

Member Spotlight

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Yesterday and Today: Contrasting the Vision of Whitehall Borough

By James Nowalk, Mayor, Whitehall Borough

“We must adjust to changing times and still hold to unchanging principles.”

—President Jimmy Carter invoking his high school teacher Julia Coleman in his Inaugural Address

It hardly seems possible that in the approximate life span of the average American man, so much has changed about Whitehall Borough, Allegheny County. Founded in January 1948, just as the post-war boom was beginning to take hold, it is a small borough of 3.3 square miles, just outside the limits of the city of Pittsburgh, and was created when it seceded from Baldwin Township.

Its founders believed that the municipal services being provided by the township were inadequate for the growing population, and they wanted high quality police and fire protection, traffic regulation, strict zoning laws, and recreational parks to maximize the quality of life.

Traversing through Whitehall Borough today, it is difficult to imagine how it looked and felt at the time of its founding. At that time,

the population numbered 4,025 people. There were vast swaths of vacant land, woods, and marshes, several working farms and a dairy farm, few businesses and no business district, and no houses of worship offering services, but a motherhouse for the Sisters of St. Francis occupied a large tract of wooded land.

There was a single elementary school and the township high school. Most homes were modest, single family dwellings with most of the few apartments centered in a single complex. The populace was by and large, Caucasian, and voters were registered Republican by a margin of 5 to 1.

There were no municipal parks, library, or swimming pool. Borough offices were housed in a repurposed building, and the police department consisted of a chief and two officers, sharing a single patrol car.



Today's police force has a dedicated canine unit.

Whitehall Today

Contrast that vision with today's Whitehall Borough.

The remaining vacant land of perhaps a few hundred acres is slated for development, with primarily multi-family dwellings. Housing options are varied and include single-family homes, townhouses, and apartments, as well as assisted living and skilled nursing facilities.

The farms have all been sold off, but the dairy remains. There are six public parks with baseball and soccer fields, playground equipment, tennis and pickle ball courts; six churches, and three public and three private schools.

The 14-acre borough complex includes administrative offices,



Leaders of the 1976 Bicentennial Celebration pose with one of their projects.

a modern police building, an award-winning public library, a public works garage, borough swimming pool, and a plaza with an amphitheater.

The police force has 20 officers, a deputy chief and chief, a canine unit, and maintains a five-member dispatch center. The all-volunteer Whitehall Fire Company recently dedicated a modern fire station to serve the borough.

After peaking at nearly 16,000 residents in the mid-1970s, the population has stabilized at approximately 14,000, but its composition has changed dramatically.

Registered Republican voters now trail Democrats by approximately 1,000. Large influxes of refugees have made Whitehall their home – more than 20 languages are spoken, and the Baldwin-Whitehall School District has one of the largest

English as a second language (ESL) student populations in the Commonwealth.

Despite these many changes, Whitehall Borough has stayed true to the principles that guided its founding – operating with fiscal prudence, providing excellent service, and maintaining stable governance.

In 1979, Whitehall Borough became a home rule community so it could raise its wage tax and real estate transfer tax, thereby lessening its dependence on property taxes.

An accelerated property tax collection date has eliminated the costs of a tax-anticipation note. A separate fund to maintain the sanitary sewers and a single-purpose fee payable by all property owners, including non-profit organizations, to maintain the storm sewers, and a program for prefunding fire equipment

have been established. Careful fiscal management policies such as these have resulted in long stretches when property taxes were maintained, instead of being raised.

Whitehall Borough's police, fire protection, ambulance, and public works services are acknowledged to be second to none. Cooperation among these borough service providers is one reason for their continued excellence. That cooperation is modeled by the elected officials of Whitehall Borough. The council presidency rotates annually and is not determined by the party in the majority.

Another stabilizing force in Whitehall Borough is the dedication of its employees, appointees, and elected officials.

The employees retire, many working 30 or more years. The longest serving member of council has 28 years, while the mayor has been in elected office for 34 years. Appointed officials such as the borough engineer, solicitor, and volunteer commission and board members have decades-long tenures.

The elected officials are proud to say that at 70 years, Whitehall Borough is embracing change, while it continues to hold to its founding principles of service to its residents.

To learn more about Whitehall Borough, visit www.whitehallboro.org. 