

## **January 29, 2026 Special Townhall Meeting**

### Meeting minutes

The Mount Penn Borough Council and Lower Alsace Township Supervisors met for a Workshop/Townhall Meeting on January 29, 2026, at the Auditorium of Antietam High School located at 201 N. 25<sup>th</sup> Street, Reading, PA 19606. Supervisor John Theodossiou called the meeting to order at 7:00 PM, Christine Dise adjourned the meeting at 8:06 PM.

Supervisor Chairman John Theodossiou, Supervisor Vice Chairman Todd Weikel, Supervisor Ann Sellers, Council President Rick Lombardo, Council Vice President Christine Dise, Council Member Thomas Baer, Council Member Kelly Dudash, Council Member Troy Goodman, Council Member Michael Kindlick, and Council Member David Korinchock, were present. Mayor Ryan Maurer was absent. Staff and professionals present included Township Manager Don Pottiger and Borough Manager Hunter L. Ahrens. State Officials present were Terri Cunkle, Andrew Sheaf, Kabir Hossain, and Isabelle Fiume. About 15 community members were present including Jordan Gensemer.

#### **Presentation from DCED on Municipal Mergers & Consolidations**

Representatives from the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED) delivered a presentation on municipal merger and consolidation. Present from DCED were Andrew Sheaf (Deputy Executive Director of the PA Governor's Center), Terri Cunkle (Merger and Consolidation specialist), Kabir Hossain (Southeast Regional Government Specialist), and Isabelle Fiume (Southeast Region Planner).

Mr. Sheaf opened by providing context on DCED's role, describing the agency as a "one-stop shop" for assisting local governments across the Commonwealth. He noted that DCED had been working with Mt. Penn for approximately five years on financial and operational planning, and that through that process, broader and more sustainable options had been explored. He noted that municipal mergers, while available as an option for some time, were gaining meaningful momentum, with approximately four mergers occurring in the past year alone, and more anticipated in the near future.

Ms. Cunkle then delivered the main presentation. She began by clarifying the distinction between a merger and a consolidation: in a merger, one or more municipalities cease to exist and are absorbed into another, much like merging into a lane of traffic; in a consolidation, two or more contiguous municipalities come together to form an entirely new entity with a new name and potentially a new classification. She noted that the municipalities involved must share a border, and that school district boundaries are never affected by either process.

Ms. Cunkle outlined the two methods by which a merger or consolidation can be initiated:

1. **By Joint Agreement of Municipalities:** The elected officials of both municipalities agree to pursue a merger, solicitors jointly draft a single identical ordinance, and a referendum question is placed on the ballot. The ordinance defines the proposed merger date, which can be set up to four years in the future to allow sufficient time for integration. Ms. Cunkle noted that the timeline allows elected officials' terms to cycle through, and gave an example of one municipality that waited two years

specifically so that an 89-year-old tax collector could finish her term. Once passed in both municipalities, the ordinance is submitted to the election office no fewer than 13 weeks prior to the election. If the referendum is favorable in both municipalities, the work of integration begins; if it fails in either, the same referendum question cannot return to the ballot for five years.

2. By Initiative of the Electors: Citizens themselves can place a merger question on the ballot by gathering petition signatures representing at least 5% of the votes cast in the last gubernatorial election. A threshold Ms. Cunkle noted could be as few as eight signatures in smaller municipalities. She referenced the first-ever successful elector-initiated merger in Pennsylvania, which culminated in a ribbon-cutting on January 1 of the current year, where elected officials had declined to act and residents took the initiative themselves. In this pathway, because no joint ordinance has been drafted, the elected officials must form a board and produce a joint agreement within one year of the election certification, with full implementation to be completed within four years.

Ms. Cunkle explained that during the period between a favorable vote and the final merger date, each municipality continues to operate independently, though certain resolutions — such as those authorizing the acquisition of new debt — require mutual agreement. She described what occurs at the point of full merger: ordinances of the surviving municipality govern if it is a merger, while a consolidation's joint agreement becomes Ordinance No. 1. Zoning and tax rates must be equalized across the merged entity. She also acknowledged that mergers carry some associated costs, such as website updates, legal work, and any architectural studies needed to assess inherited buildings.

Regarding the financial rationale, Ms. Cunkle shared that DCED does not engage in merger discussions unless the preliminary numbers make sense. She confirmed that the preliminary numbers for Mt. Penn and Lower Alsace did make sense, citing the duplication of professional services — solicitors, engineers, and similar roles — as an area where efficiencies could be realized, while emphasizing that core services such as public works and police still need to be maintained. She also noted that the fear of losing community identity is a common concern but referenced examples of merged communities where residents still strongly identified with their original neighborhoods decades later.

Ms. Cunkle addressed the concern about taxes directly, acknowledging that while tax rates may differ between the two municipalities at the outset, the combined financial picture — accounting for all revenue streams — was what made the discussion worthwhile. She cautioned that even without a merger, municipalities are generally experiencing 20–30% increases in costs since the COVID-19 pandemic, and that annual incremental tax increases may be unavoidable regardless. She suggested that in some cases, municipalities in a multi-year merger process had held off on incremental increases, only for taxes to rise more noticeably at the point of consolidation — though she noted this was not unique to mergers.

Regarding community autonomy, Ms. Cunkle observed that fewer and fewer residents are even aware when they cross a municipal boundary, and that the shared provision of services tends to matter more to daily life than municipal identity. She concluded the presentation by listing recent merger successes in Pennsylvania, including the Borough of Wheatland

merging into the City of Hermitage, and the DuBois-Sandy consolidation effective January 1 — the latter resulting in a municipality of approximately 19,000 residents.

### **Public Comment**

A member of the public raised a question regarding what criteria DCED uses when determining whether "the numbers make sense." Ms. Cunkle responded that DCED examines revenues, expenses, and comparative taxation rates, and also considers what each municipality stands to gain through consolidation of resources. She reiterated that DCED would not be present if the financial case were not at least preliminarily sound.

Another member of the public asked about the primary factors behind the successful mergers that had already taken place, and what both sides could do to help achieve a successful outcome. Ms. Cunkle responded that transparency from the outset — as demonstrated by holding the present public meeting — was the single most important factor. She noted that in unsuccessful mergers, a lack of public knowledge about what was happening behind the scenes was often a significant contributor to failure.

Mr. Theodossiou added to Ms. Cunkle's response, emphasizing that it was critical for elected officials from both municipalities to remain unified and to serve as cheerleaders for the process. He warned that if elected officials were publicly supportive but privately working to undermine the merger with constituents, the effort would be a complete failure and a waste of resources — both for the municipalities and for the state taxpayers whose funds support DCED's involvement.

A member of the public raised the topic of shared services already in place between the two communities, noting that both municipalities share water, sewer, and police services, and expressing a desire to avoid the financial difficulties experienced by neighboring municipalities. The primary differentiator identified in the discussion was money — specifically, the duplication of administrative and professional costs.

A member of the public also raised a concern about school taxes, to which Ms. Cunkle's responded that municipal mergers have no effect whatsoever on school district boundaries or school tax rates, and that the municipality has no authority over school taxes.

### **Discussion of Merger Topics**

Discussion among the officials and attendees centered on the practical next steps and the structure of any potential merger study. It was suggested that rather than commissioning a comprehensive professional study — which has been done in only one of the five recent Pennsylvania mergers — the municipalities could work internally through their managers, who already have deep knowledge of each community's finances.

However, there was agreement that bringing in a neutral, third-party financial consultant specifically to assess whether the numbers make sense would be valuable, as it would provide an unbiased perspective for the public.

One official cautioned against over-investing in a broad study that would attempt to predetermine things such as which municipal building to use or the color of fleet vehicles,

noting that such details cannot bind future boards. The consensus was that the heart of any study should be the financial picture, and that a third-party financial consultant — rather than a full planning study — would be the most appropriate and cost-effective approach.

Ms. Cunkle confirmed that DCED provides assistance with public meetings and education throughout the process leading up to a ballot vote, and that formal grant and framework support from DCED is made available after a favorable referendum vote.

### **Discussion of Future Meetings**

Discussion addressed the structure and cadence of future public meetings. Ms. Cunkle urged that if the municipalities move forward, at least three additional public meetings be held after the question is placed on the ballot, to ensure that information does not become distorted as it spreads through the community. She used the analogy of a telephone game to illustrate how the message can change as it passes from person to person.

One official strongly advocated for maximum transparency at every step, recommending that all committee meetings be publicly advertised so that no member of the public could later claim the process had been conducted behind closed doors. She suggested that a full schedule of meetings be advertised at once to minimize advertising costs, with the understanding that meetings not needed could simply be cancelled rather than adding new ones piecemeal.

It was recommended that the municipalities form a small, manageable joint committee — including managers and one or two elected officials from each side — to lead the process, rather than having all officials involved in every working session. Ms. Cunkle noted that DCED is available to participate at the committee table as the process moves forward.

### **Approvals (Mount Penn Borough Only)**

*Motion by David Korinchock, seconded by Michael Kindlick, to adopt Resolution No. 22-26 to approve staff retention of emergency plow drivers and other matters. Troy Goodman abstained due to a conflict of interest. Motion carried unanimously.*

*[abstention form for Troy Goodman attached to these minutes]*

### **Adjournment**

The workshop was adjourned by Christine Dise at 8:06 PM.

Submitted by:

*Hunter L. Ahrens*

Hunter L. Ahrens (Feb 27, 2026 14:23:29 EST)

Hunter L. Ahrens, MPA, SHRM-SCP  
Borough Manager



## Borough of Mount Penn

*"The Friendly Borough"*

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January 29, 2026

Mount Penn Borough Council  
Attn: Hunter L. Ahrens  
200 N. 25<sup>th</sup> Street  
Reading, PA 19606

Mr. Ahrens,

At the January 29, 2026, meeting of Mount Penn Borough Council, I abstained from voting on the matter authorizing payment for snow plow relief driver services performed by me. This letter serves as the required written disclosure and record of my abstention and the reason for it.

Under the Pennsylvania Public Official and Employee Ethics Act (Title 65, Chapter 11), a public official is prohibited from engaging in conduct that constitutes a conflict of interest and is required to abstain from voting on matters in which the official has a direct personal financial interest. In this instance, the vote concerned compensation payable to me for services rendered as a snow plow relief driver, which constitutes a direct pecuniary interest requiring abstention pursuant to the Ethics Act, including the voting-conflict provisions of Section 1103.

This disclosure is submitted to ensure transparency, compliance with the Ethics Act, and proper inclusion in the public record. Please attach this letter to the official minutes of the Borough Council meeting held on January 29, 2026.

Sincerely,

Troy Goodman  
Borough Council Member

# Binder1

Final Audit Report

2026-02-27

Created:	2026-02-27
By:	Hunter L. Ahrens (manager@mt pennborough.com)
Status:	Signed
Transaction ID:	CBJCHBCAABAAGaDTH-TpXiWz7hFYdh0A2oLOFICS0hnc

## "Binder1" History

-  Document created by Hunter L. Ahrens (manager@mt pennborough.com)  
2026-02-27 - 7:22:56 PM GMT
-  Document emailed to Hunter L. Ahrens (manager@mt pennborough.com) for signature  
2026-02-27 - 7:22:59 PM GMT
-  Email viewed by Hunter L. Ahrens (manager@mt pennborough.com)  
2026-02-27 - 7:23:16 PM GMT
-  Document e-signed by Hunter L. Ahrens (manager@mt pennborough.com)  
Signature Date: 2026-02-27 - 7:23:29 PM GMT - Time Source: server
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