

**Municipality of Bethel Park
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NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Bethel Park Municipality Asks Voters to Support May 18 Referendum

Bethel Park, PA – Bethel Park voters are being asked to consider voting “Yes” on a May 18th referendum being placed on the ballot by the Municipality.

“Bethel Park’s existing Home Rule Charter requires that the Municipal Planner live within the Municipality of Bethel Park,” said Bethel Park Manager Laurence Christian. “However, the most qualified candidate may or may not currently reside in the community.”

According to Bethel Park’s Director of Engineering Stacey Graf, the role is significant to the community.

“The Municipal Planner provides recommendations regarding the approval of the land development and subdivision applications,” said Graf. “He or she also makes recommendations to the Planning Commission and Municipal Council relative to development activities and oversight of the development of the Comprehensive Land Use Plan as well as associated changes to the Zoning and Subdivision Ordinances.”

And, it’s been challenging to find an appropriate candidate since the position became vacant in May 2019.

“Due to such a specific background needed for the Municipal planner along with residency requirements, we’ve struggled to find and keep an individual in this position,” said Graf. “There’s a limited number of people who have a degree in Urban Planning or City and Regional Planning; and, ideally, we’d also like to find someone certified by the American Institute of Certified Planners.

Currently a contract employee is serving as the Interim Municipal Planner.

“When it first became vacant, we hired an interim planner who acted as a consultant and worked part-time; I worked in the position as well along with my job as director of engineering,” added Graf.

Many Municipal positions are already filled by extremely qualified individuals who are dedicated to Bethel Park despite living elsewhere such as Director of Special Projects Drew Dowdell who joined the Municipality about a year ago.

“I’ve come to think of Bethel Park as an ‘extra’ neighborhood of mine now,” said Dowdell who lives in Pittsburgh’s Eastern suburbs and commutes about 30-45 minutes to work each day. “I’m really getting to know the community and the local businesses. And, I feel like I’m a part of the community even though I don’t live here.”

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Since joining Bethel Park, Dowdell has volunteered for many Municipal functions including filming a Facebook live of the Bethel Park Halloween Parade from his classic car dressed as Sherlock Holmes, assisting at three COVID vaccination clinics where he made registration improvements resulting in vaccinating about 2,100 individuals in a day to about 3,000, and consistently showing up at evening Council meetings to lend technology support ensuring that broadcasts are correct for resident viewing.

"I'm learning more about Bethel Park each day, and now I use businesses here for many of my personal needs such as work on my vehicles, restaurants and shopping," said Dowdell.

And, Dowdell's commute isn't too far off from data that shows the average one-way work commute in Allegheny County to be 26.7 minutes. Based on these stats, the majority of Bethel Park residents most likely don't live and work within the confines of the Municipal boundaries.

"However, that doesn't make them less enthusiastic about where they work or their profession," said Graf.

And, Christian agrees.

"We truly try to hire employees who have the desire to make Bethel Park the most sought-after place to live," he said. "However, we're aware that not everyone wants to relocate to the community where they work due to already being established in their current home, having children happy with their schools, and a variety of other reasons."

Graf explained that passage of the referendum will allow the hiring pool to widen.

"We're hoping that we gain community support for the referendum so that we can hire the best person for the position whether they live in or outside of the community," she said.

The only positions requiring Bethel Park residency in the Home Rule Charter are the Manager, Assistant Manager, Police Chief, Finance Director and Municipal Planner.

"We're hoping to also change residency requirements for the finance director position in the future," said Christian. "We have no plans to change residence requirements for the other positions."

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