

Centre Documenters

Meeting: State College Borough Council
Township: College
Documenter names: Justin Segal & Aria Eichhof
Date: Feb. 5, 2024
Start Time: 7:00 p.m.
End Time: 8:43 p.m.

Notes

Attendance:

28 audience members, not including the council.

Call to Order

Moment of Silence & Pledge of Allegiance

Roll Call

Ezra Nanes, Mayor
Gopal Balachandran, Council Member
Matt Herndon, Council Member
Kevin Kassab, Council Member
Nalini Krishnankutty, Council Member
Divine Lipscomb, Council Member (not present)
Evan Myers, Council President
Josh Portney, Council Member

Proclamations

Mayor of State College Ezra Nanes began by proclaiming February as Black History Month.

“The theme for 2024 is African Americans and the arts, and it explores the key influence African Americans have had in the fields of visual and performing arts, literature, fashion, folklore, language, film, music, architecture, culinary and other forms of cultural expression,” Nanes said.

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Elana Laing, a second-year student in the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications at Penn State, then spoke on the importance of acknowledging Black History Month.

“For many of us, intentional unity, radical honesty with ourselves and society, and creative problem solving need to be our art form that leaves the brush marks on the fabric of the canvas of our future,” Laing said.

Carmin Wong, a Penn State Ph.D. student, poet, scholar of Black literary history and appointed member of the borough of State College Racial Equity Advisory Commission, talked about the play she wrote about the 19th century Black community in Bellefonte and other efforts she’s made to preserve and highlight Black history in Centre County.

Ezra Nanes issued a proclamation naming Feb. 10, 2024, as Lunar New Year in State College, which begins the Year of the Dragon. The holiday celebrates “the eternal bond of respect, honor, and love for family, community and country, and unites families over generations,” Nanes said.

Nanes presented former mayor Don Hahn and Sharon Rovanseck from Halfmoon Township with the Lunar New Year proclamation. Hahn emphasized the importance of recognizing the Lunar New Year for the Asian community and international students at Penn State. Rovanseck shared her childhood memories of celebrating the holiday and her heritage.

For his final proclamation, Nanes said he will rename the borough of State College “the City of THON” for THON Weekend 2024, which will be in place from 5 p.m. on Feb. 16 to 4 p.m. on Feb. 18.

Nanes said THON has raised over \$219 million since 1977 for Four Diamonds, and THON raised over \$15 million just last year. Two Penn State THON captains thanked the council for the proclamation.

A note from your Documenter – Did you know? THON is a student-run philanthropy that provides emotional and financial support for families impacted by pediatric cancer. Four Diamonds through the Penn State Health Children’s Hospital is the sole beneficiary of THON, which culminates in an annual 46-hour dance marathon in the Bryce Jordan Center.

Special Business

Lynn Herman, chair of the State College Tree Commission, gave an annual report for 2023 to the council.

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Last year, the commission planted 220 trees, removed 127 dead or dying trees and pruned 365 trees by contract. Herman also said the commission talked with the Department of Transportation to limit the number of trees it plans to chop down for road projects and will continue to voice concerns.

Brian Heiser, executive director of the State College Borough Water Authority, told the council that the water replacement project on Calder Way is underway. With this and other planned projects, the water authority looks to replace 11,500 feet of water line this year.

The Nixon-Kocher Water Treatment Facility project is complete after four years of renovations. Heiser said he was proud to say that this \$25 million project was under budget by about \$2 million.

A note from your Documenter – Did you know? The Nixon Kocher Water Treatment Facility features membrane microfiltration, which is considered “state-of-the-art” water treatment technology, according to the State College Borough Water Authority. Also featuring UV disinfection, the facility serves to improve the quality of water in the area.

Heiser also mentioned that the water authority is providing service at competitive yet low rates for borough residents.

After a community member asked about the quality of water, Heiser said the groundwater is high-quality and abundant, and the authority has been sampling the water for agricultural contaminants since proactively constructing the water treatment facility.

Another community member brought up the boil water notices in Boalsburg that were posted on residents’ doors and asked if there’s another way people could get notified, but Heiser said the notices and knocking on doors has been the quickest way to reach people.

Gary Abdullah then presented a 2023 report on the Racial Equity Advisory Commission.

The borough celebrated Martin Luther King Jr. Day with a peace march, and the 2023 Juneteenth celebration garnered a larger audience than ever before. Abdullah also said the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom brought leaders from both the Penn State campus and State College community groups for social justice together like he hadn’t seen before.

Abdullah said the commission is still defining its role in the community but will continue supporting cultural celebrations and partner with local advocacy organizations to uplift minoritized groups. He also mentioned that the commission doesn’t know its budget for 2024 yet.

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Zoe Boniface, chair of the Planning Commission, highlighted the commission's 2023 activities and said there are plans in place to tear down the Hammond Building and replace that space with walking paths because the long building blocks the town from Penn State's campus.

The commission's first update of the zoning ordinance, the comprehensive update, is their highest priority project for 2024 because it has been in the works for decades. The Planning Commission will also begin updating the 2013 Downtown Master Plan because Boniface said it will affect funding if they don't put a new plan in place before the authorization expires in December 2026.

Matt Herndon, State College borough council member, said the affordability of housing is a huge problem in State College, and he expressed interest in spending more time with the Planning Commission to get the zoning plans hashed out and executed.

Because of council member turnover, the zoning ordinance update has been put to the backburner for over 50 years, but Boniface and other council members agree that they need to be prepared to talk about affordable housing and how to navigate that in the update.

A note from your Documenter – Did you know? The current zoning ordinance has not had an official and comprehensive update since it was put in place in 1959, but the council has amended it hundreds of times since then. Here is a link to the current zoning ordinance:
<https://ecode360.com/32909719>

Boniface also said the Planning Committee needs to have a plan in place for the abandoned Fairmount Building once it is deaccessioned by the State College Area School District.

A note from your Documenter – Did you know? The Fairmount Building at 411 S. Fraser Street was the State College High School until 1955 when the North Building was built, according to the State College Area School District Physical Plant and Facilities. Since then, it has housed the Delta Program and other organizations.

John Rattie, The State Theatre executive director, provided the 2023 report on the theater and said it has “yet to realize its full potential” in its 17 years since reopening.

A full-time development director and second talent buyer were hired to help attract more national acts. Rattie said 17 shows are in the queue to be announced. Rattie also said he wants to increase the theatre's capacity, an effort that's taking longer than desired.

The State Theatre surpassed its financial goal in 2023 and reached 150% of that goal, Rattie said.

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Consent Items

The following consent items were approved unanimously:

- Approve Payroll and Accounts Payable Vouchers for the month ended Dec. 31, 2023, totaling \$4,239,689.99.
- Accept William Elmendorf’s resignation, with regret, from the Tree Commission.
- Accept Jennifer Baldwin’s resignation, with regret, from the Historical Architectural Review Board (HARB).
- Award the Municipal Building Heat Pump Replacement Project to the McClure Company of State College in the amount of \$116,047.
- Award the Programmable Message Boards with Speed Sensors Project to All Traffic Solutions of Chantilly Virginia in the amount of \$47,500.
- Approve, with conditions, the Pop-Up Ave event, including the closure of Fraser Street between the Fraser Garage and College Avenue and Calder Way, Kelly Alley and Miller Alley, and the use of the MLK Jr. Plaza on April 24, 2024, from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.
- Approve the following appointments/reappointments (term ending)
 - Janine Gismondi, HR Commission (12/31/26)
 - Terry Watson, HR Commission (12/31/25)
 - Larry Miles, University Area Joint Authority (01/06/29)
 - Walt Schneider, Historical Architectural Review Board (12/31/27)
 - Roman Bahadursingh, CDBG Citizens Advisory Commission (12/31/27)
 - Russell Hartz, Zoning Hearing Board (12/31/26)
 - Vincent McDonald, Community Oversight Board (12/31/26)
 - Sonya Miller, Transportation (12/31/27)
 - Michael Morelli, Historical Architectural Review Board (12/31/28)
- Approve the following minutes:
 - Jan. 2, 2024, Special Meeting, Pages
 - Jan. 2, 2024, Reorganizational Meeting, Pages
 - Jan. 8, 2024, Regular Meeting, Pages

General Policy and Administration

The council passed an ordinance amending sewer fees from \$11.92 to \$12.67 per 1,000 gallons of metered water usage, effective for water consumed after Jan. 1, 2024. State College Borough Manager Tom Fontaine said this ordinance comes as a result of Centre Region Wastewater Treatment approving a 10.6% rate increase of the borough’s sewage treatment costs.

Official Reports and Correspondence

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Mayor's Report: Nanes gave updates on the events he attended since the last meeting. Nanes said he's eager to speak at THON in under two weeks.

President's Report: Council President Evan Myers reminded the council members that when they're addressing community members or the media, they should speak only for themselves, not on behalf of the borough, unless they are designated to do so.

Staff Reports: None

Student Representative Reports: A written report from the State College Area School District was received but will be distributed later.

Adjournment

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Summary/Takeaways from your Documenter:

- There are many community events to look forward to in the coming weeks. Black History Month celebrations, including African American read-ins at elementary schools, the Lunar New Year, and THON, are coming to State College. All three of these events received proclamations at the beginning of the borough meeting.
- An official and comprehensive update to the zoning ordinance in State College is the top priority for the Planning Commission because an update hasn't been made for over 50 years. "It is our highest priority project, and other priorities may be minimized in order to focus on getting this done," Zoe Boniface said.

Follow-Up Questions:

- What exact renovations are planned for The State Theatre to raise the capacity, and when can we expect them to be completed?
- Gary Abdullah spoke of multiple upcoming racial equity events in the area. Where can we find these events and/or get involved?

Top Quote

- "The Lunar New Year celebrates the eternal bond of respect, honor, and love for family, community, and country and unites families over generations." — Ezra Nanes // Mayor of State College
- "Right now, we're trying to create a process that builds on what has been done for the three previous councils but also gets everybody up to sort of the same knowledge base, but then also accommodates for those new ideas and new approaches." — Ed LeClear // Planning & Community Development Director on zoning

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