

CITY COUNCIL MEETING – Tuesday, January 17, 2023

Regular Meeting

Mayor Grenier called the Regular City Council Meeting to order at approximately 7:25 pm.

a. Pledge of Allegiance

b. Roll Call

Present: Mayor Grenier, Councilors Higbee, Eastman, Remillard, Roland Theberge, and Morency

Absent: Councilors Morgan, Robert Theberge, and Berthiaume

Also present: City Manager Phillip Warren, Jr, Director of Strategic Initiatives Pamela Laflamme, City Clerk Shelli Fortin, Rep. Corinne Cascadden, Jan Zicha, Jeffrey Quackenbush, Dan Whittet, Dammon Frecker, Robert Labrecque, and Lisa Connell, Berlin Daily Sun.

c. Councilor Remillard moved, with a second by Councilor Higbee, to accept the minutes of the January 3, 2023 Regular Meeting and Work Session. So moved, the motion passed.

Disbursements:

Disbursement Summary Draft #1929 start date 01/04/2023 end date 01/17/2023 for a total cash disbursement of \$1,050,940.73. Councilor Roland Theberge moved with a second by Councilor Higbee to accept the disbursement summary and pay all bills as recommended by the Committee on Accounts/Claims. So moved, the motion passed.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

Robert Labrecque, who owns property on Peavey Lane, asked about the budget and how much it went up. Mayor Grenier advised that the budget has not gone up, but the residential values climbed higher than the utility or commercial values, which shifted the tax burden to residential properties. Mayor Grenier advised that residential values increased, while utilities decreased, and commercial stayed about the same. They are not raising more money for the budget; the property tax pie has been re-aligned. Mr. Labrecque stated that the property assessments are not fair and that there is no incentive to fix your property, as you are penalized by higher taxes. Mr. Labrecque stated that he bought the home as a foreclosure and fixed it, and now he is paying double what his neighbors do. Mr. Labrecque noted that he cannot charge \$1,600 in rent, and that his taxes are up 56%, while his income is only up 8%. Mayor Grenier advised that the revaluation was forced on the city by the DRA, and they are required to follow the guidelines. Mayor Grenier also noted that the state has consistently pulled money away from communities, while giving tax breaks to big corporations. Mayor Grenier advised that even though the state is legally required by law to pay 35% of NHRS, they have funded zero in the last five years. Mayor Grenier also advised that Berlin has lost \$14 million in revenue sharing since 2009, which could have been used for infrastructure and to reduce property taxes. However, the state has consistently downshifted costs to local governments. Mayor Grenier suggested that Mr. Labrecque talk to his state legislators, of which Rep. Cascadden is here tonight and has been fighting for funding for education. Mayor Grenier suggested that Mr. Labrecque become active in following how the legislators are voting in Concord. Mayor Grenier also noted that property values are based on sales. Mr. Labrecque stated that there needs to be a return on investment, and if this was a different area, the rents may be higher. Mr. Labrecque noted that this is a depressed area, however he chose to come back here to live for less pay but a better quality of life.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

1. Council Committee Reports

There were no Council committee reports.

NEW BUSINESS

1. Resolution 2023-01 Aerial Ladder and Pumper Lease Purchase (1st read)

Councilor Remillard moved, with a second by Councilor Higbee, to table the Resolution and schedule a public hearing for February 6, 2023. So moved, the motion carried.

2. Resolution 2023-02 CPCNH Membership (1st read)

Councilor Higbee moved, with a second by Councilor Morency, to table the Resolution and schedule a public hearing for February 6, 2023. So moved, the motion carried.

3. Ordinance 2023-01 Building Inspection Fees (1st read)

Councilor Remillard moved, with a second by Councilor Higbee, to table the Ordinance and schedule a public hearing for February 6, 2023. So moved, the motion carried.

4. City Manager's Report

1. Attached is the Fire Chief's December report, the Monthly Incident Report and the EMS call volume report.
2. We had another snow / rain event on Friday, it appears that we fared better this time – staff did spend a lot of time before and during the storm making sure basins were clear, brooks were running and ponding in the roads was kept to a minimum.
3. The budget process is beginning – Finance will be sending out directives as to the amounts for various line items such as fuel, NHRS, health insurance and others. My question to the Council – is there any specific direction that should be offered? It has been stated prior that this office will be focusing on all line items to ensure the necessity and amount of each item – the goal being that some efficiencies can be gained by a “fresh look”. Overall, my recommendation on budget would be that we should continue to deliver the services and programs we currently do, without adding any new services or programs or increasing the scope of said services.
4. We continue with training at various departments – this week the sewer crew will be trained in structure and pipeline assessment. This will allow staff to analyze and report the condition of our underground assets for both sewer and stormwater in an “industry standard” format. With the addition of the new camera this initiative will be a successful one.
5. The Capital Improvement Program is almost presentation ready – it is expected that the council will get a look at it prior to the next council meeting – the step after that will be to present it to the Planning Board.
6. Staff has been working at the Public Works facility readying the area for the salt shed project. It is planned that the project will begin in the spring. The acceptance of the funds from the county for this project will appear on a future agenda.
7. The City Hall chairlift has reached the end of its life. Prices are being sought for a replacement.

City Manager Warren called attention to the Fire Chief's Report and the number of hours that the apparatus were out of service, 87 hours for Engine 4.

Councilor Remillard moved, with a second by Councilor Higbee, to accept the City Manager's Report and place it on file.

Councilor Higbee asked about the chairlift replacement, and if they will be replacing it with the same system. City Manager Warren advised that it is too expensive to replace it with an elevator, and that an elevator would be a very large project due to the architecture of the building. An elevator would destroy half of the stairway in the lobby. The other possibility would be to re-orient spaces on the Finance side of the building, but that would require a complete overhaul of the building. At this time, the recommendation is to replace the lift in-kind.

So moved, the motion passed.

5. Mayor's Report

Mayor Grenier advised the Council that on February 6, 2023, there would be a group from the Androscoggin Valley Energy Committee meeting with the Council during the Work Session before finalizing their membership in the coalition. Mayor Grenier advised that City Manager Warren had some points to clarify with the City Attorney before they finalize.

Mayor Grenier also advised that they will have a non-meeting on January 30, 2023 with their attorney and the Board of Selectman from Gorham in reference to legal issues.

a. State of the City Address

The past year of 2022 has been a good year for the long term future of our great city. We began the year looking for a qualified replacement for long time City Manager Jim Wheeler and we could not be more proud of the hiring of Philip Warren Jr. as our new manager. Phil is very experienced in a host of areas in municipal management in communities large and small with varying degrees of wealth. During his second interview, Mr. Warren was eager to take on the challenges the City of Berlin faces as we reinvent our future and I am excited to work side by side with him as we chart a new course. Public acknowledgment must be given to Community Development Director/Asst. City Manager Pam Laflamme, Deputy Public Works Director Mark Lapointe and City Comptroller Holly Larsen for their herculean efforts to keep our city moving during the 6 months Berlin was without a city manager.

January 2 of last year also saw the retirement of long time Berlin Police Chief Peter Morency. Chief Morency served for decades in various roles of law enforcement including the ever dangerous NH Drug Task Force. Pete continues to serve our community as a Berlin City Councilor and is currently president of the New England Police Chiefs' Association. Long time Deputy Chief Dan Buteau was promoted to Berlin Police Chief and has done a remarkable job in today's difficult law enforcement environment.

The most exciting news of 2022, however, is Berlin's grant awards totaling nearly \$21,150,000! With the steadfast support of our very effective members of the Berlin City Council, I worked hand in hand with our federal delegation members as well as fellow members of the Coos County Board of Commissioners and Delegation to secure badly needed funding. This is a prime example of how developing good, honest, long term working relationships with dedicated people of both parties benefit the people I was elected to serve.

The grant funds will take some time to draw down as there are very strict federal guidelines we must follow. Among the smaller projects that will be completed at little to no cost to Berlin include the completion of the East Mason Street bridge over the canal, engineering for the installation of water and sewer infrastructure phase 1 to extend to Jericho Mountain State Park, a new salt shed for Berlin Public Works (finally!!), a brand new state of the art 4WD pumper truck for the Berlin Fire Department and finally a grant to study the feasibility of supplying effluent water from the Berlin Pollution Control facility to White Mountain Paper Company and treating their effluent. The granddaddy of all the grants is the full depth reconstruction of Main and Pleasant Streets. Beginning from the Post Office, construction will head down Exchange Street to Main Street, all the way up Main Street to Good Shepard Church, back down Pleasant Street to the Post Office. It will include all connecting side streets, water sewer and storm drain infrastructure, the removal and replacement of the box culvert "bridge" on lower Main Street that has been slowly failing for years. Light poles will be new and with the snow melt grid as part of the final project, that area of the city will be ice and snow free during winter months. It was that part of this ambitious project that earned the scoring to be awarded the grant.

As all residential homeowners in Berlin and Gorham witnessed last month, myself included, not all news is positive to report and I will not downplay the impacts. The crazily rapid increases in prices of homes sold in our area in the last five years have created a massive shift in property tax allocation. The amount to be raised by taxes from this spring remained unchanged but the allocation from various property classes did. Commercial values had a very small overall increase as did the values of utilities. Utility values are subject to conditions as of April 1st in the new tax year. Because utility property is essentially a calendar year behind in change of values, we expect some upward change in the coming year. As a result, utility values went from about 36% of Berlin's tax value to 25%. Commercials also went down as a percentage so you can see how we were all affected. That said, the amount to be raised by taxes this coming year, an item under direct control of the City Council, will come under heavy scrutiny. This issue also raises the critical importance of the Main/Pleasant Street reconstruction project. Poor infrastructure conditions will not attract investor dollars, which in turn will not increase values from the center of our downtown. Our big bond issue the city took for the Rt 110 realignment will mature in FY 2026 (three years), freeing up nearly \$440,000 annually for street repair. The city is currently developing a plan with North Country Council to address roadway rehabilitation, condition of subsurface utilities and traffic volume to maximize the efficiency of the \$500,000 that will become available on an annual basis.

Finally, on a lighter note, I want to take a moment to recognize a few organizations who perform tremendous work volunteering to make our city a better place. First, I can never forget "Championship Sunday" last March. Berlin High School boys, Berlin Youth Hockey Pee Wees and Berlin Youth Hockey Mites all won their state tournaments. It was a very proud moment for Berlin's rich hockey history. Ryan-Scammon Post 36 Jr Legion Baseball team, coached by DJ Johnson and Rick Mercier, won the state title. Consisted of young players from throughout the North Country, these athletes made Berlin proud. Nansen Ski Club continues to put Berlin back on the map with Nordic skiing events and I'm praying we get snow for the upcoming winter carnival. The Androscoggin Valley Chamber of Commerce is back in full force after being restricted by COVID-19 for over two years. All of the chamber sponsored

events went off without a hitch, including an unforgettable Riverfire celebration. There are many more awesome, standout volunteers who do great work without an ounce of recognition, and for that, I thank you.

6. Public Comments

Rep. Corinne Cascadden of 1787 Hutchins Street advised that she is wearing a different hat, but is looking forward to meeting others on the team. Ms. Cascadden noted that consistency in leadership is what makes a difference in how a community makes progress. Rep. Cascadden stated that she is on the Education Committee, and that there are 120 bills that they will be holding public hearings on. Rep. Cascadden stated that the work is intense, and the goal is helping with school funding. Rep. Cascadden noted that this is a hot topic, and she will keep fighting, and it will make a difference as to who is present and absent when they vote. Rep. Cascadden advised that she is there to listen and learn and see where the needs are. Rep. Cascadden stated that if there is anything she can do, to please contact her.

7. Council Comments

There were no Council comments.

8. Adjournment

On a motion by Councilor Higbee, seconded by Councilor Roland Theberge, the Council voted to adjourn the meeting at 8:00 pm. So moved, the motion carried.

A True Record, Attest:

Shellie Fortin
City Clerk

Note: Minutes are unofficial until they have been accepted by the Council by motion.