

City Council Work Session
March 16, 2020

Present were: Mayor Grenier, Councilors Rozek, Remillard, Higbee, Eastman, Theberge, Berthiaume and Morgan. Councilor Otis was absent.

Others present: City Manager Jim Wheeler, Superintendent Julie King, Coos County Family Health CEO Ken Gordon, Fire Chief James Watkins, Police Chief Pete Morency, Deputy Chief Dan Buteau, State Representative Larry Laflamme, State Representative Henry Noel, Community Development Director Pamela Laflamme, City Clerk Shelli Fortin, Finance Director Patty Chase, Richard Laflamme, Jamie Welch, Barbara Tetreault, *Berlin Daily Sun* and public.

Mayor Grenier opened the meeting at 6:30 p.m. Mayor Grenier changed the order of the agenda to have the COVID 19 discussion as the first item.

COVID-19

Mayor Grenier noted that Ken Gordon, CEO of Coos County Family Health and Julie King are here to talk about the COVID-19 pandemic. He noted that he's left dealing with the pandemic to the professionals. Mr. Wheeler showed a chart of high peaks which represents what will happen with the virus if it is left to naturally reproduce without intervention. The capacity of the health care system will be overwhelmed if that happens and people will be left without care. All the precautions are being taken to minimize the peak so that the health care system will be able to care for us.

Ken Gordon spoke about the preparations being made to address this public health outbreak which is the most serious in our lifetimes. It is a challenge to health care, schools and businesses. A group of community organizations, schools, college, hospital, prisons, and health care has been convening to make sure everyone is sharing resources and expertise. CCFH continues to operate with essential services, taking precautions to protect patients and staff to make sure the organization does not serve as a vector for transmission.

The dental office at CCFH has curtailed normal operations and will be used for emergency care, one or two days per week. CCFH has started screening patients to assess travel history and to deal with it in the most appropriate way. The offices are limiting the number of visitors that come with patients to reduce the spread of virus and practice social distancing. Testing in the community is limited, here and around the country.

Mr. Gordon reported that he is shocked at the speed at which the events are transpiring. We need to prepare for changes in our daily lives. This is a major event that will disrupt us for the foreseeable future. The effort is to stem the tide and flatten the curve. We should all take time to be calm and consider people who may need extra help as well as emotional support.

Mr. Gordon went on to say that we are relying on the recommendations of the CDC and DHHS and people are encouraged to visit their web sites. He reviewed the cases in NH. He asked if there were questions.

Councilor Theberge asked if there have been tests done in Coos County and Mr. Gordon confirmed that there was one and it came back negative. Tests are very limited and commercial labs are now offering testing. Councilor Morgan asked if the test is covered by insurance and Mr. Gordon stated that commercial insurance has said they will cover; however the details are not confirmed yet. Councilor Rozek asked what minimum threshold needs to be met before testing is initiated. Mr. Gordon noted that they are using the CDC guidelines of having travel history, a proximity to someone whose been diagnosed and symptoms such as high fever, and respiratory problems. Guidelines will be expanded once more tests become available. Mr. Gordon stressed that knowing whether you have it or not will not change treatment. Councilor Morgan confirmed that treatment is to lay low and wait for it to go away. Mr. Gordon added that the majority of cases are mild and treatment is the same as flu or cold, with an aspirin regimen, plenty of fluids. There is a misconceptions that young people are immune; this is affecting people of all ages and it is to be taken seriously.

Richard Laflamme, 128 Jasper Street commented that he has daughters who work for CCFH and they have to go out to meet with the public. How is CCFH preventing them from being exposed? Mr. Gordon acknowledged that it is difficult for health care providers and they are at risk for this and every other illness. Staff is being screened and asked to self-monitor. Health care workers are voluntarily put at higher risk.

Henry Noel, 7 Bisson Road, asked about the dissemination of information to help the local community. Mr. Gordon mentioned that the Chamber of Commerce is using e-mail and social media platforms. There are older people and the disadvantaged who may be more at risk if they get sick. Mr. Noel clarified that he wanted to know how they will be informed. Mr. Wheeler said that the city has the ability to implement its emergency operations center which utilizes incident command. There is a subset of group, consisting of Fire, Police, City Manager, and Communication Liaison who met to talk about the flow of information and how to get it out. We will use whatever platforms there are. Councilor Remillard noted that the 211 line is available as well.

Barbara Tetreault, 404 Church Street asked about maintaining educational standards and keeping up with goals. She also asked if this goes on for a long time and people ignore preventative care, will we end up with a population that is unhealthier. Mr. Gordon mentioned that this came up in the context of child visits, that it may delay or interrupt immunizations of children. He encourage all to talk with their provider. Councilor Nelson noted that the Chamber of Commerce has a tower that gives access to Conway cable channels. They make 30 second slots available to non-profits for public information.

Julie King addressed the group and stated that every minute, there is a change in plan. Students are not in buildings and Staff has one week to prepare before going live with web based learning. We have to make sure that all students have the tools for at home learning. Each child has Individual computers; however only grades 9-12 are allowed to bring Chromebooks home. This week will be spent distributing materials and learning tools to the students who need them.

The Elementary school is looking at a different approach. Books and Chromebooks will be available during a 12 hour day for families to pick them up. Beyond that, is to determine which families need internet access; estimates are that about 10% don't have access. There are also areas in Milan and Dummer that are not serviced by the companies offering free access.

Lunch distribution is another aspect that will need to be covered. USDA food service has free breakfast and lunch available to any student in the household under the age of 18. A bussing schedule will be developed to deliver meals.

Teachers are scrambling to put a plan for on line learning. Students are not expected to be in front of a screen for 6 hours. Questions are difficult to answer and the schools are relying on information from the Department of Education. They are working on guidelines for special education. Ms. King noted that this is a whole new avenue and staff will work hard at keeping the students engaged. CTE students' needs are being considered because they have to meet competencies for licensing and certification by the end of the year. Councilor Eastman asked if there is screening going on. Mr. Gordon indicated that at CCFH they are screening patients for symptoms.

Larry Laflamme, 474 Second Ave. asked about children receiving free lunch and breakfast and Ms. King assured him that all children under the age of 18 are eligible. There is a plan to determine which children want the program and how to get the meals to them.

Mr. Wheeler stated that precautions are being taken to have minimal contact among people and how to protect staff. We are keeping people out of the secure areas of city hall. We are advising staff to practice social distancing and telling staff to stay home if they are feeling sick. The Recreation Center is closed; staff will remain. The Fire Department is not allowing walk-in traffic. The Library is closed but they will offer curbside service for anyone who wants to take out a book. Public Works will continue garbage pick-up and their other work. Councilor Rozek asked that the executive chambers be disinfected at the end of the day including the room, doorknobs and the top and edges of the table.

Mr. Wheeler went on to say that we will inventory staff who have travelled; review and may ask them to stay out of work for two weeks. The emergency management group met today regarding public safety. There may be drive thru testing in Berlin which would be put into place in the next few weeks and the goal of emergency management in Berlin is to be the hub for the valley. Councilor Rozek confirmed that testing consists of a cheek swab and the sample is sent to the State lab for testing. Councilor Theberge spoke to the Governor closing bars and restaurants throughout the State except for take-out. Chief Watkins added that the action is to remove people. Councilor Berthiaume asked if we are going out on every ems call and Chief Watkins confirmed that we are not; we go only when needed.

In closing Mayor Grenier thanked the City Manager and credited his work with the hospital as valuable experience that will get us through the crisis. He added that as an elected official, he will not take part in the planning of this emergency; it is serious and he wants people to take it seriously. He thanked staff and the health care organizations saying that we will get through this if we all work together.

PD Grant Resolutions

Mr. Wheeler reported that, to expedite grant submittals, the PD grant resolutions were written so that the Police Chief could sign off on them. He asked NHMA to review and they found that Berlin's Charter is specific that the Mayor and Council retain that authority and the City Manager is authorized to act on behalf of the Council. The resolutions will need to be amended to reflect the change from Police Chief to City Manager.

Zoning Change for Downtown

Ms. Laflamme explained that in the strategic planning with BIDPA there were recommendations for things to do with downtown. Camion suggested that the existing downtown footprint is too large. The last change was to remove the section from City Hall to St. Annes Church. Having a smaller area that is in the Downtown Zone will allow more focus. The new downtown zone will be from Mason to Mechanic Streets and parcels going east from Pleasant to east of Main Street. The parts that will no longer be in the downtown zone will be zoned business general.

There being no further business in work session, Mayor Grenier moved on to the Regular Meeting at 7:45 p.m.

Non-Public Session

At 8:20 p.m. Councilor Remillard moved to go into non-public session per RSA 91-A:3II (d) land matters; and (b) hiring; Councilor Morgan seconded and the motion carried unanimously by roll call.

Councilor Rozek moved to come out of non-public session; Councilor Higbee seconded and the motion carried unanimously by roll call.

Councilor Rozek moved to seal the minutes of the non-public session indefinitely, as releasing them would make the action taken ineffective; Councilor Berthiaume seconded and the motion carried unanimously.

Adjourn

Councilor Rozek moved with a second from Councilor Morgan to adjourn. So moved the motion carried. The meeting ended at 9:20 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,
Susan Tremblay
Administrative Assistant

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