



# ***COMMITTEE of the WHOLE***

## ***CITY COUNCIL***

### **SUMMARY**

#### **November 29, 2021**

#### **Hybrid Meeting**

#### **COUNCIL MEMBERS PRESENT:**

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

#### **OTHERS PRESENT:**

L. Kelleher (in person), S. Smith, R. Torielli, M. Glore, W. Stoudt, C. Crespo, F. Lachat, M. Whitmoyer, S. Rugis, C. Castner, J. Kelly, M. Rodriguez, J. Long, A. Amoros, E. Moran, J. Abodalo, F. Denbowski (all electronically)

The meeting was called to order at approximately 5:01 pm by Mr. Waltman.

Due to COVID-19, the public is prohibited from physically attending the meeting. People can observe the hybrid meeting through the virtual link or phone number on the posted agenda, or watch Facebook Live. Citizens without internet access or dial-in capability can view the meeting in the Penn Room.

#### **I. Fire Staffing – SAFER Grant**

Fire Chief Stoudt shared a Power Point presentation.

J. Stoudt and M. Oppenheimer joined the meeting at this time.

Deputy Fire Chief Glore stated that two critical numbers to keep in mind are that Reading's population density exceeds current minimum manning staff. He stated that currently 18 fire fighters per shift will respond and that in 2001 22 fire fighters per shift would respond with 14,000 less people.

Chief Stoudt stated that there will be no increase in apparatus and the grant will allow additional staffing only. He reminded all of the standards set by the National Fire Protection Association rule 1710.

Deputy Chief Glore stated that rule 1710 generally does not apply to Reading properties because they are more than two stories tall and have basements so Reading should respond with more personnel than the rule requires, not less.

Chief Stout stated that volunteers are no longer a viable option.

Deputy Chief Glore stated that the fire fighters know their tasks to contain and control fires but there is not enough manpower. He stated that Reading depends on its mutual aid agreements with other fire departments. He stated that the other departments have their own responsibilities and fires are unpredictable. He stated that regionally fire call volumes are increasing.

Chief Stoudt stated that engine responses to EMS calls are only for life threatening situations. He stated that this has reduced the engine call volume to approximately 6,600 calls per year which is still more than all of Reading's sister cities except Allentown. He stated that Reading is also below its sister cities in minimum manpower. He noted his hope that adding an officer to apparatus will increase the minimum response.

Deputy Chief Stoudt expressed the belief that another key is the span of control. He explained that there are many inexperienced fire fighters at this time who need extra guidance. He stated that an officer assigned to an apparatus would help with supervision. He stated that in many cases building construction has row homes with common interior spaces and along the roofline where fire can spread quickly.

Chief Stoudt expressed the belief that urban fire companies should have a minimum of four personnel on each apparatus. He stated that the SAFER Grant, through FEMA, will increase staffing but not to the full level. He stated that the grant will cover salary and benefit costs for 36 months.

Chief Stoudt explained that he would like to apply for funding for 12 additional fire fighters. He explained that this will allow the addition of an officer to each truck company, one officer at each fire station, and grow the minimum manning level from 18 to 21. He stated that no matching funds are required for the grant but that the City would need to fund approximately \$1.6 million in the budget at the conclusion of the grant.

Chief Stoudt presented three possible scenarios for the grant funding noting that he prefers option #1. He explained that due to attrition, numbers are reduced at this time.

Ms. Rodriguez questioned the amount of the grant. Mr. Kelly stated that it would be approximately \$1.5 million for each year. He agreed that an additional \$1.6 million would be needed at the conclusion of the grant to retain the manning level. Chief Stoudt explained that the grant amount would increase over the three years to cover salary increases.

Ms. Rodriguez questioned how the City would find an additional \$1.6 million to fund the positions after the grant expires. Mr. Kelly stated that a tax increase could be considered. He also suggested that the City may wish to renegotiate the sewer fund transfer to help offset these costs. Mr. Amoros agreed that additional revenue would be needed. He stated that the Fire Department is understaffed and it is very concerning. He reminded all that there is no guarantee that the grant would be received.

Ms. Rodriguez agreed with the need for additional fire fighters especially with Reading's population increase. Chief Stoudt stated that the SAFER Grant will not bring Reading to the rule standard but it would make an improvement.

Mr. Marmarou agreed with the need for additional fire fighters. He questioned if the addition of personnel would help offset overtime expenses. Chief Stoudt stated that the overtime keeps the minimum manning at 18. He expressed the belief that the cost of overtime would remain at the same level.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz thanked the Fire Department for a great job. She stated that this is a reality check. She stated that Act 47's focus has been on improving the City's finances but now most departments are not adequately staffed. She stated that too few fire fighters is a danger to the community and that this was a compelling presentation. She noted the need for the Administration to draft a concrete plan to sustain these positions. She expressed the belief that the City cannot do without them and fears the destruction that could occur to the City's row homes, especially if there is more than one fire at the same time.

Deputy Chief Gloré stated that the Department is currently responding to smoke from the basement of 726 Locust St.

Chief Stoudt agreed that this is a reality check. He expressed the belief that this is phase one and additional manpower will be needed in the future. He questioned how to proceed if the grant is not received.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz thanked the Chief for his presentation. She noted her concern with the increase in population with not enough staff in place. She questioned how to move forward if the grant is not received. Chief Stoudt stated that the Fire Department has had the same manning level since 2011. He stated that the fire fighters keep doing their duties but additional funding will be needed to hire more personnel.

Deputy Chief Gloré stated that in 2000 Reading had 80,000 residents with a minimum manning level of 22. He stated that in 2020 Reading has 95,000 residents with a minimum manning level of 18.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz questioned if part time employees were considered. Chief Stoudt expressed the belief that part time fire fighters would not be helpful. He stated that the

Department must follow civil service rules and there is extensive training required. He noted the need for 24 / 7 coverage.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz questioned the use of volunteers. Chief Stoudt stated that the number of volunteers has fallen since the mid 1990's and additional professional staff was hired. He stated that this is a national trend.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz suggested that the part time fire fighters could become full time as positions become available. She stated that they would already be trained and expressed the belief that this would be a way to rebuild the Department. Chief Stoudt again noted the need to follow civil service rules and stated that there are also contractual issues.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz questioned the current overtime costs. Chief Stoudt stated that overtime has increased in 2021 due to unexpected retirements. He stated that new classes are underway. He stated that overtime costs for 2020 were approximately \$1.6 million and will be approximately \$2 million in 2021. He explained that the overtime costs maintain the minimum manning of 18 and does not increase the number of fire fighters on duty.

Deputy Chief Glore stated that much of the overtime is for EMS as there is a national shortage of EMTs and there has been difficulty hiring EMTs.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz questioned if the additional officers would be chiefs. Chief Stoudt stated that they would be lieutenants on apparatus to oversee the crew. He stated that there would be three additional lieutenants under option #1.

Ms. Reed stated that Reading provided mutual aid to West Reading today. She agreed that all fire departments are undermanned. Chief Stoudt agreed and stated that Reading is more reliant on mutual aid now than ever in the past. He expressed the belief that all fire departments are in the same situation.

Ms. Reed noted the increase in Reading's population. She noted her hope that the Administration would continue to explore incentives to deconvert rentals. She expressed the belief that rentals exacerbate dangerous situations when fire fighters enter buildings. She noted her hope that a plan would be provided soon.

Deputy Chief Glore stated that the lieutenants would be added to the aerial apparatus. He explained that this apparatus is dedicated to search buildings for occupants and to perform rescues. He stated that life safety issues are increasing.

Mr. Waltman questioned when the grant period opened and the length of time to apply. Chief Stoudt stated that there is usually a 30 – 45 day window to apply and he expected the grant period to open in December or early January.

Mr. Waltman requested the presentation to more closely examine the options. Chief Stoudt stated that he will share the presentation with Council.

Mr. Waltman suggested further discussions and review in several weeks.

Mayor Moran thanked Chief Stoudt and the Fire Department for their amazing work. He stated that he goes to fire scenes to support the Department as he is able. He stated that he is glad this discussion is occurring. He noted the need to be creative to address this challenge and noted his hope that the Council body would support additional fire fighters to have a safer environment for residents.

Mr. Waltman suggested that questions be sent to Ms. Kelleher and requested additional discussion in two weeks.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz encouraged all to consider exploring the use of volunteers. She expressed the belief that college students may volunteer and become staff in the future. She requested confirmation that the grant has been applied for. Mr. Kelly expressed the belief that the market for volunteers has dried up and no longer exists. He noted the need to commit to these positions after the grant expires.

Mr. Amoros stated that Reading is now the fourth largest city in PA. He expressed the belief that it needs professional fire fighters because its citizens deserve the best. He noted the need for \$1.1 million - \$1.7 million to sustain the positions and expressed the belief that this is a worthwhile investment. He stated that property values have skyrocketed but that there is no price for human life. He stated that Reading has three years to plan how to fund the positions in the future. He noted his hope that Council would approve the additional positions and closely examine the statistics provided. He stated that this is an Administrative priority.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz stated that she fully supports the proposal. She agreed that volunteers cannot replace professionals. She noted the need to address parking at fire hydrants as it may lead to the loss of life – resident and / or fire fighter. She agreed that this is a priority and the current manning level is not acceptable.

Mr. Waltman requested additional discussion in two weeks after Council has time to review the information. He agreed that public safety is always a top priority.

## **II. Administrative Manual**

Mr. Denbowski stated that the manual has been updated and there is no need for legislative approval.

Deputies Stoudt and Glore disconnected from the meeting at this time.

Mr. Denbowski stated that Mr. Whitmoyer interned in the Mayor's office and was the project manager. He shared a Power Point presentation and explained that most of the policies that were added to the manual already existed. He highlighted the new policies that have been added including

- Community rapid response
- Administrative transition
- Ceremonial documents
- Logo and branding
- Language access
- Records management
- Filming

Mr. Denbowski introduced Mr. Whitmoyer and stated that he was an unpaid intern.

Mr. Whitmoyer stated that the manual is a living document and should be used. He stated that additional policies will be added as they are located. He noted the need for a succession plan and stated that the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion policy is currently in process. He stated that the manual will be effective January 1, 2022 and noted the need for buy-in from the Departments.

Mr. Denbowski thanked Mr. Whitmoyer for his guidance. He noted the need to continue to update the manual. He stated that the Charter gives this responsibility to the Mayor and Managing Director. He stated that a final legal review is needed. He noted the need for language consistency and stated that the 2014 manual was a good start.

Mr. Denbowski stated that model manuals were researched for best practices. He stated that this information was provided publicly so it would be known that the Mayor is fulfilling this Charter requirement. He stated that this was a team effort and additional discussion could be held if necessary.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz thanked the team for their work. She stated that this is a good framework. She agreed that legal review is needed. She noted the need to review the information with a fine toothed comb. She noted the need for all to understand who is responsible for additional updates after the next transition.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz thanked Mr. Denbowski for his work. She questioned if there is a Personnel Code and Personnel handbook. Mr. Denbowski stated that there are. He explained that the Code is a legislative document and the manual applies the legislation to daily functions. He stated that some policies are by executive order and the Administrative Manual is internal policies. He stated that the manual is open and transparent so the public can see how the City does business.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz questioned who is working on the manual. She noted the need for it to remain updated and contain accurate information. Mr. Denbowski stated that each policy sets who is responsible under the Managing Director. He stated that edits are needed and that there are many placeholders.

Ms. Reed thanked Mr. Whitmoyer for his work. She questioned who would enforce the policy if it is not followed. Mr. Denbowski stated that the Managing Director would implement the policies. Mr. Amoros stated that each Department Director will be reviewing their section. He noted the need to close loopholes and examine how the Charter Board would fit into the enforcement process. He stated that he will be editing the manual. He noted his hope that the manual would empower the Directors and noted the need for consistency and clarity.

Mr. Moran thanked Mr. Whitmoyer for his work and stated that the manual project could not have been accomplished without him. He thanked Mr. Denbowski. He stated that policy and accountability are important. He stated that this large Charter requirement has been tackled and staff is making him look extremely good. He stated that he is surrounded by great professionals and the manual will be implemented shortly.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz stated that she has not yet read the manual but that she will. She questioned if there was a policy to address salaries and qualifications as these are very important. Mr. Denbowski stated that the City uses a merit-based personnel system. He expressed the belief that a salary study is a separate project and that detail is not included in the manual. Mr. Amoros stated that salaries and salary increases are awarded based on experience, education, and performance. He stated that the City does have guidelines. He noted the need to update all job descriptions.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz stated that she sees inconsistencies in salaries and job titles. She noted the need for the City to be fair and equitable for all employees.

Mr. Whitmoyer disconnected from the meeting at this time.

### **III. Amending the P3 (Downtown Public Private Partnership) Ordinance**

Mr. Amoros stated that this amendment considers the dissolution of DID.

Ms. Castner stated that changes are recommended to revamp the P3 so that it is City driven. She stated that the other partners will become strategic assets. She expressed the belief that the intent of the original body was to provide input and guidance downtown. She noted her hope that the partners would continue to provide financial support downtown and suggested that the group meet quarterly.

Ms. Castner stated that the Downtown Coordinator would work closely with Mr. Abodalo to review the Stantec Plan. She stated that amending the P3 is recommended in the Plan.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz questioned if the P3 would remain active. Ms. Castner stated that it would. She stated that membership would change as follows:

Current:

- Council member
- Council member alternate
- Administrative Rep
- Council appt
- Council appt - alternate
- Mayor appt - vacant
- GRCA appt
- GRCA appt
- Mayor appt
- City Downtown Coordinator
- Executive Director

Proposed:

- Representative from Council, initially the President of Council
- Representative from the Mayors administration
- Community Development Director from the City of Reading
- Representative from the County of Berks administration
- Representative from the Greater Reading Chamber
- Representative from Berks Alliance
- Representative from the Latino Chamber
- Representative of the Reading School District
- Representative of the Reading Parking Authority
- Representative from Collegetowne
- Downtown Coordinator

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz questioned the main goal of the P3. Ms. Castner expressed the belief that the P3 was formed to propel DID with downtown projects and events. She stated that Mr. Waltman was a driver to establish the P3 and expressed the belief that it is not as functional as it should be. She stated that the proposed new members have expressed desire to be part of setting the direction of downtown. She stated that she is currently working with the Berks Alliance.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz questioned if there would be participation by downtown merchants and expressed the belief that a merchant association is needed. She noted the need to survey downtown merchants and stated that the merchants feel they are not part of the process. Ms.



Castner agreed that the merchants are important and feel they are not part of the process. She also agreed that a merchant association is needed.

Ms. Reed stated that the Reading Marketing Association existed in the past. She noted the need for a strong group of merchants. She suggested using the real estate transfer tax that the City receives on downtown properties to fund downtown operations.

Ms. Reed noted her concern that Council has not yet seen the Stantec Plan. She expressed the belief that the Plan does not contain any new information but that Council should still review it. She stated that the City spent money on the Plan and its review is overdue. She noted the need to determine what parts of the Plan will work and what parts will not work. She stated that she is profoundly disappointed in the Plan.

Mr. Waltman stated that he is meeting with the Mayor and Managing Director tomorrow. He agreed that the Plan needs to be reviewed by Council as soon as possible. He explained the original intent of the P3. He noted the need for a closer look at the amendment. He stated that the P3 was created to produce a strategic plan for downtown. He stated that a new P3 concept is now being considered but that Council must review the Stantec Plan before it considers amending the P3.

#### **IV. Other**

Mr. Waltman noted the need for additional discussion about the paperless parking ticket system. He stated that many residents are concerned that tickets are not placed on their vehicles. He noted the need for Councilors to provide their input via email.

Mr. Oppenheimer left the meeting at this time.

Ms. Cepeda-Freytiz agreed that the paperless parking tickets need additional discussion. She stated that residents are very disturbed by this process.

Mr. Waltman suggested that the discussion be scheduled on next week's agenda. Ms. Kelleher questioned if Mr. Matz should be invited to attend. Mr. Waltman stated that he would discuss this with Ms. Kelleher tomorrow.

#### **V. Executive Session**

At 7:03 pm, the six (6) members of Council, Ms. Kelleher, Ms. Smith, Mr. Amoros, Mr. Lachat, and Mr. Moran went into executive session to discuss litigation. The executive session concluded and the meeting adjourned at 7:32 pm.

*Respectfully Submitted by*

