

Proposed FY 2020 City of Berlin Budget Public Hearing – May 22, 2019

Mayor Grenier opened the duly scheduled and advertised public hearing in the City Hall Auditorium at approximately 6:30 p.m. Present were Councilors Otis, Morgan Allain, Gentili, Remillard, Rozek, Higbee, Nelson and Theberge. Also present: City Manager James Wheeler, Finance Director Patty Chase, Police Chief Peter Morency, Assistant Police Chief Daniel Buteau, Superintendent Corinne Cascadden, School Board Members, City Department Heads, Outside Agencies, citizens, Barbara Tetreault, Berlin Daily Sun, WMUR, and NHPR.

Mayor Grenier welcomed everyone and introduced District 1 Representative, David Starr, who advised he was here to listen and lend support. Mayor Grenier also pointed out Berlin Representatives Larry Laflamme and Henry Noel. Mayor Grenier reviewed how the meeting will be run and advised the public that comments would be limited to 3 minutes.

City Manager James Wheeler pointed out the positive things happening in the City, including the Route 16 road work that has been completed, Heritage Park, Riverfire, the proposed Riverwalk, activities offered by the Chamber of Commerce, Nansen Ski Jump, the recent grant to Burgess Biopower, the expansion of Capone Iron, ATV tourism, and development along Route 110, among others. City Manager Wheeler explained that Berlin is considered a property poor town, and there are only two ways to keep taxes in check, one being to increase value and the other to cut expenses. City Manager Wheeler advised that property values are continuing to rise, however with the reduction in stabilization for education, this budget is a stopgap to get us through the year until decisions are made in Concord.

City Manager Wheeler shared a pie chart of the general fund, which displayed the school as the largest part of the budget, followed by public safety and public works. Mr. Wheeler then reviewed the proposed FY2020 budget, pointing out reductions that have been made so as to not raise taxes this year. The total expense budget is \$32,526,626.00. Mr. Wheeler then reviewed revenue sources.

Corinne Cascadden addressed those present and advised that this has been the most difficult budget process for both the School Board and Administration. Dr. Cascadden advised that the school has lost a total of \$2.1 million in cumulative aid. Berlin has an equalized property value of \$314,000 as opposed to the state average of \$1,040,000, and 60% of the property in Berlin is tax exempt. Dr. Cascadden stated that NH has a constitutional responsibility to fund education that is equitable to all NH students. Dr. Cascadden advised that the school has seen an increase in the costs of health care and retirement funding, a decrease in the number of enrolled students, and an increase in special education which includes mandated services that districts are required to provide. The school currently employs 232, and has a student population of 1,144 in grades K-12. The school budget for FY18 was \$18.1 million, the budget for FY19 was \$18.1 million, and the budget this year is \$17.8 million. They will have to cut positions and capital improvements, and have decided to close Brown School. Dr. Cascadden thanked Representatives Starr, Thomas, Laflamme, and Noel for their work advocating for Berlin, but advised that they are only 4 of 400 representatives in Concord. Dr. Cascadden urged the public to call Governor Sununu's office at 271-2121 and ask him to freeze reductions and restore funding to the 2016 levels. Dr. Cascadden re-iterated that the State of NH needs to

create a funding formula that is fair and urged the City to join the lawsuit against the State if they do not, as public education is a right that should be afforded to all children.

Police Chief Peter Morency spoke to those in attendance and advised that the department is at a breaking point and the proposed cuts would be detrimental. Chief Morency advised that the cuts would mean the difference between being an agency that just is just responding to calls and one that can work on preventing them. The cut of 6% in the budget totals \$213,000, but with the loss of grants and revenues that have been used to offset costs, the total will be higher. Chief Morency advised that they are already down 4 police officers and 2 support staff from the recommended staffing by the FBI, and advised that the issue is not a spending problem, but a revenue problem. Chief Morency advised that several legislative decisions involving mental health, the opioid crisis, bail reform, changes in the retirement system, the decriminalization of marijuana, and increased court time have contributed to increased workload and budget issues in the department. Chief Morency advised that the department received 65,000 calls for service last year, of which 23,094 were emergencies. These calls consisted of 869 arrests, 99 protective custodies, 261 thefts, 189 vandalism complaints, 230 drug cases, 24 untimely deaths, 281 accidents, 413 dog complaints, 203 juvenile incidents, and 1,542 other agency assists, among others. Chief Morency advised that the City cannot afford to cut services and emphasized that school funding needs to be restored.

Fire Chief John Lacasse spoke on behalf of the Fire Department. Chief Lacasse advised that cutting two more firefighters from the department would jeopardize the safety of his men and the citizens of Berlin. The Fire Department currently has 4 shifts, three with 5 men, and one with 4. The cuts would bring this coverage to one shift with 5 men and 3 with 4 men. This will still allow them to follow the 2 in/2out rule when responding to structure fires, however having the extra man on scene makes a world of difference. Chief Lacasse also advised that the reduced staff will affect other services that they provide, including fire prevention instruction for businesses and schools.

Justin Hale of 214 Collins Street agreed that everything said about cost is true, however the City does not see the negative effects of funding, such as what citizens go without to pay for taxes. Hale suggested that the City look for creative ways to deal with unfunded mandates. Hale stated that education expenses have doubled since the 1970's, and although the teachers and administration are not at fault, throwing money at the problems has not solved them.

Craig Melanson of 409 Madison Avenue stated that he was speaking as a parent with two boys in the public school. Melanson is a graduate of Berlin High School and is concerned that the good experience he had will not be available to his children. The City has great people, but has fallen on hard times. Melanson questioned all the money that has been discussed for special education, and asked why it is not also spent on Advanced Placement courses for the children who need those. VLACS, or online courses, is not the way to go, and the social interaction is just as important as the learning. Melanson stated that there are children out in the neighborhood riding bikes and playing street hockey, which is how it should be, but if the City does not provide the opportunities children need, families will be forced to leave. Melanson stated that the cuts are dramatic and will only hurt the children in the long run. Melanson said that he City should continue its fight in Concord, but asked what will happen if funding from the State does not come through.

Amanda Cassidy of 199 Cole Street advised she was the Administrative Assistant at the Berlin Fire Department and stated it is an honor to work with them. Cassidy stated these men love being Firefighters in Berlin and have chosen to stay here despite better opportunities elsewhere. Cassidy stated that reducing services will force people to leave the area. Cassidy stated that having the two extra men as floaters in the schedule allows the fire department to cover vacation time, sick leave, and personal time, and not having them would cause overtime pay to skyrocket.

Tiffany Hale of 214 Collins Street advised that budgets are tough and that instead of starting with a wish list and having to cut, maybe the city should start at zero and add what is needed. She suggested that the City consider if those things are worth putting families in a lurch, or risking the loss of homes or businesses.

Alexeya Mellen of 199 Cole Street stated that she had a medical emergency in February of this year and owes her life to the Berlin Fire Department. She stated that although she may regret the decisions she made, she does not regret the people who helped her and continue to support her.

Larry Laflamme of 474 Second Avenue addressed the group as a Representative at the State House in Concord. Laflamme stated that the restoration of stabilization grants has tremendous bipartisan support in Concord, in part due to the work of Corinne Cascadden, Mayor Grenier, and James Wheeler. Laflamme stated that the City is not alone, as the cuts have not only been felt by Berlin, but by Pittsfield, Franklin, and other communities in the State. Laflamme said that the state is looking at other methods for funding schools and one is based on the number of students on free and reduced lunch, of which Berlin has a high percentage. Laflamme also stated that he doesn't know police work or education, but he does know firefighting, and that reducing shifts to 4 makes it difficult, not just for fires, but rescues too. Laflamme advised the Council that when the money comes, to spend it wisely on education, police, and firefighters.

Stuart Light of 634 Burgess Street stated that it has been a while since he looked at a city budget and stated it is a lot of headache for the Council for a little money. Light suggested that the City could save a lot of money, eliminating one total page of the budget, by selling the airport. Then they could focus on keeping Berlin safe.

Nicole Plourde of 111 Washington Street spoke as Chair of the School Board. Plourde stated that this has been a difficult time and morale has never been lower. They have all been working hard to be sure that the kids don't feel the effects of the cuts. Plourde stated that the budget was not a wish list, and that they have to make the building safe for the children. Plourde said that it is not okay for a property rich community to be able to have a better quality of life. Plourde stated we need to keep the city attractive and safe, and we are writing ourselves off if we do not. Plourde said that although we don't want to see our taxes raised, we have to do what we have to do. Plourde encouraged citizens to continue the fight in Concord and call the Governor at 271-2121.

Ted McCormick of 119 Prospect Street stated that he is just one person, who has affected many of the people in the auditorium (by a show of hands) in some way. McCormick stated that on average, the school has returned \$200,000 to the City every year for the last 35 years, which totals \$7 million. With inflation, this would total \$15.8 million. McCormick agreed that the City and the school are in this together. McCormick stated that two choices were proposed by City Manager Wheeler, to cut spending or raise taxes, but he suggests increasing taxes slightly and

making some cuts. However, McCormick asked that whatever they take away from the school this year, they have back next year.

Jamie Welch of 102 Church Street stated that he is a second generation teacher here in Berlin who chose to live here. Welch stated that he expects to receive something from the City for the taxes he pays, such as police, fire, and school. Welch stated that the kids enrolled in school this year are not getting what they received last year, classrooms will be shared, the teaching budget has been cut in half, and the school is limiting maintenance and safety items to meet the budget request. Welch stressed that the students deserve the same as every student had before them. Welch stated he does not want to continue to pay a lot and get less.

Tony Valliere of 7 Charron Avenue addressed the Council and thanked them for their service and stated that he did not envy the tough decisions they have to make. Valliere stated that families that choose to live here feel angry, sad, disappointed, confused, and hopeless. However, the state funding does not change the job the Council has to do. If we want to keep what we have, we need to raise taxes, and if we get the state funding it can be fixed then. Valliere told the Council they really don't have a choice and should keep the services and raise the taxes.

Jason Vien of 40 Smyth Street introduced himself as the president of Berlin IAFF 1088. Vien stated that last year the Fire Department received 900 calls, which were not just structure fires, but also included brush fires, chimney fires, overdoses, car accidents, and ATV accidents. Vien stated that all cities respond to the same emergencies, however the difference is that Manchester responds with 30, and we have 5. In this budget, that number would be dropped to 4. Vien reminded the Council that the firefighters that would be cut in the budget are both born and raised here, and have families that are part of the community. Vien stated it is not fair to drop the budget crisis on the door of public safety and hopes the Council will make the right choice and put the positions back in the budget.

Greg Auger of 99 Wentworth Avenue stated that he is an employee of the Berlin Fire Department. Auger stated that the majority of the fire department budget is for manpower, and there is no wiggle room. There is no money for apparatus or training. Auger stated that he understands the focus is on education funding, but the cuts will affect the police and fire departments as well. Auger stated that these cuts may also affect the ISO rating for the City and that would affect rates for homeowners insurance. Auger stated that the department loves and supports the community and requested that the Council support them as well.

Denise Valerino of 84 Horne Street stated that she has been working at the courthouse for 22 years. She has seen parents lose custody of their children due to opioid addiction, which has become worse over the last few years. The issues these children face roll over to the school department, which is required to provide special services. Valerino stated that we should meet in the middle and raise taxes some. Valerino stated it is a terrible situation, but would like to keep the services, even if it means raising taxes.

Kristin Labonte of 4 Victoria Lane stated that she is married to a police officer in Berlin, who used to work for State Police. She shared that her husband chose to work for Berlin, as State Troopers work alone, with very little backup. However, with cuts to the police department, officers are having to respond to calls alone and wait for backup, which is a concern for safety. Labonte stated that she has worked with the Fire Department for the toy drive and that these employees do more than what they get paid for.

Carl Gagnon of 24 Petrograd Street stated he has been a lifelong resident of Berlin. Gagnon stated that he thought that the City would change over the years but it has not. Gagnon stated that he is not here to criticize any department but that he had hoped the leadership in the City would replace the taxable property that was demolished years ago. Gagnon stated that he did not agree with the Public Works truck being parked out front, as that is theatrics. Gagnon stated that the City needed forward thinking to reduce expenses and suggested combining all municipal offices to one building. Gagnon asked department heads to look at their budget line items and cut what is spent frivolously. Gagnon agreed that if the airport can be sold, he is all for it.

Connor Couture of 444 Second Avenue stated that he has learned many life lessons from teachers and coaches at the school. Couture urged the Council to not make the cuts.

Roland Berthiaume of 46 Franklin Street thanked the Council for their service. Berthiaume stated that the cuts will affect him personally and the people he works with. Berthiaume urged the Council to be creative and stated that the fire department has looked at ways to be more efficient and more effective and stated they have to be creative in making the equipment and tools they need with practically nothing. Berthiaume urged people to get involved and volunteer to make the community better, as that is the best way to make a difference.

Griffin Melanson of 409 Madison Avenue advised he is a Freshman at BHS. Griffin cautioned that cutting AP classes from the High School could hurt students' further education opportunities. Griffin stated that students in Berlin deserve the same education as other students in NH.

William Barth of 51 Wood Street advised that he was not local, but chose to live here in Berlin to help disadvantaged children. He married and started a family here and is concerned about the safety issue of putting the smallest children in one of the oldest school buildings.

Pam Couture of 444 Second Avenue stated that she went to school here, along with her children, and her grandchildren. Couture stated that she does not want to pay higher taxes, but when people choose to move to a community, they look at the school system. Couture stated that we need something to give our children and grandchildren and we need to provide safety and education. Couture stated that she will pay more if it means moving forward as a city.

There being no further comments from the public Mayor Grenier thanked all for attending and stated that they appreciate the comments from the public. Mayor Grenier stated that the Council will try to make the budget work. Mayor Grenier declared the public hearing closed at 8:22 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,

Shelli Fortin
City Clerk