

BOROUGH OF HIGHLAND PARK
MIDDLESEX COUNTY
SPECIAL MEETING – JANUARY 24, 2023

A Special Meeting of the Highland Park Mayor and Council was held in Borough Hall, 221 South 5th Avenue, on Tuesday, January 24, 2023 and was called to order by Acting Mayor Foster at 7:00 PM. Notice of this meeting was provided to The Home News Tribune, the Star Ledger and the Highland Park Planet on January 19, 2023, and was posted on the Borough website at www.hpboro.com and on the bulletin board at Borough Hall, 221 South Fifth Avenue, Highland Park, NJ on January 19, 2023, and has remained continuously posted as required by law.

Present: Acting Mayor Foster; Councilpersons Canavera, George, Hale, Hersh, Kim-Chohan; Borough Attorney Schmierer; Borough Administrator Jover; Borough Clerk Santiago.

Absent: None.

Acting Mayor Foster opened the meeting for public discussion and called upon all those wishing to speak to identify themselves. The total time for this session is 21 minutes; three minutes maximum per speaker. Comments are limited to items on the agenda. If you want to speak on an item that is not listed, there will be an opportunity to do so later in the meeting.

Tim McKinnon, 201 South 2nd Avenue, commented that he wanted to express his esteem and respect for all of the Councilmembers here today. For him, the choice comes down to what we are going to do for our town that sustains over time and evolves and develops our town to grow into the coming years. For him, that answer for the best person for the job would be Councilmember Hersh. Matt has relationships from a career that spans government policy, housing and communications and he has all the tools from those areas to excel in this role. He has the expertise and the social relationships around town with all kinds of different groups. You can text him at any time and he will eat, sleep and breathe this job. He hopes they will give him a shot.

Dan Stern Cardinale, 221 Harper Street, commented that over the last 20 years there have been a string of resignations and appointments. This is how people have become Mayor and most of the current members of Council were originally appointed rather than elected. He thinks a good way to break that cycle is that Councilman George has expressed that we would complete this term and not seek re-election as an incumbent. He thinks that would be a very positive development to break this cycle of appointment and then running as an incumbent.

Rob Holzapfel, 431 South 7th Avenue, thanked all of the Council for their service and noted that he is also concerned about the cycle of being appointed and then running for re-election as an incumbent. He would like to see this put into the hands of the voters with an open primary. For that reason, he is supporting Phil George because he will retire.

Dominic Cerminaro, commented that he has watched for many years Councilmember perform their duties and he complimented everyone on the Council. He does not know many of them, but he has known Councilman George for over 40 years. Phil has always impressed him as a person who will listen to all sides of an issue and give it thought and come up with a solution. If Phil is given the position, he hopes that he stays beyond a year and continue to serve the Borough.

No one else appearing to be heard, Acting Mayor Foster closed the public discussion.

Borough Attorney Schmierer noted that a vacancy occurred at the end of last year, Mayor Brill Mittler stepped down and we have a vacancy in the position of Mayor. The process was/is to contact the Highland Park Democratic Committee and request that three names be sent over for the Governing Body to consider appointing as Mayor. The local committee did that and sent over three names. Those three names are member of the Council this evening. The names are Councilman George, Councilman Hersh and Acting Mayor Foster. Tonight, hopefully a Mayor will be selected because the law that governs this vacancy has a timeframe involved. The local committee did their job exactly the way they were supposed to within 15 days of the vacancy. The next step is to have this Council do their job within 15 days of that or by January 30th. If we don't have a Mayor appointed by January 30th, the statute would require that the Municipal Clerk contact the Middlesex County Board of Elections and a special election would have to be held for the election of a Mayor for the remainder of this year. He opened the floor for nominations to appoint a Mayor for the remainder of 2023.

Councilman George commented that first I'd like to address my fellow Councilmembers and ask for your vote for me to be interim there to fill out the remainder of the term. I've worked to express my dedication to Highland Park for everything from shoveling snow downtown in storms and playing Santa Claus to working with everybody to try and reach compromises on some issues, to bring issues forward and also to assist with another Councilmember who wants to bring a matter forward to work with our former Mayor. I have a passion for fairness equity and equality that comes from my family and my profession and I bring that every time I pick up the phone, answer an email or come to Borough hall. I think I've contributed to the leadership in the town, especially the interface we've had with infrastructure and state and federal regulations which have been something of a problem and something of an opportunity over the last couple of years especially with our water, sewer and storm water infrastructure. I would like to continue

SPECIAL MEETING – JANUARY 24, 2023

to try and manage our resident's burden with the tax burden in trying to meet some of the requirements that we have as well. Although I've just been elected to another term on this Council, he would like to serve as Mayor and capstone my experiences here in Highland Park starting with the Prosecutor's position over 20 years ago and leaning forward and also supporting another Councilperson, Councilwoman Carolyn Timmons going against what she saw. 2023 is going to be the year that we fill in details of the programs that we've started over the last eighteen months from redevelopment; the nasty surprise of Stop and Shop leaving have left us challenges that we have to infill now at this time and I want to bring some ideas and creativity as well as some professional knowledge to try and resolve those problems to the members of the public. I thank you for your support. I thank you for the support for voting for one of the three of us here that have the experience of having sat on Council. Although I do intend to vote for myself and I think that I'm the best qualified, let's remember that we've had a series of successions for appointments, we've also had open elections. Councilman Hale will remember that we sat through a contested primary with the only debate sponsored by the League of Women Voters that I know of in Highland Park history and actually participated in that, so we have had the elections, it's just that the process has consistently brought in an incumbent through the process. The process is not ours, that process is set by law and that's what we're stuck with. I think we're at the end of an era and I'm glad to be at the point of the beginning of a new era here in town and I'm asking for Council's vote.

Councilman Hersh commented that this is an interesting process that I think we're all involved in because there are three folks who are seeking to lead Highland Park, but you may not really know about it, which is a strange thing when one's going to become Mayor. I feel that introductions are in order. I'm Matthew Hersh and I've lived at 333 Felton Avenue since February of 2008 and I try each day to be the best husband and dad in the world. I have the best job in the world fighting for affordable housing across New Jersey and I have the amazing privilege of serving with you, my colleagues, as chair of the Arts and Recreation Committee working on quality of life issues that affect how to practice daily. I serve Highland Park physically. I expertly pop and serve popcorn at the outdoor moves and haul tables and chairs at the farmer's market, I table with my boards and commissions at street fairs and other public events. My family and I plant flowers in the planters on Main Street. We shop local, we dine local, and we walk and ride bikes and play in the parks. We have three kids in the public schools. I've served on the Irving and Bartle PTO's. I'm on the board of the Highland Park Educational Foundation. I sometimes sing at the open mic nights at Pino's and I'm told that I'm pretty good. I'm a lifelong writer and journalist at heart. My first full-time job was as a news reporter at my hometown local paper that gave me a unique perspective that showed me firsthand how local decision making and local government impacts residents in real time. That perspective, coupled with an innate calling to an injustice, led me to be a progressive, a coalition builder and a political organizer to deal with some of the greatest housing and health obstacles that face our communities. Through coalition building, I've worked closely with the Murphy Administration and advocates to enact lead poisoning prevention bills, funding for emergency rental protections, funding for affordable home production and toward ending discrimination bias in lending and property appraisals just to name a few campaigns. I have strong relationships with Mayors and other community leaders in neighboring towns as well as very strong relationships with our 18th legislative district representative and I've developed close working relationships with you my esteemed colleagues. I've never tried to lead alone and most of my successes on the Council were done through careful and intentional collaboration with the community and with you again, my colleagues. Some of those successes include parks improvements. We've conducted a top to bottom needs assessment for our pocket parks so they can be the community jewels that we need them to be. I led an extremely challenging discussion around immigration in 2017 resulting in Highland Park's sanctuary city designation, meaning that our local police would not assist Immigration and Customs Enforcement in immigration actions. We also implemented a municipal ID program that still runs out of the library. I helped lead the successful temporary ownership translation through a HUD program to finance necessary capital needs for our public housing. I secured state funding for the new track and field and funding for the new river trail connector study and housing affordability and rental home conditions over the top of our priorities. Rent control, which I worked on closely with Councilman Hale, is just the first guardrail that we need to create a more stable housing environment. It's time for a new generation of leadership in Highland Park. I'm in this contest for Highland Park and I'm in this contest for Highland Park and nothing more than Highland Park. I have no visions of using this position as a stepping stone to anything other than creating a better Highland Park, a safer Highland Park, a more affordable Highland Park and a more equitable Highland Park. We've been in the subcontext of political efforts that began when I was in college at Rutgers and before some of our emerging leaders were even born. Take Andrew Dalton, who's here in the audience, who was recently honored at the MLK ceremony last week. Even at this young age, I feel I've been working with Andrew since he was in the middle school fighting for the best environmental practices. We need to embrace his efforts and let him lead now while he's here because soon he and others like Andrew are going to leave Highland Park to change the world, but he's going to do that because we nurtured him to do so. I share the sadness and fear of losing a grocery store and this has to be our 2023 top priority, but I will not be this discussion with fear and negativity and will have no role in building positive outcomes. However, criticism and questioning processes are welcomed and they must be embraced. Helping neighbors understand how we can work together to reform processes is how we can be transparent, educate, be more equitable in our decisions and build support. It's civics. I've met several times with many of our most vocal critics and I would say each meeting has been quite positive on a human level because there was a clear mutual understanding. That's leadership. I'll pay close attention to the things that are important to the day-to-day existence of residents; roads, parks, snow removal, safety and events and I'll work to provide ways to showcase our position as one of New Jersey's premier locations for arts and music. Strong public and administrative leadership is what we need now. I have deep roots in the

SPECIAL MEETING – JANUARY 24, 2023

community and I believe I have the support of many constituencies. We need to leverage those relationships. We as a Council need to leverage those relationships to build trust and allyship through transparency, engagement and equity. But it's impossible to lead without community support. I think I'm the best candidate to lead and build broad public support and I would very much like to take that challenge on as our Mayor. Let's have fun and get things done.

Acting Mayor Foster commented that I have been in Highland Park now for 28 years, but I want to share with you a little bit about my journey of getting involved in our community. In the mid-1970's, my family migrated from Jamaica to Newark, New Jersey. At that time, in my beloved country of Jamaica, we were going through political turmoil. We were terrified of going to school, to shop, to do any little thing that we were living through because there was an election going on and it was completely corrupt and gang violence was pervasive and they were taking over everywhere. We were on the brink of a coup in our country and the terror that we saw as young kids trying to get to and from school or trying to get to and from shopping was just horrendous. We had young girls that would have gone missing, people getting chopped up, people getting killed because of political violence. We moved from Jamaica and we came to Newark to live and everything was fine. I was happy, I was safe, I felt secure and then there was an announcement of an election and all my fears came flooding back in and all of a sudden I was scared, I was nervous and I remember going to my mom and saying that we're going to have the same thing all over again and she said that does not happen in the United States, that will never happen. I wasn't convinced, my younger sister and I were scared and we went the night of the election and we hid after dinner. The reason why we hid was because we were trying to tell them that the values that we've seen back home was going to happen. They didn't believe us. Early the next morning, I crept out of my hiding place and I went downstairs. I checked my parent's bedroom and they were fine. My brothers and sisters in their rooms were fine. In the dark I went downstairs and I looked out the window and there were no cars burning, there was nobody chopped up, there were no dead and there was no mayhem. I couldn't believe it. Eventually, I had the nerve to turn on the TV and I watched as the news came on and it said that we had a new President. Jimmy Carter was elected President of the United States and there was no mayhem, no nothing. I sat there in the dark for a while and that got me to start thinking about safety and how important it is that we are safe and how important safety is and I made a pledge to myself that I would give back to this country and I would give back in my small way and I would find a way to serve. Fast forward all those years. I moved to Highland Park. I became involved with the PTO, I became involved in many groups and organizations and eventually on the Council. As of today, I've been on the Council for 22 years and I have watched my town grow and I have aided in the growth and the creation we have today. I am proud to be a part of the leadership that has driven this process and for making changes. For example, in our Department of Public works, through equal and equity employment, and creating anti-nepotism ordinances, so opportunities are given to all members of our community. We have worked to make all our citizens feel safe and valued, not only by rejecting hate, but also instituting programs, activities and increased cross-cultural understanding, anticipation, respect and unity. I have worked with the Police Department to help foster relationships and community engagement. We are residents and families, have block parties where Officers stop by to flip burgers and toss the basketball or two with the kids, from Coffee with the Cops, community engagement from our Police Officers volunteer to support and teach sports teams, from National Night Out, from bike rodeos, trunk or treat, smart street program and pedestrian safety. I have served on all the committees on this Council. I have worked with four Mayors over the years and I have seen many management styles and I hope I have taken the best from all of them. In my past 20 years plus of service, I have reached across all communities, Orthodox, black, white, and Asian, and have formed long-standing and deep relationships by working with religious groups and organizations to build bridges when we are faced with various racial and hate crime issues in our town. From time to time, I have worked with such groups as Bridge Builders, South Side Pride, and human relations and I have brought my skills and expertise to many boards and commissions by creating our first food pantry and bring in service agencies to aid seniors such as creating the senior prom, the holiday dinner, sightseeing tour for seniors, engagement program, intergenerational program, street naming for long-serving residents and volunteers in our town and for our local heroes and especially our Zone 6 Teen Center. I served as Finance chair, securing funding for Highland Park projects from State, Federal and at local levels for a fire engine, police building, open space pocket parks, our first turf field that we put together in the high school, our downtown furniture, those welcoming banners that you see on the Avenue, those were intentionally done to let people know that there's a welcoming place for all here in Highland Park, small business block grants, road improvements, traffic light on Woodbridge Avenue, which took forever to get, but I didn't give up, safe walk to school grant, pedestrian safety grant and our neighborhood preservation grant in our Orchard Heights community. I also chaired the economic development committee which brought into Highland Park the creation of our business improvement district. We got state designation for Main Street Highland Park, first planting of cherry blossoms on Woodbridge Avenue, we were the first to have solar panels on our borough building and we were the first green community in the State of New Jersey. I have worked on cultural and entertainment projects, streets fairs,

Autumn in the Park, and horse and buggy rides for all. Those are some of the things that I did there and now we are faced with another challenge. Fifteen years ago, Stop and Shop wanted to leave and we were able to get them to sign a 15-year lease. However, with the pandemic, they decided to leave. As you know, the pandemic has hit all major institutions in our country. We are actively working to get another supermarket in that location. Stop and Shop is now in our redevelopment zone thanks to Councilmember Hale. We've been working with the Councils of Supermarkets to ensure that our community continues to enjoy the convenience of shopping locally. We are exploring options for new supermarkets. Affordable housing – we created a tax stable base to increase businesses in our downtown and create stability for our

SPECIAL MEETING – JANUARY 24, 2023

tax base. I have worked with this 15% set aside for new construction for the senior housing and for section 8 vouchers for seniors to create more housing. I have worked with the Police Department and Rutgers Social work to aid the Police Department for mentally disturbed cause, for more grants for police training and community engagement, more opportunities for community conversations. My top three things, and number one is safety. The next is affordability and downtown redevelopment. As you can see, I have done it or its 20 years plus well spent. I'm up for the challenge. I have the requisite knowledge, experience and tenacity to move our community forward as we face multiple challenges in our country. If chosen, I can do this job and I ask for your support.

Borough Attorney Schmierer thanked all the Councilmembers for their statements. He indicated that the State law that governs the vacancy filling talks about filling the vacancy for a Mayor and in this case, it has to be approved by a majority of the full membership of the Council and that means in this case, there has to be four affirmative votes for the successful candidate. As Councilman George pointed out, under our rules of order, a nominee may vote for themselves if and when they're nominated. He asked for nominations for Mayor for the remainder of 2023.

Councilwoman Kim-Chohan nominated Acting Mayor Foster for Mayor. The nomination was seconded by Councilman Hale.

Councilwoman Canavera nominated Councilman Hersh for Mayor. The nomination was seconded by Councilman Hersh.

Councilman Hersh nominated Councilman George for Mayor. The nomination was seconded by Councilman George.

Borough Attorney Schmierer asked the Borough Clerk to take a roll call vote on the nomination of Ms. Foster to become Mayor for the remainder of 2023.

The nomination of Ms. Foster for Mayor was confirmed by the following roll call vote, to wit:
Ayes: Councilpersons Canavera, Foster, Hale, Kim-Chohan.
Opposed: Councilpersons George, Hersh.
Abstained: None.

Borough Attorney Schmierer administered the Oath of Office and Allegiance to Mayor Elsie Foster.

Mayor Foster asked for nominations for Council President.

Councilman George nominated Councilman Hersh for Council President. The nomination was seconded by Councilwoman Canavera.

Councilman Hale nominated Councilwoman Kim-Chohan for Council President. The nomination was seconded by Councilwoman Kim-Chohan.

The nomination of Councilman Hersh for Council President was confirmed by the following roll call vote, to wit:
Ayes: Councilpersons Canavera, George, Hersh.
Opposed: Councilpersons Hale, Kim-Chohan.
Abstained: None.

Borough Attorney Schmierer administered the Oath of Office and Allegiance to Council President Matthew Hersh.

There being no further business, on motion made Councilman George, seconded by Councilwoman Kim-Chohan and carried by affirmative voice vote of all Councilpersons present, the meeting adjourned at 7:40 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Jennifer Santiago
Borough Clerk