

## **City Council Work Session October 2, 2023**

Present were: Mayor Grenier, Councilors Morgan, Roland Theberge, Higbee, Morency, Eastman, Robert Theberge and Berthiaume.

Others present: City Manager Phillip L. Warren Jr., Dir. Of Strat. Initiatives and Asst. City Mgr. Pamela Laflamme, City Clerk Shelli Fortin, Finance Director Holly Larsen, Library Director Ann Brungot, Deputy Chief Nathan Roy, Former Councilor Remillard, Jamie Welch, Brian Valerino, Connor Arsenault, Richard White, Mia Qualls, Cassandra Mason, Rep. Eamon Kelley, Eric Moran, Robert Cone, Lori Korzen and Lisa Connell, Berlin Daily Sun.

Mayor Grenier opened the meeting at 6:33 p.m. He requested to add two items to the work session agenda under other. The first item being a tentative legal settlement agreement between the City of Berlin and Eversource on their portion of tax year 2018 for the Smith Hydro facility. The settlement needs to be discussed and voted on in public. Councilor Higbee moved to add the legal settlement agreement to the work session agenda under other. Councilor Berthiaume seconded and the motion carried unanimously by roll call.

The second item is to allow Mr. Eric Moran of White Horse Recovery to give an update in regards to the Center opening soon in Berlin. Councilor Higbee moved to allow Mr. Moran to give an update. Councilor Roland Theberge seconded and the motion carried unanimously by roll call.

### **Interviews for Vacant Council Position**

Mayor Grenier thanked the applicants for volunteering to fill Councilor Remillard's unexpired term. He advised Council will be voting this evening by public vote to instate a new Councilor. The new Councilor will serve until the third week of January 2024, unless He/She decides to run for office and is elected by the people. He reminded Council they cannot, by law, ask candidates their sexual orientation or their age. He asked candidates for a brief introduction and to state why they want to serve on the Council. He requested that the candidates not being interviewed sit in the audience in the Council Chambers during the interviews.

### **Richard White**

Mr. Richard White of 628 Burgess Street commented he's been a resident of Berlin for 8 years. He loves this community. Before he moved to Berlin he was very active in the local government of Lewiston, Maine. He served on several committees. He was the vice president of the community block grant committee which also helped oversee the 5-year planning of Lewiston, Maine. He's also served on their planning board. He stated he is the person that actually looked for feasible and cost-effective solutions. He doesn't look for band aids, he looks for solutions. He does due diligence, research, asks questions and works as a team. He considers serving the people of Berlin an honor.

Councilor Berthiaume asked Mr. White his thoughts on the Berlin School System. Mr. White responded he thinks there is a lot of improvement needed in the school system. He commented the school does outsourcing and from his experience, this is a lot of special education funding going out the door. He commented that by outsourcing, you're spending three to four times more than if you had services in house. He does realize there is bullying in the schools and feels parents need to be listened to.

Councilor Eastman asked Mr. White what's his opinion on the current tax rate. Mr. White responded it is high and definitely needs to be lowered. He understands the tax rate went up because the property values went up due to out of State individuals buying properties for top dollar. His rent was increased

by his landlord because of the tax increase. He commented this is why the City had to tax deed so many properties. Mayor Grenier thanked Mr. White.

### **Brian Valerino**

Mr. Valerino of 84 Horne Street commented he lived at this address for over 30 years and is a lifelong resident of Berlin. He's been in Berlin during the great times and the bad times. He recalls Main Street during the 80's which was phenomenal. He loves this community. He worked with many Councilors on many occasions. He was Deputy Chief for the Berlin Police Department and worked closely with Councilor Morency. He commented the City has a great Police and Fire Department. He also commented that the Public Works Department for what they have for staff and equipment, have been doing a great job. He commented he thinks Berlin has a wonderful school system and turned out many good students out of this community. He feels Council is going in the right direction and he sees nothing but positive things coming for Berlin. The ATV festival has grown through the years and the Chamber has done a great job at putting on events like the RiverFire. These events bring in thousands of people which is good for the economy. He wants to see this continue to grow. He stated there were many issues with blighted buildings and absent landlords. The City has done a great job addressing the issues and removing the buildings. It has helped the City crime wise and neighborhood wise. He wants to be part of this team to see the City grow and become what it once was. He has done a lot of things in his career. He was with the Berlin PD for 26 years from Patrolman to Detective, Detective Sargent, Captain and Deputy Chief. After that he's been the Coos County Sheriff and has been unopposed for the four terms he's ran. He works well with County Commissioners and Delegation Members. He's a great communicator. He was president of the NH Police Association, the Coos County Chief Association and the Sherriff's Association. He served on the Executive Board of the New England's Police Chiefs.

Councilor Berthiaume asked Mr. Valerino if he had anything to add in regards to the Berlin School System as he already discussed this. Mr. Valerino feels the education system is great and there are a lot of successful students that came out of the Berlin School system.

Councilor Eastman asked Mr. Valerino what's his opinion on the current tax rate. Mr. Valerino responded everyone wants lower taxes, but thinks Council does the best they can to keep the tax rate as low as they can in relation to City services. The tax rate shouldn't be lowered at the expense of cutting services. He thinks what the citizens pay in taxes for the services they receive is good. Mayor Grenier thanked Mr. Valerino.

### **Connor Arsenault**

Mr. Arsenault of 527 Champlain Street Apt. 3 shared his background with Council as stated in his application letter. He commented because he is so young, he feels he could bring a new perspective to the table by bringing that youth energy. He would like to try and get some new ideas out there for the community.

Councilor Berthiaume asked Mr. Arsenault his thoughts on the Berlin School System. Mr. Arsenault responded he just graduated 3 years ago so he has a good perspective. He thinks Berlin Public Schools do an amazing job. They do great with what they have. He feels the education he received from Berlin Public Schools, put him in a position to start his career right away. The skills given to him by the schools allowed him to go right into a career and really flourish. He's already been promoted four times in his current role at the Bank of NH which the head of the training department called unheard of. He attributes a lot of this success to the Berlin Public Schools.

Councilor Eastman asked Mr. Arsenault what's his opinion on the current tax rate. Mr. Arsenault responded that to be honest, this is something he is not sure about. If selected he would definitely want

to sit down with Council to discuss further and learn more about the taxing process. Mayor Grenier thanked Mr. Arsenault.

**Debra Ackerman**

Ms. Ackerman was not present.

**Mia Qualls**

Mrs. Qualls of 278 Champlain Street commented she wants to be a Councilor to be more part of the community and be more involved. She feels this would be a great way to do it.

Councilor Berthiaume asked Mrs. Qualls her thoughts on the Berlin School System. Mrs. Qualls commented she doesn't know a lot about the school system other than her children attended. Her daughter attended a Charter School as she didn't work well with the Berlin School System. Her son was a three-season athlete for the Berlin School System and never had issues.

Councilor Eastman asked Mrs. Qualls what's her opinion on the current tax rate. Mrs. Qualls responded she doesn't really have an opinion. She receives her tax bill and pays it. She's not angry about it as everyone has to pay taxes. She doesn't compare the rate to other Cities as different Cities/Towns have different needs or services.

Councilor Morency commented that Mrs. Qualls is part of the focus group for the opioid crisis. She is very involved in the community. Mrs. Qualls commented she has been a nurse at CCFHS for 27 years. She's is the MAT Program Coordinator for the opioid use disorder program. She is an advocate and recovery coach. She has a daughter who is an addict and she is looking to change our community so that some day she can come back and get the recovery services she needs. Councilor Berthiaume asked Mrs. Qualls if she will run for office in the upcoming elections. Mrs. Qualls responded that yes, she will be running for office. Mayor Grenier thanked Mrs. Qualls.

**Cassandra Mason**

Mrs. Mason of 61 Horne Street commented she purchased a home in Berlin 4 years ago yesterday and moved here permanently 2 years ago due to the passing of her mother and mother in law. She was able to telework from home 3 days a week and travels to Concord 2 days a week. She's been in public service her entire career. She discussed her career background as described in her resume. She commented that being someone newer to the area and not intending to run, she feels she is a good fit for the temporary position on the Council. She commented she can bring public service perspective to the position and likely not have any conflicts of interest. She would really like to serve the community.

Councilor Berthiaume asked Mrs. Mason her thoughts on the Berlin School System. Mrs. Mason responded she is not familiar with the Berlin Public School system. She did look at the budget for the schools and commented there is definitely needs in the school system. From interactions she's had with students, they seem to enjoy being at school.

Councilor Eastman asked Mrs. Mason what's her opinion on the current tax rate. Mrs. Mason responded it would be nice if it was lower. However, she knows the hard decisions Council has to make in terms of mitigating the services versus generating revenue for those services. Mayor Grenier thanked Mrs. Mason.

Mayor Grenier asked all candidates to come back in the room. He advised Council would be voting now on a candidate and the City Clerk would issue the Oath of Office immediately. He commented this will be a hard vote as all are good candidates.

Mayor Grenier called for a show of hands for Mr. Richard White.

Councilor Eastman raised his hand.

Mayor Grenier called for a show of hands for Mr. Valerino.

Councilors Berthiaume, Morgan, Robert Theberge, Morency, Eastman, Roland Theberge and Mayor Grenier raised their hands.

With all Councilors having voted, Mr. Valerino was appointed to the Council by majority vote of 8-0.

Mr. Valerino was issued the Oath of Office by City Clerk Shelli Fortin to take his seat at the Council table.

Mayor Grenier thanked all candidates and moved on to the next work session item.

### **Setting Polling Times/Locations**

Mayor Grenier requested that the Council set by motion the polling hours of 8:00 am to 7:00 pm for the Municipal Election and the polling locations of Berlin Recreation Center – Precinct 1, St Anne’s Hall – Precinct 2 and 3, and Community Bible Church – Precinct 4. Councilor Higbee moved, with a second by Councilor Berthiaume, to approve the polling hours and locations for the November 7, 2023 Municipal Election. So moved, the motion carried with all in favor.

### **RiverFire Walk/Race Request**

Mr. Warren discussed the request received. He commented this is the same request they’ve had for the past 11 years. He is recommending approval of this request as presented. Councilor Berthiaume moved to approve the RiverFire 5K Walk/Race request as presented. Councilor Roland Theberge seconded and the motion carried with all in favor. Councilor Morency asked if this was coordinated with the Berlin PD. Deputy Chief Roy advised that yes, it has been coordinated.

### **Polling Locations**

Mrs. Fortin reminded Council she had discussed this earlier in the year to reduce the polling locations to 2 instead of 3 as the rental cost for St. Anne Hall increased. She advised she received a call from Bill Maddalena of the Berlin VFW offering their facility, free of charge, as a polling location. She is proposing having precinct 1 & 2 at the Berlin Recreation Center and precinct 3 & 4 at the Berlin VFW. This would not be starting this election or the primary, but next Fall for the State primary and Presidential election. She did tour the VFW with three moderators, who all felt like the space would work well. Mayor Grenier asked Mrs. Fortin if she needed a decision this evening. She advised not this evening, but soon as she would need to prepare and send out notices to the voters. Councilor Roland Theberge asked if there are charges for the other locations. Mrs. Fortin advised the cost increased to \$700 for St Anne Hall and \$200 for the Community Bible Church. Councilor Berthiaume asked what the cost savings is to change the polling locations. Mrs. Fortin commented she didn’t add up the staff fees, but it would be a \$900 cost saving by eliminating the two locations. Mayor Grenier asked Mrs. Fortin if the VFW know that because they’re having elections in their facility, the canteen will have to be closed. Mrs. Fortin advised yes, they know. Mayor Grenier asked that this item be added to the agenda of the November 20<sup>th</sup> work session.

### **Voting Machines**

Mrs. Fortin advised that the Ballot Law Commission has approved two new voting machines. One is VotingWorks and the other is Dominion ImageCast from LHS. She did attend the demonstration of the machines in Concord. She would like to stay with the same company the City has had for the last 20 years which is LHS. There is a Resolution that will be first read tonight during regular meeting requesting the purchase of 3 machines. They are not approved for use until March 1, 2024. We

wouldn't use them until next Fall. The purchase cost does include training expenses as well. She did include to the agenda packet, the Ballot Law Commission's decision and the quote from LHS.

## **Other**

### **Eric Moran – White Horse Recovery**

Mr. Moran, Peer Resource Director at White Horse Recovery, discussed the progress made as of now on the Berlin Recovery Center. He commented they've been working on the facility which is at 38 Glen Avenue, above Aubuchon Hardware. It is a great space and will be ideal for what they're doing. They hope to have a soft opening on October 12<sup>th</sup>. The facility won't be finished but they will have offices up and functioning so that people can start coming in to get assistance. This can be anything from getting on insurance, getting to detox, getting into treatment, maybe just getting some food or some connections to other family resources. They are not a place where people will be sleeping for 28 days, he wants to make sure everyone knows this. They will also probably have transportation as the funding is relatively substantial for the stand up of the Center. They will be able to collaborate with the local doorways, the Police Dept. and actually transport individuals so they are receiving all the services they actually need in order to recover and become good active participants back into society. They are shooting for a grand opening of November 1<sup>st</sup>. He's anticipating everything except the floors and ceilings to be done by then.

He advised White Horse Recovery is a recovery community organization and the Berlin location will become whatever the community wants. It's called the "Shed" as it's a place you can shed your old life. One of his biggest goal with this brand-new launch is to look for at least 4 more community members to join the advisory board. For the launch, he had to take care of staffing, but he is not from the area. He's done the best due diligence he could by coming up and meeting the recovery community that's already here talking about how it will be staffed. The idea of the advisory committee is that community members will sit on it, sort of like a board and the community will decide the avenue for their recovery community organization. Every community is different. They have big hopes and dreams of maybe becoming a food pantry, getting a shower working for homeless folks, washing machines and dryers, etc. He commented this is one part of three parts that's required for this to be successful and save the children of Berlin. This is just part 1 and part 2 would be sober living and if the businesses of this community get involved in this recovery friendly work place, this would be part 3.

He's reached out to the AA & NA community for their support. Mayor Grenier asked Mr. Moran if the AA and NA community are being supportive. Mr. Moran responded they seem to be onboard but have concerns about the previous failed center in Berlin. They feel if this fails again, there won't be any more. Mr. Moran advised they will make sure this does not happen again. It will come together if the community does their part. Councilor Morency commented they have been putting together all resources and there's a lot of things to bring to the community. There's been inquiries on housing and also meeting with local businesses. The support is there, they're ready and want to help. Mayor Grenier thanked Mr. Moran for the update.

### **Proposed Settlement Agreement**

Mr. Warren distributed to Council the proposed settlement agreement and advised this is for the litigation that the City was involved with PSNH originally with the Smith Hydro Station. This was for the April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018 tax year. He advised that the only sure way to settle a suit that you know what the outcome will be is to have a settlement agreement. The City has been working with the City Attorney and Sansoucy Associates to prepare for this upcoming trial which was based on the value of Smith Hydro Station. Their value was much lower than ours and are looking for a much higher refund. Our value was lower. The amount of \$120,000 paid over two tax years (4 payments) is what the City can comfortably support. It is very easy to double or triple this amount if we went to trial and this is without the legal

and experts' fees. He recommends that Council approve this settlement and move forward. He commented this is only one piece of the City's value and assessment issues on these hydro and electric utilities. Councilor Higbee moved to approve the proposed settlement with the last of the Smith Hydro Station value appeals. Councilor Morgan seconded and the motion carried with all in favor.

#### **Non-Public Session**

At 7:58 p.m., Councilor Berthiaume moved with a second from Councilor Morgan to enter into Non-Public Session per RSA 91-A:3 II; (d) Consideration of the acquisition, sale, or lease of real or personal property which, if discussed in public, would likely benefit a party or parties whose interests are adverse to those of the general community. The motion carried unanimously by roll call.

Two items were discussed in Non-Public Session. The first item being the sale of City owned property and the second consideration of property sale. No votes were taken on the second item discussed.

At 8:21 p.m., Council and Staff came out of Non-Public Session. There being no further business in Work Session, Mayor Grenier recessed before moving on to the Regular Meeting.

Respectfully Submitted,  
Danielle Rioux  
Executive Assistant

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