



CITY COUNCIL

Standards of Living Committee

Monday, June 3, 2013
Meeting Report

Committee Members Attending: Marcia Goodman Hinnershitz (Co-Chair), Randy Corcoran (Co-Chair)

Others Attending: D. Reed, D. Sterner, S. Marmarou, L. Kelleher, B. Rivera, C. Snyder, C. Jones

The meeting was called to order at 5:00 pm.

Review Administrative Reports

Ms. Snyder stated that due to communication issues with the Departments there are no reports to review at this meeting. She stated that reporting will begin in July with Community Development. A discussion about the timing of reports occurred.

Mr. Spencer, Mr. Younger and Mr. Murin arrived.

Street Light Assessment

Ms. Snyder stated that this issue was discussed briefly during the 2013 Budget process. She stated that after further legal review, the Solicitor has determined that Reading can create an Enterprise Fund to support the street light services (electric, maintenance, repair, replacement, etc.). She stated that currently the street light program is supported by the Liquid Fuels Fund, which eliminates the City's ability to perform paving of streets that are not designated as State roadways. She stated that creating this assessment would free \$400K per year to perform paving services.

Ms. Snyder stated that a charge of \$1 per linear foot applied to curb line would apply to all properties, including schools, colleges, churches and other non-profits who currently do not pay property taxes. She noted that all property owners benefit from street light services, not only those who currently pay property taxes.

Mr. Jones stated that the City's GIS system would determine the size of the curb footage. He noted that other municipalities, including Spring Township, have applied this assessment for many years. He noted that some municipalities charge for only the front curb line and others charge for the front and side curb line, in the case of corner properties.

Ms. Snyder stated that the Administration would like to introduce this ordinance so it can be approved and billed out in August/September of this year, which would allow the City to begin a paving project this year.

Mr. Marmarou stressed the need for public education as many will view this assessment as just another tax.

Mr. Sterner expressed the belief that this assessment is unfair, as once more those residing in the low density residential areas will bear a greater burden than those in the high density areas. He also noted that people owning corner properties will, in most cases, be paying double. He noted that those residing in low density areas already shoulder a higher property tax burden, as the size of their lots are larger than properties in the high density areas. He questioned if this additional burden will cause more people to leave Reading.

Ms. Reed agreed that this assessment will place a larger burden on properties in low density areas. She stated that, in general, her constituents do not support this concept, even though they understand it will also apply to tax exempt properties. She stated that her constituents see this as an additional "nickel and dime burden."

Mr. Corcoran questioned if this assessment would be charged to Wyomissing Park residents before their street lighting service has been restored. Ms. Snyder stated that these residents will not be charged until the street lights are working. She noted the need to define a maintenance period after a street light is reported out.

Mr. Jones stated that Wyomissing Park residents, in general, expressed a willingness to pay the street light assessment if that will assure quality service.

Mr. Corcoran expressed the belief that this new assessment will be an additional deterrent to those who are already paying multiple taxes. He noted that the City Real Estate Transfer tax and EIT are already the highest in the State. He stated that Reading's high tax rates push the middle class away.

Ms. Snyder agreed that Reading does not need to place an additional burden on property owners; however, she stated that as this will be applied to all property owners, including tax exempt properties, she views it as fair.

Mr. Marmarou inquired if the Administration has had feedback from non-profits such as churches and the educational community. Ms. Snyder stated that outreach has not started. She stated that the only group she has spoken with is the CAB.

Mr. Corcoran inquired if this assessment works positively in other communities. Ms. Snyder stated that she is unsure. Mr. Jones stated that Spring Township has had the streetlight assessment in place for 30 years.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz stated that she can see both the pro and con with this issue. She agreed that the City does need to find some resource that will enable a street paving program. However, she noted that it is unbelievable that East Reading is still waiting to have Cotton Street re-paved. She noted that the City has been left handling the brunt of the re-paving responsibility required with UGI's meter project.

Mr. Corcoran inquired if UGI is responsible to make the street repairs. Mr. Jones explained that UGI is responsible for street repairs. He stated that the process begins with a temporary patch which is replaced with a permanent repair about 90 days later. He stated that in cases where there are many breaks in the street surface UGI will re-pave an entire lane, which was the case on Cotton Street. As the City wanted to repave both sides of Cotton Street, UGI provided the City with one half of the paving cost and the City is attempting to cobble money together to cover the remaining cost.

Mr. Jones stated that the City is also considering drafting a beefed up utility cut ordinance. He stated that the City's requirements were softened in the early 90s. He stated that he has reviewed firmer ordinances that are in place in York and Lancaster. He noted that utility companies usually object to firmer regulations.

Mr. Corcoran inquired if the Administration has studied the impact the street light assessment will have when layered with the proposed land value tax, as both those programs will cause increases in the fees paid in low density residential areas. Ms. Snyder stated that an evaluation has not occurred.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz inquired about the next steps for street light assessment. Ms. Snyder suggested introducing the ordinance on June 10th. She noted that the Administration wishes to get the bills generated by September of this year.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz noted the need for further review by the Finance Committee before the ordinance is introduced.

Ms. Kelleher inquired about the enactment and advertising regulations for street light assessments. Mr. Younger stated that he would check and provide a response. He noted that a public hearing may be necessary.

II. Gateway Initiatives

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz stated that this issue stemmed from the weekly leadership meetings. She requested an update from the Administration.

Ms. Snyder stated that she conferred with Ms. Edwards who confirmed that un-programmed CDBG funds are available to cover the Gateway beautification project. She suggested forming a task force with people from Council, the Administration and community members. She noted the need to identify the areas that require attention and their needs.

Ms. Reed explained that Senator Schwank convened a group last year to begin this discussion. She stated that a map was created showing the various gateways and the improvements made to all. She stated that she will contact former Mayor McMahon to obtain the map in electronic format.

Ms. Snyder stated that she will attempt to re-convene this group before the July meeting.

Mr. Sterner noted the need for improved maintenance at the 2nd and Penn Triangle. Mr. Jones explained that Public Works is gearing up for summer maintenance.

IV. Housing Strategy

Ms. Snyder stated that the housing strategy was prepared by Mr. Kromer and Mr. Weiss and adopted by Council, as per the Act 47 Recovery Plan. She described some of the initiatives within the strategy such as beefed up Codes enforcement, the MVA, the CORE Program and the Blighted Property Review Committee. She stated that Neighborhood Reinvestment areas for Centre Park, Penns Commons and the Goggleworks areas are currently under consideration.

Mr. Sterner inquired if the “housing czar” has been hired. Ms. Snyder stated that although interviews occurred the proper candidate has not been identified. The search will continue.

Mr. Corcoran noted that one of the initiatives to take title to abandoned and foreclosed properties will require capital and he inquired if the Administration plans to provide funding. Ms. Snyder stated that she is unsure if this initiative will be funded.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz suggested prioritizing the housing issue in the Podio software so Council can obtain regular updates.

Other

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz noted that removing copper ground wires from electric poles is the new trend in copper theft. She stated that she reported several electric poles with stolen ground wires earlier today.

Mr. Corcoran noted the problem with the theft of brass plates covering the water/sewer pits. Mr. Jones stated that replacing these plates is the responsibility of the property owner.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz noted the recent issue with a food vendor operating in front of a restaurant. Mr. Spencer stated that the ordinance originated in 2010 and allows vendors within the commercial core only. He stated that the ordinance also requires the vendor to carry liability insurance.

Mr. Lloyd arrived.

Mr. Spencer stated that the ordinance was amended to allow the Property Maintenance Division with the ability to approve vendor permits and vendor location. The vendors can appeal to the Vending License Board.

The group discussed the breakdown in the intent of the ordinance as Property Maintenance allows food vendors to operate in the direct vicinity of a restaurant, which can detract customers from the restaurant's located within buildings.

Mr. Sterner and Mr. Spencer suggested asking the DID Board to approve the location of vendors as they are more in touch with the corridor and the businesses.

Mr. Corcoran noted the need to make sure vendors have all the required permits and licenses and that they pay the required taxes on their income. He expressed the belief that vending carts are a component of the underground economy.

There was a discussion about the collection of revenue.

Ms. Kelleher inquired about the status of the Guidebook. Ms. Snyder stated that her assistant has obtained one half of the sponsors required to cover the printing costs. She stated that Councilors will be contacted for references to businesses within the various Council Districts.

No further issues were discussed and the meeting adjourned at approximately 6:10 pm.