

CITY COUNCIL MEETING – Monday, May 6, 2024

Regular Meeting

Mayor Cone called the Regular City Council Meeting to order at approximately 8:17 pm.

a. Pledge of Allegiance

b. Roll Call

Present: Mayor Cone, Councilors Qualls, Higbee, Morency, Valerino, Grenier, Korzen, and Theberge.

Absent: Councilor Berthiaume

Also present: City Manager Phillip Warren, Jr., Director of Strategic Initiatives Pamela Laflamme, Finance Director Holly Larsen, City Clerk Shelli Fortin, Superintendent Julie King, Jamie Welch, Gina Welch, William Graham, and Lisa Connell, Berlin Daily Sun.

c. Councilor Korzen moved, with a second by Councilor Grenier, to accept the minutes of the April 15, 2024 Regular Meeting and Work Session, and April 22, 2024 Budget Work Session. So moved, the motion passed.

Disbursements:

Disbursement Summary Draft #1960 with a start date of 04/16/2024 and an end date of 05/06/2024 for a total cash disbursement of \$1,551,202.80. Councilor Theberge moved, with a second by Councilor Valerino, to accept the disbursement summary and pay all bills as recommended by the Committee on Accounts/Claims. So moved, the motion passed.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

There were no public comments.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

1. Council Committee Reports

There were no Council Committee Reports.

NEW BUSINESS

1. City Manager's Report

1. Attached please find the BWW – Municipal Water Usage from January 2, 2024 to April 1, 2024 (May 2024 Billing Quarter).
2. We have begun the transition from winter to spring maintenance, including street sweeping, repairs from winter maintenance, line painting and grounds cleanup.
3. Recently some residents picked up all of the roadside trash on Hutchins Street – our thanks are offered to these civic minded people!
4. The Day of Caring is Friday May 17.
5. We are still working on the chairlift for City Hall – the requested waiver was denied by the state. Staff from Garaventa is coming back out to remeasure the area and provide some possible alternatives.
6. We were just advised that the construction of the tennis courts at Horne Field should commence in early June.
7. I had a discussion with a property owner regarding dilapidated buildings, specifically the former motel next to Berlin Marketplace. They were surprised to learn that the taxes are current and that since the building is secured there is nothing the city can do. This particular building is presently secured and when openings are found the property owner addresses them.

City Manager Warren also noted that the rocks at Horne Field are in the way of the new tennis court. They will be removed and stored.

Councilor Grenier moved, with a second by Councilor Valerino, to accept the City Manager's report and place it on file.

Councilor Grenier asked about the time frame for the pickleball courts on Glen Avenue. City Manager Warren advised it will be late summer, to coincide with paving.

So moved, the motion passed.

1a. Union Contracts

Councilor Grenier read the cost items into the record for BESS, BEA, and AFSCME Local 1444. The totals for all three are as follows:

Year 1	\$1,020,598.60
Year 2	\$1,749,964.16
Year 3	\$2,287,838.88

Councilor Grenier moved, with a second by Councilor Higbee, to approve the BEA, BESS, and AFSCME Local 1444 cost items as presented.

Councilor Grenier noted that finding good people in this environment is difficult, and the unions have been fair with the City. Councilor Grenier noted that it is a big price tag, however it is the largest department in the City with over half of the employees and budget. Councilor Grenier noted that the year 1 cost was already built into the proposed budget.

So moved, the motion carried by roll call vote. Qualls – yes, Higbee – yes, Morency – yes, Valerino – yes, Grenier – yes, Korzen – yes, Theberge – yes, Cone – yes

2. Mayor's Report

a. Letter from William Rosenberg re: EMS Services

Esteemed Council Members,

I wanted to take brief few moments of your time to discuss the current and future state of 911 Emergency Services in the City of Berlin, since we have neither been asked, what I think are important questions, nor been allowed to address the council.

Those of you who do not know me my name is William Rosenberg; I am CEO and owner of Berlin Emergency Medical Services (BEMS). I purchased BEMS in December of 2021 from Christopher Dubey, the Dubey family had been providing emergency services to the citizens of the city since 1980. In the summer of 2021 when I came to visit the city and look at the possibility of purchasing BEMS, I was originally, given its rural location and travel from the airport turned off, but during my drive, and after meeting the staff, seeing the town, and taking in all the things Berlin has to offer fell in love with the town and it's residents, and as they say the rest is history. I am a paramedic, an accomplished Operations Executive with 20 plus years of success driving organizational growth and multi-state expansion within the healthcare field, father of four kids and four dogs, but most importantly I am an involved, engaged, and proud sole owner of BEMS with an unrelenting passion for its service to this community and beyond.

Prior to the acquisition, I meet with the city council at the time, to express my desire to work with them to upgrade the care the citizens received, through technology, staffing, training, and so much more. During that hearing I expressed my desire to be partners for the long haul, not raise rates beyond what was reasonably necessary to maintain and never leave the citizens in a lurch without the best possible care available. Their biggest fear was one seen by so many small cities; a local company gets acquired, the new owner comes in and at the next renewal double the price, cut service and quality, or worse leave town as is often the case with large multi-owner companies such as AMR. BEMS is not owned by private equity, we are not a large conglomerate, and although not a New Hampshire resident, I am the sole owner who cares about the patients and employees, that only answers to himself for the care and quality provided. After all, a survey completed the previous year estimated it cost the city more than triple what BEMS was charging, and they would likely get less service, especially should there be a fire and EMS emergency simultaneously.

The city council agreed we would work on a long-term agreement, unfortunately through staff turnover in the city, when it came to renewal time, despite our desire for a five-year locked in price agreement with a minimalistic 4% increase in a time when inflation was greater than 9%, we were rebuked by the Fire Chief, and a three-year agreement was struck. When I bought BEMS, my intention was to provide steady reliable, professional, high-quality EMS access for the long haul, or frankly I wouldn't have invested the money I have.

Since acquiring BEMS, we have added a second full time staffed ALS crew to the city, not on call as the agreement requires. We have added ventilators and IV pumps to the crew's assets, added power stretchers for the safety of the patients and crews, and replaced one of the aging ambulances. A second brand new ambulance is due in this summer; however, may be diverted if another agreement cannot be reached with the city. Our agreement calls for a primary ambulance no more than seven years of age, and a second ambulance no more than ten years of age staffed within 30 minutes of a call, as noted above it is staffed 24/7 in the city going above and beyond our contractual requirements. It is important to note that our primary 911 ambulance is and always has been four-wheel drive equipped: a necessity considering the winters in Berlin.

The lack of communication and transparency regarding the cities desire to take EMS under the auspices of the Fire Department (FD), is baffling to me considering the 30+ year partnership, and collaboration between the city and BEMS. I would've welcomed the opportunity to schedule a meeting with the mayor to discuss the pros and cons of the cities desire to bring EMS under the FD. Understanding the importance of this decision and knowing the data I could provide to aid in the Council making an informed decision, I reached out the mayor to have this discussion.

It would be remiss of me if I did not share several important data points with the group. The billing numbers provided to the city are inaccurate causing your revenue projections to be too high. The parent company to BEMS employees ten fulltime billers working to collect at the highest level, and at a fraction of the cost the city will have to pay an outside billing company who is never as vested as the provider. When BEMS was acquired and collections came in house, collection rose almost 17%. Additionally, the FD's capital costs, are understated if you want ambulances in service providing safe care, if you only have two and one is down for maintenance, you are at a deficit, and given their age, and mileage there will be high maintenance costs, and no you cannot simply re-chassis them both. Current wait time for re-chassis is approximately 18-24 months and one of the ambulances purchased would not be a candidate. You have been told that there is a cost to the FD and Police Department because of BEMS providing 911 services, first let's address the FD, we did not ask for them to be added to many of our calls that was done by the Fire Chief, not us, so that cost is self-inflated, as for the PD dispatching, again this was not our request; during COVID-19 we were informed of how the city would be dispatching. If you would like to just intake 911 calls and have us dispatch ourselves that is an option as well. Lastly, the ability for the city to recruit four to eight paramedics at the FD current salaries will be near impossible. We employ several recruiters and offer a higher salary and have a clear understanding of the roadblocks to staffing.

In closing, yes, we would like to renew our contract, and we would commit to a long-term contract up to ten years with a locked in price. If the FD request is not funded and you open an RFP the price will be significantly higher than now, as opposed to a simple negotiation. If we negotiate a price, it will be similar to current pricing with mild COLA increase. Yes, if we stop doing 911, it is highly unlikely we will or anyone else will serve AVH timely, meaning you may have a FD to take you to AVH, but you may also die waiting for a transfer to a tertiary care facility, because 911 and IFT MUST work in synergy for both to be viable in a community as rural as Berlin.

Most importantly thank you for your partnership, I sincerely hope you are willing to hear the rest of the story and more of the facts than you are being told, not in an aggressive campaign manner as they are being fed to you, but in a simple discussion of facts, and then you the council members get to make your decision as elected to do, but any decision with only half the facts, and none from the source of truth (BEMS) on things like actual EMS revenue, actual costs, IFT effects, and staffing and capital challenges, in my mind is a foolish decision.

I look forward to talking to you in the future, and hope you look at all the facts and consider the experience and insight I'm willing to share before making a major decision that could negatively impact both the physical health of the citizens and the fiscal health of the city.

Yours in Service and Partnership,

William Rosenberg, M.S., NRP, CCENT-P
President & CEO

b. Dinner on the Bridge – St. Kieran Community Center for the Arts

Dear Ms. Fortin,

On behalf of St. Kieran Community Center for the Arts, I would like to request the use of the Bridge Street pedestrian bridge to once again host our Annual Dinner on the Bridge event!

We would like to hold our event on Sunday the 8th of September. Like times past, we will need a block of time to set everything up (4 to 5 hours), another block of time for the actual dinner (2-3 hours) and a third block for clean-up (3-4 hours). It would be great if we could close the bridge to all public pedestrian traffic during the actual dinner block, realizing that closing it for the entire time would make things difficult for those who depend on that path for multiple purposes.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. I look forward to hearing from you and sharing information with our Board of Directors.

Respectfully submitted,

Sylvie Warren, Arts Center Manager

City Manager Warren advised that this event has been seamless over the last several years and is a great event.

Councilor Korzen moved, with a second by Councilor Valerino, to approve the request for the use of the Bridge Street pedestrian bridge for the Annual Dinner on the Bridge hosted by St. Kieran Community Center for the Arts on September 8, 2024. So moved, the motion carried.

Councilor Morency requested that they add notification for the public.

c. BIDPA Appointment – J. Nickerson

Mayor Cone & City Council:

BIDPA has been actively seeking new membership for their board. They have been seeking individuals with specialized experiences such as backgrounds in real estate. Janet Nickerson, who recently opened her own real estate firm right here in downtown, A House to Home Realty, is interested in joining the board. She would be filling the following open term:

- A three-year term as a regular board member to expire on July 31, 2027.

Thank you for your consideration of Janet's appointment to the board.

Sincerely,

Pamela E Laflamme
Director of Strategic Initiatives

Councilor Grenier moved, with a second by Councilor Higbee, to approve the nomination of Janet Nickerson for a three-year term on BIDPA to expire July 31, 2027. So moved, the motion passed.

Councilor Higbee noted that he is delighted that a female business owner is interested in serving on the board.

d. North Country Council Appointments – D. Whittet and C. Mason

Mayor Cone and City Council,

North Country Council allows for each community in their region to have representation on the NCC Commission. This commission typically meets three times a year. Councilor Higbee along with Tom McCue, Planning Board

Chairman, have both been the City's representatives to the Commission for many years. They have each indicated they would be happy to step aside from this role and allow for new members to replace them.

Daniel Whittet and Cassandra Mason, both newer members to the Planning Board, have each expressed interest in representing the City on the NCC Commission. NCC asks that these members be appointed by a vote of the City Council. There are no terms for this commission, therefore simply a vote to appoint Dan and Cassie as the City's new representatives to the Commission would be all that is needed.

I want to thank Councilor Higbee and Chair McCue for their years of service in representing the City in their roles on the Commission.

Thank you for your consideration of these two new appointments.

Sincerely,

Pamela E Laflamme
Director of Strategic Initiatives

Councilor Grenier moved, with a second by Councilor Higbee, to approve the nominations of Daniel Whittet and Cassandra Mason as the City's representatives on the North Country Council Regional Planning Commission. So moved, the motion passed.

Councilor Grenier thanked Councilor Higbee and Planning Board Chair Thomas McCue for their many years of service.

Councilor Grenier moved, with a second by Councilor Morency, to accept the letter from William Rosenberg and place it on file, and to send a letter to Mr. Rosenberg thanking him for his communication to the City. So moved, the motion passed.

3. Public Comments

Julie King, of 410 Alpine Street, shared her appreciation to the Council for herself, the Board of Education, and the staff and children of Berlin Public Schools for their support.

4. Council Comments

Mayor Cone welcomed back Councilor Higbee, who had been absent due to health issues.

5. Adjournment

On a motion by Councilor Higbee, seconded by Councilor Grenier, the Council voted to adjourn the meeting at 8:47 pm. So moved, the motion carried.

A True Record, Attest:

Shelli Fortin
City Clerk

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