

**Town of Camden
Regular Town Council Meeting
Camden-Wyoming Fire Department
March 2, 2026**

CALL TO ORDER

Vice Mayor Rhodes called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m. and noticed that this regular Council Meeting was being held in compliance with the Delaware Open Public Meeting Act by posting the agenda on February 23, 2026, in the following manner:

- a. The Town Hall Front Door,
- b. The official bulletin board,
- c. The official Town of Camden website.

Vice-Mayor Rhodes led attendees in the Pledge of Allegiance and a moment of silence.

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

Council Absent: Councilman Woodall, Mayor Dougherty.

Staff Attending: Town Manager Harold Scott Jr., Town Clerk Lynda Huizinga, Jim Ligori for the Town Solicitor Greg Morris, and Police Chief Marcus Whitney.

AMENDMENTS TO THE AGENDA

Councilwoman Sturgeon asked for an Amendment to the Agenda to have Horty & Horty, PA, present the 2026 Audit Report, presented by Paige Rubino, added to New Business (8b).

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Town Hall will be closed on Friday, April 3rd, in observance of Good Friday.

OATH OF OFFICE

Jim Ligori swore in Darlene Marie Sturgeon-Rothe for a 2-year Mayoral term.

Jim Ligori swore in Mary Ellen Gray for a 3-year Council term.

Jim Ligori swore in Sharon Gail Morgan for a 3-year Council term.

New Business (8b)

Paige Rubino from Horty & Horty, PA, presented the fiscal year 2025 audit. She said that earlier this evening, we met with management to review the financial statements and federal filing requirements. We issued an unmodified (clean) opinion on the financial statements. We also did not identify any internal control deficiencies that rose to the level of a significant deficiency or material weakness. Both have very positive results. The Town's assets exceeded liabilities by \$12 million, with \$8.3 million in unrestricted assets and \$3.7 million in invested capital assets, net of debt. Outstanding bonded debt totaled \$2.3 million, and capital assets were approximately \$6 million. There was also a required accounting adjustment in Fiscal Year 2025 related to compensated absences, resulting in a restatement of the net position. Overall, the audit went well, and the Town remains in a strong financial position.

A motion was made by Mayor Sturgeon, and seconded by Councilman Ridgely to approve the fiscal year 2025 audit. All in favor; none opposed.

REORGANIZATION FOR THE YEAR 2026

Selection of Vice-Mayor – A motion was made by Mayor Sturgeon, seconded by Councilman Ridgely, to appoint Councilwoman Rhodes as the Vice-Mayor. All in favor.

Selection of Town Clerk – Unanimous vote to appoint Lynda Huizinga.

Selection of Town Solicitor – Unanimous vote to appoint Greg Morris.

Selection of Building Inspector – Unanimous vote to appoint Harold Scott, Jr.

Selection of Engineer – Unanimous vote to appoint Kevin Minnich.

Selection of official newspaper for publications – Unanimous vote for the Delaware State News.

MINUTES

A motion was made by Vice-Mayor Rhodes, and seconded by Councilman Ridgely to approve the January 5, 2026 Regular Meeting Minutes. All in favor; none opposed.

FINANCE REPORT

Mr. Scott gave the report on behalf of Ms. Lewis. Mr. Scott stated that the delinquent is \$37,504.65. He added that we received \$5,123.05 in RETT funds in February.

Mayor Sturgeon mentioned that Business licenses and rental income are on target. Code enforcement revenue is slightly down due to fluctuations in building permits, which currently account for 57% of the budget. Police revenue is 83%, interest income is on target, and overall revenues are 86%, well above the 70% benchmark for this time of year. On the expense side, insurance and snow removal are slightly over budget, both of which are difficult to forecast. Police expenditures are slightly under budget, and overall general expenditures are at 66%, which is appropriate for February.

CAMDEN WYOMING FIRE DEPARTMENT

Chief Lewis gave a report that included, but was not limited to, fire and EMS calls. In January, we responded to 94 alarms with a total manpower of 1,049. The average manpower per alarm was 11, with seven truck-qualified personnel. Total time out was 46 hours, with an average alarm time of 31 minutes. The first truck response time averaged 4 minutes. We were assisted by neighboring companies four times and provided mutual aid to surrounding departments multiple times. We responded to 15 motor-vehicle collisions, 16 automatic alarms, assisted the ambulance 16 times, and handled 36 miscellaneous calls, including outside fires and downed wires.

In February, one of our busiest months, we responded to 116 alarms, up 22 from January. Total manpower was 1,094, with an average of 9 personnel per call, 6 of whom were truck qualified. Total time out was 57 hours, and the average alarm time was 30 minutes. First-truck response time improved to three minutes. Notably, we handled 28 fire alarms, 23 wires-down calls due to recent weather, 13 motor-vehicle collisions, 9 ambulance assists, and 29 miscellaneous alarms.

CAMDEN WYOMING SEWER & WATER AUTHORITY

Councilman Ridgely reported that they held a January meeting at which they retroactively approved the budget without a rate increase. During that meeting, the board was also reorganized. Our new chairman is Seth Greenberg from Wyoming, and our vice chair is Anita Beckel, our newest member from Camden. Moving forward, the board will meet quarterly. Our next scheduled meeting is expected to be in April.

FRIENDS OF HISTORIC CAMDEN

Gail Christenson said that I would like to introduce Shawn Brighenti, who has very generously donated photographs of the Stetson and Ellison Cannery, which was located on this very site where we are standing today. The Friends of Historic Camden is working to expand the depth of the historical record and preserve stories like this. These photographs help tell that story, and we truly appreciate this donation. We have also sent out our 2026 membership mailing. Our income remains steady, and our bank account is in good condition. In addition, we are working on our 2026 speakers' lineup, as well as planning our presence at the upcoming Teach Festival and other community events.

Councilman Ridgely said that Shawn Brighenti has generously offered these historic photographs of the Stetson and Ellison Cannery facility and would like them presented to you, Madam Mayor, as a gift.

Shawn Brighenti took the floor and said we hope to find a good home for these photographs in Town Hall. These are original, 100+-year-old, last-generation negatives, and there are three images in total. There has also been some discussion about the exact location of the buildings that once stood on this site. The donation is a wonderful contribution to preserving the history shared by the Friends of Historic Camden. He concluded that, based on available historical references, the Stetson and Ellison Cannery structures date roughly 1850-1920, as supported by surviving records and photographic analysis. The exact construction year is not clearly documented, but the site was active during that late 19th- to early 20th-century industrial period.

POLICE REPORT

Chief Whitney gave a report that included, but was not limited to, traffic arrests and criminal activity. He stated they had 89.5 hours of paid overtime and 14 hours of court overtime. He added that they received a total of 464 calls during this period, some of which were more serious, compared with 401 last year. Chief also said that I would like to advise Council that, although we previously had two recruits in the academy, we currently have no recruits due to serious injuries sustained. The department is reviewing potential courses of action.

Councilman Ridgely asked if the Tahoe purchase was still in conversation or closed.

Chief Whitney provided an update on the vehicle purchase. In the previous order, it took about a year, or possibly slightly longer, for the vehicles to arrive. However, after authorization to purchase three new Tahoes, the order was placed the next day, and the vehicles arrived approximately two to three weeks later. Those vehicles are currently sitting in the rear parking lot. We are currently waiting for the equipment ordered to arrive and be installed. Once installation is complete, the units will be sent down for graphics and put on the Street.

Councilman Ridgely said I have a question regarding another item. At a previous meeting, you mentioned the possibility of upgrading the cameras throughout the town. Is there any update on that initiative?

Chief Whitney said we should hold off on purchasing the cameras and that the building is the priority right now.

Councilman Ridgely noted that it appears part of the project may be handled as an emergency repair, with the broader scope to be reviewed during the budget process.

Chief Whitney confirmed he can bring this back to the council for consideration at a later date.

Councilman Ridgley concluded, "Chief, I'm sorry to hear about the two candidates." Were they the individuals expected to fill the open positions, and does that mean the department is now back to needing two officers?

Chief Whitney explained that two candidates had been placed in the academy, bringing the department's staffing to 12 officers. Council previously authorized 14 positions, and funding was allocated accordingly. However, the Chief had been unable to identify two additional qualified candidates for the remaining positions. Since the two candidates in the academy are no longer with the department, staffing has returned to 10 officers.

TOWN MANAGER REPORT

Mr. Scott began by extending my condolences to the Burris family on the passing of former Mayor Eddie Burris. I also want to express sympathy to Diane Mosby, our administrative assistant, for the loss of her father earlier tonight. Moving on to some better news, he said he did 16 inspections in January. and reminded residents that building permits are required for most home projects. He noted that The Asian Bistro, located behind Aldi, opened this past month. We also learned that Popeye's property, which remains closed, was sold in September for \$2.5 million. I spoke with the builder today to clarify whether it will remain a Popeye's or if the new owner plans to bring in a different fast-food restaurant. The builder seems confident it will remain a Popeye's.

Mayor Sturgeon asked whether it was sold by a franchisee, sold away from a franchisee, and whether the corporate entity bought it back.

Mr. Scott said the buyer is in Pennsylvania and is not a corporation.

Mr. Scott said that over a month ago, a sprinkler line on the third floor broke, causing significant water damage to the second floor and the processing room. Most of the damaged sheetrock has been removed, and Serve Pro is handling cleanup. An HVAC company will inspect insulation for water and mold before reconstruction begins. Preliminary damage estimates range from \$500,000 to \$1 million before insurance, including Advantec systems, servers, electronics, and the phone system. All affected items have been documented, and office staff are temporarily working in meeting rooms. The pipe failure was caused by shifted insulation, which exposed it to cold air. Restoration will continue in coordination with the insurance company.

Mayor Sturgeon emphasized the importance of working closely with the insurance company to ensure that most of the damage is covered. She stressed that anything affected by water must be properly addressed; everything should be dried out; and items such as insulation that cannot be salvaged should be fully replaced rather than repaired. Mayor Sturgeon emphasized the importance of getting the restoration right this time. With tenants in the building, it is critical to ensure a safe and healthy environment. She stressed the need to work closely with both the insurance company and the mitigation service to ensure all work is completed properly and thoroughly.

Mr. Scott said that following the flood, Chief Whitney was notified that the generator was running, but the building had no power. After troubleshooting and contacting Roy's Electric, we determined that the main power must be turned off for the generator to function. Upon inspection the next day, the electrician found that the building had only two of the three phases from Delmarva Power, which prevented the generator from operating properly. During this process, the building's sign was unfortunately damaged and will need to be replaced. He also noted that while most people understand snow removal, some do not. He explained that when plowing, snow naturally rolls off the plow onto driveways, especially on main roads. It is not possible to clear every driveway, and residents are encouraged to be understanding, as the state often arrives later to address remaining snow.

Chief Whitney said, to follow up on that, I think some of you may recall that I used to have my own business. Years ago, before my 10 years with the Town, I held the snow removal contract for the City of Camden and managed all snow removal for the City. I can tell you that the crew did a tremendous job with what was not typical Delaware snow. The snow must go somewhere when you drop the plow; it must push it to one side. We can't put it in everyone's driveway, and we can't keep it on the road, so it must be moved somewhere. Considering the conditions, they did a phenomenal job. They were out there working all night.

Mayor Sturgeon added that it is small until you must plow snow. With only two plows, clearing all the roads and ensuring everything is done properly becomes much more challenging. The crew did an amazing job, and we truly appreciate their efforts. Clearing the roads is a critical safety issue, and we're pleased we were able to complete it effectively. Thank you very much to everyone involved.

Councilman Ridgely said, " Before we move on, Mr. Scott, I'd like to clarify for the record that once we address the short-term need for these emergency repairs, I would support having an assessment done of the mechanical system. There may have been a previous miscommunication about the cost, but I believe it is an investment worth considering. Depending on the amount, we might seek additional quotes. I support having a professional evaluate the system and provide recommendations.

Mr. Scott said this is just a starting point. The professionals need to come in and assess the system, determine your flows, and identify areas that need improvement. We clearly have airflow issues, and, based on their recommendations, we will need to review procurement options in accordance with procurement rules.

Councilman Ridgely asked whether, for the assessment, since this would involve engineering services, we would be required to accept the lowest bid.

Mayor Sturgeon said no. It depends on the amount. Under state procurement rules, up to \$100,000, you can issue a professional services contract directly. Between \$100,000 and \$150,000, you need to obtain three quotes. For amounts over \$150,000, a formal RFP is required. This applies whether the role is a contractor or a professional consultant. The contract's total amount drives the process.

Mr. Scott said that per the charter, all services are over 5,000. He also said he can engage 3 different HVAC engineers to perform the assessment only, not the work, at this time.

MAYOR

Mayor Sturgeon reported that there is currently a report on the building's situation. I want to emphasize that the staff has done a remarkable job, given the work environment and the challenges they are facing. Much of the burden has fallen on Harold and the Chief due to the water damage and the impact of recent snowstorms. As a result, there is a bit of a backlog. If responses to the public are not as timely as usual, we ask for your patience, as the building remains our top priority. We are hopeful that the weather will cooperate, allowing us to address the issues more effectively. The Chief and his team have been operating in a makeshift capacity, and we are grateful for the support of neighboring towns and community partners during this period. Their assistance has been invaluable, and we sincerely appreciate it.

OLD BUSINESS

A. Purchase of Municipal Bonds

Mayor Sturgeon reported that, based on my interpretation of the situation, we should set this action aside. Given the pending building expense, we do not yet know the full extent of the damage, as we have

not received any information from the insurance company. The damage could be anywhere from \$500,000 to \$1.5 million, and we do not yet know what the insurance will cover. There are also several issues related to purchasing back bonds or handling our own bond issue. This item requires additional research and legal opinion because, as a municipality, we are not a taxable entity. Certain actions could make us taxable, which we want to avoid. My recommendation is to remove this item from the agenda for now and focus on addressing the building and its related expenses. We have a budget cycle coming up and have just completed the audit report, but I do not believe this should be a current priority. The annual cost of the bond issue is less than \$150,000. Spending \$2.3 million to save \$150,000 per year does not seem justified. Additionally, we generate interest from our bank account, and using those funds would reduce that income. Between third-floor tenant rent and interest earnings, we more than cover the \$150,000 annual bond payment. Taking \$2.3 million from unrestricted funds would limit our ability to address building needs and other upcoming expenditures, such as the recently presented street study. Furthermore, the investment account was opened without a council vote, motion, or consent; it must be closed. I wanted to present this for discussion and see if anyone has any questions or additional comments.

Councilwoman Gray mentioned that she doesn't fully understand this issue, which concerns me. I don't see a clear financial advantage and view it as a risk. I agree that more research is needed. Regarding the account opening, while I don't have the charter memorized, I assume it requires council approval or a motion. I concur that we should put this issue on hold for now.

Mayor Sturgeon moved to table this item indefinitely and revisit it as needed. Additionally, I move that the investment account opened for the purpose of purchasing municipal bonds be closed. Seconded by Councilwoman Gray, all in favor: none opposed.

B. Updates on the Personnel Policy

Mayor Sturgeon suggested that this item be tabled until the next meeting to allow new council members time to review it. She also mentioned that Harold has prepared a redline version of the administrative personnel manual, which highlights all the changes and updates. This will allow everyone to review the revisions. At the next meeting, we can have a more thorough discussion, with Harold guiding us through the changes and answering any questions.

NEW BUSINESS

(8a) Investment Policy – Discussion

Mayor Sturgeon said that, regarding the investment policy, since we are moving away from municipal bond purchases, we are linking this item to that decision. The investment policy goes hand in hand with the bond issue; if we revisit the bond purchase in the future, we will ensure an investment policy is in place at the same time. There is no need for further discussion on this matter at this time, as it will be addressed alongside the bond issue if and when it returns to the table.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

Gail Christensen (21 South Main Street) noted that a recurring point during public comment was the lack of feedback from the current Council. Now that leadership is in place, she would like to bring this back so the public can feel heard and receive feedback. Of course, information can be emailed to us, but this is their opportunity to address public comments during the meetings. I would like to see this reflected in how our meetings are conducted.

Councilwoman Gray asked Ms. Christensen to clarify what she meant and what she was seeking.

Ms. Christensen said that the silence that followed felt dismissive to the public. It gave the impression that questions were not being heard or valued, and that attendees were not entitled to ask questions. This perception rubbed people the wrong way and made it seem as though our interaction with the council was not transparent or engaging. We want all comments, whether small or large, to be treated with equal importance. Inconsistency, perceived unfairness, and lack of transparency discourage public engagement. The number of empty seats at meetings illustrates this. People are less likely to speak up if they feel their input is not heard or valued. Addressing this is essential to foster meaningful participation and transparency.

COUNCIL COMMENTS

Councilwoman Morgan noted that she is here to help drive meaningful change in the town and ensure residents see these meetings as beneficial. People tend to attend only when there is a tax increase, filling the room wall-to-wall. However, for routine discussions, attendance is very low. Our goal is to create an environment where residents and businesses feel comfortable attending, knowing their voices are heard and that actions and changes result from their input. This commitment is a key reason why I joined the council.

Vice-Mayor Rhodes said, "Thank you, everyone, for attending, and to those who voted, I truly appreciate your participation." Congratulations to the new members of our council! If you have any issues or concerns, please feel free to contact me by email—that works perfectly. If you don't have my contact information, you can obtain it from the town. I will also follow up by call or message as needed. Finally, I want to extend a special thank you to Brian and Harold for their efforts with snow removal. Your hard work is greatly appreciated.

Councilman Ridgely noted that one thing I've noticed tonight is that this is a historic moment for our town, likely the first time in its history with only one male on the council. I'm honored to be part of that. I believe this represents a positive change. I want to thank all the new members for stepping up and volunteering to serve, and I also want to recognize the town staff; you're doing an outstanding job navigating the challenges with the town hall situation. I look forward to serving this year. As Ms. Christensen mentioned, communication has long been an important topic, and we now have an opportunity to improve how we communicate, bringing it into the 21st century, being more responsive, and ultimately providing better service to our citizens. Thank you again. As Councilwoman Rhodes mentioned, I am always available by phone or email to discuss town business.

Councilwoman Gray said I'm very excited to be here. Some of you know me, but many of you may not. I've been a planner for many years, and planners tend to focus on the big picture and how things are interconnected. I believe my background provides a skill set that can benefit the town. Before serving here, I was on the Planning Commission for about 15 years. I've also been a resident of Camden for nearly 19 years, so this community has been home to me for a long time. Throughout my career, I've been involved in public service, and I hope to leverage that experience to serve the Mayor, the Town Council, the staff, and the citizens of Camden. I'm also a strong believer in the importance of process. When you follow clear processes, you create transparency, and transparency helps people understand what's happening and what to expect. Public participation is also very important to me. I agree with the comments that were made earlier tonight about improving communication. There are many tools available today that can help us do that more effectively. Sometimes I even have to ask my kids about the latest tools, but there are plenty of options we can explore while improving the methods we already use. I'm really looking forward to working together and serving the community. I'd also like to echo the comments others have made tonight and thank everyone for being here.

Mayor Sturgeon noted that the weather lately has not been ideal. It has been brutal, and Mother Nature has made her presence known here in Camden. I want to thank everyone for the extra work that has gone into dealing with that. Your efforts are truly appreciated. As I step into the mayor's position, I ask for a little patience while I get acclimated. I have a full-time job, but I am adjusting my schedule to dedicate more time to the town. I look forward to working closely with Harold, the Chief, and our staff as I become familiar with the town's issues and priorities. Communication is a top priority. I believe this council is open to improvements. I don't always like to use the word "change"; I prefer to think of it as improvements. There is always room to grow and build on the good work already done, and we will continue to discuss and outline those improvements in the meetings ahead. Our new council members will also be getting their town email accounts set up. Communication with council members must be conducted through their official Town of Camden email addresses rather than personal email addresses. This helps us maintain proper records and ensures that communication is transparent and organized. The town office staff, including Harold, also has phone numbers and other contact information available. However, email is generally preferred when possible because it allows us to track requests and ensure items are addressed and completed promptly.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

To consider strategy with respect to pending and/or potential litigation and/or with respect to personnel issues and/or collective bargaining.

ADJOURNMENT

A motion was made at 8:03 p.m. by Vice Mayor Rhodes, seconded by Councilman Ridgely, to adjourn the council meeting. All in favor; none opposed.

*Respectfully submitted,
Lynda Huizinga, Town Clerk*