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White Township will allow some of the public into its meetings

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White Township will expand attendance to its meetings in line with new state guidelines effective next month, but that won't mean a whole lot more seating, to meet Centers for Disease Control social distancing guidelines.

The township can take such action after April 4 under relaxed state guidelines recently announced by Gov. Tom Wolf.

Township Manager Milt Lady said that will mean 17 people can gather in the conference room for the board of supervisors meetings — the five board members, five township staffers, two news media representatives and five from the public.

There were 13 in attendance Wednesday night, including the two news media representatives.

Supervisor Sandi Gillette moved and Supervisor Rich Gallo seconded a motion to advertise on the township website that, if someone wants to speak at the meeting, they will have to register. And it will be first come, first served.

"I would hate to turn away people," Gallo said.

Meetings likely still will be available on a GoToMeeting link, but that was not the case Wednesday night. Assistant Township Manager Chris Anderson tried without success during the first 20 minutes of the meeting to dial up the conference call.

Solicitor Ryan Fritz of Delaney & Fritz P.C. said the meeting was a legal one despite the lack of an internet link.

"We're not keeping anyone out," Fritz said. "This is a technological issue."

Friends of White's Woods spokeswoman Pat Heilman took a different tact.

In an email sent after the meeting, she provided a link to an Oct. 8, 2020, Legal Intelligencer article about “a civil dispute that raises novel issues involving the application of the Sunshine Act to virtual public meetings during a pandemic.”

The legal publication said a Lackawanna County Court of Common Pleas judge ruled in favor of a furloughed Scranton School District employee. The publication said she was able to prove that the virtual meeting where her job and health insurance were terminated was conducted in violation of the Sunshine Act.

“There were quite a few items on the agenda that we were interested in hearing,” Heilman wrote, “including Judy Holliday speaking about more transparency and the correspondence on White’s Woods.”

The agenda acknowledged “public correspondence to supervisors concerning White’s Woods.”

Holiday was one of two people who had signed up to speak about agenda items.

While she was unable to do so because of the lack of an electronic link, resident David Smith was in the meeting room.

He said he was disappointed that the board keeps the meetings on the second Wednesday of each month at 1 p.m. “because it shuts out people who are working.”

The board also meets on the fourth Wednesday of the month at 7:30 p.m.

Smith said he hoped there could be more public involvement in township meetings, such as those of the White Township Planning Commission.

In other business Wednesday, the Clymer American Legion asked the supervisors to dedicate the bridge over Route 286 on Route 119 be dedicated to the late Timothy Rice “for injuries and medals received for service in Vietnam.”

The supervisors were not sure if such a move would require approval of the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, as Route 119 is a state-maintained highway, but Supervisor Eugene Gemmell moved and Gallo seconded the motion to have Lady write a letter of support for the dedication.

Rice, 71, died at his home in Commodore on Nov. 24.

The Clymer American Legion detailed a list of medals and citations Rice received, including the Purple Heart and an Army commendation.

At the request of Pennsylvania One Call, the board also approved a resolution recognizing April as “Pennsylvania 811 Safe Digging Month.” Gemmell made the motion and Supervisor Gail McCauley seconded it.

Anderson reported that 10 residential and 11 commercial building permits were issued in line with the Uniform Construction Code.

In all, the township issued 29 permits including those not covered by UCC, as well as up to 14 applications to allow demolition of properties.

The board mulled over a buyout of the cellular tower lease in the White Township Recreation Complex, but chose not to act on that idea.

Gallo moved and Gemmell seconded the motion for a two-year extension of current vision benefits for township employees. Lady said there would be no increase in premiums.

Lady said the annual Indiana County Association of Township Officials will take place May 13 at the Rustic Lodge.

And the meeting ended with an executive session to consider a real estate matter.

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