

CITY COUNCIL MEETING – Tuesday, January 3, 2023

Regular Meeting

Mayor Grenier called the Regular City Council Meeting to order at approximately 7:44 pm.

a. Pledge of Allegiance

b. Roll Call

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

Absent: Councilors Eastman and Berthiaume

Also present: City Manager Phillip Warren, Jr, Director of Strategic Initiatives Pamela Laflamme, City Clerk Shelli Fortin, Ann Morin, and Lisa Connell, Berlin Daily Sun.

c. Councilor Remillard moved, with a second by Councilor Morgan, to accept the minutes of the December 19, 2022 Regular Meeting and Work Session. So moved, the motion passed.

Disbursements:

Disbursement Summary Draft #1928 start date 12/20/2022 end date 01/03/2023 for a total cash disbursement of \$2,162,839.85. Councilor Roland Theberge moved with a second by Councilor Morgan to accept the disbursement summary and pay all bills as recommended by the Committee on Accounts/Claims. So moved, the motion passed.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

Ann Morin of 24 Tamarack Lane stated she is extremely concerned about the increase in taxes and the tax rate. Ms. Morin noted that the Council had the option of a lower tax rate, but voted to set it at \$27.62, which leaves her paying almost \$13,000 per year in taxes. Ms. Morin noted that she maintains the access road to her property, and her property value increased \$180,800 from last year. Ms. Morin shared a concern for those that are retired, as there is zero chance to be able to maintain your home and live, especially with the increased cost of heating oil, electricity, and gas. Ms. Morin noted that if something is not done to help by lowering the tax rate or the evaluations, there will be more of a housing crisis. Ms. Morin stated there is no incentive for people to improve their properties, as their taxes will skyrocket. Ms. Morin also noted that with the empty storefronts, there is little incentive for people to come to town. Ms. Morin stated that her suggestion and request is that the Council do everything in their power to figure out a way to make it more affordable to live here. Ms. Morin suggested combining the Berlin and Gorham school systems, as they already work together sharing some classes, and it would make fiscal sense for both Berlin and the Town of Gorham. Ms. Morin stated that she was disappointed to not see more people at the Council meeting. Ms. Morin stated that the only reason she lives here is because her husband was a firefighter with the City of Berlin and wanted to live in the community he worked in. Ms. Morin noted that her home was built by the school on land they purchased, and noted that the assessed values are disproportionate, with a huge variant between properties.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

1. Council Committee Reports

There were no Council committee reports.

NEW BUSINESS

1. City Manager's Report

1. Attached is the November 2022 Property Transfer list.
2. Attached is a description of values by classification and the average value increase by classification.
3. During the snowstorm of December 16-18, we had a few issues –Per snow removal policies, the city would have 2 loaders working in each ward – 8 machines. We only have 6, 2 are on order, should be here in February (ordered last summer). That means 2 wards only have one loader. Staff began working on Friday, this was a long storm that required rotation of personnel which delayed sidewalk cleaning and snow pickup. One loader was put out of service due to a crash, as well as the operator (he was not injured). Due to the

amount of snow, coupled with the tight confines near the school did not allow us to just use the sidewalk plow so sidewalk cleanup was delayed until Monday night, staff did not have the capacity to conduct snow pickup on Sunday. Snow pickup was further delayed due to a gearbox failure on the new large snowblower – we moved to the backup large snowblower and that machine developed mechanical issues – this is why the later in the week snow pickups were done by loader, a time-consuming process. The old snowblower is back in service and the repairs to the newer, primary snowblower are almost complete. The damaged loader is at the dealer being assessed, Primex is working with the vendor to facilitate repairs.

4. During the snow / rain / snow event of December 23, we had many instances of flooding from brooks and or groundwater, blocked storm drain grates, sheet flows of water on city streets, icing and erosion issues. Watson Street was severely damaged due to sheet flows of water jumping the road and heading for the river, temporary repairs will be made this week, permanent work will be done in the spring. We had instances of where sewer backed up into residences. All of this was due to the amount of heavy wet snow, followed by over 2 inches of rain, followed by a hard freeze. This weather event was a non-normal, extraordinary event. Staff was on duty and addressing issues for the duration of the storm, this includes DPW, PC, Fire and Police. Even though this was an extraordinary event there are areas of city infrastructure that can be improved – the benefit being that infrastructure will perform better under normal conditions. 3 property owners have filed claims with the city's insurer.

City Manager Warren advised that the City is 68% residential, with the average single-family home increasing in value by 75%, two-family by 105%, three-family by 118%, 4+ units by 136%, and commercial properties by only 12%. Mr. Warren advised that the market changed radically as it relates to commercial and industrial. Mr. Warren noted that the City is residential heavy and they should focus on commercial and industrial development. Mr. Warren noted that providing services to residential properties is expensive, as they require school, police, fire, and EMS services much more frequently than commercial properties do.

Mr. Warren noted that they had three claims filed against the City from the storm on December 23. Two of the claims were for backed up sewer, and one was a groundwater issue. Councilor Roland Theberge asked about runoff from brooks and if the city is going to be looking at these areas. Mr. Warren noted that many of these areas are on private property, but ones on city property would be looked at. Mr. Warren also noted that they are still working on the cleanup of debris from the flooding. Councilor Remillard advised that she was approached by a citizen asking if the Watson Street station had been opened, and if opening it could have avoided the flooding issues. Mr. Warren advised that they have a CSO at the Watson Street pump station which is installed to protect the pump station and the sewer plant. It would open automatically if it gets to a number that it cannot treat, but does not relieve the collection system of what is already in it. Mr. Warren advised that the collection system is old, and there are things that are still connected that should not be, which is why that have been working on I&I (Inflow and Infiltration) projects to keep the clean water out of the system that does not need to be treated. Mr. Warren advised that sewer blockages, under normal conditions, are usually in the service line. Mr. Warren advised that although the storms lately have been larger, you would not design a system that that capacity. Mr. Warren advised that any overflow ends up in the river, but it was not a failure of the pump station or equipment. Mr. Warren advised they are required to report any overflow to the DES and EPA.

So moved, the motion passed.

2. Mayor's Report

- a. Letter from Maurice Fortier re: Elderly Exemptions

Dear Mayor and Council,

The purpose of this letter is to discuss the negative ramifications to the elderly of Berlin of not adjusting the property exemption amount with the changes to the property assessment.

My name is Maurice Fortier and I am writing this letter for my aunt Lucille Bugeau. She is 91 years old and lives at 418 High Street. Between by grandparents and my aunt, they have lived there for about 90 years. Our concern is how not changing the elderly exemption amount very negatively affected her (and I assume all of the elderly with exemptions in Berlin), because it was not updated and the assessment and tax rate were.

A little history. In 2020, she paid \$2,385 in taxes. We applied for the elderly exemption and was approved for \$42,000 (her property assessment was around \$60,000). In 2021, she paid \$891 in taxes, which was a big help in

helping stay in her home, and we know that is one of your goals. However, this year, her property value jumped to \$119,800. This would not have been a serious issue, if the exemption amount had changed accordingly. Based upon the numbers, the exemption should have increased to roughly \$100,000, which would have kept her taxes appropriate. However, because the exemption did not get updated, her taxes increased to \$2,121! This really hurts an elderly person with limited income and assets. We feel confident your intention was not to get funding off of the backs of the elderly. We are thinking this was an oversight, and will be fixed as fast as possible, so she can a refund soon.

Thanks for your consideration, as this really means a lot to my aunt and the other elderly of Berlin. I can make myself available for any questions or discussion. My phone number is 603-540-6976.

Maurice L. Fortier
140 Vandora Drive
Manchester, NH 03103

Mayor Grenier asked if Corcoran Consulting was looking at the elderly exemptions. City Manager Warren stated that they are only contracted to measure and list. Mr. Warren advised he can ask to make this part of their scope of work and come up with something to present to the Council.

Councilor Remillard asked about the income and asset guidelines, and was advised these would be sent to the Council.

Councilor Morgan moved, with a second by Councilor Remillard, to enter the letter from Mr. Fortier into the record and to send a letter to Mr. Fortier thanking him for sharing his concerns.

Councilor Morency asked about the percentage of the exemption, and Mr. Warren advised it is a set number.

So moved, the motion passed.

b. Appointment to Planning Board – Larry Laflamme

Mayor Grenier:

It is my understanding that there is an opening on Berlin's Planning Board. I have just finished three terms in the New Hampshire House advocating for the best interests of the City of Berlin. I would like to continue to participate in Berlin's future by serving on the Planning Board. Thank you for your consideration.

Larry L. Laflamme
474 Second Avenue
Berlin, NH 03570

Councilor Remillard moved, with a second by Councilor Higbee, to approve the Mayor's nomination of Larry Laflamme as a voting member of the Planning Board with a term to expire on April 30, 2026. So moved, the motion passed.

3. Public Comments

Ann Morin of 24 Tamarack Lane further re-iterated her concern about the tax rate in general, even with the Council looking into the elderly exemptions. Ms. Morin stated that the rate could have been lower, and asked if there was any way they could make it lower, as that would be easier on people. Ms. Morin stated that her original re-assessment was an increase of over \$200,000 and after requesting an abatement, it went down some. Ms. Morin stated that the taxes are a definite hardship for people in the community.

4. Council Comments

There were no Council comments.

5. Adjournment

On a motion by Councilor Higbee, seconded by Councilor Morgan, the Council voted to adjourn the meeting at 8:19 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.