

# Township of Bensalem



Joseph DiGirolamo  
Mayor

## 2021 BUDGET MESSAGE

To: Township Council  
From: Mayor Joseph DiGirolamo  
Date: December 2, 2020

Pursuant to Section 2-24 of the Code of the Township of Bensalem, on November 10, 2020, I submitted to you my proposed 2021 Municipal Budget. I now submit to you my accompanying Budget Message for my 2021 Municipal Budget.

As I prepare this Budget Message, our community finds itself in the midst of the global COVID-19 Coronavirus Pandemic. Since March of this year, when Governor Wolf signed his first Declaration of Emergency, the pandemic has affected our daily lives in ways none of us could have ever foreseen as the year began.

The Governor's Orders forced many local businesses to close, including PARX Racetrack and Casino, the largest employer in our Township. Citizens throughout the Commonwealth were ordered by the Governor to stay in their homes as he closed our schools, restricted our travel, and prohibited public gatherings and assembly. These closures and orders resulted in many of our residents and taxpayers being furloughed or completely unemployed as the pandemic continued. Even as the Governor's restrictions slowly lifted, some local businesses and jobs never came back, and others struggled to survive while being forced to comply with the numerous regulations coming out of Harrisburg.

Throughout this crisis, I am proud to say that our Township Government has continued to operate and deliver essential services to our residents. I am equally proud to say that despite this crisis, our Township has, thus far, successfully weathered the economic challenges resulting from the Governor's shutdown of our state and local economies.

Since the earliest days of the pandemic, our police, fire and rescue services have functioned without interruption. Our Bensalem Rescue Squad is responding to an increased number of calls, many related to the Coronavirus, and all during a period of great uncertainty and concern regarding COVID-19. The same is true of our Bensalem Police Officers, who all day, every day, respond to calls, and take suspects into custody, never knowing whether the people they encounter are potential sources of COVID infection. Our Township Fire Companies, staffed by brave volunteers, and our Bensalem Fire Rescue, are all ever vigilant in protecting our lives and our property, despite not only the dangers they face every day, but the added risks of the Coronavirus, as well.

Throughout the height of the pandemic, my Department Heads and I met daily to ensure that the Township was appropriately responding to the immediate directives coming from the Federal, State and County Governments regarding the Coronavirus, but equally as important, to ensure that Bensalem Township was continuing to provide governmental services to its residents and businesses. All of our Township employees have continued to work, with virtually no interruption, throughout the duration of this pandemic, and I could not be more proud of all of our Township workers and First Responders for the way that they have performed their duties during and under conditions unlike any they could have ever previously imagined.

Similarly, my Department Heads and I have been continuously monitoring the Township's financial position throughout the pandemic. As I have reminded you many times, however, this constant review and analysis of our revenues and expenditures, together with continuous analysis and vigilant research for opportunities to find savings and secure grants and other third-party funds, is not something unique to this pandemic. Rather, it is the manner in which my Department Heads, our professionals, and I have conducted Township operations since the earliest days of my Administration. As you know, I was a successful local business owner before being elected Mayor, and I have always attempted to run Township government with the same sense of fiscal responsibility that I employed in operating our family business. Our taxpayers deserve no less, and that is why I am proud to advise you that despite all of the challenges presented to the Township this year, my Budget for 2021 once again proposes no increase in any Township taxes.

Much has changed in Bensalem from the days when I worked alongside my Father on our family farm on Dunks Ferry Road. Over the course of the past century, Bensalem has grown to become one of the 10 largest communities in all of Pennsylvania, with over 60,000 people residing within the 21 square miles of our Township. Today we have a police force of over 100 officers, an infrastructure of over 144 miles of roads, and over 1,300 acres of open space, parks and playgrounds within our borders.

I am proud that during my time as your Mayor, our efforts have led to Bensalem becoming a destination for so many people throughout our region who seek to share in our community's prosperity and unparalleled quality of life, civic attributes that have led to Bensalem attaining national recognition as "1 of the 50 Best Places to Live in America," and as "1 of the 100 Best Communities for Young People." Locally, the *Bucks County Courier Times* lauded our community as a "Model for America".

However, as I reflect upon the way in which everyone in our community has risen to the many challenges of this past year, I believe that never has our community been more deserving of such accolades than it is today.

Events occurring outside of Bensalem throughout this past year have given us all reason to pause and reflect upon the incredible diversity that exists within our community. As I stated above, Bensalem has become a destination for so many people who seek to share in our community's prosperity and quality of life, and I am proud that our community continues, without exception, to welcome and embrace all who wish to be a part of, and to share in, all that Bensalem is and has to offer.

In a similar manner, events outside of our community this past year led us to pause and provide assurances to everyone within our community regarding the various means and methods by which we protect the citizens, visitors and businesses of Bensalem.

As you know, the safety of this community and its residents has always been my paramount concern. This is certainly reflected in our Bensalem Police, Fire and Emergency Management Services, all of which are the best equipped, most well trained, and most community active of any such departments or squads in the Commonwealth.

Our Police Department has earned and achieved both national and state accreditation. Of the more than 1,100 Police Departments in all of Pennsylvania, only 14 Police Departments can make such a claim. This recognition is reflective of the professionalism, dedication, and hard work of our officers and command staff alike to assure that our policies, practices, and procedures meet the highest levels to which law enforcement officers and departments can be held.

Our Bensalem Police Officers are among the best equipped and most highly trained law enforcement personnel at any level of government in this nation, receiving annual training in the use of firearms, use of force, defensive tactics, bias, crisis intervention, incident de-escalation, and emergency preparedness that exceed, and in some cases double, the state training requirements. In 2019 our officers attended training in over 125 different areas or topics, making up over 8,400 hours of training by our officers in a single year.

Our officers utilize state of the art technology, equipment and software, including our Rapid DNA technology, body cameras, in-car cameras, and a video evidence storage system, that not only greatly assist in the prevention and solving of crimes within our community, but also assure that every interaction between our officers and the public comports with all Departmental policies and standards. Our award-winning K-9 unit of six police dogs are trained in the detection of a variety of illegal drugs and explosives, and are integral in various police investigations, in the apprehension of criminal suspects, and in day-to-day law enforcement within our community. As I prepare this message, the Township is preparing to place into operation our new K-9 Training and Kennel Facility to further enhance police services in Bensalem.

Our Bensalem Rescue Squad, with a staff of 20 full-time and approximately 60 part-time personnel, is the most busy unit in the County, responding to 1 out of every 7 emergency calls received by the County 911 Dispatch, with an average response time to any location in our community with Advanced Life Support level of care in under 7 minutes, well exceeding the Commonwealth standards for both Basic and Advanced Life Support.

In 2019 Bensalem EMS recently placed into service our Mobile Stroke Unit, one of only two in the entire country, that is revolutionizing the diagnosis and treatment of stroke victims in those first crucial minutes of the onset of a stroke. Our Bensalem EMS not only respond to 911 emergency calls, but they also serve as paramedics to the Bucks County South SWAT Team, and are trained and equipped to respond to hazardous, chemical and biological events of any scale, including active shooter and mass casualty events. The training and expertise of our personnel also

led to Bensalem Rescue Squad being 1 of only 6 ambulance services initially chosen by the Commonwealth to be a member of its Highly Infectious Disease Transport Teams.

Our team of six volunteer fire companies continue their long history and tradition of service to this community. Through a combination of government funding and their own fund-raising efforts, these brave men and women continue to undergo the training, and to operate and maintain the equipment and facilities necessary, to safely protect and save lives and property throughout our Township. Our Township also employs a complement of full-time firefighters as part of our Bensalem Fire Rescue, all of whom are available to respond to emergency calls anywhere in the Township during those daytime hours when our volunteer companies may not have the manpower available to fully respond to a call. To help our volunteer companies in their efforts to maintain and grow their ranks, my budget this year continues to provide for the funding of our "FIRE" Program for volunteer firefighter retention, and we continue to operate and maintain our own Township Fire and Emergency Training Facility, right here in Bensalem, constructed so that all of our First Responders would have the ability and facilities to train locally, and to also coordinate training among our Firefighters, Police and EMS for all possible emergencies within the Township.

The service every one of our First Responders provide to this community is the foundation of our success in making and keeping Bensalem a desirable place to live and work.

While we all certainly recognize the importance of Philadelphia to the economy of the region, for a community like Bensalem, located right along the city's border, our proximity to the city also results in great economic challenges to our community, particularly in the areas of law enforcement and crime prevention. As I write this message, 454 people have been the victims of homicide in the City of Philadelphia, well exceeding last year's total of 356 homicide victims. This is in addition to the over 4,000 reported robberies, over 8,500 reported assaults, almost 3,300 reported residential burglaries, over 3,100 reported commercial burglaries, almost 7,000 retail thefts, and over 8,300 vehicle thefts, all in the first eleven months of 2020.

In addition to all of the reported crime in the City, the past several months have also seen multiple incidents of rioting, looting, and vandalism in Philadelphia. On more than one occasion this year, National Guard Troops have been mobilized in the City to quell violence and to maintain order. Countless businesses throughout Philadelphia have been looted, vandalized, and, in some cases, set ablaze. Many have yet to reopen, and some never will. The neighborhoods they served remain without the food, medicines, merchandise and services they once provided to the citizens of that City.

As Philadelphia was looted and burned, our Police and First Responders employed their emergency management and public safety skills and training to protect our community. They coordinated with our local business community, and throughout the days and nights of unrest across our border, our Police and First Responders stood ready and prepared to confront whatever unrest or criminal element might try to make its way into our community, and did, in fact, arrest several individuals who attempted to break into and loot several businesses in Bensalem.

Our proximity to Philadelphia also directly impacts our efforts in the fight to keep illegal drugs out of our community and to battle the other epidemic that has gripped our region, the opioid

epidemic. Nearly 80% of the individuals arrested in Bensalem are not, in fact, residents of Bensalem. They have travelled into our community from other places, mostly from Philadelphia, to traffic in drugs or to commit other crimes.

Clearly, a tremendous amount of our Police resources are spent in our unending efforts to prevent crime, and to arrest criminals, that come into Bensalem from across our border with Philadelphia.

Maintaining the safety of this community and its residents does come at a cost, a cost that represents 69% of our overall 2021 Township Budget. I am pleased to report that as a result of the decisions and policies of my administration, in 2021 we will be able to fund and maintain our Police, Fire and Emergency Medical Services at their current levels of service, levels that must be maintained, and even expanded upon, if we are to maintain the safety and quality of life we enjoy in our community. We must remain ever vigilant both today and into the future.

I have continuously pledged to the people of this community that our public safety will always be my top priority, and that we cannot, and I will not, allow anyone to play politics when it comes to keeping the people of Bensalem safe in their homes, on our streets, in our schools and in our businesses.

I am proud to say that the quality of life we enjoy today, and the quality of governmental services that the Township delivers to its residents, have greatly improved over the past quarter century. As I have shared with you in the past, when I was first sworn in as Mayor in 1994, the Township was in severe financial distress, facing a budget deficit, runaway expenditures, a significant tax increase, and poor revenue projections.

Upon being sworn into office, I opened the budget and immediately rolled back the tax increase that had been put into place by the outgoing administration. I cut expenditures from that budget, and I instituted a strong financial management and investment policy for the future fiscal growth of the Township. I also instituted a plan to improve our decaying infrastructure through sound capital expenditures.

In the years that immediately followed, the Township undertook major capital improvement projects to improve our system of roads and improve the flow of traffic throughout the Township. Every Township road was repaved at a total cost of \$25 million, and eight different intersections involving State Highways were enlarged and improved at a cost to the Township of \$8.5 million. The Township also redeveloped a major portion of Bristol Pike through Eddington, Cornwells Heights and Andalusia, from Street Road to Mill Road, at a cost of \$9.5 million. Hulmeville Road was widened between Street Road and Bensalem Boulevard to improve Township-wide traffic flow along this major corridor, the Rockhill Road extension was constructed at the direction of the Township to improve traffic conditions on Bristol Road and Rockhill Drive surrounding the Neshaminy Mall, and we engineered and partnered with PennDOT on the construction of the Galloway Road extension to alleviate traffic congestion at the intersection of Hulmeville and Byberry Roads in the heart of our community.

More recently, in our continued efforts to improve traffic flow and traffic safety throughout the Township, we have undertaken the installation of an Adaptive Traffic Signal System along Street

Road, Hulmeville Road, Rockhill Road, and Bristol Pike. This 21<sup>st</sup> century technology, which is nearing completion, adjusts and changes the timing and phasing of the traffic signals along these roadways, based upon the real time traffic volumes and conditions at each of the improved intersections, to respond to the actual traffic conditions that arise throughout the day.

Looking ahead, we continue to partner with the County and PennDOT on plans to fund and construct a new slip ramp onto I-95 South in the hope of alleviating congestion and back-ups we all currently endure at the I-95 and Street Road interchange, and funding has been secured for the engineering and construction of Renaissance Boulevard as the next phase in the redevelopment of our Riverfront District. Funding for nearly \$2.5 million dollars of roadway and intersectional improvements has been secured by the Township for State Road at its intersection with Dunks Ferry Road to improve both commercial and vehicular traffic accessing the I-95 Industrial Park. We also look forward to the completion of the reconstruction of the Pennsylvania Turnpike/Street Road/U.S.1 Interchange and associated highway projects along the U.S.1 corridor in Bensalem, which have been a long time in coming, and should help to improve the flow of traffic in this heavily traveled part of our community.

We have recently also replaced every one of the more than 3,300 street lights within the Township with programmable, long lasting, energy efficient LED fixtures to improve safety throughout the Township, while at the same time reducing our long-term energy costs associated with these facilities.

Notably, last year also saw the completion of the second Township-Wide Road Repaving Project undertaken by the Township during my time as your Mayor. I can state with great confidence that few if any surrounding communities, particularly communities of our size or with our number of miles of roads, have completed the repaving of their entire community twice in the span of 25 years!

During my time as Mayor, the Township has also embarked on a number of projects and initiatives aimed at improving the quality of life in our community.

We built, expanded and developed our Bensalem Central Park, including the construction of our Amphitheater that today serves as the centerpiece of our Summer Concert Series and our Fall Festival Community Pride Day Celebration. We rebuilt neighborhood playgrounds and constructed both the Bensalem Community Park and Firefighters' Field Complex to provide much needed sports and recreation opportunities to our residents, especially our youth. We also proudly partnered with the Bensalem Kiwanis to build our Imaginationland Playground that provides recreation opportunities to children of all abilities within our community.

We constructed a brand new Senior Citizen Center at a cost of \$1.6 million, and we partnered in the construction of the Ashland Manor, Gravel Pike, Presbyterian Homes and Somerton Court Senior Housing Facilities that provide quality, affordable housing for our growing population of senior citizens.

As I prepare this Message, after years of planning, we prepare to cut the ribbon on the Bensalem Veterans Housing Residence on Mechanicsville Road. This facility, constructed on land that was

provided by the Township, will provide affordable housing for age and income qualified Veterans of our Armed Forces, the first project of its kind in Bucks County and one that is long overdue for our Veterans.

Well over 200 acres of open space have been preserved by and through the Township during my time as your Mayor, increasing the total Township Open Space to well over 1,300 acres. The open space acquired by the Township has been used for active recreation, such as Firefighters' Field, Bensalem Community Park, for passive recreation such as Central Park and Newport Park, and for green belts along the Poquessing Creek, Neshaminy Creek and Delaware River. Most importantly, this land has been forever preserved from future development and will instead continue to contribute to the high quality of life we enjoy in Bensalem Township. Our Township Trail system, which includes the Bensalem Greenway in our Riverfront Renaissance District, and our recently completed Central Park Trail System that now connects Central Park directly with Hulmeville Road and Imaginationland, are also amenities that enhance the enjoyment of our community by so many of our residents.

As I prepare this Message, we have also completed our acquisition of the Trifecta Sporting Club (the former United German-Hungarian Club) property that was slated to be sold to builders for the construction of over 40 homes. The preservation and planned improvements to this property will create a nearly 18 acre Township recreation facility for the youth of Bensalem, and its preservation as open space in this residential area will maintain and enhance the quality of life for the Trevoise neighborhood of our community.

We are also about to undertake the installation of lights at the Drew Hacker Memorial Softball Field in Bensalem Community Park. When completed, this will become the first lighted athletic field in the Township designated exclusively for use as women's athletics facility.

Stormwater management continues to be at the forefront of our future capital projects. Thanks to our current, strong fiscal position, we were able to construct and place into operation the first phase of the Ogden Avenue/Cornwells Stormwater and Basin Project. This Project has already improved and alleviated many stormwater management problems that have long plagued the Cornwells Heights and Eddington neighborhoods, two of the oldest neighborhoods in our Township. That is not to say, however, that we have accomplished all there is to do in this part of the Township. My 2021 Budget includes funds for the upgrade and replacement of concrete curb radii in these neighborhoods that will further improve stormwater flow and reduce ponding and flooding in these neighborhoods, and for new stormwater facilities in the area of the Bensalem Country Club to alleviate stormwater issues along and near Hulmeville Road. At the same time, our engineers continue to both to identify and implement plans and facilities throughout this area of the Township.

We have similarly been able to address stormwater management and roadway drainage issues in Trevoise this past year along Clark Avenue, and we will also continue to address similar issues on and along State Road within our Delaware River Renaissance District that have also been a problem for decades. The stormwater management improvements made in the past year have significantly reduced the road flooding problems on State Road near Street Road, and we are currently coordinating with PennDOT to identify, design, engineer and construct additional

stormwater facilities along State Road that will alleviate and remediate, to the extent possible, other ponding and flooding issues in that area.

The ongoing transformation of our Delaware Riverfront as a residential, dining and entertainment destination, and the continuation of the Bensalem Greenway, continue to be initiatives that will help to shape and direct the redevelopment of our community for years to come. As mentioned above, my 2021 Budget includes funding that has been secured for the engineering and construction of Renaissance Boulevard, the next phase in the redevelopment of our Riverfront District. We also remain actively engaged with the owners and stakeholders of the Neshaminy Mall to discuss their plans and vision for the future of this important part of our Township's economic base.

All of these improvements and projects, both past and more recent, have all contributed to the development of an expanded and improved housing base within our community, a stronger business climate in Bensalem, a significant boost to our local and regional reputation, and a strong sense of community pride.

As a result of the fiscally responsible decisions and policies of my administration, heading into 2021 the Township's fiscal position is, and remains, strong and stable.

We have not only successfully weathered the economic challenges of the past that saw our nation experience some of the worst economic conditions since the Great Depression, but we are also successfully weathering the challenges brought on today by the Coronavirus Pandemic.

In the process, we have achieved and maintain both the short and long term financial stability necessary to maintain and improve our already strong credit rating of Aa1. Contributing to our financial stability and this strong credit rating are our conservative budgeting style, a tax base growth rate that is on an upward trend, a general fund balance that meets general accounting standards, and a Township liquidity that remains solid. Further, as I reminded you above, my Directors and I constantly study and analyze our operations to assure that we remain efficient, and, as always, we continue to look to find ways that our Township government can "do more with less."

These policies and practices of my administration not only have made and kept our financial position strong, but they have also allowed us to provide all of the government services our residents continue to receive and enjoy, and to accomplish the many capital and community projects detailed above, without any increase in Township property taxes during the 27 years that I have been your Mayor. I am proud to report to you that this remains unchanged in the coming year, as my 2021 Budget proposes no increase in our Township property taxes.

The benefits of holding the line on property taxes are obvious for most Bensalem residents and businesses. As I have shared in the past, however, there are added benefits that may not be quite as obvious. For instance, by holding the line on property taxes, we have allowed the more senior members of our population, especially those on fixed incomes, to age in place without being taxed out of their homes. Furthermore, as we continue to weather the effects of the global pandemic, those members of our community hit hardest by the Governor's Orders, especially those on tight



budgets or enduring extended periods of unemployment, are able to focus their energies and priorities towards getting back on their feet without having to contend with the added burden of a Township property tax increase.

In that same regard, I am extremely pleased to report that I am proposing to continue the Homeowners' Assistance Grant for 2021 at \$300.00. As of the date of this Message, Bensalem will have returned over \$42 million dollars to its residents over the life of the Homeowners Assistance Grant Program, and with the funding I am proposing for 2021, that figure will increase to over \$46 million. I am proud to have fought in Harrisburg, alongside Senator Tomlinson and then Representative DiGirolamo, for the inclusion of the Casino Host Fees in the State Gaming Laws, and I am proud that **Bensalem remains the only community in Pennsylvania that provides any Casino Host Fee monies directly to its residents.**

As you will recall, in response to the Governor's business closure and stay at home Orders imposed this past March and April, my Administration immediately responded by issuing the Homeowner Assistance Grant checks in April, rather than in October as has been our normal policy. Bensalem families were hurting, and despite the issues associated with issuing the checks early, it was an action we had to take to help the people of this community.

Bensalem is a proud, dynamic, diverse and vibrant community. While our strong financial position, the unparalleled services we provide, and the ambitious public works projects we pursue all contribute to our success as a community, our prosperity as a community is not dictated by just these factors alone. Ultimately, it is the people of this community that make it a great place to live, work, worship and raise family. The ongoing involvement, commitment and support of our residents and business partners are essential to Bensalem's continued success and our recognition as a strong and unified community.

In closing, I would like to once again thank my staff for their hard work, support and dedication. Without them, the many successes we have accomplished for the people of Bensalem over the years would not have been possible, and certainly the Township's ability to continue to respond throughout the pandemic to previously unimaginable issues, and to maintain, without interruption, the exceptional levels of service that our residents and businesses both expect and deserve, is a testament to all of their dedication and hard work.

I must also take this opportunity to once again thank the members of Township Council, past and present, who have given me their support through the years, and especially to our current Township Council, all of whom have given me their counsel, cooperation and support throughout the Coronavirus crisis. I believe that together we have been successful in our efforts to make and keep Bensalem a community with quality of life of which we can all be proud.

Despite the challenges this past year has presented, our community and its government remain strong, and together we will successfully overcome whatever challenges may lie ahead.

Bensalem's future remains bright, and I look forward to continuing to lead this community into that bright future.

Thank you.