



# *CITY COUNCIL*

## ***Public Safety Committee***

Monday, February 1, 2010

5:00 p.m.

**Committee Members Attending:** D. Sterner Chair, M. Goodman-Hinnershitz, J. Waltman

**Others Attending:** L. Kelleher, W. Heim, R. Hottenstein, C. Younger

### **Temporary Sign Ordinance**

Chief Heim and Ms. Kelleher explained that the current ordinance is unenforceable. The need for the change was identified by Sgt. Delewski when she fielded an inquiry from patrol officers who wanted to issue citations. A better ordinance was identified in Allentown. The Allentown Ordinance requires those wanting to post signs to obtain a permit. The ordinance allows signs to be posted a pre-determined number of days before the event and requires them to be removed a pre-determined number of days after the event. The ordinance makes the event sponsor responsible to obtain a permit and holds the event sponsor responsible if the terms of the ordinance are not followed.

Mr. Younger agreed that the current ordinance has holes and is impossible to enforce.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz agreed with the need for a change in these requirements, as many sponsors use this method of free advertisement.

Chief Heim stated that he will check with Allentown on their enforcement success with this ordinance. He also noted the need to check the Crimes Code as he believes that it is illegal to place a sign on a utility pole. Ms. Kelleher stated that she was told that utility companies can approve posting of signs on poles.

There was a discussion on another approach that would restrict the posting of any signs on utility poles within Reading, as signs can be posted on private property after obtaining permission from the property owner.

Mr. Sterner agreed that an improved ordinance is needed. He noted that the signs are a form of litter and can be distracting to those driving vehicles.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz suggested that the City contact the utility companies to gain their permission to have signs posted on utility poles if the Allentown Ordinance is used.

Mr. Waltman suggested that we should, instead, work with utility companies to prohibit the placement of signs on utility poles. This approach would allow citation to any sponsor who posts signs.

Chief Heim suggested keeping the fine at a flat rate, due to the disposition of the MDJs. However, Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz noted the need to make the fine more than the cost of advertising. She stated that signs deface public property. Mr. Waltman agreed noting that the posted signs are distracting and create public safety hazards.

Mr. Sterner asked Chief Heim and Ms. Kelleher to rework the ordinance for review at the March meeting.

### **Special Event Ordinance**

Chief Heim stated that the draft ordinance is modeled after an ordinance in place in a Texas city. He stated that revisions were made after the last review by the Committee in October. Chief Heim noted that it is difficult to determine the original language from the revisions. He asked Ms. Kelleher to rectify this problem.

Ms. Kelleher reminded the Committee that the current special event ordinance is more focused on parades rather than events that occur in neighborhoods for a lengthy period of time. The need was identified by neighbors in Centre Park and East Bank. Chief Heim stated that the new draft provides better controls that will protect neighborhoods and provide clarity.

Mr. Sterner asked Ms. Kelleher and Chief Heim to rework the ordinance and have it ready for review at the March Public Safety meeting.

### **Codes Ticketing**

Chief Heim stated that Codes is seeking a paperless solution similar to that used by the Parking Authority's parking tickets. This solution uses an electronic device to issue the ticket and the information is then downloaded into the City's IT system for tracking.

Chief Heim stated that this project is about a year behind schedule. He noted the need to move in this direction and suggested beginning with a manual system as a pilot. The manual system would use an approach similar to the old parking ticket system, using a multi-page form. Information is then entered into a spreadsheet. He also noted the need to check the viability of the technology before purchasing the software program.

Chief Heim stated that the ticketing program would be low cost and would eliminate the current warning prior to citation. The quality of life violations will be listed out on each ticket.

The committee discussed the pros and cons and noted the need for public education prior to use of the new system.

Mr. Sterner asked Chief Heim to present the draft ordinance at the March meeting. The Chief stated that the ordinance would include sliding scale fines.

### **Vacant Property Registration**

Ms. Kelleher stated that she has been speaking with Ms. Mayfield about creating a registration requirement for vacant properties. Ms. Mayfield now agrees with the need but would like to set the fee lower than the cost to register a rental property.

Ms. Kelleher stated that a 2007 study found almost 1300 properties in Reading that are vacant. Currently the Blighted Property Review Committee (BPRC) is the only means to address these properties. Without a registration fee for vacant properties, it is more economical for people to keep the properties vacant. Ms. Kelleher stated that the BPRC sent pre-eminent strike letters to approximately 45 vacant properties in January 2010. About 20 property owners have called to complain, most stating that they refuse to maintain the property and keep it vacant by choice. If this continues, Reading's problems will never be controlled.

Chief Heim stated that it would be difficult to add this component at this time, as the housing permit process is still not properly managed. Ms. Kelleher inquired if the Fire Department could begin the vacant property registration process. Mr. Hottenstein promised to speak with Chief Rehr.

### **Vagrancy**

The committee discussed the recurrent vagrancy problem in the North 9th Street area.

Mr. Waltman noted that this issue would be handled if it occurred on Hampden Boulevard, in Centre Park or on Penn Street. He expressed the belief that an improved gateway to social services such as County Mental Health/Mental Retardation is needed.

The group discussed the need for a person to be considered dangerous to either himself or to the public before social service agencies will step in. They also added that many homeless individuals are homeless by choice and refuse assistance.

### **Deer in Charles Evans Cemetery**

Ms. Reed arrived at the meeting.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz questioned the City's role in this issue as Charles Evans Cemetery is private property.

Chief Heim and Mr. Sterner noted the proper procedure used by the police when they found a mortally wounded animal who was impaled on the fence surrounding the property.

Chief Heim expressed the belief that the Game Commission has the ability and authority to properly handle this situation. He added that their authorization of a permit for a controlled shoot overrides city regulations.

Mr. Sterner noted that the deer population in Charles Evans is considerably low when compared to the deer population in other areas.

Ms. Reed described the damage caused by the deer to the vegetation and monuments in the cemetery.

Reading Eagle reporter Don Spatz described the chain of events that occurred, leading to the discovery of the plan for the controlled shoot.

Mr. Waltman urged the consideration of all options including moving the deer to a new location. He also noted the need for public input on the situation. He suggested that the Game Commission conduct public education if they plan a controlled shoot.

Ms. Reed explained that the Game Commission used specially trained sharp shooters who use suppression devices. She stressed the need for anonymity to deter protestors.

Chief Heim explained that the Game Commission reports the event to the Police to make them aware.

### **Goal Update**

Ms. Kelleher asked the Committee to review the 2009 goals behind the agenda. She inquired if the group would like to consider updating the goals.

Mr. Waltman suggested adding the need for empty warehouses to have sprinkler systems to avoid serious fires. Mr. Hottenstein stated that he will ask Fire Marshall Ieager to attend the March meeting.

In response to a question Chief Heim stated that the Crossing Guards are trained by the Reading Police Department. He added that the Reading School District covers one-half the Crossing Guards' salary.

The Public Works Committee adjourned at 6:45 p.m.

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

**Issues for Follow-Up:**

- Redraft of the Special Events Ordinance - March
- Redraft of the Sign Ordinance - March
- Effectiveness of Sign Ordinance enforcement in Allentown - March
- Review Codes Ticketing Ordinance - March
- Beginning small scale vacant property registration - March
- Vacant Property Registration Ordinance (larger properties) – March
- Discussion w/ Fire Marshall re requirement for sprinkler systems in warehouses - March