

CITY OF BERLIN

New Hampshire

Minutes of Council Budget Session of 4/8/2024

Council Chambers

6:30 pm

Members:

Mayor Cone
Councilor Theberge
Councilor Grenier
Councilor Morency
Councilor Korzen
Councilor Higbee
Councilor Berthiaume

Police Commissioners:

Linda Pivin
Marc Tremblay
Pierre Morin

City Staff:

City Manager Phillip Warren, Jr
Holly Larsen, Finance Director
James Watkins, Fire Chief
Daniel Buteau, Police Chief
Nathan Roy, Police Captain
Det. Sgt. Wade Goulet
Kimberly Bijeau, PD Administrative Assistant
Jenn Cloutier, Police Department Dispatch Supervisor
Kris Saunders, BFD
Jon Leveille, BFD

Public:

William Graham
Scott Lees
Lisa Connell, Berlin Daily Sun

Mayor Cone called the meeting to order at 6:32 p.m.

1. FY2025 Budget – Safety Division

a. Police Department

Chief Daniel Buteau addressed the Council with an overview of the Police Department budget. Chief Buteau noted that the budget has increased, that they have budgeted for an additional dispatcher due to increased responsibilities and more complex calls, and that they are doing more internal training. Chief Buteau noted that they have applied for grants for equipment needs, and are seeking \$800,000 in grants this year. Chief Buteau noted that they face police staffing shortages, and have made changes to policy

and contracts to award longevity. Chief Buteau noted that they engage with the community on many levels and 2023 saw the lowest crime rate in 20 years. Chief Buteau noted that they will continue to use their discretion to prevent crime and enforce the law, while maintaining integrity, courtesy, and civility. Chief Buteau noted that the current police contract runs through 2025 and they have had an early start to negotiations for 2026. The total budget shows an increase of 8.4%. Chief Buteau thanked the Council for their hard work during the budget season.

Councilor Morency asked about the \$355,000 for dispatch equipment, and Chief Buteau advised this is a Congressionally directed spending grant to cover radio equipment on Cates Hill. Chief Buteau advised that there are no grants currently available for the tower, however they have been budgeting \$25,000 per year for this project, and have ideas for funding from other sources. Chief Buteau noted it will probably be about two years before this project is done.

Mayor Cone noted that overall the budget has increased \$314,566, and was advised much of this is due to contractual increases, health insurance, and increases in costs.

Councilor Grenier asked what the \$15,000 for Building Renovations will be used for, and Chief Buteau advised for walls, flooring, and ceiling work. Chief Buteau noted that they have done a good job with maintenance projects to keep up with repairs, however suggested that it is time for a feasibility study for an addition to the building. Although they have started digitizing records, more space is needed.

Councilor Berthiaume asked about the percentage of EMS calls, and Chief Buteau advised there were 892 EMS calls in 2018 and 1,357 in 2023. Fires calls were 81 in 2018, and 316 in 2023. Councilor Berthiaume asked if EMS contributes to the cost of dispatch, and was advised they do not. Councilor Morency noted that this was discussed when the current contract was being negotiated, and any cost charged to EMS for dispatching would have been charged back to the City in the contract, so it was decided not to bill for the service. City Manager Warren noted that the Police Department is planning to take over dispatch for the Fire Department, which would allow more flexibility at the Fire Department.

Councilor Grenier asked what the second budgeted amount of \$75,000 for building repairs was for and Chief Buteau advised it is for the repair of the cell area, which is very dated.

Councilor Theberge asked how many new officers have been hired, and Deputy Chief Roy stated there were four in 2022, three in 2023, and two this year. Chief Buteau noted that they had a number of retirements, and some who left for other employment. Chief Buteau stated that most of the new hires have been from out of state.

Councilor Theberge noted that there was no written policy or MOU between the Police Department and Fire Department for search and rescue. Chief Buteau noted that historically missing persons have been handled by the Police Department, however it depends on the nature of the call. Chief Buteau advised that the Police Department has good communication with the Fire Department and that they meet on a monthly basis to discuss issues and ways to improve services to the City.

Councilor Grenier asked about the budget for cruisers, noting that FY22/23 budgeted \$106,000, 23/24 was \$122,000, and this budget calls for \$147,000. Chief Buteau noted that two OHRV's are included in this budget, as well as two cruisers. Councilor Grenier noted that typically they budgeted for two cruisers two years in a row, and then just one. Councilor Grenier requested a list of the Police Department fleet be furnished to the Council. Deputy Chief Roy advised that the price of vehicles and the setup has increased, with the cost around \$75,000 for a fully marked cruiser. Councilor Theberge asked if the Police Department has a need for a snowmobile, and was advised that Fish and Game and the Fire Department can assist with this.

Councilor Theberge asked if the Police Department contracts with AVRRDD, and Chief Buteau advised that they do provide periodic patrols.

Councilor Morency asked what hours the additional dispatcher would work, and Chief Buteau stated it would either be 11-7 or 10-6 based on a study. They would also be available to cover big events, such as the eclipse today, Chamber events, and additional traffic enforcement details. Chief Buteau advised there are not any grants available for dispatch personnel, however they did receive funds for dispatch services for the Rainbow gathering.

When asked about vacancies for officers, Chief Buteau advised they currently have four, but are planning to hire one in May.

Mayor Cone asked Chief Buteau what could be trimmed down in the budget, and Chief Buteau advised that the budget presented is what is needed to effectively serve the City.

a. Fire

Chief James Watkins provided the Council with a timeline of EMS integration, noting that this has been an ongoing discussion since 2014, with a Council vote narrowly failing in 2020. City Manager Warren noted that he endorsed continuing to look at the Fire Department providing EMS service when he began, as the previous City Manager had done.

Chief Watkins addressed some of the concerns, noting that there is a plan to remount the box on the vehicles since they are over ten years old, and that the City's new snow and ice policy and spot chains will help with the vehicles not being 4WD. Hiring personnel who are Paramedics only is still on the table. Chief Watkins advised that AVH contracted with Butler Medical Transport to provide transfers, and could continue to do so. They could also contract with another service, or provide their own. Chief Watkins advised that Berlin Fire will handle all transfers within the City, and may consider inter-facility transfers in the future. City Manager Warren noted that AVH is aware of the City's plans and are considering options.

Councilor Grenier shared a personal story highlighting the need for transfer services for EMS, and Mr. Warren advised that discussions with AVH are ongoing. Councilor Grenier noted that transports are profitable for EMS providers, however 911 calls are not.

Mayor Cone agreed that transfers need to be provided, and also noted that the Fire Department providing EMS services will make the City more well prepared for a mass casualty event. City Manager Warren noted that it is the City's responsibility to provide 911 care, but it is the hospital's duty to provide transfer services. Chief Watkins advised that providing transfer services would require additional ambulance, more staff, and the union contract would need to be renegotiated. Councilor Berthiaume asked if the investment would be reimbursed from revenue from the transfers, and was advised there is no guarantee.

Councilor Korzen asked about the SAFER grant, and was advised it is for three years. Councilor Korzen noted concerns about the costs of staffing after the grant is done. Chief Watkins advised that they would need eight staff members to staff both the fire and EMS apparatus. Councilor Korzen asked about the difficulties with staffing, and City Manager Warren advised that the difficulty with staffing has not applied to the Fire Department. Chief Watkins advised that he has seven people currently willing to fill positions in July.

Councilor Korzen asked what initiated the EMS integration, and Councilor Berthiaume noted the increase in the cost of the EMS contract. City Manager Warren advised it has been a goal of the City for several years.

Councilor Morency asked when the investment in EMS would pay for itself, and was advised two years with the SAFER grant and four years without. However, it is difficult to predict revenue.

Councilor Berthiaume noted that they need to think about all of the costs not taken into consideration, such as the Fire Department currently responding to EMS calls to assist. Councilor Grenier requested to see the number of calls that the Fire Department assisted EMS with over the last three years, and Councilor Berthiaume added that she would also like to see the reason for those assists. Councilor Grenier noted that there are manpower costs, and wear and tear on vehicles to consider. Councilor Berthiaume asked about communication equipment, and Jennifer Cloutier advised that the City is responsible for all of those costs.

Councilor Korzen asked who would back up Berlin Fire if they were busy, and was advised they do have mutual aid, along with the ability to call in additional personnel. City Manager Warren advised that they could look to provide service to Milan and Dummer in the future, and be compensated for those services.

Councilor Morency asked if enough was budgeted for training, and Chief Watkins advised there was.

Councilor Grenier asked when they would find out if they received the SAFER Grant and Chief Watkins advised two months. It was noted that they may know before they pass the budget, which could be adjusted. Mayor Cone asked what the budget could be reduced by if they get the grant, and Chief Watkins advised about \$700,000.

City Manager Warren advised that revenues generated from billing would be put into a segregated fund for future improvements.

2. Other

City Manager Warren advised that additional information about the request for a letter of support for the BiomonitoringNH grant was sent out by Director of Strategic Initiatives Pamela Laflamme this week for review.

Mayor Cone noted concerns about liability to the City if problems were found.

Councilor Korzen noted that the former Chlor-alkali facility has impacted the rivers, even though mitigation has been done. Councilor Korzen noted that from a public health standpoint, it is an issue our community is facing, and unless you know the problem you cannot fix it. It was noted that they are looking at things that may impact the health of our citizens so that corrective actions can be taken. Councilor Higbee noted that he would like to send a letter of support, as it impacts the health of the people who live here.

Councilor Grenier moved, with a second by Councilor Higbee, to send a letter in support of the BiomonitoringNH grant application. So moved, the motion passed unanimously by roll call vote. Berthiaume – yes, Higbee – yes, Korzen – yes, Morency – yes, Grenier – yes, Theberge – yes, Cone – yes

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

Adjourned at 7:57 p.m.

Respectfully submitted by Shelli Fortin, City Clerk