

Introduced by:

CITY OF TAKOMA PARK, MARYLAND

RESOLUTION 2021-XX

EXPRESSING APPRECIATION FOR THE CITY OF TAKOMA PARK SENIOR LEADERSHIP TEAM

WHEREAS, the past fifteen months have been extremely challenging ones for the City's Senior Leadership Team, which consists of department and key division heads; and

WHEREAS, this time period included the COVID-19 pandemic and all of the work related to the shutdown of City facilities, continuity of City services, care of employees, and provision of assistance to residents and businesses; the death of George Floyd and its impacts; national and local elections; the January 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol; the second impeachment of President Trump; and preparations for the transition to a new City Manager; and

WHEREAS, during this time, the City of Takoma Park continued operations and expanded services with few problems due to the skill, hard work and commitment of the members of the Senior Leadership Team; and

WHEREAS, the Senior Leadership Team kept its focus on providing the residents and business owners in Takoma Park the critical information, services, grants and care needed during this once-in-a-century international health crisis; and

WHEREAS, each member of the Senior Leadership Team also worked to support their staff and had additional challenges specific to their area, as identified on the attached report from the City Manager; and

WHEREAS, the City's senior staff faced what for most was the most difficult fifteen months of their professional lives, and they did so with great skill and dedication to service to the City and community of Takoma Park.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Council of Takoma Park expresses its deep appreciation to the following members of the Takoma Park Senior Leadership Team for their work during the COVID-19 pandemic:

Director of Public Works Daryl Braithwaite
City Clerk / Director of Council Operations Jessie Carpenter
Finance Director Susan Cheung
Recreation Director Greg Clark
Deputy City Manager Jessica Clarke
Economic Development Manager Samira Cook Gaines
Information Technology Director Lars DeSalvio
Police Chief Antonio DeVaul
Community Development Manager Rosalind Grigsby

Library Director Jessica Jones
Retired Library Director Ellen Arnold Robbins
Human Resources Director Tracy Smith
Housing Manager Grayce Wiggins
Communications Specialist Donna Wright

Adopted this ____ day of June, 2021.

**CITY MANAGER SUMMARY OF EXTRAORDINARY SERVICE
OF THE TAKOMA PARK SENIOR LEADERSHIP TEAM
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

From March 2020 through June 2021, the City of Takoma Park Senior Leadership Team performed their responsibilities at the highest level under extremely challenging conditions. I am honored to have them as my colleagues.

All Senior Leadership Team members:

- oversaw operations with frequently changing direction on safety protocols
- provided care and direction to staff who were concerned about getting sick, needed assistance to get tested, had to quarantine, did get sick, or had family members who became ill, had mental health problems, or passed away
- needed to facilitate staff in working remotely, accommodating technology and scheduling needs of staff working at home (often with children learning at home or other family pressures), and worked to ensure that services to residents and staff could continue
- intensely reviewed and proposed reductions to the budget affecting their department or division
- kept careful records of all COVID-19 expenditures for reporting and possible reimbursement
- did this all while they were facing their own health and family needs.

In addition, each member of the Senior Leadership Team had challenges specific to their area:

Director of Public Works **Daryl Braithwaite** oversaw the Public Works crews that continued work throughout the pandemic. Early on during the pandemic, there were concerns about the safety of handling garbage and the type of facility cleaning that was needed. Ms. Braithwaite worked with Human Resources to establish safety procedures for staff and she oversaw staff that undertook an upgrade of the air handling system of City buildings. She revised operations so that staff would not share vehicles and developed an alternate approach to handle tasks such as leaf collection with fewer seasonal staff for the safety of employees. She continued oversight of the Flower Avenue Green Street project, proposed and coordinated a new stormwater billing system, continued work on addressing climate change, was heavily involved in budget preparation, and hired staff to fill key vacancies.

Mostly working remotely, City Clerk/Director of Council Operations **Jessie Carpenter** worked with CityTV staff to move Council and other meetings to virtual ones. This process requires a great deal of time, skill and coordination. In perhaps her biggest challenge, she worked with the Takoma Park and Montgomery County Boards of Elections to conduct the first concurrent City and national elections, which would be difficult enough any time, but was particularly challenging during a

pandemic and with the added move to mail-in voting and vote counting under COVID-19 health protocols and with the highest voter turnout ever for a City election. She also worked to coordinate responses to a heavy load of Maryland Public Information Act requests and assisted working with Committees under the various constraints they faced.

Preparation of the proposed FY21 budget document was just being finalized when the pandemic hit in March 2020. Finance Director **Susan Cheung** helped identify possible financial impacts across the City accounts and proposed budget cuts, while at the same time helping set up payment and monitoring systems for the City to provide funds to residents and businesses reeling from the pandemic. Working in a small enclosed office, several staff needed to work remotely or on hybrid schedules. During this time, Ms. Cheung also needed to train new staff on the financial systems, including Budget and Accounting Manager Ron Kawaley and Deputy City Manager Jessica Clarke. As the pandemic proceeded, preparation of the FY22 budget needed to take place as well as early preparation for the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds.

Recreation Director **Greg Clark** had difficult personnel communications to make as the City went into lockdown. Before and after-school programs were suspended in March, but the City made the decision to pay the part time staff through June. Such payments could not continue with the beginning of the new fiscal year, so staff worked with them to sign up for unemployment insurance. Planning for Recreation programs generally takes place well in advance of the programs so as to be able to schedule rooms, hire program staff and do advertising. Mr. Clark and his staff worked a two-track system for the entire time, planning for virtual and outside classes as health conditions permitted and constantly trying to plan what could be offered at the end of the pandemic, whenever that would be. A number of the virtual classes were very successful and kept connections to the young people throughout the difficult time. In moving to in-person programs, all staff were trained in special health safety measures and the sign-in protocols and cleaning regimens were changed.

Deputy City Manager **Jessica Clarke** started working for the City less than a month after lock-down. She jumped right in facilitating the Council's review of the FY21 proposed budget as well as the FEMA/CARES reimbursement process, participated in union negotiations, continued racial equity efforts, and oversaw the Finance, IT, Library and Public Works units and their work as they pivoted during the pandemic. She took on coordination of the Library renovation project, at the same time the Library was working to provide service during the pandemic and preparing for the retirement of long-time Library Director Ellen Robbins. She oversaw the FY22 budget presentation process and ably addressed budget presentation goals expressed by the Council and community. She also worked closely with the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services to bring regular COVID-19 testing and COVID-19 vaccination clinics to the City, and created the COVID-19 Dashboard to monitor key health metrics. Through it all, she worked to understand the city management functions and become familiar with the Councilmembers – remotely – in preparation for the retirement of the current City Manager.

Economic Development Manager **Samira Cook Gaines** and her intern had just started working with an online communication tool with local businesses when the pandemic hit. Immediately, businesses who had not had much ability or interest in communicating with the City needed to do so. Ms. Cook Gaines reached out to let them know the City cared and crafted a small grant program to help them long before Montgomery County was ready to assist. A contract with ChalkRiot provided fun, inspiring chalk messages across Takoma Park, directing customers to the businesses and helping Takoma Park feel like a community, even during the lockdown. To the businesses, the City provided PPE, Wear a Mask signs, and hand sanitizers, and provided hope and connections. In the midst of this, Ms. Cook Gaines also advanced the outreach activities regarding the Recreation Center project and assisted with several significant housing initiatives.

Information Technology Director **Lars DeSalvio** already had a very full plate when the City went into lockdown. Within 24 hours, many City staff had to move to remote work and the technology resources were not quite available for all to do so easily. Computer and phone equipment, connections and processes were provided very quickly, with a lot of handholding by Mr. DeSalvio and his small team. IT assistance was needed for remote meetings and classes as well as online transactions. During the elections, constant and secure video monitoring of the election ballot drop off boxes and the vote counting process was required. After the elections, the video of the County's election drop off box needed to be reviewed for completeness and securely packaged for transmittal to the County Board of Elections. During this time, there were many Maryland Public Information Act requests, each of which requires a great deal of time from the IT Director. Major technology security projects were underway during the pandemic to protect the City against ransomware and other attacks. As the pandemic is coming to a close, identifying the technology the City needs to handle activities with American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding is beginning.

Police Chief **Antonio DeVaul** went into the pandemic focused on staff safety. Most Police Department staff continued to work in person and the need to interact with individuals and go into people's homes was very concerning when little was known about how COVID-19 was spread. Chief DeVaul helped get staff potentially exposed to the virus tested, obtained PPE and established clear health safety guidance for staff. On May 25, 2020, George Floyd was murdered by a Minneapolis police officer, capping a string of deaths of Black and Brown people by police officers, many of which had been captured on video. The national outrage led to demonstrations despite the pandemic and the posting of signs in many places protesting this wrongdoing. In Takoma Park, a police officer was videoed removing such a sign and outrage was expressed against the Takoma Park Police Department. Chief DeVaul worked to address his officer's actions and share the policies and goals of the department with residents, while also working to keep up morale within the department. During the pandemic, officers responded to more violent crime and mental health calls than normal, including the suicide of Congressman Raskin's son. With the challenges to the validity of the outcome of the Presidential election, Chief DeVaul and his emergency management team followed concerns about homeland security. The January 6th insurrection against the Capitol required heightened

response and one officer was deployed through the National Guard to the Capitol for several weeks. As the Impeachment hearings got underway, Takoma Park Police Officers worked to protect lead Impeachment Manager Congressman Jamie Raskin and his family until federal officers could take over. Takoma Park Police monitored the homes of many local officials who could be targets. As the pandemic waned, an off-duty Pentagon police officer committed a double homicide in Takoma Park and Takoma Park Police investigated and charged the individual. During this time, Chief DeVaul continued to hire new officers to fill open positions and assisted in providing a great deal of background information and statistics to the Reimagining Public Safety Task Force.

Community Development Manager **Rosalind Grigsby** has had many large efforts underway that involve community engagement that is more difficult to do during a pandemic. She and her staff rose to the challenge by doing more online communication and social media outreach. These activities were complicated by staffing changes and the need to hire a new Planner and a new intern. Work on projects such as Takoma Junction, Purple Line, Minor Master Plan, Maple Avenue Complete Street, the Equity Walk, and online arts programming continued during this time, mostly with staff working remotely. Her unit was highly successful in pursuing grant funding.

Former Library Director **Ellen Arnold Robbins** had anticipated a busy year preparing the plans for a new library building and remote operations during construction, even as she prepared for her retirement. With the pandemic, remote operations started earlier than expected. Quickly, the library staff developed Books To Go, virtual programming and a book delivery program. At the same time, recruitment for a new Library Director started. With the hiring of **Jessica Jones**, the City gained her experience providing library services during construction and during the early months of the pandemic. With her expertise, the focus has turned to even more outreach and services to the public – particularly related to computer and internet access – and plans for reopening the library before construction have now been set for July 6th.

Human Resources Director **Tracy Smith** had an especially heavy load this past year, even as she did without a fulltime intern to save money. The FY21 budget was her first time preparing personnel numbers and the last minute budget changes associated with the pandemic were challenging. Through the early days, there was constant attention to identifying how staff could work and follow health protocols, when and how to quarantine, how to alter work hours given children doing schooling from home, learning new federal personnel rules, how to support staff facing health and mental health challenges, how to end employment of most part-time staff sensitively, and how to pay hazard pay and to whom. Ms. Smith participated in union negotiations and responded to staff inquiries related to pay and working conditions. Working mostly remotely, she had to help departments adjust to a different way of providing services. During this time, there were the normal disciplinary matters and terminations, recruitments and hiring operations. Major hires included a new Library Director, new Deputy Public Works Director and assisting with the hiring of a new City Manager.

Housing Manager **Grayce Wiggins** had been assisting families facing evictions or other issues before the pandemic hit and had already made connections to landlords and management companies. That knowledge became critical when the pandemic hit in March 2020. At that time, little health safety advice was available for people living in multi-unit buildings, and there was a need for PPE and information about the safety of ventilation systems and communal spaces. Virtual meetings were set up with high rise buildings to hear of concerns and share resources, materials in multiple languages were prepared, and handholding of families in desperately-sad situations took place. As with the business assistance, COVID-19 funds were provided quickly to residents in need and processes for providing and monitoring the aid were established. While that direct assistance occurred, connections with non-profit groups and careful monitoring of the City's Opportunity to Purchase laws led to opportunities for two rental properties to move towards affordable home ownership. When tragedies occurred, such as when a child fell from an apartment window and died, Ms. Wiggins was there to directly assist the family and continued to press for window guards, which requirement is now memorialized in the recently adopted Ezechieel's Law. As the pandemic is nearing an end, evictions are increasing and all efforts are focused on addressing this threat to Takoma Park residents. A major first use of the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds will be to work to assist families whose safe housing is threatened.

When the nation went on lockdown, the most important commodity became communication, and Communications Specialist **Donna Wright** stepped into full gear. For many weeks, Ms. Wright did not have a day off as she shared constantly changing information with the public about what was open, how to obtain services, and what health safety information could be trusted. She and Emergency Manager Ron Hardy had been working on Census outreach when the pandemic hit, and that effort continued. There was communications work needed about the City's response to national incidents and there was a vast amount of communications needed about the City's elections and the new voting processes that were being put in place. Although she was working remotely, there was so much going on in Takoma Park that social media was always needed, signs in multiple languages needed to be prepared, and coordination with the County and other entities required frequent meetings. Besides her direct work, she oversaw interns, worked with CityTV on video and radio presentations, and coordinated with the Newsletter editor. Many parts of the City's webpage have been updated and she is working with the IT Director on webforms and a webpage overhaul. Her major efforts are to provide residents with the information they need, in the form they need it, and share the positive work going on in the City of Takoma Park.