



# Upper Darby

*A Home Rule Community  
Established 1736*

**Mayor Barbarann Keffer  
2022 Budget Address  
October 3, 2021**

We are approaching the end of my second year: we have returned to in-person meetings for Council and our boards and commissions. We have made modifications to municipal buildings that make them safer in the wake of COVID and for the personal safety of our employees and the public. We still live and work with the impact of the pandemic and the ensuing Delta variant, their effects felt throughout all of our departments, be it increased costs of materials and fuel, elongated delivery times or decreased revenues.

Gladly and recently, we have hosted two outstanding in-person community engagement events - the pop-up Skate Park two weeks ago at Observatory Playground, coordinating with the Delco Skatepark Coalition and the return of the International Festival in conjunction with the Friends of the Tower Theater District. This summer, we were able to offer a full and fully funded Summer Stage program with COVID precautions in place. We continue to focus on building partnerships with public and private entities like the YMCA, Septa, Friends of the Tower Theater District, the Upper Darby School District, the Tree Tenders of Upper Darby and many others to enhance our programming, spur economic development and improve our neighborhoods and business districts.

Our annual budget is an opportunity to showcase the priorities that will set us on a path to becoming the very best version of Upper Darby that we can become together. Those priorities remain, reinvestment, revitalization and reform. These three objectives are intertwined as we build the future of Upper Darby. Historically, Upper Darby has not pursued and/or received our fair share of state and federal grant money when compared to our peers communities such as Scranton, Reading, and Lancaster. A retooled and more aggressive grant writing program spearheaded by the CAO's office and implemented across all departments, working closely with our elected officials in Harrisburg and Washington has continued to bear fruit. Some of the awards we received in 2021 are:

- RACP: \$1 million for the Community Center demolition and site work
- \$75,000 for life-saving and officer protecting body-cameras
- Treevitalize Grant: \$100,000+ for streambank restoration at Gillespie Park
- PECO Green Region grant to support the Chapman Park-to-Marshall Road multi-use/bike trail

- \$425,000 from the Commonwealth Financing Authority for pedestrians improvements on Market Street & Powell Lane
- \$735,000 for 6 brand new cleaner-energy trash trucks

In addition, we have new programming initiatives to help spur development and improve public safety. The vacant property registration program will help combat blight while the Upper Darby Planning Commission will guarantee community input at an early stage in the land development process and into our future zoning code. The new Fire Code Inspection Program and the PA Department of Community and Economic Development management study of our combination career and part-time fire department will reduce community risk and improve response times and overall operations. Soon, we will be rolling out our new website and completing the transition from the AS400 system to a modern software system that increases efficiency across departments and will allow online tax and fee payments. The parking department now offers a phone app payment option at our meters and soon will offer electric vehicle charging stations in Municipal lot #1.

We are at the preliminary stage of the budget season. This year's budget continues to address the more than \$6 million structural deficits we inherited and worked hard to balance last year with no increase in taxes or fees. Once again, we do not anticipate the need to increase taxes in order to deliver a balanced budget for 2022. Unfortunately though, the nature of a structural deficit is that it recurs annually until the underlying cause or causes are addressed. In our case, the trash and sewer fees, which do not currently cover the real cost of sanitation and sewage disposal and treatment, continue to create serious budget challenges. Additionally, we inherited a budget where more than seven and a half of every ten tax dollars are already committed to staff salaries that are subject to contractually mandated annual increases. These factors when taken with the rising cost of fees from the sewer and solid waste authorities create serious challenges.

One major step we have taken is, working with AQUA, we plan to institute a more fair and equitable usage-based sewer fee system. This will not only help address the structural deficit it will ease the burden placed on seniors and others by the old flat-rate fees. Bills would be issued quarterly and you would only pay for what you actually use unlike now when a family of five or a business is paying the same fee as a single senior citizen living on a fixed income. Many municipalities in the county already use this system.

This year I plan to introduce a trash fee rebate program for seniors and other residents who also qualify for the state's Property Tax rebate. We will be working closely with our state representatives to ensure that all eligible residents receive this rebate. In order to offer this important and well deserved rebate and to address the sanitation shortfall in a responsible way, we do anticipate a trash fee increase of less than \$4 per month.

Over the next few years, we will work to further address the structural deficits. Administratively, we have implemented measures to cut costs in sewer and sanitation fees. Our recycling costs have been lowered by 30% by negotiating a new contract with a new hauler. We

instituted a weekly yard waste collection this year which diverts these materials from the trash stream. I encourage our residents to continue to keep plastic bags out of recycling bins and to participate in the yard waste collections.

Working with Council, we instituted a sewer lateral inspection ordinance which benefits new homeowners and will cut down on the infiltration and inflow which get measured and for which property owners pay. The roofs on the township building and the Watkins Center will soon be replaced and they will both have solar panels which will cut our electric costs. Measures such as these are just the beginning of our comprehensive plan to put Upper Darby on a more prosperous and financially sustainable course for the future.

Upper Darby has received American Rescue Plan money, as have most municipalities, to cover lost revenue due to COVID and to fund qualified projects mostly in the area of infrastructure. This ARP money cannot be used to cut taxes or temporarily offset other similar recurring expenses. It's primary purpose is to keep the economy moving by offsetting lost revenues due to the pandemic and it is important to note that the spending through this plan will be closely audited by the federal government. We do expect that a significant part of the funds will be used to address our revenue losses.

In our operating budget, in addition to the structural salary increases that are part of our contractual obligations to the four unions which form the bulk of our staff, we also have pension and post-employment health care mandates that are among the most expensive in the state. The 2022 budget reflects my commitment to continue a clear, accountable system that addresses long-standing structural deficits and builds the future of a vibrant Upper Darby. At the end of the process we will once again deliver a line-item budget to create transparency.

As another part of our ongoing effort to bring more transparency to the Upper Darby tax payers we are building on our already strong working relationship with the School District to untangle our balance sheets while still providing exceptional services and education to our shared populations. One major piece in this puzzle will be that the Township will begin to collect, as nearly every other municipality in the state does, half of the realty transfer taxes. While this will bring us more in line with how things are done in most other communities it will not nearly address all of our budget issues as it is simply one part of a complex financial relationship. As further evidence of our strong collaboration with the School district and our shared commitment to Upper Darby's future, we are continuing our strong support of their capital facilities improvement program which will enhance our children's education and benefit our entire community for decades to come.

The operating budget reflects our commitment to reinvest in our workforce with paid professional development, promotion-opportunities and a retooled Human Resources Division; we hired 19 new police officers this year, the most qualified and most diverse cohort in Upper Darby history and we're on track to make significant progress in our Fire Department early in 2022. For the first time in our history, we have also hired a Director of Community and Economic Development who brings a vast array of professional experience to help us grow and promote

our commercial tax base, business community, and non-profit sector. Our public spaces have also seen a significant focus and investment: a park system master plan, sidewalk ADA accessibility, a multi-municipal bike lane and trail study, improved and modernized parking lots, vibrant streetscapes, increased litter control and a street sweeping demonstrate my administration's commitment to reinvest in and revitalize our community. The time is now for transit-connected, walkable inner-ring suburbs such as ours to reclaim their rightful place as the most desired locations for growing families and businesses to live, work, and play.

On Wednesday, our CAO will present the preliminary budget and we look forward to discussion with Council and our taxpayers. Thank you.