



UNIVERSITY
HEIGHTS

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March 14, 2022

Signing Statement to Ordinance 2022-15, An Ordinance Authorizing Permanent Appropriations for Current and Other Expenditures of the City of University Heights, Ohio for the Period Commencing January 1, 2022 and Ending December 31, 2022.

On January 11, 2022, I issued my report to community in support of the Administration's "Putting People First" budget. As the community will recall, given the pending election of at least three new people to City government in 2021, I waited until after the first of the year to propose the 2022 budget. By state law, permanent appropriations are to be in place by March 31, 2022.

After amendments by the City Council Finance Committee, the budget passed the full council by a vote of 6-1 on March 7, 2022, and is before me for signature. Today, I sign this budget into law. While there are good things that are positioned to happen this year with this budget, I have reservations over the cuts made by the Council Finance Committee. Accordingly, I am making this Signing Statement for the record.

First, the good.

The Cedar Road project is funded. While the projected cost rose 25% after the budget proposal in January, City Council agreed with the Administration's recommendation to place full funding in escrow even as the Administration seeks additional funding through NOACA. In doing this, the Administration is also seeking additional outside funding for the manhole separation project.

The rest of the 2022 roads program as proposed by Administration has been approved with this budget. The second half of Glendon Road, White Road, and Bushnell Road from Edgerton to Warrensville Center Road, will all be resurfaced in 2022. The appropriation contemplates full curb replacement on these streets, consistent with new Administration policy.

There are appropriations for improvements at Purvis Park (pool painting and pool deck furniture replacement), and at The Walt (restroom upgrade).

There are appropriations for the Priority One Sign Program, which has been sidelined since 2019. With this program, new signs with the city branding we created in 2018 will adorn our city gateways, and the plastic signs at Walter Stinson Community Park will be replaced with permanent signage.

A second transfer of \$100,000 to the municipal facilities fund will now occur. The Administration is exploring means of financing the construction of new facilities without raising taxes, as Warrensville and Brooklyn recently accomplished. We have a unique opportunity to improve service and community engagement for generations to come.

There will be new turnout gear for the Fire Department. Continued funding of the voluntary Home Safety Inspection program is preserved.

Completing the police radio system is underway. There will be two new police cars, to replace two police vehicles in our aging fleet. This incremental progress is consistent with Administration's ask for 2022, and we will seek further fleet replacements in 2023 as we catch up on the replacement schedule.

As the Housing and Community Development Department enters year three of the reformed Exterior Maintenance Program, funding is restored for the Exterior Maintenance Program, established in 2019, providing 90-10 grants up to \$2,500 to qualified homeowners to resolve an exterior violation.

The Service Department has capital appropriations for a new garbage truck (the second in a series of five needed over five years), a one ton pickup truck with plow, and a new mower, all to replace equipment in poor condition that are due or past due for replacement.

While the line item was reduced in light of the remaining time in the calendar year, Council has committed to Administration recommendations to formalize a regular IT provider to the City. Same also with a contract for HR services. Funding to replace our 1990s era phone system is in place. Funding to improve our website is appropriated, and we will continue to increase functionality of the website for arranging for services, as we did when we moved ordering Special Pickups online.

Funding to hold our first Memorial Day Parade on Memorial Day since 2019, the new Juneteenth celebration, the Summer Concert series, the third annual Fall Fest, are all in the budget. These are high profile celebrations that elevate our community, and help make University Heights a great place to live, work, play, and raise a family.

Now for the rest.

I begin by reminding the community that this City carried over from 2021 \$9.8 million across all funds, and over \$5 million in the general fund alone. That is your tax money, collected from you to provide you services and infrastructure. In 2019, my administration proposed and council approved a reserve policy consisting of 15% of the previous year's tax receipts to be kept as a reserve. For 2022, that would be \$2.3 million kept as a prudent minimum reserve.

The Putting People First budget kept that reserve and more. To be clear, all of Administration's proposed expenditures were within our means. No cuts were necessary. Which is to say that cuts made by the City Council Finance Committee were a deliberate choice to do less, and not made out of necessity.

The first and most obvious cut was to eliminate the recycling modernization program. In 2021, our recycling rate dropped to just 4% of all solid waste collected in the City. This is directly attributable to the antiquated method of pickup using blue bags for recyclables and requiring the cardboard be flattened and tied – which is no guarantee that it will be recycled given the equipment the City provides its Service staff.

The flurry of activity to create the appearance of action on the subject is no substitute for actually implementing procedures consistent with the solid waste study commissioned in 2019 and finalized May 2020. Meanwhile, our current recycling contract ends this October, and without new containers for the collection of loose recyclables, our City will not be ready for a new contract that pays us for our recyclables instead of paying to process blue bagged recycling. It would appear some on council are embracing the idea of ending recycling pickup. Richmond Heights did this in 2019, and their recycling rate plummeted to 1% in 2020.

The response from the residents on Administration's proposal to modernize recycling was overwhelmingly favorable. And as word has gotten out that the containers have been cut

by the Council Finance Committee, the response has been overwhelmingly one of disappointment. I urge you to continue letting your council members know.

I ran on sustainability, including improving our solid waste pickup and recycling numbers. I have been working at this since we commissioned the study in 2019. The people want us to do this work. I will not let this issue go away until next year.

The next cut I address is the Finance Committee's elimination of the Senior Services Coordinator position. The position was vacated with the onset of the pandemic. As I reported in January, "we owe it to our seniors to do what we can with what we've got, even with the challenges of COVID variants and our own limited facilities." At this time, the City offers no programming or other special services to our senior citizens, except for subsidizing rides provided by Senior Transportation Connection. The restoration of the position would have been a small step in the right direction.

I have called upon Council's Community Outreach Committee to take up this matter. Administration also will set a date for a town hall on senior issues, and make more and further proposals for serving the 11% of our population that has been historically underserved by the City. I recently took a call from a 95 year old resident who built her home here over sixty years ago who said she can't wait another year. That she needs socialization now. That she needs services now. She's right. This is another matter that cannot wait until next year for action.

As I previously reported to council in my mayor's report of February 22, 2022, the elimination of the City Planner position endangers the viability of the Comprehensive Zoning Code update project. A Planner on staff would be the day-to-day contact with our zoning code consultants, and would grow into the most knowledgeable authority at the City on the new zoning code. The Council Finance Committee preserved the funding for the consultants, but eliminated the position of the city employee who would work with the consultants.

The last attempt at a comprehensive zoning code update was abandoned in 2014. I don't want to see the City fail at this a second time. We should be taking steps to ensure the success of the project, not creating obstacles to overcome. I will not embark on the project if I do not believe it will be successful. Administration will be evaluating this over the next few weeks.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not again raise the staff shortage in the Service Department. As I reported in January, and again at the State of the City, we must finally address and fill the need to hire two additional service department employees. At times in 2021, we had no more than one driver and one temp on a rake doing leaf pickup, while everyone else was assigned to solid waste pickup. That isn't sustainable and cannot continue.

The previous City Council declared as recently as November 15, 2021, that "[t]he City of University Heights shall maintain backyard solid waste collection for its residents." In order to do that, we added two new full time laborers to the budget. These hires are essential to ensuring the timely collection of rubbish, the ongoing improved plowing of streets, and keeping leaf pickup on schedule.

The Council Finance Committee cut these two service employee positions, while doing nothing to lighten the workload of the department. This will be the subject of ongoing discussion and evaluation by Administration.

These are not all the cuts, but they are the most significant cuts worthy of note.

These budget cuts were passed by the City Council Finance Committee by a 3-0 vote with no discussion after their announcement, the three votes being Vice Mayor Michele Weiss, Councilperson Justin Gould, Councilmember Barbara Blankfeld. Notably, these same three voted as a block on September 21, 2020 in opposition to continuing the residential recycling pickup program in the City at that time. On the Finance Committee, Councilmember Blankfeld serves as an alternate, and voted in the absence of Councilmember John Rach.

Councilmember Rach, in a written statement read at the February 10, 2022 Finance Committee meeting, expressed his support of the cuts that were being announced that evening. Telling about that statement, is that in order to express his support of the cuts in a statement prepared in advance of the public meeting, the cuts had to have been discussed and circulated by Finance Committee members in advance of the public meeting where the budget was to be discussed. As a matter of governmental transparency, I continue to be troubled by the Finance Committee's continuing practice of making decisions regarding the public's business in advance of meetings, instead of

raising, discussing, and deliberating on them publically at meetings as required under Ohio's Sunshine Law. Public bodies are to do the public's business in public, and not behind closed doors and then announced to the public.

At the joint Finance Committee and Finance Advisory Committee meeting of February 10, one of the citizen advisory committee members questioned why they were even there, that these items apparently were already decided by the Council Finance Committee members, when do they as advisory committee members get to provide input? Another finance advisory committee member urged him to run for city council if he wants to have a say. My regrets to the advisory committee members whose input was neither heeded nor relevant to the process as done by the City Council Finance Committee.

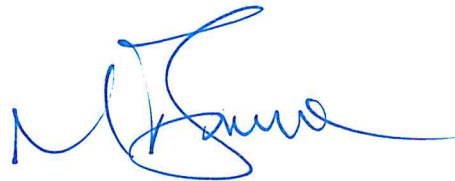
I call upon our City Council leadership again to follow the Sunshine Law and bring these discussions out into the public where they belong. As Justice Louis Brandeis once wrote, "Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants; electric light the most efficient policeman." When Brandeis wrote those words in 1914, who could have dreamed of the electric light of modern media and social media? The words and the underlying principle remain evergreen. Because of this, I share this statement accordingly, and not merely attach it to the legislation for the record.

Finally, while this has not been the general practice, I am hopeful that the Council Finance committee will reconsider and restore to the budget this year items it has cut. While state law requires permanent appropriations in place by March 31, there is no restriction on revision and restoration of programs our community supports. I call on the Council Finance Committee to reconvene, reconsider, and restore, and join me in Putting People First. For sustainability. For our seniors. And for the future.

For all the forgoing reasons, I hereby sign Ordinance 2022-15 and append the within signing statement thereon.

March 14, 2022

Date



Mayor Michael Dylan Brennan