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City Passes Budget with 8.1% Tax Increase



Budget Funds Sidewalk Repair



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HEADLINES

THINK POSITIVE. BE POSITIVE.



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CITY PASSES BUDGET WITH 8.1% TAX INCREASE

BY TERRY ROGERS

At their regular meeting, Milford City Council approved the 2025 operating budget totaling \$60,592,347 which included capital expenses approved in the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) also adopted that evening. Before voting on the CIP, Councilman Jason James reminded those in attendance that the CIP covered wish list items over the next five years, but only those designated for 2025 were included in the current budget.

“The budget provides the citizens of Milford with information regarding the operations of city government and details how public funds will be utilized throughout the community,” Mark Whitfield, city manager, said. “As agreed upon by council with the adoption of the FY2022 budget, a \$0.01 real estate assessment tax is included in the budget and the use of Realty Transfer Tax (RTT) for operating expenses will be reduced by \$100,000.”

In addition to the planned increase due to the reduction in use of RTT funds, the bonds for the police station will come due adding \$0.59 per \$100 of assessed value, increasing property taxes by 8.1 percent. During three nights of budget hearings, council asked many questions about the expenses included in the budget proposal. Councilwoman Madula Kalesis asked about the City Hall Plaza upgrades included in the budget.

“It is basically an overhaul at the front of City Hall. It includes brick pavers in the front relocating the flagpoles,” Brad Dennehy, director of Parks and Recreation, said. “It’s making it a pedestrian friendly and also making it with removable bollards, so that you could have, it’s almost like an area where people or council members could have an announcement in some capacity, or any kind of city of announcement. So it’s brick paving, pedestrian friendly, and it’s removing the drive-



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way through there, but it would still have removable bollards, so you could still get a fire truck or emergency vehicle through there.”

Mayor Todd Culotta suggested that although this project would be very nice, it was not vital in a budget year where funds were tight. Councilwoman Nadia Zychal agreed that although this was a great amenity, it was not something she felt was a high priority. Whitfield explained that this project had been approved some time ago and that the city was very close to finishing the design phase. Councilwoman Kalesis pointed out that this was a \$150,000 project and there was also \$500,000 designated for acquisition of open space. Since this was a tight budget year, she wondered if one of those two projects could be eliminated.

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“That’s one of those projects that we call kind of like a grant or bust, informally, if there’s no grant funding for it, it’s not something that we’re financially capable of but a lot of times you’re seeking grant funding, the grantors want to see that you have a plan for the use of the funds, and that it’s been contemplated by city council, that it’s risen to the highest level of Council and approved, if not in terms of funding, but at least in terms of concept,” Lou Vitola, finance manager, said. “We were able to secure some other funding that way for the Sharp purchase, even after it happened. And the Sharp purchase was initially part of this \$2.5 million, or \$500,000 a year, kind of placeholder for land acquisition. Even if we cut all two and a half million out, we’re not saving, because the dollars aren’t programmed to come out anywhere. So it’s really one of those planning tools that that helps us align some some initiatives, if their opportunities arise, but otherwise, there’s no risk in leaving that in there.”

Another question for Dennehy was about fencing proposed in Memorial Park. Councilman Dan Marabello asked what fencing was necessary around the pickleball courts and playground.

“What we’re doing is adding a bottom rail to the pickleball court on the northern side of the fencing. What we’ve found is we have an adult league at the moment. I’ve had several complaints of the ball is rolling underneath the fence, so it’s a real minor thing, but we’re addressing the complaints on that and with the playground,” Dennehy said. “We’re adding some additional fencing on the front side of the playground. We’ve had

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some, I wouldn't say complaints, but concerns that there's a bit of a drop off on the front side. So, we're going to go ahead and put up a safety railing on the front of the new playground."

Mayor Culotta asked about possible lighting at the pickleball and basketball courts so people could stay on the courts longer. Dennehy stated he could look into it but was concerned that there may be pushback from residences near those courts. After discussing the Parks and Recreation budget, the city moved to the police budget. One expense included upgrades to body and vehicle cameras.

"So, with this, this is something that has passed legislation and is a requirement for all police officers to be wearing body-worn cameras that was signed into legislation by the governor," Police Chief Cecilia Ashe said. "So, what's good about this department is we were already ahead of a lot of departments in the fact that we have had body-worn cameras here in Milford since approximately 2013 or 2014. That's good and it's bad. One, a lot of funding came to police departments when that legislation came out that helped agencies pay for body-worn cameras. I've raised some concerns at the state level, and hopefully making some headway on this that it almost penalizes agencies that were proactive and progressive in thinking about body-worn cameras before others were required to so I'm hoping that once the state budget passes, that we'll be getting some type of grant funding around \$70,000 which hopefully will cover most of our first year out of FY 25 but again, that's

no guarantee with that being said, though, looking at this, this is a five year contract."

Chief Ashe explained that Captain David Wells had worked with the camera company and was able to negotiate the price down somewhat. Mayor Culotta recalled when Milford began using body cameras and that they were one of the first towns to do so. Another project from the police budget was a maintenance building that was put on hold when the new police station was constructed. Under Public Works, several parking lot upgrades were included in the budget.

Several non-profit organizations were included in the budget as well. Carlisle Fire Company will receive \$205,000 from the city, the same amount as 2024 but there is also an \$11,000 incentive fund to encourage residents to volunteer for the fire company using a tax incentive. The Milford Museum will receive \$40,000, the same as 2024 while the Milford Public Library and Downtown Milford Inc. (DMI will also receive the same as the year before, with the library receiving \$28,000 and DMI receiving \$50,000. Funds for community festivals were set at \$65,000.

The budget passed with a vote of six yes, one no and one absent. Councilman Marabello was the only no vote. The CIP also passed with a six yes votes with Councilman Marabello abstaining and Councilwoman Lori Connor absent.



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MOTIVE RELEASED FOR DOUBLE HOMICIDE

BY TERRY ROGERS

The motive in the double homicide of 31-year-old Mercedes Ortiz and her 3-year-old daughter, Aloni Truong, is documented in court paperwork. The two were allegedly killed by the father of the child,

Davis Truong, who was also injured. Court documents indicate that Truong shot the two victims and himself as part of a “planned” murder-suicide that did not go as planned. After the shootings, Truong is seen on a neighbor’s doorbell camera frantically trying to get help. He has blood on his head and body but does not appear to be severely injured.

According to the documents, Truong then walked to The Palace where two bystanders provided medical assistance. Police were called where they found Truong suffering from a gunshot wound to the head. Truong told police he was shot at a home on Pebblebrook Drive in Brookstone Trace. Police followed a blood trail leading from The Palace, which is in front of Brookstone Trace, into the development and up to the doorway leading to the residence Truong mentioned. Another resident opened the door for police where they found a significant amount of blood on the floor.

In what the other resident described as Truong’s bedroom, police found the woman and child, both deceased, as well as a loaded SCCY 9mm handgun. At the

hospital where Truong was taken with non-life threatening injuries, he told police he and Ortiz agreed to the murder-suicide. He stated that he killed them “out of love and not hate.”

Truong remains in jail under a \$2.2 million cash bond.

According to obituaries published by Evan W. Smith Funeral Home, Mercedes Antoinette Ashley Ortiz, born July 16, 1992, in Brooklyn, NY, was a “loving mother and daughter who will be missed by all. A full obituary will be published at a later date.” There is no mention of a service for her in the obituary. The obituary for Aloni Kieu Truong, born March 9, 2021, reads “our darling angel child, we know that we shall meet again.” Hers also states a full obituary will be published at a later date. Aloni’s visitation is scheduled for Friday, June 28, at 10 a.m. at Evan W. Smith Funeral Home, 518 South Bay Road in Dover with a funeral planned for 11 a.m. the same day. The funeral home offers options to send flowers, plant a tree or leave a tribute to both Ortiz and Truong through their [website](#).

At a recent City Council meeting, Police Chief Cecilia Ashe mentioned the tragedy.

“I did want to hit on just one thing in recognizing two groups. This week, we suffered a very heavy blow to this community with the tragedy of a homicide of two individuals. It’s very difficult for police officers to respond to those type of calls. But what was very rewarding in a sense of tragedy that hit this community, is how much this community stepped up for that family,” Chief Ashe

said. “From Paige’s Kindness Project, to getting that family the supplies that they would need to get by but also the Johnson family who provided beds for the entire family. So, working in many different cities throughout my 28 years, it brings me such joy to be here and see the level of compassion and hope that, even in a sense of tragedy that we experienced, the city steps up every single time. So just a personal thank you to those two organizations, as well as to the DFS workers and everybody that came to help in that tragic situation.”

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CULTURE



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SHIPYARD TASK FORCE REQUESTS \$2.6 MILLION FROM CITY

BY TERRY ROGERS

At a recent meeting, Dan Bond and Sher Valenzuela requested that the city of Milford purchase the Vinyard Shipyard property for \$2.6 million. Bond indicated that the task force had \$1.3 million in state funding to use toward the asking price of \$4 million. After providing background on the shipyard project, Bond explained how creating the Delaware Maritime Museum would benefit the city. The Vinyard Shipyard Task Force has been working to purchase the property since 2017.

“When the shipyard property is converted into a successful museum, it could eventually provide significant economic and social benefits to our community. We don’t have anything like this that puts Milford on the map. It’s a great city. It’s a wonderful city to live in. We have great medical facilities here now. We’re having a wonderful growth spurt. But we don’t have a unique at-

traction that can bring people here,” Bond said. “In order to make this happen, the city could turn the museum development and operations over to a self-financing nonprofit organization. This has always been a random sort of a hurdle for the cities whenever they buy these types of things. ‘How do we operate it?’ Well, I think you should separate the two. If you own the property, you can turn it over to a nonprofit organization. There are various ways that we could do this. That organization could be fully responsible for converting it into a museum and operating it and they would do that by getting grants from various organizations like the Longwood Foundation, the Crystal Foundation, from the state of Delaware from the federal government and so forth. They would provide their own financing. Also,

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the Loflands have offered to provide a grant in the amount of \$25,000 per year for the first five years on a matching basis to help cover the museum's operation and get it up and running."

Bond explained that \$800,000 of the funds held at the state would be withdrawn on June 30 if the city did not make a commitment. Councilwoman Madula Kalesis asked why the task force had waited until three weeks before losing the funds to come before council. Valenzuela stated that finding experts to create a good business plan was difficult for a project like this and that had taken time. According to state records, the \$800,000 grant from the Community Development Fund was awarded in 2021.

Bond explained that if the city did not move quickly to purchase land that would complete the Riverwalk, the Loflands could sell to a developer and the city would lose this valuable piece of history. He mentioned an offer by DNREC for grant funding for an easement. Councilwoman Nadia Zychal asked why the easement was not granted and Brad Dennehy, director of Parks and Recreation explained that since the city did not own the land, they were unable to use the grant funding. Councilman Dan Marabello asked if the state was willing to allow another month for the city to discuss the project further.

"When I met with the Rep. Charles Postles last week, and I believe he speaks on behalf of Dave Wilson as well, if he can hear of a level of interest and commitment from the city of Milford, his exact words were 'the city of Milford needs to own it.' And that is something that I think is very significant to the wiggle room that

we might have if the city of Milford can show its interest," Valenzuela said. "We already have the federal interest in this project. Sen. Tom Carper has been there. We already have the state's interest in this project, as represented by the funding that's already on the table. The city of Milford is the last piece that needs to fit into the equation. And that's really what our state and federal representatives are waiting to hear. And their direct quote from Charles (Postles) last week was he feels that the city, the state feels that the city needs to own its history. And that's what this is all about."

Councilman Jason James pointed out that although he was exuberant about the project, council did not have any money and that the funds they were discussing belonged to the taxpayers. He questioned what benefit this would bring to the citizens of Milford to which Bond replied the project had historical, recreational and economic value, using the St. Michael's Maritime Museum as an example.

"If you try to start a shipyard, the first five years is probably a startup, you're not going to be generating a lot of revenue. You need a lot of people coming and that takes time. The Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum began in the late 60s. So, they've had 50 years 60 years to get to a budget of a revenue of \$9 million and contributing twice as much as their revenue to the city," Bond said. "And there are economic studies, multiple that show that and they do an annual economic impact report now they're extremely successful over there. That's a museum of maritime history and all kinds of maritime related and it's also a center of activities, events

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and so forth, and St. Michael's on the water. Now, we're not as rich in this area as they are over there. I recognize that it's gonna take time to build up but there is no operating wood building shipyard comparable to the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum on the Delaware River."

Bond also pointed out that families who were staying in Milford for games at Delaware Turf were often looking for things to do between games. He felt that currently in Milford the only thing to do was to get something to eat. He felt that an attraction like the maritime museum would draw many people who wanted an activity for part of an afternoon. Councilman Marabello asked what federal funds the task force had identified, and Bond indicated they had searched for some but had yet to find any. Councilman Marabello asked about the Longwood Foundation.

"The Longwood Foundation, we ask them for help and purchasing. They said, 'Well, you're not at that stage yet. You need a good business plan,'" Bond said. "Okay. That's what we're working on. Still. You have in your packet a preliminary plan; we still have work to do on that. There's a lot of issues that need to be explored. We'll get you the final business plan, but we sort of run out of time."

Mayor Culotta stated that he felt this was a great project, but that it was not a good year to make such a large ask.

"It's a very tight budget year. We know that we know that. We have to make up a big shortfall this year. Everybody is taking a cut in one way or another," Mayor Culotta said. "So, this is a difficult discussion to have and

try to get something resolved tonight. What I propose and Mr. Rutt, you can tell me if this makes sense or not, that we make a motion to discuss this further." City Solicitor David Rutt stated a motion was not necessary and that it could simply be added to a future agenda.

"Okay, well, maybe a workshop for what we just said, there's a lot of stuff to hash out. And as for our interest possibly, or we're somewhat interested in. I don't know. We're not to decide anything tonight. It's on the agenda just as an update," Mayor Culotta said. "So, I'd say we continue the discussions. We don't have a yes or no answer to the state representatives. However, we're continuing the discussion. So that's a good. Now, the previous mayor, never really had the opportunity to have this discussion, because it just stopped before it got this far. So, what I wanted to do is give the council an opportunity to hear about it, get an update and then decide if we want to move forward. But I suggest we just we just move on and continue with discussion at a later date."

Councilman Marabello pointed out that time was of the essence.

"So, Mr. Mayor, what you're saying is that we will find time on our agenda in the very near future where we would be able to discuss this again. And keep in mind, time is of the essence, and we can discuss it in more depth and, and just thinking back I think your presentation and your update is very enlightening. And it has really helped me see it in a way of how it could be a benefit to the city of Milford in a great economic move for us. We're going to discuss money later. But I think I think it would be a great attraction for the city of Mil-

ford," Councilwoman Katrina Wilson said. "I was just sharing with Mr. James that I had two relatives that were ship makers and worked at the Milford shipyard, the Forman brothers, as well as a cousin who was a Coverdale. They all lived over in we used to call it South Milford so I'm really familiar with that area and I think that the whole climate of it has gotten a lot lighter and more doable, just for what you're saying today."

Councilwoman Wilson continued.

"As far as buying it. I think before it was like do this or not. And with that kind of pressure sitting right around I didn't want to go any further. But I feel that it's a little different at this time, this stage in the game," Councilwoman Wilson said. "So, I'm gonna pray that when you come back, that we've all had an opportunity to think about it and we've got our finance team here. They're able to look and try you know, see how creative we could be. And it might even be someone that's going to listen to this meeting tonight that might be able to contribute to it where it'd be even more stakeholders in the game."

Bond stated that in his conversations with Rep. Postles, the legislator was very clear that unless there was a commitment of \$2.6 million by June 30, the \$800,000 would be lost. Councilman James confirmed that in conversations he had with Rep. Postles, that was true, that the state was not willing to extend this any farther. Valenzuela stated that she had been told they had until midnight June 30. Solicitor Rutt stated that discussions regarding the purchase of land needed to be held in executive session.

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JUNETEENTH CELEBRATION PLANNED IN MILFORD

BY TERRY ROGERS

Councilwoman Katrina Wilson is leading the second annual Juneteenth celebration in Bicentennial Park on Wednesday, June 19, from 11 a.m. until 6 p.m. Councilwoman Wilson and Councilman Jason James helped spearhead the inaugural event in 2023.

“Come out and join us with laughter and music and everything for the children like bounce house and the food is free,” Councilwoman Wilson said. “We don’t want parents to stay home because of lack of funds. We want to make sure that every child gets to enjoy, run and have a good time. We just want everybody to be together so we can enjoy one another and learn some different things because it’s going to be a diverse group of speakers. So, we’ll definitely learn from each other being there.”

Last year’s guest speaker was Dr. Reba Hollingsworth, noted Delaware historian. The holiday, which was declared as a federal holiday in 2021 and a state holiday the same year, celebrates the day when news that the Civil War had ended reached Texas, and the announcement was made that all slaves had been freed. This occurred two years after the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. At the 2023 celebration, Dr. Hollingsworth provided details on the event.

“It wasn’t until June 19, 1865, when several union regiments of the United States Colored Troops, led by Gordon Granger, marched along with more than 2,000

Union Congressional soldiers, traveled to Galveston, TX, to take control of the state with the news that the war had ended, and that the 250,000 enslaved people were now free,” Dr. Hollingsworth said. “Major Granger said the people of Texas were informed that in accordance with a proclamation from the executive of the United States, all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between the former masters and the slaves, and the relationship heretofore existing between them both, becomes that between employer and hired labor.”

At last year’s celebration, Councilwoman Wilson told the crowd she was excited to participate in the event.

“This is a wonderful opportunity for us to celebrate our heritage, culture and each other,” Councilwoman Wilson, who was the first African American woman on City Council, said. “I have been on City Council for almost 30 years representing the people. At this time, I want to acknowledge those African Americans who served on City Council before me, William Penn Fountain, Douglas Gibson, Franklin Fountain and James Starling, Sr.”

Councilwoman Wilson hopes to fill Bicentennial Park with people in order to celebrate and lift each other up.

“That’s what it’s all about,” Councilwoman Wilson said. “Lift our brothers and sisters and all mankind up and the world is definitely a better place.”



BUSINESS



photo link: [Marcia Reed](#)



EDGE GRANT GOES TO G&R CAMPGROUND

BY TERRY ROGERS

The oldest black-owned campground in the United States, G&R Campground was announced recently as a recipient of the Encouraging Development, Growth and Expansion (EDGE) Grant. The grant provides funds to promising early-stage businesses to level the playing field against larger, more established competitors.

“Selected as one of over 100+ applicants in the small business entrepreneur competition, we pitched our business to a panel of expert judges and worked hard to secure a win!” Leonard and Yolanda Young, owners of the campground, said. “On May 23, we got the opportunity to share the legacy of G&R Campground with Gov. John Carney during the EDGE Grant reception. We were so happy to have retired G&R legend, Norman Dempster gracing us with his presence.”

Since purchasing the campground, the Youngs have used their own funds to keep it running, making many

improvements and working to attract a younger demographic to the historic campground. They have upgraded the general store, added solar panels, hammocks, a park, outdoor games and a garden so that visitor’s experiences are maximized. The Youngs plan to use the grant funding to renovate the activity hall which will promote their mission to enhance the experience while also promoting eco-conscious celebrations designed to support local businesses. Some of the renovation includes structural repair and upgrading, flooring and lighting enhancements, accessibility features, eco-friendly design, energy-efficient lighting, waste reduction initiatives, outdoor landscaping and technology upgrades that will include Wi-Fi.

Not particularly “outdoorsy,” Leonard is the founder of DelawareBlack.com and the National Black Guide.

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Yolanda is the founder of Business Babes and a federal procurement consulting firm Walker Young LLC. The Newark natives have four children and have always looked for ways to create generational wealth. After their 2019 marriage, they began investing in real estate, first buying two mobile home parks in Alabama, traveling back and forth as they developed the properties. After posting about that project on social media, the couple was advised that Norman Dempster, the owner of G&R Campground, was considering selling the property he purchased in 1997.

“Once we learned that, we were intrigued,” Yolanda said. “We took a drive to check it out and immediately began negotiating to purchase it. We did not know that Norman was looking for a black buyer in order to keep the history alive, so it really did work out.”

G&R Campground has a very rich and diverse history. The name stands for Gun and Rod, after the Gun and Rod Club for black veterans which was a black version of the rod and gun clubs that were often whites only. When the club opened in Houston, they reversed the name so that it would be clear it was a black establishment vs. a white private club. The club was on the site long before Dempster bought it in 1997, a purchase he actually made for his mother in order to turn it into a campground, Dempsey said in an interview with “Newz and Trends with Dave and Len,” a podcast co-hosted by Leonard.

“My mother was very religious, always going to church retreats,” Dempster said. “But the church retreats was only in Philadelphia, New Jersey and New York. Noth-

ing here in the state of Delaware. So, I said, as a young man, if I’m able, I’m gonna buy a piece of property to have a campground where my mother could have her church retreat in Delaware.”

Dempster faced many challenges, building the campground piece by piece. He was unable to get financing from banks, so he had to use his own money. Once he opened the campground, he faced even more difficulties as camping wasn’t popular with African Americans and because it was deemed a “black” location, whites wouldn’t reserve spots there. It was almost three years before the first white camper, a man from Milford, booked a spot at G&R Campground. The Youngs faced first-hand how black campers were sometimes discriminated against.

“We planned at trip to Hersheypark in 2019 and used one of the RV booking sites to book an RV,” Yolanda said in an interview with Technical.ly.com. “We had already paid in full and literally two days before our trip, I’m confirming everything with the woman—and again, we’re fully paid—she declined and refunded our money and I’m thinking ‘Wow, this is weird.’ I booked it under my husband’s name. My name is a little more “ethnic,” and so, you know, just interacting with her, it really felt like a slap in the face, like she didn’t want to rent her RV to us because they found out we were black.”

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CITY BUDGET CONTAINS FUNDS FOR SIDEWALK REPAIR

responsible for the maintenance and upkeep on their sidewalks.’ I felt because Milford city management operations let it go for so long and other councils and, no I’m not faulting anybody in the current setup that, you know, that was a big ask, and caught a lot of people off guard. And you know, and it wasn’t efficient.”

Mayor Culotta continued, stating that the city chose what sidewalks needed to be repaired.

“So you know, you come to my house and tell me I need to fix these two squares. And they’re one square apart between them. Now I’m cutting out those two squares and putting them in when if they just cut all three of them out, it would be a lot cheaper, more efficient. But we couldn’t make that decision because it was at the discretion of the homeowner who had to pay for it. And then we push this through, or we push this out for discussion. But we forgot to add at the end of the what the options were. Option one was to do it yourself. Option two was to let us do it and we’ll charge you. The third option was if you don’t do anything, we will do it and still charge you,” Mayor Culotta said. “And then the fourth option should have been if you feel this is a financial hardship and you can demonstrate need, council may make money available, but that isn’t our charter. So altogether, I think the individual is responsible for shoveling the sidewalk, but as far as maintaining

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BY TERRY ROGERS

During budget discussions at a recent meeting, Milford City Councilman Dan Marabello questioned a fund set aside for sidewalk repairs as he was under the impression property owners were still required to repair their sidewalks and had the option to pay over time. According to information provided by City Manager Mark Whitfield in the packet, the capital budget included funds for sidewalk replacement as well as reimbursement to homeowners who had previously paid for sidewalk replacement. He also indicated this would mean less capital funding for other projects.

“I think the council members speak but when this whole thing came out, it’s probably been four years now,” Mayor Todd Culotta said. “You know, the idea was to make Milford a more walkable city and fix sidewalks. And then we looked at our charter and said, ‘Well, you know, it’s actually in our charter it’s, which has always been the case that the homeowner is

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and taking care of sidewalks, keeping them safe, I think we can take that over as a city.”

Mayor Culotta felt that the residents of Milford were willing to give when necessary, and this was a way for them to give back.

“You know, we asked our taxpayers for our new police station and they gladly gave it to us. Every time we go to them with increases in rates, we know most people understand the thought process behind it,” Mayor Culotta said. “And I don’t think maintaining existing sidewalks in town are a big ask. But also remember when new developments are built or new houses, like infill houses, that builder is responsible for putting in a new sidewalk. So we’re not doing that. We’re just fixing the ones that we have in Milford and reimbursing the folks that have already paid for theirs.”

Councilman Marabello questioned how much this was going to cost the city, with concerns that it could get out of control.

“I think it’s my personal belief was that first of all, they went off the information they had on how much everybody spent fixing sidewalks that were pointed out to be fixed. Okay. And on the grand scheme of things, it was \$240,000 or something that wasn’t a lot,” Mayor Culotta said. “And also, I think it’s our duty as council people to beautify our city. And when we can do it this way. I like that. I think there’s an unfair advantage. Sometimes with some of the new developments they’re not even new anymore, but they don’t have sidewalks in them. We said we want a walkable city.”

Councilman Marabello stated that he knew some developments did not have sidewalks. “So they will be paying a disproportionate amount of money for everyone else’s. But I’m concerned about the insurance liability that will be taken on to be responsible for the sidewalks,” Councilman Marabello said. “I think when people own their home they take it as part of ownership and taking care of the property.”

Councilman Marabello felt more discussion was necessary and that a new policy had to be created. He had many questions and felt this could get out of hand in a budget year that was already tight. Mayor Culotta pointed out that if the city had spent \$50,000 on sidewalks every year for the past 10 years, they would not be having this conversation.

“I would like to say something. In regards to the condition of the sidewalk, this program was implemented four years ago. And anybody in Ward 2 that walks at all, I would say one out of three times that I go out in the neighborhood, I will stub a toe,” Councilwoman Nadia Zychal said. “Neighbors on my street have gone airborne from tripping. So, if you’re concerned about liability, I’m concerned about liability and injury right now with the condition of the sidewalks in a program that was implemented four years ago that clearly has not been working. It is a mess”

Councilwoman Madula Kalesis agreed with Councilwoman Zychal. “If I may, can make a comment to what Todd said, Mr. Mayor. The city comes out and makes this assessment of what is appropriate and what is not.

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from page 17

Now I've walked Nadia's street. If you're walking it, it's very dangerous. You could break a foot, you can't wear a high heel because God forbid you're gonna break something," Councilwoman Kalesis said. "But I also walk outside my street and was forced to fix my sidewalk. My sidewalk was fine. There was literally two feet from my sidewalk that was cracked and the rest of my sidewalks were fine. But the city said I have to fix all of this and you're gonna pay for it. I didn't have a problem. I paid for it. But you know when the city comes and tells you we're going to fix this whole street all the way down because we think that we have to fix it. I can afford it. I can't afford to pay it. But not everyone can."

Councilwoman Zychal felt that sidewalk repairs fell to the city. "At the end of the day, the city is responsible for the curb and that's a cost and that could be done at the same time as sidewalks and there would be an economy of scale and there would be efficiency in this way," Councilwoman Zychal said. "It wouldn't be a patchwork approach to try to play Whack a Mole with sidewalks waiting for people to choose one of three options and then seeing none of them done or it could be a economies of scale. It could all be done block by block. It could be done in an efficient and cost effective manner and be done."

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COUNCIL APPROVES 2022 AUDIT

BY TERRY ROGERS

After several delays, many due to a short-staffed finance office and technology challenges, Milford City Council approved the 2022 Audit Report submitted by Zelenkofske Axelrod (ZA). The city was found to be in good financial shape with no issues in their financial reporting.

“I’d like to thank Mark (Whitfield, Milford city manager) and all his help as well as Lou and his team as we have worked through the 2022 audit,” Kimberly Stank, CPA, CGMA, with ZA said. “We met with the audit committee previously tonight and they have a lot of the details, so we’ll just keep it brief. You have two things that were presented to you one was our letter to you. In this letter, it explains that you are the governance of the city. And so it goes through various aspects of things or were required to communicate to you and you can feel free to go through that. And we have the financial statements, and I will turn it over to Kayla just to do a quick high level overview.”

Kayla Demar, CPA, provided a quick overview of the city’s financial statements.

“So overall, we issued an unmodified opinion on your financial statements. That’s the highest level of opinion you can get a clean opinion with no modifications. If you look across most of your funds, you’ll see there was a positive change in fund balance. And all of your funds are carrying positive unassigned fund balance,” Demar said. “So that’s a healthy indicator of strong financials. In your single audit this year, your major program was the American Rescue Plan. And there were no findings or modifications in that uniform guidance opinion. There was one finding in your financial reporting opinion and that was just due to some timely closing and some adjustments that were required in the audit.”

Over the past year, Lou Vitola, city finance manager, has been open with council about delays in completing the 2022 audit. Repeatedly, Vitola stated that the finance

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office had been stretched incredibly thin and onboarding with a third party contractor in that office, while good, was “not great,” according to Vitola.

“There were some operating challenges that didn’t lend themselves to having it available,” Vitola told council in December. “The downer is that we are here right now. The good news is that some of the other things we learned from the process last year paves the way for a significantly stronger product.”

Vitola credited the auditors with helping him create better processes so that he could provide them with more details which they need to audit government financials. According to Vitola, a government audit is much different than the audit of a company or individual.

“We have billing operations that operate miscellaneous receivables that are generated in the internal service fund, the public works department when developments have been built, and we have to grant access to all these things,” Vitola said. “We also have little pockets the auditors are looking at that validate local city life. We looked at the pension multiple times because they compensated absences more than once, and many times, there was a philosophical disagreement between the product of backup.”

Processes have been put in place to have future audits completed in a timelier manner. In most cases, a delayed audit will cause no issues for a city, but it could have an impact on other DEMEC members should they need to apply for financing. The city is required under their agreement with DEMEC to provide an annual audit within six months of the end of the year. City Manager

Mark Whitfield indicated in December that DEMEC was a bit concerned about Milford not having a current audit, but that it was not the only municipality who was behind in submitting those documents.

“I’m glad it is done,” Councilman Dan Marabello said when Demar asked if there were any questions. “I am looking forward to seeing 2023’s.”

Council approved the 2022 audit with a vote of seven to zero as Councilwoman Lori Connor was not in attendance.




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Recommendations (Summary)

- Pedestrian paths (10-foot shared use path when possible; 5-foot sidewalk as alternative)
- Crosswalks at signalized intersections

REHOBOTH BOULEVARD CHANGES PROPOSED TO COUNCIL

BY TERRY ROGERS

At a recent meeting, Milford City Council heard a presentation from Dover/Kent County MPO, a planning organization that partners with municipalities and DelDOT with transportation infrastructure planning. Marilyn Smith, executive director, of the organization provided new council members with a brief explanation of what Dover/Kent County MPO's responsibilities were.

"The MPO does transportation planning in all of Kent County. We are federally mandated, but we are independent. Independent both from the federal government, and independent from DelDOT, and it often comes up well are you just an arm of DelDOT. We are not," Smith said. "The federal government designed MPOs to specifically be independent from transportation authority in the state. We work on transportation planning and policy. We're very concerned about transportation infrastructure planning. So basically, we're interested in how to get people from point A to point B, regardless of the mode that they're trying to utilize."

Smith explained that when they looked at transporta-

tion infrastructure, they did not solely look at roads.

"We think about people who walk, people who bike, people who may have limited mobility, people who rely on transit or don't have transportation. So, we are really concerned about the wholeness of the transportation system, the wholeness of a connected, efficient transportation system for everybody," Smith said. "If federal funds are going to be used for a transportation project in Kent County, chances are that project has to come through us in some way or another, whether it's a feasibility study, which you're going to see a little bit of tonight or some prioritization of recommendations."

Dover/Kent County MPO also uses a significant amount of public participation when making recommendations. They also have a long-range plan that is updated every four years but goes out to 25 years. The organization tries to make sure the transportation projects they recommend take into consideration growth, both economic development and population. At a meet-

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ing the week before, Smith listened as priorities like housing, education, economic development and other factors were discussed.

“I stood up and I said to the group, with all due respect, you can’t have any of those things if you don’t have a connected vibrant, efficient, effective transportation system. And that’s where we come in to be your partner to make sure that those happen in Milford,” Smith said. “The important takeaway for you here, right at this point is that that we’ve been working on this since January, so we’re about halfway through, and we’ve had the opportunity to meet with all the municipalities in the county. We’ve met with the county, we’ve met with state agencies, we’ve met with federal partners. We’ve also been doing a lot of public outreach, which means we’ve been out at supermarkets and festivals, anywhere that anyone would give us a table. And we’ve been asking people what their opinions are about transportation and what we need to do in the future.

After providing details on what Kent MPO’s responsibilities were, Smith turned the presentation over to Malcolm Jacob, a transportation planner with Kent MPO. Jacob explained that the Rehoboth Boulevard corridor was not the safest, despite a few schools and large businesses in the area.

“This is a priority for the city. And it’s something that we make sure everybody no matter how they’re getting around, walking, biking, driving, make sure it’s safe for them to do so,” Jacob said. “And as you’ll see in a moment, we split the ideas into chunks, bite-sized pieces so that way, if you like several of them, you can pursue

them at the city’s own pace. And these aren’t set in stone or anything, but these are based on our analysis and working with the community. These are the best ideas that we came up with.”

Looking at crash data, the majority of them happened at intersections, which is to be expected on most roadways, but there have been some bicycle and pedestrian involved accidents. Jacob explained that the intersection by Dairy Queen, near Milford High School, had not been studied previously despite being a very busy intersection.

“Something that we learned through speaking with staff from the school district is that it’s used heavily by students. They’re crossing the street to go to convenience stores, going to Dairy Queen, and also it’s used by the cross country team pretty regularly to get from one side to the other, but there’s no safe way to cross here,” Jacob said. “So that’s kind of a high priority for us. It’s a safety concern. And luckily, we don’t know of any specific incident that’s happened within that timeframe as far as students crossing and everything, but we want to make sure that’s resolved sooner than later.”

Dover/Kent County MPO held a public workshop in October 2023 where they began collecting information and a second in February 2024. They also had conversations with KSI, Perdue and I.G. Burton in addition to the school district.

“They’re important employers, especially Perdue in terms of numbers, and they were very eager to help us and tell us, ‘Well, our employees come in at this time they leave at that time. This is how they get here. This is

where they’d like to go.’ And that was very helpful and their input really shaped our recommendations,” Jacob said. “And like I said, I don’t need to go over those numbers. You’re familiar with the three main businesses along the corridor. Some of the things we’re recommending and one thing you’ll notice, we didn’t change a lot in the corridor as far as the road itself. I mean, the bus lane that’s basically directly in front of the Perdue property and that area is already there for a pull off. What isn’t there is a transit shelter for employees. They’re waiting out in the rain these days. They work regularly in the dark. We’re hoping to recommend simple shelters like that to make the wait more comfortable.”

Other recommendations included sidewalks, a shared use bicycle and pedestrian path marked driveway crossings, crosswalks at all signalized intersections, lighting upgrades, public transit bus stops and a pull-off for KSI buses who are turning into their parking lot. If DelDOT or the city were to implement all of the recommended changes, the cost for design was estimated at \$1.6 million with construction costs estimated to range from \$12.1 to \$24.4 million. The proposed changes will be presented to the Dover/Kent MPO Advisory Committee before being presented to the Technical Advisory Committee. No decision was required from City Council after the presentation.



EDUCATION



photo link: [Milford School District](#)

SCHOOL BOARD HEARS HOW KENT REASSESSMENT COULD IMPACT TAXES

BY JAREK RUTZ

At a recent meeting, Milford School District Board of Education heard from Dr. Sara Hale, chief financial officer, how the recently completed Kent County property reassessment could have an impact on school taxes in Milford. Prior to the reassessment, Kent County used property values determined in 1986. Sussex County is currently undergoing reassessment as they were using values determined in 1974.

“So this year we’re in a unique situation. We’ve talked about this at length in prior meetings where Kent County has completed the reassessment process. Sussex County has not so as I present this information to you this evening, please keep in mind that it is still preliminary,” Dr. Hale said. “We are still working with Kent County to receive final information, but wanted to give you an update as we prepare to approve the tax rates in July so just a reminder, our school tax rate is made up of

four separate components. There’s the current expense, tax rate, component debt service, match tax and tuition. And we’ll go through each one of those and kind of what they provide for the district.”

Dr. Hale explained the components of the school tax. The current expense tax is used to cover operating expenses, such as the local portion of teacher salaries, supplies and more. Typically, that tax rate can only be changed through referendum.

“So, the state does require every district to maintain a reserve to ensure that in the event of a fiscal downturn, we could make our local payroll obligations and support the district. But there is a structure in Delaware right now that supports a model where a district must go out and seek a plan or an increase that would leave them for many years with no additional increases to that funding,” Dr. Hale said. “So as an example, we

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increased our current operating rate in 2015. Here we are in 2024. We have not had an increase since, so you spent the first part of that kind of trajectory, creating that reserve that build up and then use the remainder of the downward side of that hill spending down that reserve until you're in deficit spending and ensure that you then go back out for an operating referendum.”

Debt service is also set by referendum. When the district needs a capital improvement, such as a new school or a significant remodel of an existing school, they are required to go out for referendum to seek approval from residents to sell bonds to finance the project. As the bonds are paid down, the debt service rate also goes down. Dr. Hale explained that there are some projects coming off the debt service, but new bonds will be issued for the Middle School project in the next few weeks which may increase the debt rate.

“Our match tax components are also set by the board of education based on recommendation. We have, only since 2005, collected the minor capital improvement match tax and that's so that we as a district can receive the state funding,” Dr. Hale said. “You have to be able to show that we've collected our portion in order to get that state funding. There are other match taxes that have been allowable that we have not chosen to exercise such as technology, reading and math specialists or interventionist in our state opportunity match.”

The final portion of the tax rate is tuition tax which covers the cost of special education services both inside and outside of the district. The district has monitored


these costs closely, adding more in-district programs in order to keep these costs as low as possible.

“So, for fiscal year 2025, as we're planning to look ahead and set our property tax rates, there are a couple of different considerations. The first is that our district has seen growth in the total property assessment or the total property value, which generates the revenue for our school district,” Dr. Hale said. “So, someone may have their own assessed value for their home. We collect revenue as a district based on the total property value for the entire district separate. There was also the completion of the reassessment process, as we discussed, our final bond sale which we were notified about today. And then just making sure that we're looking ahead at how to make sure that tax rates are stabilized going forward.”

Dr. Hale continued, explaining that the school tax process could be complicated. She stated that in each county, there was a separate tax assessment office and that, in 2020, both counties were ordered by the courts to conduct a full property reassessment as Kent County was using values that were 38 years old and Sussex was using values that were 50 years old. Kent County has completed their reassessment and Sussex is expected to complete theirs in 2025 for use in fiscal year 2026.

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BY JAREK RUTZ

The only summer camp in Delaware for individuals with Down syndrome and their siblings will give 90+ children the opportunity to enjoy camp experience in a safe, inclusive, and accessible environment.

The Down Syndrome Association of Delaware (DSADE) will host the 14th Annual Days of Summer Camp for individuals with Down syndrome and their siblings in three locations throughout the state—Milton in Sussex County, Magnolia in Kent County and Wilmington in New Castle County. Camp has given over 400 children the summer camp experience in a safe, inclusive, and developmentally appropriate environment, all for no cost to attendees!

DOWN SYNDROME ASSOCIATION OF DELAWARE TO HOST DAYS OF SUMMER CAMP

Individuals with Down syndrome ages 3-13, and their siblings ages 3-10, will be able to enjoy opportunities to splash in the water, build crafts, and play in the sun, just like any other child at camp. A certified nurse and teacher are always on-site, and young adults ages 15-25 serve as counselors. Volunteers are paired up with each camper to ensure camp is a safe, and fun, memory-making experience for all participants.

Special thanks to the many business and individual supporters who help to offset the soaring costs to attend summer camp allowing DSADE to continue offering, free of charge, this accessible summer camp experience for individuals with Down syndrome.

All camps are held 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. In New Castle County, the camps will be held July 29 through Aug. 2 at the Tatnall Upper School Gymnasium, 1501 Barley Mill Road, Wilmington. In Kent County, camps are July 15 through 19 at the David E. Robinson Elementary School, 1038 Briarbush Road, Magnolia. In Sussex County, camps are June 24 through 28 at the DSADE Milton Office, 28607 Meadowview Drive, Milton.

The goal of the camp is to allow children with Down syndrome the opportunity to have the experiences of summer camp while practicing independence, developing physical and emotional health, as well as increasing

their confidence levels. DSA of Delaware strives to maintain an atmosphere where children can build great peer relationships and have a fun experience at camp!

Down Syndrome Association of Delaware is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization whose mission is to support families, promote community involvement, and encourage a lifetime of opportunities for people with Down syndrome. Learn more at [dsadelaware.org](https://www.dsadelaware.org) or <https://www.facebook.com/dsadelaware>.

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HEALTH



photo link: Bayhealth

ELDER FRAUD ON THE RISE

BY TERRY ROGERS

Delaware Hospice recently reported that elder fraud is on the rise, not only in Delaware but across the country. One that is often perpetuated successfully against seniors is the multilayered “phantom hacker” or “tech support” scam. To date, \$542 million was transferred to fraudsters between January and June 2023. Two-thirds of those victimized were persons over age sixty-five! Here are three different types of fraud that are directed not only at seniors but others as well.

A call, email, or text is received “from tech support” at a company such as Microsoft, telling the victim their computer has been hacked. The scammer requests the victim download special computer-sharing software “to allow a virus scan.” In fact, this allows the hackers to see the victim’s financial information.

Another scam involves someone contacting the victim “from” their bank or brokerage firm, falsely confirming they have been hacked. The victim is told to transfer funds to a “protected third-party account.”

An older person may get a call “from” the IRS, Federal Reserve, or saying their money can be protected by transferring it to special foreign accounts set up for this very purpose. Methods include wire transfer, cash or cryptocurrency. Sometimes a letter is sent by mail on official-looking letterhead. Sadly, this step drains the victim’s accounts.

If you have an elderly family member, there are some tips you can follow to protect them. First, tell them not to respond to calls, emails, or texts advising “you’ve been hacked.” Do not take any steps suggested. If they



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do receive a message alerting them to problems, do not use any phone number or link that’s provided. Use another device to get the phone number of the company in question, and call directly.

Remind them to never let a person unknown to them download computer-sharing software. It is important to note that credible institutions do not ask you to transfer money by cash, gift card, or cryptocurrency nor do they call asking for passwords or user names.

If your loved one is at all suspicious, they should hang up immediately and contact a trusted friend or family member. You can contact the FBI at www.ic3.gov to investigate whether this is a fraud call or not.

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JOHN MOLLURA

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SPORTS



photo credit: Milford Parks and Recreation Department



BY TERRY ROGERS

KSI's 3rd Annual Paths to PossAbilities 5K Run/ Walk was held at Mispillion River Brewing Company on June 8. Organized by Nic DeCaire's team with Fusion Racing, the day started with a refreshing breeze, a beautiful blue sky, and close to 80 race entrants.

Paths to PossAbilities was made possible by many sponsors. Gold sponsors were: Daily State News, Del-One Federal Credit Union, Integrity Nursing, and Sharp Energy. Silver sponsors were: Aqua Tech Water Specialties, Atlantic Concrete Co., Artesian Water Company, Bayhealth, Best Ace Hardware, Faw Casson, and William Hare. Bronze level sponsors were: Chick's Saddlery, Dan Tidwell in Memory of Ann Haggerty, Delaware City Refining Company, i.g. Burton Auto Group,

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For general information about KSI's programs and services, please contact Alicia Hollis at 302-422-4014 ext. 3015 or hollisa@ksiinc.org.



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POLICE & FIRE



photo credit: Milford Police Department

TWO ARRESTED FOR FIGHTING

BY TERRY ROGERS

On June 9, at approximately 8:46 p.m., the Milford Police Department Patrol Division was dispatched to the 600 block of NW Front St. for a fight in progress. When officers arrived on scene, officers learned that during the fight Tyera Jarrett, 25, of Milford, had struck Tami-ra Griffin, 26, of Milford.



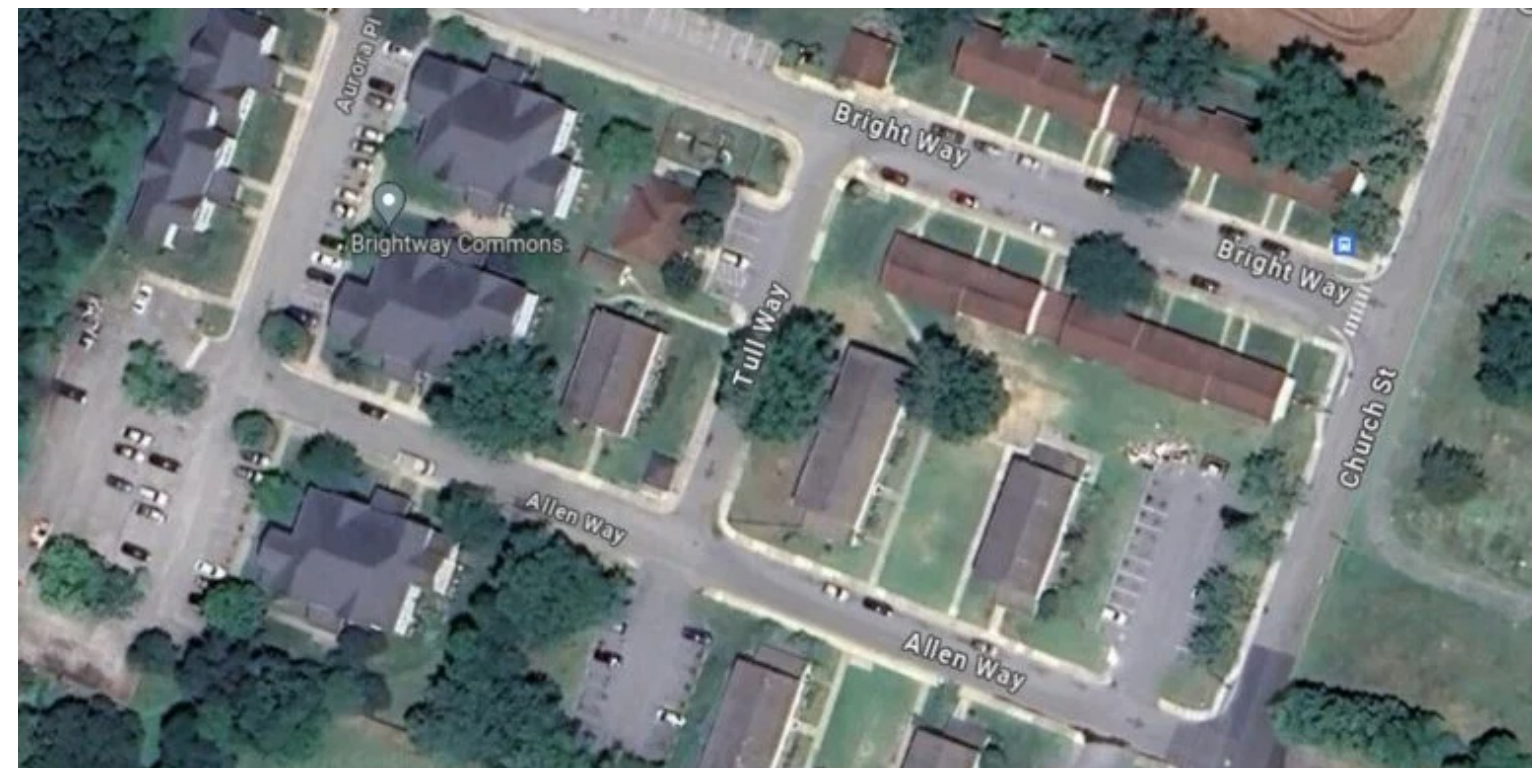
Griffin

Jarrett

The investigation also revealed that Griffin had assaulted Jarrett with a baseball bat during the altercation. Both Jarrett and Griffin were taken into custody regarding this incident.

Jarrett was charged with offensive touching and disorderly conduct. Griffin was charged with possession of a deadly weapon during the commission of a felony, assaults second degree, endangering the welfare of a child (two counts) and disorderly conduct. Both had a presentment through the Justice of the Peace Court 7. Jarrett was committed to the Delaware Department of Correction in default of \$200 secured bail with a future court date in the Kent County Court of Common Pleas. Griffin was committed to the Delaware Department of Correction in default of \$16,100 secured bail and a no contact order with the victims in this case. She was ordered to appear in the Kent County Court of Common Pleas at a later date for a preliminary hearing.

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MILFORD POLICE DETECTIVES INVESTIGATING SHOOTING

BY TERRY ROGERS

On June 9, at approximately 4:35 a.m., the Milford Police Department was dispatched to Bayhealth Sussex Campus for a shooting victim. Through investigation, officers learned that the incident occurred in the area of Allen Way and Tull Way, Brightway Commons Apartment Complex, Milford.

The 37-year-old male victim arrived at Bayhealth Sussex Campus via private vehicle, with a non-life-threatening gunshot wound. This investigation is ongoing and anyone with any information in reference to this incident can contact Det. Daniel Burgos at Milford Police at 302-422-8081 ext. 5170 or Delaware Crime Stoppers at 1-800-TIP-3333. Tips can also be submitted [online](#).

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