



COMMITTEE of the WHOLE

CITY COUNCIL

SUMMARY

September 6, 2022
5:00 P.M.
Hybrid Meeting

COUNCIL MEMBERS PRESENT:

D. Reed, C. Daubert, C. Miller, M. Goodman-Hinnershitz, J. Cepeda-Freytiz, (in person)

OTHERS PRESENT:

L. Kelleher, J. Stoudt, R. Tornielli, E. Moran, W. Heim, F. Freytiz; N. Matz, B. Ganster (in person), S. Smith, F. Lachat, J. Kelly, WFMZ, M. Lynch, BCTV (virtually)

The meeting was called to order at 5:06 pm by Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz.

I. Parking Stall Pilot Program

Mr. Matz gave a Power Point presentation on the Parking Stall pilot program that went into effect on July 1, 2022 for 31 blocks within the City. Originally the 31 blocks had 980 parking spaces; however, after the installation of lines 1,087 were created. Between the effective date of the resolution and July 1st, those residing in the affected areas received information about the start of the pilot program. The cost to stripe the blocks was \$35,809, the majority of the cost was for engineering. Enforcement began on July 11th and 89 violations were issued by August 31st.

Mr. Butler and Mr. Abodalo arrived at 5:13 pm.

Mr. Gombar arrived at 5:17 pm.

Ms. Ventura arrived at 5:19 pm.

Mr. Matz described the messages received from those who do not reside in the 31 block pilot area requesting stall parking. He distributed spreadsheets showing the comments. He noted that there was an overwhelming amount for support for the expansion of this pilot program. He stated that there are 1,589 blocks within Reading and it would take approximately 1.6 years at a cost of \$1,835,295 to implement a City-wide program. He estimated that City-wide 5,561

spaces would be added (average of 3.5 spaces per block). Mr. Matz stated that one new RPA employee would be required to maintain the parking stalls.

Mr. Butler inquired about how the RPA would handle appeals for someone ticketed for parking over the stall line due to the improper/illegal positioning of another vehicle. Mr. Matz stated that while he cannot answer for the RPA Hearing Officer, he is of the belief that there is no justification for breaking the law due to the illegal positioning of another vehicle. He noted that only 89 violations were issued within a 45 day period which is extremely low.

Mr. Miller agreed with the need for the expansion of parking stalls in residential neighborhoods; however, he expressed the belief that on major thoroughfares like North 5th Street and Centre Avenue, it may create additional challenges due to the existing bus stops and fire hydrants. He stated that PennDOT recently eliminated 20 parking spaces in the 700-800 blocks of North 5th Street which increases parking woes for an already stressed neighborhood. He stated that the majority of the properties in these blocks have been converted to multifamily rentals with multiple cars per residential unit without any off-street parking spaces. He pointed out that people who work late in the evening often return home and find they need to park blocks away from their building and these people sometimes park illegally near their neighborhood for their personal safety. He referenced a woman who finds herself in this type of situation and received over \$2,000 in parking tickets.

Mr. Matz agreed with Mr. Miller's points, noting that while the parking stalls provide some relief in some neighborhoods, the program is not a magic bullet.

Mr. Moran stated that the administration continues to address parking stress in neighborhoods and he agreed that the conversion of single family properties to multifamily units compounds the problem. He stated that he will be asking Council to reconsider the ordinance that would create an additional 64 off-street parking spaces in southeast Reading.

Ms. Reed noted that over a year and a half ago, Council asked the administration to begin working on legislation to incentivize the de-conversion of multifamily properties and the redevelopment of blighted properties and nothing has come forward for Council's consideration. She suggested moving this initiative forward.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz opined that parking stress is also compounded by the lack of public transportation in the City, noting that in larger cities with good public transportation, people do not rely on personal vehicles. However, in Reading there are multiple properties and many apartments where every person residing in the property has their own vehicle. She questioned if the City can legally place limits on the number of vehicles per household.

Ms. Rodriguez noted the need to consider the City's paving schedule prior to the installation of new parking stall lines.

Mr. Daubert stated that during the town hall meetings to develop the parking study, the RPA announced a new program to assist with the installation of parking pads in the rear yards of properties. Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz agreed that this topic was discussed but never finalized.

Mr. Matz stated that he had been working with Mr. Abodalo about this need but the process hurdles presented by zoning and planning have not been cleared.

Mr. Abodalo stated that work continues on this issue. He stated that there are properties where rear parking cannot be obtained due to ingress and egress issues caused by the width of the alley. He suggested instead to approach schools and churches for neighborhood off-street parking during times when the schools are closed and times when the church does not have services or events scheduled.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz asked Mr. Matz how he would phase in the City-wide parking stall program. Mr. Matz stated that he would begin implementation in the areas with the highest amount of density and parking stress.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz inquired about the reduction in the amount of space reserved for fire hydrants and bus stops. Mr. Matz stated that the administration is working on that issue. He stated that the RPA will converse with BARTA about the potential to revise/relocate bus stops and routes.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz suggested adding parking complaints to the iRequest system or creating similar system at the RPA. Mr. Matz stated that the RPA recently started a 24/7 dispatch center. He noted the constant work to try different approaches to cure/improve parking issues. He stated that updates on new beta projects will be made to City Council moving forward.

Mr. Gombar noted that the parking stall pilot program expires on October 1st. He inquired if the administration will be putting forth legislation to amend the parking section of the City Code to make this program permanent. Mr. Moran stated that legislation will be presented to make this a permanent program.

Mr. Matz and Mr. Ganster left the meeting at this time.

II. ReTAP Amendment

Mr. Gombar stated that the ordinance presented by the administration in late 2020 to extend the ReTAP program (Real Estate Tax Abatement Program) had various inconsistencies that prevented the entire ordinance from being codified.

Mr. Gombar questioned the intent behind applying the tax abatement program only to owner-occupied properties. He noted that the language in the version adopted in 2020 prevents tax abatement for other residential development such as that in the Buttonwood Gateway, the Madison and the former Meridian Building. He stated that generally tax abatement programs

run for 10 years and he questioned the body's desire to shorten the abatement period to five (5) years.

Mr. Abodalo explained that the extension of the program beyond 2020 began as an incentive for residential development and to incentivize the de-conversion of multifamily properties when the property is owner-occupied for a three (3) year period. He agreed that as drafted the abatement will not apply to development projects in downtown Reading. He suggested refining the ordinance to allow the abatement to all residential development and to have the applications submitted to Building/Trades. He suggested also altering the ordinance to set the abatement schedule to the cost of the project, as is done in other cities. He offered to send the schedule. He suggested retaining the five (5) year abatement for owner-occupied properties and the three (3) year abatement for other residential development projects.

In response to a question posed by Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz, Mr. Gombar stated that currently the ReTAP ordinance applies only to owner occupied properties. Mr. Abodalo stated that the owner occupied property can also include up to a three (3) unit property if the owner resides in the property. He stated that ReTAP can also provide an incentive to fight blight and turn vacant properties into occupied dwellings.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz noted the large conversion of former office space to residential units in the downtown area. She questioned if the City is prepared for the large influx of people to occupy these former office buildings and the accompanying increase in the need for various services.

Mr. Abodalo stated that in part downtown development is controlled by the capacity of the WWTP through the modification of the Official Sewage Facilities Plan submitted annually to the PA DEP and through the need for parking. He stated that at some time in the future the City may need to approve a moratorium on new development projects due to the lack of capacity at the WWTP. *(Note: Sewage Planning Modules are not approved and submitted to the PA DEP until the project is completed and after zoning, planning, building/trades processes are completed)*

Mr. Moran noted the new trend to work from home and to be close to central services.

Mr. Abodalo explained that ReTAP applies to residential properties and LERTA (Local Economic Revitalization Tax Assistance program) applies to commercial properties.

Ms. Reed expressed concern with the City's approval of residential units that are smaller than that allowed by the Zoning Ordinance and the great increase in density that creates. She inquired about the City's interaction with the Reading School District about the potential increase in the City's population and the potential increase in the number of school aged children.

Mr. Abodalo stated that the Zoning Ordinance allows leniency in the size of residential units within the commercial core. He also stated that off-street parking is not required for uses within the commercial core; however, the City currently stipulates that the developer establish a relationship with the RPA within the land development requirements to address potential parking needs. He stated that he is unsure about how the City briefs the School District about residential development. He promised to speak with his planning consultant about that issue.

Mr. Gombar stated that it appears that the administration has amendments to the corrected ReTAP ordinance draft. Mr. Abodalo agreed, noting that the amended draft will be provided to the Law Department, Mr. Gombar and the City Clerk.

III. Public Safety Reports

- Fire

Chief Stoudt stated that the department is currently training in the new ladder truck on the WWTP grounds. He stated that a grant was received to replace antiquated hoses and that the 9th and Marion Firehouse project remains on course to open in December. He announced the 911 Ceremony scheduled for 9:55 in City Park and the upcoming training opportunity at the burn building.

Mr. Moran left the meeting.

Ms. Reed and Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz noted their experience with participating in the training at the burn building, noting that this experience permanently changes a person's perception of what fire fighters experience. Chief Stoudt agreed, noting that the burn building offers a very controlled and safe environment for training.

In response to a question, Chief Stoudt explained that the department is exploring their ability to begin a Jr. Firefighter Academy. He expressed the belief that the department's current manning is too low to begin a Jr. Academy. He stated that he currently refers those who are interested to academies located in West Reading. He explained that prior to Act 47, the department had 22 people per shift. Act 47 reduced that number to 18 per shift. He added that currently the department is operating with a 10 person shortage. He stated that the SAFER grant application submitted to add 12 fire fighters in late 2021 is still pending.

The Chief explained the one (1) year training process for new fire fighters, beginning with a written exam, followed by the physical agility test and an oral interview. The department currently has a manning level of 141.

- Police

Chief Tornielli stated that the implementation of the new CAD system started a month ago and the expected bugs are being worked out. He stated that the Records Division has relocated to the Penn Room to allow the renovation of the division offices.

In response to a question from Ms. Ventura, the Chief stated that he will provide an update on the implementation of the out-sourcing of the crossing guard program. He stated that the contract for this program is managed by the Traffic Division.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz added that the new management company has interacted with the crossing guards that formerly worked for the City and the former guards are pleased that their salaries were increased.

In response to a question from Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz, the Chief stated that due to low turnout for the written test in July, a second test will be offered in October for the Police Academy class that will begin in January of 2023.

Chief Torielli stated that the implementation of the 12 hour shift is working well and is supported by the officers. He expressed the belief that the officers are better rested.

Ms. Rodriguez left the meeting.

IV. Other

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz noted the need to provide those who serve on the City's boards, authorities and commissions with guidance on the conflict provisions in the Ethics Codes and to develop policy on when someone needs to recuse themselves from deliberations and voting on certain matters. She asked Mr. Gombar to provide advice and assistance.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz stated that the Nominations Committee reviewed the boards, authorities and commissions that have non-city residents appointed. She stated that Charter Section 1002 Membership provides that:

- (c) Qualifications. As a general rule, members of boards and commissions shall be residents of the City. At the discretion of Council, persons not residents of the City, but who have a significant property or business interest in the City, may be selected to serve. No person may concurrently serve on more than one authority, board, or commission.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz stated that the Municipal Planning Code (MPC) requires five (5) of the seven (7) Planning Commission members to be City residents. She stated that currently two (2) non-city residents are serving and there is one (1) additional non-city applicant.

Mr. Heim stated that information about the upcoming Waltman Clean-up will be released soon.

Mr. Gombar called for an executive session on personnel at 6:44 pm. Everyone but the seven (7) members of Council, Mr. Gombar and Ms. Kelleher left the room. Mr. Lachat remained connected virtually to the meeting. The personnel issue ended at 6:52 pm and there were additional executive session updates on litigation. The litigation session ended at approximately 7:30 pm.

Mr. Daubert moved, seconded by Mr. Miller, to adjourn.

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