

City Council Work Session
November 19, 2018

Present were: Mayor Grenier, Councilors Theberge, Remillard, Otis, Higbee, Gentili, Morgan Allain, Berthiaume and Rozek.

Others present: City Manager Jim Wheeler, City Clerk Shelli Fortin, School Superintendent Corinne Cascadden, Claire Stiles, Barbara Tetreault, *Berlin Daily Sun*, and public.

Mayor Grenier opened the meeting at 6:30 p.m.

Communications from Claire Stiles of Norway Street

Mr. Wheeler explained that Claire Stiles has put together thoughtful correspondence regarding ATV use in the City. Her primary issue is that she wants the City Council to conduct a survey to poll residents about their views of ATV use in the City. Mr. Wheeler noted that when he started work in 2013, the Council was considering expanding use of ATVs to city streets. They took a step by step approach allowing only during the festival at first, then only on a designated route, then expanded to all streets. The ordinance that opened all streets had a sunset clause and it was reviewed every year and adjustments were made each time. Every change in the ordinance was done with three readings, and a public hearing which is the process for input.

Mayor Grenier clarified that Ms. Stiles' letter is specifically requesting whether the Council will support a community wide survey. Councilor Rozek questioned how much revenue is brought in with ATVs and the events that occur. Councilor Berthiaume indicated that there is no effective way of knowing the exact amount; however by asking people who come, it has been determined that \$500 to \$700 is spent by each on the experience. Over a festival weekend, it is estimated \$3 million is generated and spent in the communities. Councilor Rozek asked what other alternative would generate that kind of revenue? Councilor Berthiaume commented that local businesses have created or retained jobs because of the boon. There have been hires and new businesses on Jericho Road.

Councilor Remillard reasoned that the ATVs have made a big difference in the community. Each ordinance change supporting ATV use on city streets had a public hearing and there was no opposition. She added that she cannot support a survey.

Councilor Berthiaume said that she does not support a survey; however she acknowledged that there are some problem spots that need to be addressed. We also need to have zero tolerance for the abusers. She questioned why City streets are open when State roads are closed to ATVs. Anyone wanting to ride their ATV in Jericho Park at this time needs to trailer it in.

Councilor Rozek suggested that if there are issues with the timing, a letter should be sent to the Traffic Safety Committee so that it can be addressed. Mayor Grenier noted that Wayne Saunders will be at the next work session to discuss uniformity of ATV rules within the county. He suggested listening to what is being proposed so that all are on the same page.

Mayor Grenier added that he cannot support a survey because the public's opinion has been solicited through the public hearing process. "We do we have cowboys in the City and that needs to be addressed," he said. There are common sense regulations like eye protection, horns on vehicles and some safety equipment that are being proposed. ATV use needs to be regulated and uniformity created within the county.

Councilor Higbee questioned whether there has been a surveyed and Mayor Grenier reiterated that multiple public hearings have been our survey. Councilor Higbee noted that a survey would be inviting people to come in to see what the effect is on them. He stated that he does hear from others that find riders on the streets unpleasant and they say they are considering leaving because of it. We have never asked people, how is it affecting you? Councilor Theberge countered that there are people who have bought homes because they can use their ATV here.

Mayor Grenier added that in a survey, someone with an axe to grind will be sure to put in a survey; however the person who is indifferent will not bother. He added that this is working and where there are issues, they should be addressed.

Councilor Rozek moved with a second from Councilor Theberge not to support a survey. So moved, the motion carried; Councilor Higbee voted against the motion.

School Updates

Dr. Cascadden distributed an updated School brochure. She reported that the Schools were awarded infrastructure grants to improve safety. Funding came at 80% with a 20% match from the City. Surveillance at the high school was improved with an added vestibule and safety glass at a cost of \$99,000. There is now a need to be keyed in twice before access is gained. There is new money available in January and Hillside Middle School complex will request funding for safety improvements to the State Street entrance. Councilor Rozek confirmed that the federal government never offers 100% funding.

Dr. Cascadden added that the schools have a Crisis Response Team that focuses on safety. They have to have trained staff. School safety has to be an everyday priority.

Since the Legislature started decreasing school aid, Berlin has lost \$849,000. Enrollment has been on a steady decline as well, with a loss of 33 students this year. Employees at the schools have gone from 252 to 231. The School Board is contemplating closing a school; however no final decision has been made.

Mayor Grenier stated that, with the change in the Legislature, school funding may not be as dire.

Tax Rate Update

Mr. Wheeler reported that the Board of Assessors met to consider the KRT assessment proposals. They are uncomfortable with the land sales and they question observations they've made out in the field. The BOA meeting was four hours long. Chair Goddard was going to contact Rob Tosier and the City Manager would contact the DRA to see if an across the board increase in assessments is allowed. Mr.

Wheeler expects the chair will call another BOA meeting next week and hopefully, that will result in a decision.

If tax bills don't go out soon, it could create a cash flow problem. We have enough money to pay the bills for now but the longer we go without having money coming in, the situation becomes more serious. If it is protracted for a matter of weeks, we will need to issue a freeze on discretionary spending to departments and try to accelerate getting grant reimbursements. The County Tax is a bill that we will have to pay and it is \$157,000 more than budgeted.

Councilor Rozek asked why we don't just send out the tax bills. He added that all the values were changed in the assessing model. Mr. Wheeler confirmed that though the values were changed, the pre-update data is there. He cautioned that if we send out tax bills based on that, we will be entertaining a large increase. Councilor Rozek questioned the utility shortfall and Mr. Wheeler explained that part of the change is due to increasing values in residential properties. Because our equalization ratio was reduced, when it is applied to the utility values, the amount goes down. Councilor Remillard asked why the values are affected the second part of the year and Mayor Grenier replied that it is based on values as of April 1 and it is one year behind on utilities.

Councilor Rozek mentioned that the BOA is considering an across the board increase if it is allowable. Mayor Grenier warned that if we take the old values, taxes will increase by over \$1 per thousand. Mayor Grenier stated that it is important to let the BOA do their job. They are a quasi-judicial board that should have no interference from elected officials. He expressed confidence in the three members and stated that they need the space to do their job.

With no further business in the Work Session, the Council moved on to the Regular Meeting.

Respectfully Submitted,
Susan Tremblay
Administrative Assistant

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