

# POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

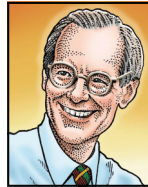
## Borough as bad guy?

For the second time this year, Pottstown Borough Council was roundly condemned for issuing code violations to churches trying to help the poor and the homeless.

In July, borough government was scolded for citing two High Street churches who allegedly violated Pottstown's zoning ordinance because they offered free meals and other social services instead of focusing on worship services.

The citations were withdrawn a few weeks later after "productive discussions" between borough and church officials.

This time, St. Paul's United Church of Christ, Franklin and Grace streets, was cited for leasing space in its basement to Beacon of Hope, a non-profit, to use as a 35-bed "pop-up" warming shelter this winter.



Commentary by Tom Hylton

At a Council meeting Dec. 7, Assistant Borough Solicitor Matthew

Hovey said the borough's zoning ordinance does not allow for a homeless shelter. That use has been assigned to other municipalities in the surrounding area as part of a regional compact.

Furthermore, Beacon of Hope did not contact the borough about the shelter at St. Paul's, Hovey said. Instead, the borough found out about it indirectly after the shelter had already started operations.

Tom Niarhos, executive director of Beacon of Hope, claimed borough officials were well aware of its plans to use St. Paul's since last summer.

Whatever the case, Beacon of Hope filed a zoning appeal and the borough suspended enforcement of the ordinance citing the cold weather.

Meanwhile, during Council's regular meeting Dec. 12, a bevy of protestors took to the microphone to excoriate Council for its heartlessness.

Regardless of how well borough officials have handled the situation, the underlying truth is that Pottstown has become the regional warehouse for the poor.

Just two indicators: Pottstown has twice as many low-income students as Pottsgrove and five times as many as Owen J. Roberts.

The borough has about 450 Sec-

tion 8 subsidized rentals. With less than 3 percent of the county's population, Pottstown has nearly 20 percent of its low income vouchers.

In addition, about 20 percent of all Pottstown real estate is tax exempt — including its most valuable property, The Hill School campus.

Pottstown has among the highest taxes in the commonwealth, and its tax base has been shrinking for years.

As solicitor Hovey stated, "The only homeless shelters operating in Montgomery County are located here.

"Montgomery County consists of 487 square miles with a population of almost 900,000 people.

"Pottstown Council must do what it can to ensure that the rest of Montgomery County does its fair share to address the issue of homelessness.

"...We are already seeing an influx of homeless individuals from outside the region who, by their own admission, come here because this is where services are located. They are leaving the places where services are not.

"Pottstown being an epicenter for societal issues more affluent communities refuse to address is nothing new."

Last week, we devoted two columns to photographs of just some of the vacant storefronts on High Street, our showcase street.

This town is hurting.

Should Council be blamed for trying to prevent Pottstown from being more of a dumping ground for the poor and troubled than it already is?

Pottstown's Tax Base	
Year	Total assessed valuation
1998	\$816,841,351
2022	\$760,202,652

Tax exempt properties	
2011	305
2022	340
Annual taxes lost: \$2.6 million	

Municipal tax rate 2022	
Pottstown	13.95
Lower Pottsgrove	4.12
Upper Pottsgrove	4.0
West Pottsgrove	3.0