

**Town of Montville Town Council/Montville Housing Authority
Joint Special Meeting Minutes
June 9, 2021, 6:00 p.m.
Town Council Chambers – Town Hall
Hybrid Meeting via GoToWebinar and In-Person**

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On May 20, 2021, Governor Ned Lamont issued an Executive Order 7B suspending in-person open meeting requirements, and to hold such meetings or proceedings remotely by conference call, videoconference or other technology. Additionally, In Person Attendance is allowed following proper masking and distancing protocols.

For all publicly broadcasted meetings, public comment on agenda items or topics in accordance with the Town Charter may be submitted in writing in advance or by live audio via GoToWebinar.

Written comments must be emailed to the Town Clerk at townclerk@montville-ct.org at least 1 working day in advance.

Written comments may not be read in their entirety, but rather similar messages may be aggregated or paraphrased for submission to the Mayor, Council, Board or Commission.

Live audio comments may be made via GoToWebinar by registering at the web address or calling from your telephone or computer mic & speakers (VoIP) noted above.

Comments will only be accepted at times designated for public comment by the Chair of the meeting. The Montville Town Council Rules of Procedure, decorum, timeliness and suitability shall be followed and enforced in the same manner as if the meeting were held in person.

1. Call to Order

Chairman May called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m.

2. Pledge of Allegiance followed by a moment of silence in honor of our military

3. Roll Call

Town Council: Present were Councilors Leonard Bunnell, Sr., Billy Caron, Joseph Jaskiewicz, Tim May, Kathleen Pollard, and Colleen Rix. Absent was Councilor Joseph Rogulski. Also present was Mayor Ronald McDaniel.

Housing Authority: Present were Housing Authority Members Michael Brower and Patty DiGioia-Evrett. Absent was Housing Authority Member John Szarzynski.

Chairman May welcomed the attendees and stated that the purpose of the meeting is to discuss the policies, procedures, and overall operation of the Montville Housing Authority in light of some of the issues that have been transpiring over the recent past.

4. Remarks from the public relating to matters on the agenda with a three-minute limit – *none*
5. Discussion regarding the policies, procedures, and overall operation of the Montville Housing Authority

Housing Authority Chairperson DiGioia-Evrett and Vice-Chairman/Tenant Brower responded to the following questions posed by the Councilors:

Timeline of Events (Councilors May and Caron): The Town Council first became aware of the issues with the resignation of Housing Authority Member Sierra Davis in December 2020. Her resignation was followed by the observations of and issues raised by town employees and tenants which corroborated the statements made by former Housing Authority Member Davis. The statements and complaints included the Authority's policies and procedures, mishandling of the tenants' personal/confidential information, and bullying and intimidation of tenants. Councilor Caron stated that the Town Council is elected by the townspeople to represent its residents. The members of the Housing Authority are appointed by the Town Council and entrusted to properly represent its tenants. As a result of the ongoing complaints that have been received, this evening's joint meeting was organized as a first step to addressing the issues and concerns that have been brought to their attention.

Policies and Procedures (Councilor Pollard): The Housing Authority follows the guidelines prescribed by CHFA (Connecticut Housing Finance Authority). The guidelines state the necessary income criteria for those seeking SSHP (State-Sponsored Housing Portfolio); the tenants' income is re-evaluated every two years.

Charges for Damages (Councilor Pollard and Bunnell): The Housing Authority takes care of the maintenance of the facilities. Tenants are responsible for the cost of any damages and/or maintenance charges that are found to be caused by tenant negligence. To date, no tenants have been charged such fees.

In response to Councilor Bunnell, Housing Authority Vice-Chairman/Tenant Brower confirmed that no tenants have been charged for the replacement of toilets or toilet parts, lost keys, clocks, lock changes, mailbox locks, refrigerators, stoves, smoke detectors, storm doors, interior doors, sinks, or cleaning of vacated units, though some of these items have been repaired or replaced over the past 1-1/2 years.

Lock-outs (Chairman May): The doors are equipped with a self-closing, auto-locking mechanism. The fee for accidental lock-outs that occurs after hours is \$50.00, which is the cost charged by the maintenance person. The fee has not yet been imposed.

Councilor Pollard expressed her dismay regarding the fees the Authority is charging for damages, maintenance, and lock-outs. Chairman May agreed, requesting that, while he understands that such charges might be standard practice, the Housing Authority review the list of charges and/or seek alternative options.

In response, Housing Authority Vice-Chairman/Tenant Brower stated that the Housing Authority has very low base rents, the average being \$370.00. He reiterated that the charges imposed are for the deliberate abuse of property and have not been imposed since they have been in effect 1-1/2 years ago. The complexes house *independent* living for elderly and disabled individuals earning moderate-income; they are not assisted living complexes, Section 8 housing, or housing for low-income residents. He has been and will always be an advocate for the tenants, within reason and the rules of the

Housing Authority. He has been a member of the Housing Authority for approximately five years and has been a tenant for approximately six years.

Administrative Structure (Chairman May): The Housing Authority has been without a Director since July 2019 and Housing Authority Chairperson DiGioia-Evrett has been filling the role as the Acting Director. Since her appointment, Housing Authority Chairperson/ Acting Director DiGioia-Evrett stated that she was not aware of the tenants' issues.

In February 2021, Shirley Smith was hired as the Housing Authority Administrator.

Bullying: Housing Authority Vice-Chairman/Tenant Brower felt that he is far from being a bully, as he has been described by some of the tenants. He has been helpful in numerous ways, including handling a 3:00 a.m. fire alarm call to guiding a confused tenant back to their unit and contacting their family member(s) to taking care of a tenant's air-conditioning unit after hours. He felt that, over time, the tenants have come to view the complexes as *assisted*, rather than *independent*, living facilities.

Maintenance (Councilor Pollard): The individual who handles the maintenance for the complexes works part-time and is on-call. As such, Housing Authority Vice-Chairman/Tenant Brower has opted to handle simple matters himself rather than incurring the cost(s) of calling maintenance.

Handling of Personal/Confidential Information (Councilor Caron): Housing Authority Vice-Chairman/Tenant Brower stated that he does not handle any personal or confidential information. Aware that the Department of Social Services is understaffed, he has assisted tenants with completing forms so that they may receive such benefits as energy assistance and renters rebate.

Councilor Caron stated that the Town Council recently approved to add 10 hours/week to be dedicated to outreach which should help alleviate the need for the Housing Authority to perform such duties.

Threats of Eviction (Councilor Bunnell): It was confirmed that tenants have been evicted. None were threatened with eviction. KAPA Notices, i.e., warning letters deriving from their attorney, have been issued to tenants for non-compliance.

Funding and Number Occupied Units (Chairman May): Housing Authority Chairperson/Acting Director DiGioia-Evrett stated that, in July 2019, the Housing Authority had \$35,000.00. They are now comfortably funded. Of the 80 units in both complexes, there are 5 unoccupied units that are in the process of being turned over. There is currently a short waiting list.

Housing Administrator: Housing Administrator Shirley Smith stated that she has been working on the premises since February 2021. Because all of the paperwork was previously handled by hand, a new computer system was purchased and installed. She conducts daily walkabouts at both of the complexes and is in the process of purchasing a mobile phone so that she may be contacted when she is not in the office. She has approached and introduced herself to many of the tenants. Her priority is the tenants.

In response to Councilor Rix, Housing Administrator Smith stated that she last visited Independence Village Elderly Housing today, Wednesday, June 9, and last visited Freedom Village Elderly Housing yesterday, Tuesday, June 8.

In response to Councilor Caron, Housing Administrator Smith stated that she currently works 20 hours/week. Housing Authority Chairperson/Acting Director DiGioia-Evrett added that the previous Director worked full-time and later worked part-time. The hours are expected to be increased to 35 hours/week at the end of June. It was confirmed that the previous Director resigned from the position in July 2019. The long

time-lapse was due to the time needed to clean the office and organize the paperwork. The Housing Authority did not hold any meetings in 2020.

Hiring Process (Vice-Chairman Caron): Housing Authority Chairperson and Acting Director DiGioia-Evrett stated that the job was posted prior to the pandemic and very few responses were received for the position and none of the candidates were qualified.

Handling of Complaints/Issues (Chairman May): In response to Chairman May who reported that he has received approximately 30 complaints from individuals who stated that they have been unable to speak with anyone whom they trust at the Housing Authority. As the result, they voiced their complaints to the Senior & Social Services Department, the Mayor, State Representatives, and Town Councilors.

In response to Councilor Jaskiewicz, Housing Authority Chairperson/Acting Director DiGioia-Evrett reiterated that she was not aware of the complaints. Councilor Jaskiewicz questioned the complaint process and did not understand their lack of awareness.

Grievances (Chairman May): Tenants may file grievances with the Housing Authority.

Mayor McDaniel reported:

- (1) that he received numerous letters and telephone calls – all of which were made anonymously due to feeling “deathly fearful of reprisal” by either or both the Housing Authority Chairperson/Acting Director DiGioia-Evrett and/or Housing Authority Vice-Chairman/Tenant Brower.
- (2) on the lack of any Housing Authority meetings being held during the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the public could voice their concerns, was inexcusable. He cited that all of the town’s boards and commissions were able to hold their regularly scheduled meetings either electronically, by telephone, or otherwise.
- (3) that both the Housing Authority Chairperson/Acting Director DiGioia-Evrett and Housing Authority Vice-Chairman/Tenant Brower informed him of their plans to hire a Director and stated that, when hired, he would be informed and introduced to the new Director. This never took place and he was surprised to learn this evening that an individual was hired in February.

In response, Housing Authority Chairperson/ Acting Director DiGioia-Evrett stated that an e-mail response was sent to him regarding the hiring of the new Administrator.

- (4) that no PiLOT (Payment in Lieu of Taxes) has not been received by the town for the past two years. As such, he questioned how the Housing Authority is continuing to operate without having made any payments. The town is expected and will continue to provide services to the Housing Authority, but the requisite payments must be received, per their agreement.
- (5) that he also received a telephone call from a prospective tenant whose telephone calls have been left answered and, as such, has been left with feelings of ill-treatment. The individual has submitted a letter for the record.

The aforementioned issues reflect the reasoning behind this evening’s joint meeting. The town also took the additional step to support the Housing Authority by approving funding for an additional 10 hours/week to provide outreach to the town’s elderly/ disabled community. He further noted that there are only two members of the Authority present at the meeting, reflecting its low priority. He was also taken aback by their wish to hold the joint meeting in private.

DeeAnn Morton, Social Services Assistant/Outreach, expressed her wish to build a partnership with Housing Administrator Smith and getting to know her and her background

and experience. She questioned where the position was posted as they were unable to find the posting over the course of several months, citing their knowledge of several individuals who were interested in applying for the position. She provided a brief history of their knowledge of the issues which came to their attention over one year ago, following the departure of the Director. Due to the lack of attention the tenants were receiving, the town agreed to extend Social Services Assistant Morton's hours to provide outreach to the disabled/elderly community. The Housing Authority has stated their intentions to run the Authority as a business providing, not elderly housing, but affordable housing. To this end, their funds have grown from \$35,000.00 in July 2019 to over \$200,000.00. She enumerated the numerous complaints they have received, including the rude and condescending demeanor of the Acting Director, the Tenant Commissioner's bullying of tenants and inappropriate access to the tenants' personal records, and constant fears of eviction. The complaints they have received and their subsequent conversations with the Housing Authority have led the Department to believe that the Authority has not been working with the tenants' best interest at heart. She requested that the town incorporate some type of accountability with the Commission to ensure that the tenants' needs are met and their sense of safety and security re-established. The Housing Authority, she felt, should be working in tandem with the Social & Senior Services Department. A packet of written documentation, which includes letters of complaint, correspondence, Housing Authority documents, Resident Association By-Laws, Tenant's Handbook of Rules & Regulations, and the like, was distributed to the Councilors.

Complaint Process (Councilor Jaskiewicz): Social Services Assistant/Outreach Morton stated that the tenants have not been provided with the opportunity to voice their concerns to the Housing Authority. A previously available Complaint Form has not been utilized for approximately two years. In addition, tenant groups that were previously formed have been disbanded. The existing fear, ongoing pandemic, and lack of a Director/ Administrator were cited as reasons for the tenants' inability to express their concerns.

Washers & Dryers: Chairman May questioned the adequacy of providing only two washers and two dryers on each of the premises to accommodate the laundering needs of the 40+ tenants of each complex.

6. Remarks from the Public with a three-minute limit

In reference to the extension of Social Services Assistant Morton's hours to provide outreach, Chairman May stated that the town is specifically offering its services to a select community of residents, which they do not take lightly. He requested that the tenants center their concerns around the facts and keep their comments brief, concise, and absent of any threats or derogatory remarks. The purpose of the meeting is to listen to both the tenants and the Housing Authority for the edification of the Town Council whose goal is to resolve the issue(s) and move forward in a positive manner.

Robert Burke, Independence Village, 41 Milefski Drive, Unit 35, thanked the Town Council for their time and commended the Housing Authority for eliminating the previous issues involving drugs and prostitution on the property. Regardless, he has experienced and witnessed many issues with the members of the Housing Authority, including the receipt of threats, tampering in his apartment, and the tenants' overall fear of the members.

Maxine Yuckniuk, former tenant of Independence Village, 41 Milefski Drive, Unit 37, stated the incidents she experienced as a tenant included feces in the washer and dryer, lock changes with only one key provided, stealing, disrespectful treatment, irrelevant personal questions that were required responses on a reassessment questionnaire, etc.

Claudia O'Connor, a seven-year tenant of Independence Village, 41 Milefski Drive, Unit 28, commended the previous Director, upon whose departure led to all of the issues they

are currently experiencing. She was not aware that a new Housing Authority Administrator had been hired. While never personally having had any negative experiences with the members of the Housing Authority, she felt that it was unnecessary for people to be living in fear. The tenants are seeking to live a life of peace, joy, and comfort. Because the complex is over 40 years of age, the units are in dire need of updating. She cited that the cabinets are deteriorating and there is mold on and in the building, which has been an ongoing problem, especially for those who experience breathing issues.

Carol Evans, 12-year tenant of Independence Village, 41 Milefski Drive, Unit 25, who suffers from COPD, relayed her negative experiences with the Housing Authority and reiterated Ms. O'Connor's comment regarding their wish for peace and quiet.

Tierney Tully, Freedom Village, 81 Liberty Road, Unit 68, thanked the Town Council for organizing the meeting. She reflected on her negative experiences with the Housing Authority with respect to her request for an emotional support dog, which led to three threats of eviction. *Ms. Tully was unable to continue as her three-minute time limit expired.*

Christina Dimick, Freedom Village, 81 Liberty Road, Unit 60, thanked the Town Council for holding the meeting and reported on a telephone call she received from an anonymous member regarding the withholding of her rent checks in an attempt to claim that the checks were not received, thereby providing them with the grounds to issue an eviction notice. She provided the Town Council with copies of the checks and bank statements.

Patricia Bridge, a 15-year tenant of Freedom Village, Montville resident since 1973, and wife of Vice-Chairman/Tenant Brower, stated that her mother also resided at Freedom Village for 12 years prior to her tenancy at the complex. She expressed her dismay with the comments and complaints that have been made by the tenants and the statements that were published in the local paper – all of which are mistruths. She felt that Housing Authority Vice-Chairman/Tenant Brower is a professional individual who is very good with people. The difficulties the Housing Authority encountered during their job search were due to the unique nature of the position, which requires a “thick-skin”. She is ashamed of her fellow beings and is disappointed with the character assassination of one who has encountered tough challenges and has expressed great empathy to the tenants.

Eileen Rose, whose grandmother and mother resided in both of the complexes, has been a personal friend of Housing Authority Vice-Chairman/Tenant Brower, who she described as a most generous and kind person. She stated her disgust with the article that was published in *The Day* newspaper, adding that the article was filled with mistruths.

Tierney Tully, Freedom Village, 81 Liberty Road, Unit 68, stated her disappointment with the allowance for the members of the Housing Authority to speak ad nauseum while the public's, i.e., tenants, comments are limited to three-minutes. She continued to speak of her experience as she sought to maintain her ownership of her emotional support dog, resulting in a series of threats of eviction. With the Housing Authority as the “gatekeeper” and a Mayor with no jurisdiction over the Housing Authority, she was left without recourse. *Ms. Tully was unable to continue as her three-minute time limit expired.*

DeeAnn Morton, Social Services Assistant/Outreach, stated that Social & Senior Services Director Peck and herself are present due to the numerous complaints they have been receiving from the tenants of the complexes. They are advocating for those tenants and would like to ensure that the issues are resolved.

7. Remarks from the Members of the Housing Authority

Housing Authority Vice-Chairman/Tenant Brower agreed that some of the issues that have been stated need to be remedied and became increasingly evident six months prior to the previous Director's departure. The cleaning of the buildings and rebuilding of the pumphouse are in process. The water issues are under the guise of the Department of

Public Health. They are unable to remedy some of the issues due to a lack of funding. He stated that he is serving the tenants as a volunteer and is doing his best to improve their living conditions. He stated that he is a good person and does his best to help his neighbors. He also clarified that the Housing Authority did not purchase a new truck for the individual who takes care of the maintenance of their complexes.

Housing Authority Chairperson/Acting Director DiGioia-Evrett stated that very little of the statements that were made this evening and at the May Town Council meeting were truthful, including the distribution of items, which were outlined by a grant they received, during the pandemic and the holding of checks.

Chairman May urged them to review the tenants' grievances that were provided this evening.

8. Remarks from the Councilors and the Mayor

Councilor Pollard, who has worked with the elderly for several years, expressed her understanding, disappointment, and dismay with the information that was provided this evening. She invited the tenants to contact and speak with her regarding their grievances. The issues will need to be further investigated.

Councilor Rix thanked everyone for attending the meeting and stated that there is no judgment being formed as the Town Council wishes to listen to all of the parties involved. They have received an abundance of information that will need to be processed.

Councilor Bunnell clarified that Ms. Smith's title is the Housing Authority *Administrator*, whose role it is to run the day-to-day operations of the complexes; he expressed his concern that many individuals were not aware of her existence. He felt that the process should be corrected and avenues should be in place allowing the tenants to submit their grievances to an individual who is not a member of the Housing Authority. He is hopeful that they will be able to resolve their issues. He expressed his appreciation to Senior & Social Services Director Peck and Outreach/Social Services Assistant Morton for attending the meeting and providing the information. He also thanked all of the individuals who spoke this evening and reiterated his confidence that the issues would be resolved.

Councilor Jaskiewicz agreed with Councilor Rix, stating that an abundance of information was provided by both the Housing Authority and the tenants that need to be absorbed. He felt that the bulk of the issues appeared to stem from either a miscommunication or lack of communication.

Mayor McDaniel agreed with the Councilors, adding that the purpose of the meeting was to discuss the policies and procedures of the Housing Authority, determine its shortcomings so that they can devise a way in which to address and resolve those issues; it was not a hearing during which the residents may air their grievances. He apologized to Housing Authority Chairman Evrett, stating that he did receive her e-mail response in April regarding the hiring of the Administrator which he discovered in his SPAM folder. He commended Chairman May for his handling of this evening's meeting.

Councilor Caron agreed with his colleagues, adding that the Councilors do not take their comments lightly. He is looking forward to meeting with the Housing Authority Administrator to discuss the issues. He stated that the Town Council's job is to listen to all sides, obtain and review the facts, and determine the best way to move forward. Any additional documentation may be submitted to the Councilors. He thanked everyone for attending the meeting this evening.

DeeAnn Morton, Social Services Assistant/Outreach, stated that former Housing Authority Member Sierra Davis has arrived and would like to speak. Unfortunately, because the

public comment portion of the meeting has passed, she was unable to speak, but was invited to provide her comments in writing.

Chairman May stated that, following the last Town Council meeting, they were left feeling both sad and mad with the issues that had come to their attention; their goal for this evening's meeting was to acquire additional information. The overarching issue appears to be a breakdown of communication – the lack of voices being heard, concerns not being addressed, and policies that do not mesh with the community they represent. The Town Council does not have any jurisdiction over the Housing Authority, but due to the magnitude of the issues, were forced to take action. He implored the Housing Authority to review their policies, how they address complaints and concerns, and find a way to maintain the peace and harmony the community strives for. The role of the Housing Authority is to properly maintain the property and support its residents. He thanked everyone for attending and listening to the meeting and stated his hopes that the Housing Authority will take action to resolve the issues.

9. Adjournment

Motion made by Councilor Jaskiewicz, seconded by Councilor Rix, to adjourn the meeting at 7:47 p.m. Discussion: None. Voice vote, 6-0, all in favor. Meeting adjourned.

AN AUDIO RECORD OF THE MEETING CAN BE FOUND ON THE TOWN'S WEBSITE LOCATED UNDER RESOURCES – MEETING RECORDINGS