

Town of Camden
Public Workshop
Camden Municipal Building
May 19, 2025

CALL TO ORDER

Mayor Dougherty called the meeting to order at 6:30 p.m. and noticed that this Public Workshop was being held in compliance with the Delaware Open Public Meeting Act by posting the agenda on May 9, 2025, in the following manner:

- a. The electronic sign,
- b. The official bulletin board,
- c. The official Town of Camden website, and
- d. The Delaware State News.

Councilman Ridgely led attendees in the Pledge of Allegiance and a moment of silence.

Council Attending: Mayor Dougherty, Vice Mayor Rhodes, Councilwoman Sturgeon, and Councilman Ridgely

Council Absent: Councilman Woodall

Staff Attending: Town Manager Harold Scott Jr, Account Specialist Malori Lewis, Administrative Assistant Diane Mosby, Town Solicitor Greg Morris, and CFO Tom Josiah

ANNOUNCEMENTS

None.

REVIEW/DISCUSSION

Proposed FY26 Budget

Mayor Dougherty explained that the purpose of this Public Workshop is to review the proposed budget for FY26. The tax rate must change due to the county-wide reassessments completed last year. We used the billing totals from the previous year to determine the neutral rate based on the overall assessment totals and adjusted that rate to produce a balanced budget based on the anticipated expenditures for the year. This results in an overall tax increase; some bills will go up, and some will go down. Annual bills are based on property assessment totals and the tax rate. He advised that this is a draft budget, and that the town has not seen a tax increase since 2011. As we all know, costs have increased due to high inflation in recent years, and it is catching up to us. A major part of drafting a budget is salaries, with the largest salaries being the Police Department. We are having a hard time finding Officers. It is hard to compete when State Troopers start at \$86,000, but we have been managing to do it. We still have two vacant positions that were approved in the previous budget. We have only added one additional position, for which the salary will be paid via the COPS grant. We have multiple Police vehicles that are giving us problems, which should hopefully be covered under warranties

Councilman Ridgely stated that the School District needs more money for salaries and infrastructure, and in some cases, towns will partner with the School District to assist them in getting funds, such as implementing a school tax, and believes having a dialogue with Caesar Rodney is a good idea. He noticed that all taxes are going up, with commercial being the most significant, and seniors having a small increase, and stated that he feels that seniors need to take on a little more burden, and we should consider updating the projected revenue from \$99,000 to \$200,000.

Mayor Dougherty explained that many of the residents taking advantage of the senior discount are in Barclay Farms, where homes are valued much less than surrounding properties. Even though seniors are approximately 28% of our population, not all our senior residents are eligible for the discount because there are requirements they must meet to qualify, such as age and income. He added that doubling the revenue for the senior rate would require the rate to change from the proposed rate of \$0.24 to \$0.48, which is \$0.18 higher than the proposed residential rate. The senior discount would not be a discount if the rate is higher than what all other residents would pay. The key factor in the re-evaluation of tax rates was based on the reassessments that were made, which the Town had nothing to do with, and everyone's assessment is different.

Councilwoman Sturgeon explained that not every senior gets the discount, which is just based on the population we know that takes advantage of it. While it only goes up proportionately by a smaller amount, some people will see their bills go down, and some will see their bills go up. She stated that it is possible that one assessment could have gone up, and their neighbors could have gone down, so the numbers do not look so dramatic with a smaller pool of residents, because everyone's assessment is different. She added that her tax bill could double because her assessment went up significantly, and she is okay with that because she gets very good police service for that.

Mayor Dougherty added that residents did have an opportunity to appeal their assessment with Kent County. He also stated that in the future, the Town might want to consider making a small increase each year, instead of a large increase after 14 years with no changes to the tax rate. Right now, we are stuck with rising inflation and are trying to come up with a tax rate to account for that, which is difficult because it generally means an increase.

Mr. Josiah explained that the first step after a reassessment is to recalculate the tax rates to get to a revenue-neutral position, otherwise, everyone's taxes would go through the roof. The next step is deciding if you want to make changes to increase or decrease the taxes and come up with a proposed rate based on that decision.

Councilman Ridgely asked why building permit revenue is decreasing from \$110,000 to \$43,000 when we anticipate a major development.

Mr. Josiah said that you can never know how much revenue building permits will generate, and you cannot build a budget based on permit revenue.

Mayor Dougherty stated that the major development has not started and will not start until at least the end of this year or later, which would be at least halfway through this budget or longer.

Councilman Ridgely asked if there is a police, fire, and ambulance fee associated with building permits or business licenses, and if there is a separate funding pool for RETT.

Mayor Dougherty advised that a portion of each permit fee goes to both the Fire Department and the School District, 0.25% each. We also have the Public Safety Impact fee that was recently increased for all new residential buildings, which is reviewed every two years for adjustments. He added that RETT is controlled separately because there are limitations on what the funds can be used for. These funds are usable for public safety, and things like police equipment and police vehicles can be taken from there. Scheduled vehicle maintenance, such as oil changes and tire replacement, is included in the general fund budget of \$1,000-\$3,000 per vehicle.

Vice Mayor Rhodes added that she believes the building permit revenue should be kept low and potentially generate more, rather than being high and getting less.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

Brian Lessard (261 Camden Wyoming Ave) – Stated that it looks like there is a 46% increase on residential taxes and an 87% increase on commercial taxes, and he does not understand why seniors have a much smaller increase when they have access to the same services that all others are using. He asked if the police budget for last year was under or over budget, and if there are new police vehicles included in the budget. He suggested that we sit down with businesses to come up with a solution that satisfies everyone because a large tax increase could deter businesses from coming to or staying in Camden.

Mayor Dougherty advised that the police budget for the current fiscal year was under budget because the open positions were budgeted for but were not filled. He added that we have had 3 police vehicles on order for quite some time, because there is a regular rotation of replacing the oldest vehicles. These vehicles are not in the budget because the purchasing and equipping of these vehicles come out of RETT.

Dawn Gonzalez (Barclay Farms) – Asked if the public safety impact fee is the same for both residential and commercial, how much that fee is, and whether it is a flat rate or a predetermined percentage because we need to look at who is using the police services the most and they need to start taking some responsibility for the tax burden of the town. She stated that we should ask how other municipalities distinguish between a small business and a corporate business with different tax rates, so that a \$300 million business is not paying the same rate as a \$50,000 business. She added that she is unsure of the exact percentages for the increase in budget, but believes the numbers mentioned tonight are a bit off. She also mentioned that, unlike residents who are still working and getting occasional pay increases, seniors are on a fixed income like Social Security, which does not increase much, if at all.

Mayor Dougherty explained that the public safety impact fee is only for new residential construction, and the fee is not a percentage; it is a flat rate that was calculated based on the total cost of a new Police Officer and is reviewed every two years. He added that we cannot base fees on the number of calls a business may have, because police must respond to any criminal activity, regardless of where it occurs, so we have not come up with a way to charge different businesses different charges.

Councilman Ridgely stated that larger businesses like Walmart and Wawa keep our police very busy, and the general population and smaller businesses should not have to suffer for that.

COUNCIL COMMENTS

Councilman Ridgely stated that we had a good conversation today, and he will do some research on the public safety issue.

Councilwoman Sturgeon mentioned that some good points have been brought up, and she is interested in seeing what the conversations have been in the past, because we don't want to be unattractive to businesses or run people out. We want to have the opportunity to build our community and build the legacy of our Town. It has been 14 years since the Town has redone its taxes, and we will need to do some research and figure out what we can do going forward because we can't always assess new taxes, but we also cannot limit or put restraints on our Police Officers. Their duty is to protect and serve, so we must find that balance.

Vice Mayor Rhodes added that we want and need businesses in our Town.

ADJOURNMENT

A motion was made at 7:29 p.m. by Councilman Ridgely, seconded by Councilwoman Sturgeon, to adjourn the Public Workshop. All in favor; none opposed.

*Respectfully submitted,
Malori Lewis, Account Specialist*