

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

“Quality of life” basics need attention

It’s hard to believe that government in Pottstown, a town of just 22,000 residents, spends nearly \$97 million a year, but it does. (A breakdown is shown on the chart, below right.)

The lion’s share of the money — almost 60 percent — goes to educate 3,100 students, who attend school about six and a half hours a day, 180 days a year.

Other big ticket items are water and sewer service and police protection.

Some services are bargains. Thanks to Pottstown’s volunteer fire companies, for example, quality fire protection in Pottstown costs a fraction of what it does in unionized cities like Allentown and Scranton.

Pottstown spends nearly \$2 million on bus service, but that’s almost entirely reimbursed by the federal government.

Trash collection is an example of a service that has improved in recent years without big spending increases. At one time, trash bags created visual blight as they sat out on sidewalks, often for days at a time, occasionally torn open by scavenging animals.

Since the introduction of big bins for trash and recycling — funded by grants and private sources — the daily spectacle of trash bags and dented cans on our sidewalks is mostly gone.

But other services have declined.

Last year, the borough contracted with a street sweeping company for \$15,000 to sweep more than 70 miles of Pottstown streets. One time.

Years ago, street sweeping, like leaf collection in the fall, was a regular municipal service. But these “quality of life” services are no longer provided.

Moreover, on top of their taxes, residents are expected to pay for such things as the maintenance of street trees and sidewalks.

A handful of Pennsylvania municipalities — such as Phoenixville, West Chester, Wyomissing, and State College — plant

and maintain street trees as a municipal function.

Others — although none in Pennsylvania — take responsibility for sidewalks. Some like Rochester, New York, not only maintain sidewalks as a municipal function, they plow the sidewalks when it snows.

Washington, D.C., does it all. The city’s streets department maintains streets and sidewalks as well as the city’s 150,000 street trees. This is a “quality of life” service that benefits every resident and makes it a pleasure to walk through its neighborhoods.

A cost-benefit analysis should be the first step in preparing any public budget — ensuring we get the most benefit from our tax dollars.



Commentary by
Tom Hylton

Pottstown government spending		
2015	\$	%
School district	\$55,992,642	58%
Sewer fund	\$9,094,390	9%
Water fund	\$6,183,849	6%
Police	\$5,605,982	6%
Pensions	\$1,399,815	1.5%
Health ins.	\$2,336,974	2%
Admin, other	\$3,523,736	3%
Trash pick-up	\$2,933,805	3%
Fire	\$1,392,870	1.4%
Parks	\$1,042,567	1%
Public works	\$1,004,764	1%
Street repairs	\$532,525	.5%
Debt service	\$352,224	.4%
Codes	\$728,768	1%
Street lights	\$268,839	.3%
Library	\$178,760	.2%
Airport	\$180,853	.2%
Parking lots	\$145,253	.2%
Capital projects	\$3,980,400	4%
TOTAL	\$96,799,016	100%
Grants fund*	\$4,067,601	
Bus Service*	\$1,891,105	

*Not funded locally