

CITY OF BERLIN

New Hampshire

Minutes of Council Budget Session of 3/30/2022

Council Chambers

6:30 pm

Members:

Mayor Grenier
Councilor Roland Theberge
Councilor Berthiaume
Councilor Remillard
Councilor Morgan
Councilor Higbee
Councilor Eastman
Councilor Robert Theberge
Councilor Morency

Police Commissioners:

Gerry Nault
Marc Tremblay

City Staff:

James Watkins, Fire Chief
Daniel Buteau, Police Chief
Nathan Roy, Police Captain
Kimberly Bijeau, PD Administrative Assistant
Jenn Cloutier, Police Department Dispatch Supervisor
Pamela Laflamme, Interim City Manager
Holly Larsen, Finance Director
Cpl. Dennis Gale and Kodiak

Public:

Kevin Botelho, North Country Home Health and Hospice
William Carroll, Berlin Daily Sun

Mayor Grenier called the meeting to order at 6:31 p.m.

1. Outside Agencies:

a. North Country Home Health and Hospice Agency

Kevin Botelho of North Country Home Health and Hospice advised that in 2021, they served 459 homecare patients in Berlin, 125 hospice patients, and 12 long-term care patients. Mr. Botelho advised that the agency has expanded their services to include the Plymouth area as well. They continue to develop their palliative care program. Mayor Grenier asked how much of their operating budget is from Medicaid or Medicare and Mr. Botelho advised about 80%. Mr. Botelho advised they also have some private insurers. Mayor Grenier asked if they use funds from municipalities to match grant funds and Mr. Botelho advised he was not sure, as that would be a question for their Community Relations Director.

Mayor Grenier asked if they request funds from other communities and Mr. Botelho advised that they do from Gorham, Colebrook, and Littleton. Mr. Botelho advised that they are required to provide services even if Medicaid and Medicare benefits have run out, so municipal funds can help to cover some of that cost. Mr. Botelho also advised that the reimbursement is higher for hospice, so that helps their budget. Mr. Botelho stated that they have a good reputation in the community and provide a valuable service. Mayor Grenier noted that it takes a special person to work in this field. Mr. Botelho noted that many agencies do not have full-time medical providers on staff, however they do provide this service.

Councilor Higbee moved, with a second by Councilor Berthiaume, to add two items to the Agenda under Other, HB1417 and Public Works Equipment. So moved, the motion carried.

2. Safety Division:

a. Fire Department Budget

Mayor Grenier invited Chief Watkins to present the Fiscal Year 2023 Fire Department budget.

Chief Watkins advised there is not much change in the 2023 budget. Chief Watkins advised there is an increase in salary due to the stipend for the change in job description for his position. There is also an increase in vehicle repair.

Chief Watkins advised that they are still waiting on the two Assistance to Firefighters grants, which are supposed to be awarded in April. Chief Watkins advised that it appears they will get the grant for the cardiac monitor, and he is supposed to get an email with final approval next week.

Chief Watkins reviewed the Fire Department's fleet, noting the age and hours out-of-service for each vehicle since June of 2021. Chief Watkins advised that although BPW has done a great job trying to get things repaired, the City needs to look at a way to get new equipment. Mayor Grenier asked what the down payment would be on a lease purchase for a new engine if they did not get the grant, and Chief Watkins advised it would be \$95,000. Chief Watkins advised it takes about 24 months from the order to delivery. Mayor Grenier stated that if they do get the grant for the engine, the City should consider getting a ladder truck. Chief Watkins was asked if the reason for the delay in delivery was due to the oversize motor and 4-wheel drive, and Chief Watkins advised it was not, it is due to staffing and materials. Chief Watkins advised that Senator Shaheen, Senator Hassan, and Representative Kuster all wrote letters of support to FEMA as to why the larger engine and 4-wheel drive were needed in Berlin. Councilor Robert Theberge asked if the old engine could be sold, and Chief Watkins advised it could be, but it could not be used for emergency services. Councilor Robert Theberge also asked if there was a charge to borrow Gorham's engine and Chief Watkins advised they did not charge anything.

b. Ambulance

Mayor Grenier invited Scott Lees from Butler Ambulance Services to speak. Mr. Lees advised that they have been providing services in Berlin since December of 2020. Mr. Lees advised that they have had some scares with staffing, however they currently have 6 paramedics, 4 AEMT, 5 EMT, and are paying for four students to attend the EMT class who will join the service as employees when finished. They also currently have 2 in paramedic school and 2 in AEMT classes. Mr. Lees advised that the state lost many EMT's over the last few years, due to the stress of Covid on EMS workers. Mr. Lees advised that they have a new ambulance coming on May 1, and just got a Z Vent ventilator from Zoll. They also have 6 IV pumps, one for every truck to administer medication if needed, and 3 new power cots. They have done some work in the building as well, with a new bathroom and new furniture.

Mayor Grenier advised that volunteer resources are shrinking with the aging population, and asked if the ambulance service has considered expanding their outreach to include other communities. Mr. Lees advised that the Milan and Dummer service has been unable to provide services, and that last week they had to refuse two calls there as it would have left Berlin without coverage. Gorham Ambulance ended up responding to those calls.

Mayor Grenier advised that the City is providing dispatch services to the company, as well as assistance from the Fire Department personnel, and asked if the company had considered some sort of reimbursement to the City when they have a profitable year. There is currently no mechanism for reimbursement in the contract. Mr. Lees noted that calls being routed to their office from 911 would not be in the best interest of the public, as they do not have the equipment needed for things such as pinging the location of a cell phone. Mr. Lees stated he would mention the idea of a reimbursement to the City to the owner.

Councilor Berthiaume asked about the total calls for service in 2021, and Mr. Lees advised it was about 2000. Mr. Lees advised they would be providing reports to the Fire Chief on the first Monday of every month per the new contract.

Councilor Morency asked about the indemnification section of the EMS contract, which states “reasonable attorneys’ fees”, and wondered who determines what is reasonable. Mr. Lees advised that not much has changed in the contract from last time, but he can mention this to the owner.

c. Police Budget

Chief Daniel Buteau presented the proposed 2023 budget for the Police Department. Chief Buteau advised that the cost of living and inflation has risen, with the cost of fuel rising substantially. Chief Buteau advised that this budget takes this into account, while still continuing to offer services. Chief Buteau advised that the operating budget has increased 5.1%. The police union is currently negotiating a new contract, and have asked for no new increases, other than the 1.5% that was given in January and step increases. No additional positions have been added to the budget. Health insurance has a not-to-exceed rate of 12% for the coming year.

Chief Buteau advised that law enforcement officers see the worst society has to offer and have been pummeled by lawsuits and false accusations. Chief Buteau advised that this climate is partly to blame for the difficulty in keeping staff members and the substantial turnover rate. Chief Buteau advised it is increasingly difficult to hire new staff, which is a trend throughout the country, not just in Berlin.

Captain Roy advised that over the last 4 years, the Police Department has had to replace 16 officers; 3 that retired, 2 who left for better positions, 2 trainees that did not work out, and 9 who left the law enforcement profession. Captain Roy noted that the Police Academy provides a foundation of knowledge, but they also need to provide in-service training. The Police Academy used to provide many of these courses free of charge, but they have cut back on this. Mayor Grenier asked if the department could provide their own trainers, and Captain Roy advised they do have some who have attended instructor courses, however offering programs does increase liability. They currently provide their own in-house training for Tasers, OC, MOAB, and firearms.

Councilor Robert Theberge asked if the sign-on bonuses at the prisons will cause a problem with staffing or hiring at the Police Department. Captain Roy advised that many other agencies are offering bonuses of up to \$15,000 to recruit certified officers, however he does not believe that the prison will take staffing from the department due to forced overtime requirements there.

Mayor Grenier commented on the need for the Police Commission, which provides a buffer for the Council. Mayor Grenier also noted that the community respects the police force, and that this respect comes from good leadership.

Mayor Grenier noted that he will sit down with Chief Buteau to review the budget, as a \$6.00 increase in taxes is untenable for the City.

Councilor Morency complimented the Police Department on the activities they are providing to connect with children in the community.

Jennifer Cloutier, the Communications Manager, spoke in reference to the challenges that dispatchers face. Ms. Cloutier advised the challenges are similar to officers, as they are the first person to speak to people in crisis, and suffer from the same vicarious trauma, mental health issues, and stressors. Ms. Cloutier noted that in NH, dispatchers are still classified as clerical workers, although a lot of states have proposed legislation to change this classification to first responders.

Ms. Cloutier noted that the radio system is 20 years old, and they are looking at plans to replace it, as it is the lifeline for officers and can jeopardize their safety if not working properly.

Ms. Cloutier noted that the dispatchers they have are excellent, and they want to retain them. Ms. Cloutier stated that dispatch part-time wages start at \$15.62 per hour, and full-time at \$16.62. This was increased from \$12.35 prior to that. There is no increase included in this budget, but it may be considered in the future.

Commissioner Gerry Nault complimented Ms. Cloutier on her work, stating that she is known statewide. Commissioner Nault noted that information technology is needed, but creates a fiscal strain on the budget. Commissioner Nault noted that although it is difficult to recruit fully trained officers, many come to Berlin to work due to the department's good reputation.

Councilor Robert Theberge asked about the School Resource Officer position and Chief Buteau advised they are still hoping to fill it.

Chief Buteau asked the Council to reconsider their budget request for body cameras and Tasers, communication equipment, radios, and cruisers, which was cut in the City Manager's budget. Mayor Grenier asked if the \$106,000 originally requested for cruisers was for two, and Chief Buteau advised it was, with the equipment setup. Chief Buteau advised that they are planning to stay with the Ford Explorers, so that the equipment is interchangeable. Chief Buteau will email the list of vehicles in their fleet to the Interim City Manager.

3. BEMS Contract:

Interim City Manager Pamela Laflamme advised that the contract contains the changes requested by the Council at the previous meeting and has been reviewed by the City Attorney.

Councilor Remillard moved, with a second by Councilor Morgan, to approve the contract with Berlin Emergency Medical Services as presented.

Councilor Morency again questioned the language about attorney fees. Ms. Laflamme advised that the City Attorney has reviewed the contract and was comfortable with the language. Chief Watkins advised the same language was also in prior contracts.

So moved, the motion passed.

4. Other:

a. HB1417

Councilor Robert Theberge advised that HB1417, concerning the state contribution to the NHRS, will be going to the floor of the House. Councilor Robert Theberge advised that he will defend it on the floor. Councilor Robert Theberge advised that the letter from the Mayors arrived late, but thanked Mayor Grenier for signing. Councilor Robert Theberge suggested that for time sensitive items in the future, the Mayor should consider acting before consulting the Council. Mayor Grenier advised that he only has certain extra powers granted by the Charter, and that acting outside of that authority would be a disservice to the community. Mayor Grenier advised that he only signed that letter because it was from a group of people, not specific to Berlin.

b. Public Works Equipment Request

Interim City Manager Pamela Laflamme advised that the public works department is need of a piece of equipment to help with road repairs that was not in the budget. They have an opportunity to purchase a used roller from Milton Rents for \$15,800. Ms. Laflamme advised that there were funds included in the 2021 budget for a sidewalk tractor that have not been expended that could be used for the roller. Ms. Laflamme advised that she would bring a formal Resolution to Council on Monday night.

Councilor Robert Theberge mentioned that if the state suspends the gas tax, it may affect the amount of money the City receives.

Councilor Berthiaume moved, with a second from Councilor Higbee to approve the expenditure of \$15,800 for a roller for the Public Works Department to come from account 01-480-913-0025. So moved, the motion carried.

Mayor Grenier advised that they would have to vote to suspend the rules at the meeting on Monday to approve the Resolution for this purchase that evening.

A motion to adjourn was made by Councilor Higbee and seconded by Councilor Berthiaume. So moved, the motion carried.

Adjourned at 7:57 p.m.

Respectfully submitted by Shelli Fortin, City Clerk