

City Council Work Session December 2, 2019

Present were: Mayor Grenier, Councilors Rozek, Higbee, Gentili, Otis, Theberge, Remillard, Berthiaume and Morgan.

Others present: City Manager James Wheeler, City Clerk Shelli Fortin, Community Development Director Pamela Laflamme, Superintendent of Schools Julie King, School Board Members Nicole Plourde, Scott Losier, Lyne Moore, Louise Valliere, Police Chief Pete Morency, Assistant Chief Dan Buteau, Fire Chief James Watkins, Wastewater Superintendent Jon Goodreau, Richard Laflamme, Jamie Welsh, Gina Welch, Barbara Tetreault, *Berlin Daily Sun* and public.

Mayor Grenier opened the meeting at 6:29 p.m.

Wastewater Retirement

Superintendent Goodreau reported that he received a retirement notice from one employee and another will be out for surgery. Once given the authority to hire, there is still a month long process before someone new is ready to come on board. The position is budgeted. Councilor Gentili moved to approve hiring for the open position at the wastewater treatment plant; Councilor Rozek seconded. In discussion, Councilor Berthiaume asked if this would be an apprenticeship and Mr. Goodreau indicated that it would, as that has worked well for the plant and it is a good opportunity for someone to learn a trade. In the vote that followed, all voted in favor of the motion.

Fire Department Grant Applications

Chief Watkins introduced himself saying that he was chief in Whitefield, Gorham and now Berlin. He started with the City in October.

He stated that he asked the firefighters for five likes and dislikes about the fire department and realized that radio communication in remote areas is a problem that can be dealt with. Mobile repeaters have recently been added as necessary equipment and have become eligible for Emergency Management funds. The mobile repeater will boost the signal so that radios will work when responding to ATV and snowmobile calls. There is a 50% match and training funds can be used toward the match so the grant will not likely cost the city any money.

The Fire Department has tried to get Assistance to Firefighters grants for trucks and equipment in the past. We will apply for a pumper and self-contained breathing apparatus. There is match of 10% and there is money in the budget for half of the SCBA's. Mayor Grenier noted that there is also match for the pumper if we were to get the grant. There are resolutions for all three grants for first reading.

Councilor Rozek asked if there would be better chances for grant funding if we participated in mutual aid. Chief Watkins stated that there is no written documentation to that effect. Berlin already has high hazard and critical infrastructure; however if we were on mutual aid with other communities, we could add their hazards and infrastructure to ours. There is no guarantee that it would add to grant. Mayor Grenier noted that the Council was not informed that its AIP grant failed. Chief Watkins said that he was only told that the grant failed when he attended a workshop. FEMA is not consistent in their timing for awarding grants.

Brown School Cost Savings

Nicole Plourde and Julie King joined the Council at the table. Councilor Rozek established that the Council has not received details of how much is saved by closing Brown School. Are there the same number of employees? Superintendent King reported that she put together a comprehensive list of savings and one-time expenses estimating a savings of about \$316,000. Ms. King said that they have reduced an administrator, being down to 4 administrators where there were 6 two years ago. There have been one-time costs to reorganize the building, so far, \$189,711.96 and \$161,250 of anticipated costs. There were capital improvements of \$245,000 to be done at Brown School that were not done. The overall savings were \$338,266 and over a six year period, it ends up being over \$3 million dollars.

Councilor Rozek asked if, in retrospect, the School Board is pleased with the decision of closing the school. School Board Chair Plourde did not agree that they were pleased; there was no funding and the Board had no choice. She said that she is amazed and pleased by the staff and how they came together. Mayor Grenier thanked the School Board for attending the meeting.

PD DTF Grant

Chief Morency noted that we continue to fight to get resources for the drug problem in the North Country. We finally got the attention of State officials and a grant for \$520,000 is being made available to create a team in Coos County. Chief Morency was concerned about filling the positions. It takes six to nine months to train someone. In looking at a solution, we can get one or two through recruiting and we can bring on retired part time guys; however the retirement system only allows them to work 24 hours.

Milan could hire and they would have the ability to work 35 hours. Milan would build into their budget and we would replenish quarterly. If the town were to vote against, we would have to find another way.

Councilor Morgan confirmed that this grant is for Coos County. Councilor Rozek asked if the State Police are in tune with what is going on in the North Country. Chief Morency said that they have put some resources here; however their concentration is more in the southern tier. In the five person unit to be created with this funding, there is a trooper working with us. Chief Morency noted that he is meeting with the AG's office tomorrow for more details.

Brown School RFP Process

Ms. Laflamme reported on behalf of the Brown School Committee. A request for preliminary proposals went out and a walk-through was done with 2 developers and two nonprofits. The two developers put in proposals and the Committee was asked to review and rank the proposals. The committee ranked New England Family Housing second and Wildcat LLC, Fred Danbrie as first. Both own other properties in Berlin and there is a time frame of about 18 months. New England Family Housing wanted to use CDBG for a portion of their funding and Wildcat is using a credit union. CDBG funds require tenants to be low/moderate income.

Wildcat is proposing 17 units of housing; they want to maintain the gym as a fitness center and have a public meeting space. Some units would be short term rentals for the hospital's use. Wildcat has shown a willingness to negotiate a purchase price. Councilor Higbee said that he liked the community space and perhaps a coffee shop. Councilor Berthiaume said that she didn't want to have a process where there is a mix of housing. We need to come away from the subsidized housing. Councilor Remillard agreed saying that Wildcat seemed to truly want to invest and wanted the building to be a center point.

Mayor Grenier said that he agrees with the committee. If we want to go to the next level, we can't continue to sponsor housing; it is time to help those who are making an investment.

If the committee feels comfortable, Wildcat should submit conceptual drawings and the City Manager needs to negotiate a price with them. Councilor Remillard stated that Wildcat should do a presentation to the Planning Board and they would get feedback from the Planning Board members. Mayor Grenier voiced that whatever revenue is derived from Brown School should be appropriated to the schools for capital needs.

Other

Solid Waste

Mr. Wheeler stated that the discussion has occurred before about stopping the pick up of solid waste at certain facilities because the volume is too much. The facilities that exceed the 240 lb limit fit into the institutional category. They would be advised to get a commercial contractor as of the 1st of February. These institutional entities are having huge amounts of solid waste picked up by our staff and equipment and we pay tipping fees. We cannot afford to continue to do that.

Councilor Berthiaume stated that there are many non-profits that do not pay anything in taxes and get services. She felt strongly that if they don't pay taxes, they should be contributing in some way to the community. Mr. Wheeler noted that a pay as you throw system would equalize what we pay for the disposal of solid waste. That system will fix a lot of things such as multi-unit buildings. We compare our tax rate to other communities and most other communities do a pay as you throw system. Councilor Remillard asked for a copy of the solid waste ordinance.

Councilor Higbee thought the letter to be sent to institutions should be clearer and not leave any questions. He also questioned the Monday holiday garbage pickup that gets rescheduled to Friday; then there is a pick up again on Monday. He thought it is such a waste to have them come again.

Non Public Session

Councilor Rozek moved to go into non-public session per RSA 91-A:3 II (d) Land Matters; Councilor Higbee seconded and the motion carried unanimously by roll call.

Land matters were discussed.

Councilor Higbee moved to come out of non-public session; Councilor Rozek seconded and the motion carried.

Councilor Rozek moved to seal the minutes as releasing them would make any action taken ineffective; Councilor Higbee seconded and the motion carried.

Mayor Grenier moved on to the Regular Meeting.

Respectfully Submitted,
Susan Tremblay
Administrative Assistant

*Minutes are unofficial until they have been accepted by the City Council by motion.