



COMMITTEE of the WHOLE

CITY COUNCIL

SUMMARY

November 8, 2021
5:00 P.M.
Hybrid Meeting

COUNCIL MEMBERS PRESENT:

S. Marmarou, (in person), D. Reed, L. Sihelnik, J. Cepeda-Freytiz, M. Ventura, M. Goodman-Hinnershitz, (electronically)

OTHERS PRESENT:

L. Kelleher, (in person), S. Smith, J. Kelly, B. Gamble, C. Crespo, R. Tornielli, J. Long, M. Rodriguez, W. Stoudt, F. Lachat, A. Acevedo, N. Matz, A. Amoros, F. Denbowski, J. Abodalo, E. Moran, M. Oppenheimer (all electronically)

The meeting was called to order at 5:02 pm by Ms. Sihelnik.

I. Budget Review

- **Library**

Mr. Kelly explained that the Library has nine employees paid by the City – 6 AFSCME members and 3 management. He stated that the salary increases have been calculated and are included.

Mr. Kelly stated that there are several library projects included in the capital budget including HVAC systems, lighting, fire alarms, security cameras, etc. He stated that there has also been an update to the ARPA earmarks to include digitization projects, wifi boosting, and senior outreach.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz requested clarity on the proposed ARPA projects. Ms. Gamble stated that the library already works with the twelve City high rises. She stated that tablets and wifi hotspots will be purchased to train seniors on how to use the internet and telemedicine. She stated that the wifi boost will allow residents to sit in the library parking lots after closing to use the internet. She explained that the PA Room's unreplaceable

materials will be digitized. She explained that the digitization project includes the purchase of a high quality scanner and an intern to perform the work over a two year period. She stated that there will also be a focus on enhancing virtual adult programming.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz questioned the total costs of the ARPA projects. Ms. Gamble stated that it is approximately \$300,000.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz questioned if the library receives services from Public Works. Ms. Gamble stated that they receive electrical and plumbing services but that large projects are outsourced. She stated that cleaning, lawn care, snow removal and utilities are paid directly by the library.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz questioned how the library operated before Act 47. Ms. Gamble stated that she was not the Executive Director at that time. She stated that the library had 20 employees in the past and two of those employees focused on maintenance. She stated that these employees were paid by the City but that was eliminated in 2010 and now the library directly pays most employees.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz questioned if this is sustainable. Ms. Gamble stated that she is unsure how long this system can continue. She stated that COVID caused the need for extra cleaning services and that reimbursement for these needs will end. She reminded all that the buildings are owned by the City and stated that the library will apply for additional assistance as programs become available.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz noted the need to revisit the County allocation to the library. She stated that this agreement is old and has not been adjusted. She noted the need to sustain the library and stated that it serves a large population.

Mr. Marmarou stated that this agreement is discussed annually but increases do not occur. He noted the need to pursue an adjustment with the County since County residents also use the City's libraries.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz suggested reviewing the agreement in 2022 after the new Councilors are in office. She noted the need to understand the details in the document.

Ms. Rodriguez questioned the purpose of the wifi boost. Ms. Gamble stated that this will boost the wifi signal into the library parking lots to allow residents to use the wifi after the libraries are closed.

Ms. Rodriguez questioned the cost for this specific project. Ms. Gamble stated that it will be approximately \$6,000 annually. She stated that the initial project cost also includes benches at the Northeast and Northwest branches for residents to sit on while they use the internet.

Ms. Reed congratulated the library on the work they do. She questioned how money raised during fundraising is used. Ms. Gamble stated that it is used for special projects and for programming. She stated that programs that are supported by fundraising include summer reading. She stated that programs proposed for 2022 include digital media, children's programming, supplies for crafts and go bags, and library expenses. She stated that the budget for these programs is \$45,000.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz expressed the belief that it is imperative to have multiple funding streams. She stated that the library has moved into the 21st century and noted her appreciation of the library's work.

Ms. Gamble left the meeting at this time.

- **Human Relations Commission**

Ms. Talbot joined the meeting at this time.

Mr. Kelly stated that there is one full time Executive Director and one full time clerical position. He stated that the part time salaries line item has been increased to allow additional staff to work on assistance programs. He stated that three part time positions have been proposed. He explained that contracted services will be \$0 in 2022 due to the office copy machine being moved under the Purchasing budget. He stated that the three new part time positions will be file clerks.

Mr. Kelly stated that the City has earmarked \$5.5 million of ARPA and additional HOME funds to provide homeless services. He stated that Ms. Talbot will be instrumental in this project.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz questioned the timeframe to use these ARPA funds. She also noted the major discrepancy with the Executive Director's salary being the same amount as a Special Assistant to the Mayor. She questioned how salaries are determined and how discrepancies can be rectified. Mr. Kelly stated that part of this issue may need to be discussed in executive session. He stated that he can provide a history of this salary but that HR will also need to provide input.

Ms. Sihelnik stated that this same issue has been noted in other budget areas. She stated that it is a parking lot item.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz agreed with Ms. Sihelnik. She agreed with Mr. Kelly that part of this discussion should be in executive session and agreed that equity needs to be addressed. She stated that the HRC has been given new responsibilities and noted the need for a review of job descriptions. She expressed the belief that this is a critical issue.

Mr. Kelly requested to be included in the executive session when this is discussed.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz stated that the budget for the Water Hardship Program is \$0. She questioned how this program is funded. Mr. Kelly stated that it is partially funded through RAWA. Ms. Talbot stated that RAWA provides approximately \$15,000 but it is not cash. She stated that bill adjustments are made but cash is not disbursed. She stated that the \$15,000 is used to administer the program.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz stated that this \$15,000 revenue is not reflected in the budget.

II. CDBG Budget

Ms. Sihelnik questioned if there were specific questions and reminded all that the CDBG budget had been reviewed in length several meetings ago. She questioned if any changes had been made since that review.

Mr. Amoros stated that no additional changes had been made.

Mr. Abodalo stated that no additional changes had been made. He stated that he would provide a refresher if needed.

Ms. Sihelnik suggested questions on specific items and not a full review.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz noted the need to balance whether CDBG or ARPA funds are used for projects and to be mindful of the different program requirements.

Mr. Abodalo stated that this is a great observation. He stated that in addition to the annual CDBG funding there is also CDBG funding relative to COVID-19. He stated that he will be careful how funding is used.

Ms. Talbot left the meeting at this time.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz questioned the amount of ARPA funding in the Action Plan. Mr. Abodalo stated that there is no ARPA funding in the Action Plan. He stated that the Action Plan includes CDBG, HOME, and ESG funding only. He stated that the new items included in this Action Plan are funding for the Redevelopment Authority and the Collegetowne project to assist small business owners.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz questioned if there was duplication of services since there may be separate but common issues. Mr. Kelly stated that there can be no double dipping. He stated that if that is done the City could lose its funding.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz noted the need for the ARPA funds to strengthen the City and address issues that cannot be covered by CDBG funding. She noted the need for specificity of

which funds are being used for projects and how they are being spent. She stated that this is a good practice.

Mr. Kelly stated that ARPA funding will allow the City to respond to its own needs. He stated that the new City shelter will have an outside entity managing it. He stated that this project is moving forward based on needs voiced by Councilors in the past.

Mr. Abodalo noted his hope that the City shelter will also provide day services.

Ms. Sihelnik noted the need to educate residents about the use of funds and to be clear which funds are being used. She stated that there are very strict rules about the use of CDBG funds.

III. Council Solicitor

Ms. Sihelnik stated that a start date is needed. She stated that the offer has been extended and she questioned a December 1, 2021 start date.

Ms. Kelleher stated that the Law Office has funding available to pay December 2021 salary due to a vacant position in legal staffing. Mr. Lachat agreed.

Ms. Sihelnik questioned if the salary would be paid through the Law Office in the future. Ms. Kelleher stated that this is a Council position and would be paid from the City Council budget beginning January 1, 2022.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz questioned if the start date should be January 1, 2022. Mr. Lachat stated that Council should move forward as soon as possible. He stated that this is a Charter requirement and that the timeline has already been extensive. He stated that he is looking forward to working with the Council Solicitor.

Council agreed that the start date would be December 1, 2021.

IV. Reading Parking Authority

- Issuance of parking tickets on the vehicle versus mail

Mr. Matz thanked Ms. Ventura for bringing this issue to his attention. He stated that no print tickets are now used for employee safety and he described the number of times that RPA employees are threatened. He stated that double parking seems to be the most dangerous situation.

Mr. Matz stated that increased efficiency is also attained through the no print system. He stated that enforcement officers needing to get in and out of their vehicle many times slows down the sweepers. He stated that currently four hour blocks of time are posted for the sweeper program but he hopes to have that time cut down to 1 -2 hour blocks of time. He

suggested that this will allow the City to expand the sweeper program. He stated that double parking and the sweeper program are the only two items being issued no print tickets.

Mr. Matz stated that the RPA has adjusted the penalty rate increase timeframe and he has heard no additional complaints. He stated that Council set the escalation dates but the mail is slower so the timeframe has been extended to 30 / 60 days rather than the original 10 / 30 days for rate increases. He stated that the car owner is now notified of tickets even if the ticket was issued when they allowed someone else to borrow their car.

Ms. Reed questioned if other cities are using this program. Mr. Matz stated that this is a new industry and Reading is a beta test. He stated that others are watching Reading and expressed the belief that they will start moving in the same direction.

Ms. Ventura stated that no other municipality is using this system. Mr. Matz stated that there is no other municipality using the system that he is aware of.

Ms. Sihelnik questioned if the owner can electronically check whether tickets have been issued. Mr. Matz stated that residents can register for this service on the RPA website and search by license plate number. He stated that the entire RPA history of that license plate will be displayed.

Ms. Sihelnik questioned the amount of time that passes before the ticket is posted to the RPA website. Mr. Matz stated that it should be instant but there is a delay due to the need for PennDOT verification of the owner's address. He stated that this is needed before the ticket can be mailed. He stated that this is another reason for the time extension.

Ms. Sihelnik questioned if the owner could be notified via email. Mr. Matz stated that PennDOT does not have a database of drivers' email addresses. He stated that if the owner is an RPA permit holder the email is available. He stated that this is a new idea and he will discuss it with the vendor, along with the use of a text message.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz stated that many residents are surprised when the ticket arrives in the mail. Mr. Matz stated that it should not be a surprise. He stated that people know where they should not park and if they do park illegally it is always a risk. He stated that RPA is focusing on quality and stated that if the issue is questionable a ticket will not be issued.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz suggested an educational campaign to use the Park Mobile app. She questioned if the app could inform the owner that a ticket had been issued. Mr. Matz stated that he likes that idea but it is two different vendors. He stated that the gateless system will use one of the same vendors and will discuss this possibility with both vendors. He stated that if you use the Park Mobile app, your information is already on file.

Ms. Ventura stated that she personally feels that people won't check to see if they've been issued a ticket. She stated that she's been told many times that tickets were not received in the mail. She noted her preference for tickets to be placed on the vehicle when they are issued. She stated that the fact that Reading is the only municipality using this system also has her questioning the decision to send tickets by mail.

Mr. Matz noted his understanding of Ms. Ventura's feelings. He again stated that he has had no new complaints about the timing of the payment of the ticket since it has been extended to 30 / 60 days. He stated that the appeal timeline has also been extended to 30 days.

Mr. Crespo left the meeting at this time.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz questioned if the mobile app could send a text. She suggested that this be the primary notification. She stated that the postal service is no longer reliable and reminded all that Reading mail is shipped to Harrisburg for processing and is then returned to Reading for delivery. She noted the need to have better channels of communication.

Ms. Sihelnik thanked Ms. Ventura and Mr. Matz. She stated that the topic time limit has been reached. She explained that a beta test is used to make a system better and agreed that, overall, paper systems are no longer used. She agreed that residents know when they have parked illegally and suggested an educational campaign to remind all of parking rules and the sweeper program. She thanked RPA for exploring new options. She noted the need to share public concerns voiced to Councilors with the RPA.

Ms. Reed stated that she also has other concerns to discuss. She requested another discussion with Mr. Matz at a future meeting. Mr. Matz agreed to attend meetings as often as necessary.

Ms. Reed stated that her concern is regarding exiting garages after downtown events. Mr. Matz agreed that this is concerning and stated that this is why the gateless system is being explored. He agreed that it should not take two hours to exit a garage but noted that the parking attendants should no longer be collecting cash. He stated that he has heard many complaints about this issue as well.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz expressed the belief that if those visiting Reading have a bad experience they may never return. She noted the need for the City to be welcoming and put its best foot forward to guests.

Mr. Matz stated that RPA has had to add responsibilities since DID was not re-established. He stated that the gateless system is the only guarantee to exit more quickly. He stated that RPA spent \$1.4 million in 2019 on a gate system that is inefficient. He agreed that he does not want guests to have a negative experience.

- Issuance of parking tickets after the street sweeper passes

Mr. Matz stated that the RPA does not come back around to the same block after the sweeper has passed. He stated that the RPA policy on sweeper enforcement is posted on the website. He stated that he will share this policy with Council.

Mr. Moran requested clarity that even though the four hour time is posted there is no enforcement after the sweeper has passed. Mr. Matz stated that after the sweeper passes it is okay to park in that block. He stated that it is now leaf season and the sweeper tanks fill with debris more quickly. He stated that when the sweeper must leave to empty debris the enforcement officer waits at that location for the sweeper to return before moving forward on the route.

Mr. Moran stated that he will speak with Public Works to request the sweeper finish the block before leaving to empty and return. Mr. Matz thanked Mr. Moran for his effort.

Ms. Sihelnik stated that this is a great example of service coordination.

V. Agenda Review

Council reviewed this evening's agenda including the following:

- Public Comment

Ms. Kelleher stated that two people are registered to speak – one by phone and one in person. She stated that they are both speaking on non-agenda topics.

- Resolution promoting Sergeant Aaron Demko to the rank of Lieutenant
- Resolution promoting Officer Daniel Egbert to the rank of Sergeant

Police Chief Tornielli stated that there has been a retirement and these promotions are necessary to fill those positions. He stated that these candidates are the next two eligible on the current Civil Service list.

- Ordinance amending Code of Ordinances Chapter 62 New Officers and Employees Pension Fund, Section 102 to prohibit the participation of new members where the employee is hired or rehired on or after January 1, 2022

Mr. Amoros requested that this ordinance be tabled again this evening. He noted his hope that this would be the last time and explained that there is one outstanding issue that is almost resolved.

- Ordinance authorizing a budget transfer in the Law Department in the amount of \$70,000 from Special Counsel Labor Negotiations to General Legal Services

Mr. Lachat stated that there are additional costs for outside counsel. He stated that there are Charter Board issues and several cases in the trial phase. He stated that the City will also need to use the services of a firm with specialized experience in telecommunications issues. He stated that the Law Office continues to be short staffed.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz questioned if additional funds will be needed in 2022 as the City negotiates its collective bargaining agreements. Mr. Kelly explained that this \$70,000 is available because the Administration did most of the negotiations for the current agreements. He stated that \$50,000 has been budgeted for negotiations in 2022.

Mr. Lachat stated that the Law Office budget will be reviewed at tomorrow's meeting. He stated that labor counsel reviewed the proposed collective bargaining agreements but that Mr. Kelly did much of the work. He stated that this provided significant savings.

Ms. Sihelnik suggested that Mr. Lachat provide a brief explanation to the public before the vote is taken.

- Ordinance authorizing a budget transfer of \$30,000 from Finance to the Mayor's Office for the purchase of a car for the Mayor

Mr. Kelly stated that the Mayor has been using hand-me-down cars to attend official events, both in PA and in other states. He stated that there has been an increase in maintenance and this funding will be used to purchase a certified used car for the Mayor's use. He again stated that this vehicle is used in the Mayor's official capacity.

Ms. Sihelnik stated that this ordinance is being introduced and action will be taken at the next meeting.

Mr. Moran stated that Mr. Kelly used choice words. He stated that the vehicle he has been using has left him stranded on several occasions. He stated that this will not be a new car. He stated that he is spending responsibly and this is the first time he is spending money in this way since taking office.

- Ordinance authorizing a budget transfer of \$12,000 from Finance to the Mayor's Office to reimburse the Potteiger Trust Fund to cover the cost of the gun buyback program, as this fund may be used only for charity

Mr. Kelly stated that the Auditor has clarified the Trust Fund's use and the transfer will reimburse the Trust Fund. He stated that this will resolve the issue.

- Ordinance authorizing the addition of an Agency Fund line item in the amount of \$25,000 for downtown holiday related costs

Mr. Kelly stated that the City is holding holiday events without DID. He stated that creating this agency fund will allow the City to receive donations. He explained that agency funds roll over to the next budget year if they are unspent. He expressed the belief that \$25,000 will cover the costs of all the decorations.

Mr. Amoros stated that donations have already exceeded \$25,000 in sponsorships.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz requested an update on the holiday parade. Mr. Amoros stated that the parade will begin at 10 am on Saturday, November 20. He stated that 13 groups have already registered to participate. He stated that the City is expecting a large turnout.

Mr. Moran stated that he is also working on a tree lighting event.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz questioned if there would be additional decorations and lights on Penn St. Mr. Moran stated that he will request an update from Ms. Castner. Mr. Amoros reminded all that decorations may be difficult to purchase due to supply chain issues.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz questioned if the City has the decorations that were used by DID. Mr. Amoros stated that those decorations are available. He stated that there will also be new garlands and banners.

Ms. Sihelnik requested an update from Ms. Caster at next week's meeting or via email. She stated that Council is unclear on the Administration's plan.

Mr. Moran stated that donations are always welcome.

Ms. Sihelnik requested that this topic be added as a discussion item on next week's agenda.

Ms. Reed stated that she is a long term veteran of decorating downtown. She expressed the belief that funding is not always the only issue. She noted the need to consider installing a natural tree at City Hall. She stated that she is not a fan of the artificial tree at 5th & Penn.

Mr. Moran stated that he agrees with the majesty of live beauty. He stated that he is hoping for new tree decorations and stated that many are willing to assist.

Ms. Reed suggested a live tree in addition to the artificial tree. She added that in the past live trees were donated. Mr. Moran suggested working on this for 2022 so there is more time to plan.

Ms. Reed requested the return of the Snoopy doghouse. She expressed the belief that the kids loved it. Mr. Moran stated that this also needs further discussion.

Ms. Sihelnik suggested that Councilors send their ideas to the Mayor. She stated that the plan can be reviewed at the meeting next week.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz stated that she is not Christian and thanked Mr. Moran for celebrating all holidays. She stated that Hanukah starts early this year and that she is glad a menorah is included in the decorations.

VI. OTHER BUSINESS

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz requested a review with Council of all requests received for ARPA funds before the budget is passed. Mr. Amoros stated that he will review the requests with Council before the budget is passed.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz noted the need for the public to understand who applied for funding.

VII. EXECUTIVE SESSION

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz questioned if the salary discussion would occur this evening. Mr. Lachat suggested holding an executive session tomorrow to begin this discussion.

Atty. Adair and Atty. MacMain joined the meeting at this time. The six members of Council, Ms. Kelleher, Ms. Smith, Mr. Lachat, Mr. Amoros, Mr. Denbowski, Mr. Kelly, and Mr. Moran remained in the meeting.

Ms. Sihelnik noted the need for Mr. Kelly to be prepared for the salary discussion.

Mr. Amoros requested specific questions be submitted beforehand so he is best able to answer them. He requested that this discussion be delayed until next week.

Ms. Sihelnik agreed.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz agreed that questions should be put in writing to help the Administration prepare. She stated that there are many underlying issues and this is a very important discussion.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz noted the need for HR to provide data as well. She questioned who questions should be submitted to. Mr. Lachat suggested that Mr. Kelly, Mr. Lachat, himself should be copied in addition to HR and Mr. Amoros. He stated that this will allow a more robust discussion.

Council entered executive session at 6:41 pm to discuss litigation.

Police Chief Tornielli rejoined the meeting.

The executive session ended and the meeting adjourned at 7:12 pm.

*Respectfully Submitted by
Linda A. Kelleher, CMC, City Clerk*