announces that the Township is moving in a different direction and thanks Mr. Bernstein for his service as Labor Counsel.
- Announces that tomorrow's special meeting will address parking.

Adjournment:
Motion to Adjourn at 7:06pm by Councilwoman Wells; Seconded by Councilman Graziano.
Ayes: Cozzarelli, Graziano, Guardabasco, Muldrow, Rodriguez, Wells and Mayor Velez.
Nays: None **Motion Carries (Voice Vote)**

Respectfully Submitted,



Jacqueline E. Guaman, RMC
Township Clerk

The next Regular Council Meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, October 27, 2026.