



# TOWNSHIP OF MORRIS

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CATHERINE J. WILSON  
MAYOR

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Dear Residents,

I'm sending this message to residents who have contacted me to share their views re: The Abbey. It's important to me that you understand the exceedingly difficult challenges COVID-related circumstances are presenting in regard to holding the public hearing on the Abbey. Following is a detailed update:

The July 21<sup>st</sup> meeting will be postponed. That decision, which became necessary for a variety of reasons, occurred late Friday afternoon (7/10) – after the legal notice to the newspapers had already been sent but before the notification letters to residents were picked up in the mail.

Pending official approval at this Wednesday's (7/15) Township Committee meeting, two new dates are on the calendar for the public hearing on the Abbey: it will begin on August 26<sup>th</sup>. If more time is needed, we will continue on September 3<sup>rd</sup>. The meeting(s) will start at 6PM. The location is TBD.

We are doing everything possible to ensure that the 8/26 (and if needed 9/3) meetings allow for in-person attendance. COVID guidelines permitting, our preference is to hold the meeting(s) at a large indoor venue. My personal favorite is the Mayo Theater, but we are considering other indoor venues as well. In case COVID guidelines end up not permitting the use of an indoor venue, we are also exploring outdoor venues. Holding this meeting at an outdoor venue presents significant (and still unresolved) technical and logistical challenges (not to mention weather uncertainties). I cannot say with certainty right now that an outdoor venue will work.

In order to meet the legal notification requirements, we need to decide the venue by August 10<sup>th</sup>. It is possible that state-mandated COVID restrictions could change in the interim between August 10<sup>th</sup> and August 26<sup>th</sup> – thus making it impossible to hold the meeting in person at the selected venue.

This is exactly what happened in regard to the July 21<sup>st</sup> meeting: we had planned to use the Mayo Theater, but two days before sending the notification letters a contradiction was discovered in Executive Order #157 that made it impossible for us to use that venue. We tried to find an alternative outdoor venue only to realize we were not able to meet the technical and logistical challenges in that time frame. That was a major factor in Friday's decision to postpone the 7/21 meeting.

For all of these reasons, the location of the Public Hearing on 8/26 (and if needed on 9/3) is TBD.

Having worked with COVID-related realities now for months, many of us on the Township Committee have reluctantly come to accept a truly bitter pill: that holding this meeting in person may not be possible until this pandemic ends and/or a vaccine is in place – neither of which is likely before next Spring (2021) at the earliest. If we wait until then, our ability to even consider this proposal will be lost. It is not reasonable to expect Restoration Hardware to wait until Spring 2021 for us to begin considering this proposal. They will not do that.

I understand that some residents would be happy to see Restoration Hardware move on. But there's another reality we all need to be aware of. If the Restoration Hardware proposal is taken off the table, the most likely scenario is that this property will be turned into condos. The outcome of the upcoming hearing is in no way certain. But at least it preserves this proposal (or some variation of it) as a choice. To me, that is an important consideration in working to serve the best interest of our community.

Given the full range of the ever-shifting uncertainties COVID presents, we have reached a point where we now have two basic choices:

- 1) Continue postponing this meeting until in-person attendance is certain – i.e. most likely next Spring (and thereby lose the ability to consider this proposal at all)
- 2) Proceed with the decision-making process on this proposal even if in-person attendance is not possible.

Speaking for myself: as much as I am committed to holding this meeting in person, I also believe we owe it to our community to make a decision on this proposal one way or the other. I do not believe it serves the best interest of our community to continue postponing this meeting indefinitely because by so doing, we lose the ability to even consider this proposal at all.

Postponing the meeting date even by a few months will do nothing to increase the likelihood of making in-person attendance possible. In my view, the opposite is true: given widespread predictions of a second wave in the Fall, the longer we wait, the less likely it becomes for in-person attendance to be possible.

For all of these reasons, a majority of Township Committee members support the need to proceed with the Public Hearing on 8/26 (and if needed on 9/3) even if in-person attendance is not possible and participation has to be limited to Zoom only. The thought that we MAY have to do this total anathema to me. But it's important to me that you understand well in advance that is possible – and why.

I also want to correct some misconceptions about the public hearing: the notion that the plan on the table is “take it or leave it” is simply inaccurate. Modifications can, should, and will be made to address concerns that have been and will be brought up. Discussing residents' concerns and the options for addressing them is the most important purpose for holding the Public Hearing in the first place. No one can say for sure what the final proposal will look like. That is yet to be determined as part of the public hearing. But we have to proceed with the decision-making process or the possibility of even considering this proposal will disappear.

As participants in this process, my goal (and the goal of every member of the Township Committee) is to reach a decision that serves the best interest of our community. Each of us will listen carefully and reflect deeply on every comment and suggestion that is shared. We know we need time to process and digest all of the information, ideas, and modifications that will come up. That is why we have committed NOT to vote at the public hearing but will vote at a subsequent meeting instead.

In summary: We are doing everything possible to ensure that the meetings scheduled for 8/26 (and if needed 9/3) allow for in-person attendance by anyone who is interested. Our hope is to secure a large indoor venue that meets COVID guidelines and allows plenty of room for safe social distancing. If we are unable to secure a venue (indoor or outdoor) and meet all the requirements for holding an in-person meeting, it is likely we will proceed by Zoom-only participation.

I hope this has helped you understand the exceedingly difficult circumstances COVID is presenting for all of us. I also hope we can work together in a collaborative spirit to approach these challenges with a shared goal in mind: what can we all do to serve the best interest of our community?

I look forward to keeping in touch and working together in that spirit in the days ahead.

Best to all,  
Cathy