

City Council Work Session
March 26, 2018

Present were: Mayor Grenier, Councilors Otis, Theberge, Gentili, Remillard, Higbee, Morgan Allain, and Nelson; Councilor Rozek was excused.

Others present: City Manager Jim Wheeler, City Clerk Elaine Riendeau, Health & Welfare Director Angela Martin Giroux, Chris Dube, BEMS, Chief John Lacasse, Finance Director Patty Chase, Brandon Bisson, Greg Auger, Barbara Tetreault *Berlin Daily Sun* and public.

Mayor Grenier called the meeting to order at 6:30 p.m.

Tax Liens – Patty Chase

Ms. Chase reported that tomorrow at 4:30 p.m. she will execute tax liens and tax deeding will occur April 24, 2018. Councilor Higbee commented that the trend is definitely down for tax deeded properties. To Mayor Grenier's question about what is contributing to the trend, Ms. Chase responded that assessments went down perhaps making taxes more affordable. Councilor Remillard asked if data is available that would show whether it is new owners who are not paying. Ms. Chase indicated that the finance department could report for the last three years.

New Resident Welcome Packet

Ms. Chase reported that many new residents come in to register their cars and they are given a welcome packet that has important phone numbers, AVRRDD information, school brochure, and a map of Berlin. She stated that they would be happy to include additional information. Mayor Grenier gave kudos to the Finance Department for thinking out of the box.

Budget – Ambulance

Chris Dube of Berlin Emergency Medical Service explained that the company is in a tough spot and they have challenges and a plan to move forward. There was a plan in place to replace the four wheel drive vehicle and to get a loaner while the vehicle is on order. The loaner broke down and was never usable by the company. During the time that BEMS has been waiting for a vehicle, they have lost revenue from doing transfers.

In December there was a suspension put on Medicare payments to the company; however that was short lived and was due leaving out “, Inc” on the renewal of licensure paper work. BEMS has had difficulty getting and keeping good people. The nursing home made a program available where they pay full tuition for a nursing student and some EMS personnel have taken advantage of the program. The company has lost 4 to 5 full time people and they are difficult to replace.

The State Bureau of EMS wants to increase the standards for EMT's and EMT instructors making the idea of having a class on a regular basis more difficult. When there are not enough instructors, it results in a lack of licensed ems providers. Gorham has taken a hit with this as well and BEMS is having to cover Milan and Gorham. Companies like Lifestar EMS advertise in local papers they are hiring with a starting pay higher than that of BEMS. All of this is contributing to fewer EMS personnel.

In the spring there will be a large ems class open to anyone who can submit an application. BEMS, Milan and Gorham will be given the opportunity to sponsor an applicant. The plan will include bringing pay in line to what the competition is offering by raising salaries by \$1 an hour allowing the company to make competitive offers. With that said the operating budget will need to go up by \$27,000 and it is not certain that BEMS will be able to generate revenue to make up the additional cost.

Mr. Dube stated that there is no formal arrangement with Milan or Gorham; however there were 391 calls for the year. He said that he is aware of the feasibility study on EMS and the Fire Department. The prior study estimated a startup cost to add ambulance would be \$900,000 to \$1 million and Mr. Dube inferred that it could be less than that. He offered to participate in any future study. He said that he is appreciative of the members of the Fire Department who have taken part time jobs with the ambulance. Without them, they would not have been able to meet their contractual obligation to Berlin.

There are unfunded mandates that may add cost such as mandatory power lift stretchers which would not make a lot of sense for BEMS. Defibrillators will be nearing the end of their life cycle at a cost of \$90,000.

Councilor Theberge asked how many calls refused care. Mr. Dube stated that there were 62 no transport calls and some of those may have been cancelled en-route. Councilor Nelson questioned why Milan is not charged if the ambulance goes there. Mr. Dube said that he tried to formalize an agreement however they don't want to get into an arrangement that will cost them money. BEMS charges the client the nonresident rate.

Mayor Grenier asked if it would make sense to have a regional discussion about ambulance to open a dialogue for regional service. Mr. Dube agreed saying that it makes sense and it would increase the quality of care. Mayor Grenier asked if we regionalize, would the subsidy go up. Mr. Dube stated that they like for Berlin's subsidy to be as low as possible. Councilor Higbee said that he would like to see follow up on the idea of combining ems and Fire. He would love to see us continue to move forward with the study process. Mr. Wheeler stated that the City received eight responses from all across the country to an rfp to study EMS.

Mr. Dube confirmed that he will not refuse Milan or Gorham ambulance service due to the ethics of the job; not sending an ambulance is not an option.

Councilor Nelson stated that the towns are taking advantage of BEMS. Councilor Higbee asked if there could be compensation sought for the loss of income due to the lack of a loaner ambulance. Mr. Dube noted that they are at the mercy of the company that is replacing the ambulance. It's all part of doing business. Councilors thanked Mr. Dube for his presentation and he and ambulance personnel left the meeting at this time

Health, Welfare

Ms. Martin Giroux explained that the Health and Welfare budgets were combined. The last Medicare audit for the Health Department was completed. There are no big changes in the budget request; changes are in the salary and health insurance line item. There are typical welfare line items and

nothing has changed significantly. Mayor Grenier confirmed that Ms. Giroux is now doing some of the Housing administration. Mr. Wheeler stated that Ms. Giroux's salary is split 50/50 between Housing and Welfare. Code is now by itself.

Mayor Grenier noted that there is an increase of \$6,959 which encompasses the increases in salary and health insurance. Ms. Martin Giroux stated that she has been working directly with Fire and Code and together, they are getting a lot done. Councilor Nelson asked about the additional 20 hours in code enforcement and Mr. Wheeler noted that it is for a part time summer help inspector. Councilor Nelson asked to see the building permit statistics from code.

Ms. Martin Giroux stated that she is now doing inspections of grease traps at restaurants. Councilor Remillard asked who was watching this before and Mr. Wheeler explained that the waste water superintendent would react to a problem and we are now going to do an inspection and be proactive.

Councilor Nelson asked if we are confident that health inspections on restaurants are up to date. Ms. Martin Giroux stated that they all expire June 1 and she will begin inspections to coordinate with that date.

Follow Up to Code, Planning, Zoning and Fire Complaint Letter

Mr. Wheeler reported that he wanted to follow up relative to a letter that was sent to the Council from local business leaders about enforcement of the City's codes. He said that an organized event with all stakeholders and an independent party would give all an understanding of the issues. Primex has agreed to facilitate such a meeting. So far Mr. Wheeler has not heard back from the business people.

Councilor Morgan Allain stated that small business owners and homeowners have a problem. Councilor Nelson stated that not much has changed and she feels ineffective when all remains the same. Mr. Wheeler stated that the letter criticized every corner of the building process; he encouraged anyone with a specific problem to get in touch with him. Councilor Nelson said she feels like we are not responding to a basic way of treating people. Councilor Remillard added that this has been put off so long that people relocating have an understanding that it's hard to get anything done in Berlin. Mr. Wheeler emphasized that he is not getting those examples. He has to hear from the people who are complaining and who have hard details.

Mayor Grenier noted that the Charter forbids Councilors from directing municipal employees. Councilor Morgan Allain stated that she brought a problem to the City Manager and it was resolved. Councilor Higbee confirmed that the meeting will be strictly for the signatories of the letter.

Non-Public Session

Councilor Theberge moved with a second from Councilor Morgan Allain to go into non-public session per RSA 91-A:3 II(d) land matters. So moved, the motion carried unanimously by roll call.

Councilors discussed a proposed property sale.

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

Councilor Nelson moved to adjourn; Councilor Higbee seconded and the motion carried. The meeting ended at 8:10 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,
Susan Tremblay
Administrative Assistant

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