

STRATEGIC Leadership & Governance

Under 10,000 Population

SUSTAINABLE MUNICIPAL COMPLEX

Forest Hills Borough, Pennsylvania

Steven Morus, ICMA-CM, Borough Manager



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The former Forest Hills Municipal Building, which housed administrative and police services, was built in 1922. As it aged, its limitations were obvious. Deficits included inadequate meeting and storage space, poor security, and lack of compatibility with ADA requirements. The building had a high operating cost, due in part to poor insulation.

Forest Hills is recognized as a Tree City and a “green” community, and the municipal building had little in the way of sustainable, green design. Its configuration made renovations costly and any sustainable design features almost impossible. A new, green facility was an opportunity to pursue the borough’s goal of a sustainable, environmentally friendly municipality as identified in its gold certification with Sustainable Pennsylvania and its new comprehensive plan.

An appraisal of the existing building and estimates for a new structure supported construction of a new facility, and the borough issued a bond to finance most of its cost. A grant from Allegheny County made it possible to accommodate a branch library that had been housed in a former senior center.



After some early difficulties in planning and design, oversight of the project was placed in the hands of the borough manager with assistance from the chief of police. Construction was substantially completed in January 2018. These are among the improvements in the new building:

- Enhanced access and working conditions, including about 20 percent additional space for offices, board and community meetings, and storage.
- Secure control of access in the police area, with separation between areas for the public and those for suspects.
- Improved parking for greater public access and convenience.
- Water-conserving plumbing fixtures with automatic controls that reduce water use.
- Natural light: A large clerestory panel across the peak of the roof plus a long glass-enclosed front hallway.
- A net zero annual energy use profile (equivalent to LEED Gold), with significant cost savings compared with the old building.

Several features contribute to energy efficiency. The building has energy-efficient LED lighting with motion sensor and daylight-sensing controls throughout. Electricity comes from solar panels on the roof, and the roof is angled to receive maximum sunlight throughout the year. Forty 90-foot-deep geothermal wells below a portion of the parking lot provide heating and air conditioning. And the building design includes excellent insulation.

Other sustainable building features:

- Rain gardens surround the building, and a large area in the middle of the parking lot is constructed as a bioswale to manage stormwater runoff. Sand and limestone infiltration beds reduce runoff acidity and temperature.
- Because Forest Hills is a Tree City, wood was a design theme. The main roof panels are supported on beams and columns made of glue-laminated wood rather than steel or concrete. This is one of many examples of the sustainable, nontoxic, recycled material content of the building.

Throughout the construction, the borough manager interacted with residents and officials, using Twitter and YouTube to provide well-received verbal and video updates. These videos and photos continue to illustrate to the public the unique, sustainable character of the new municipal complex and enhance the borough’s reputation as a green community. **PM**