

MINUTES
COMMITTEE-OF-THE-WHOLE WORK SESSION
August 21, 2023
City Council Chambers

MEMBERS PRESENT: Mayor King. Council Members Paul Fischer, Laura Helle, Michael Postma, Jason Baskin, Joyce Poshusta

MEMBER APPEARING
ELECTRONICALLY: Council Member-at-Large Jeff Austin

MEMBERS ABSENT:

STAFF PRESENT: City Administrator Craig Clark, Director of Administrative Services Tom Dankert and Police Chief David McKichan
Public Works Director Steven Lang, Assistant City Engineer Mitch Wenum, Fire Chief Jim McCoy, Planning and Zoning Administrator Holly Wallace, Human Resources Director Trish Wiechmann, Assistant City Engineer Mitch Wenum and City Clerk Ann Kasel

APPEARING IN PERSON: Austin Daily Herald, KAUS Radio, Elaine Hansen, Nate Smit, Nancy Schnable, Saville Lord, Tim Ruzek,

Mayor King opened the meeting at 6:20 p.m.

Moved by Council Member Fischer, seconded by Council Member Baker to table items 4 and 5 to the September 5, 2023 work session. Carried.

Item No. 1 – 2024 Budget Discussion

Director of Administrative Services Tom Dankert presented the Mayor's proposed 2024 budget. He stated the proposed tax levy must be approved by September 30th. It cannot increase after that date. It needs to be certified to the County by that date so that the County can have accurate information on the proposed tax statements.

The budget includes a 11.18% levy increase which is down from the requested department budgets. He stated the budget includes a full time fire inspector at the approximate cost of \$111,000 per year, increasing the paid on-call firefighter wage to \$20 per hour and increasing election judge pay to recruit additional election judges and be competitive with surrounding communities.

Council Member Helle asked how the fire inspector was chosen for the added position.

Director of Administrative Services Tom Dankert stated there were meetings with the Department Heads, Administrator and the Mayor.

He noted there is an increased cost for elections due to the increase in absentee voting, which is charged by the County to the City.

Mr. Dankert continued to say not included in the proposed budget are an administrative assistant for the Police Department for body cameras, three new full-time firefighters, a housing inspector, a forester for the Parks and Recreation department, and a part-time library aide position.

Council Member Baskin asked if the Nature Center staffing is operating at the most efficient way.

Mr. Dankert stated he believes the Nature Center is busy but that question could be better answered by the Nature Center Director.

Council Member Baker stated he finds an 11% levy increase unacceptable.

Fire Chief McCoy spoke in support of the fire inspector. He stated the inspections get pushed off for more important duties and the department is behind on inspections. He noted he did ask for three more firefighters but that was not granted in the proposed budget.

Council Member Fischer spoke in support of the fire department. He stated the police department was given more officers and the fire department should be given consideration also.

Mayor noted he sees the shortfall in the fire department and is in support of the inspector. He noted the City's largest asset is employees and felt the City operates on a lean employee ratio.

Council Member Postma asked if the fire department charges fees for inspection services.

Chief McCoy stated the fire department currently does not charge for inspections. He was unaware if other cities charge fees.

Mr. Dankert reviewed the general fund and stated the overall budget is 66% for personnel. He noted some temporary and overtime salaries were eliminated. He reviewed the department budgets with highlights on the items that were modified to make the budget balance.

Council Member Baskin stated an increase of 11% is very concerning. He passed out proposed changes to the budget and discussed his proposal.

Council Member Baker stated 85% of homes in Austin are less than \$150,000. A large tax increase would burden those taxpayers more.

Mr. Dankert reviewed the proposed tax increase on \$150,000 home stating that increase would be around \$65 per year for a 11.18% levy increase and \$23 per year for a 4% levy increase. He also noted the City of Austin ranks in the middle for taxes when compared to sister cities.

Council Member Baskin stated in the last 10 years the tax levy has doubled.

Council Member Helle stated the average taxpayer pays \$50-\$60 per month for City services including police and fire protection and access to park and the library. She believes the value to the taxpayer is good and added 11% is too high but going to 2% is too low for the tax levy.

Council Member Fischer stated the low tax levies of 3 to 4 percent in previous years are catching up with the Council.

Council Member-at-Large Austin stated a 11.18 percent levy is too high. He was looking for a 4-6 percent levy increase.

Council Member Postma questioned the high cost of street projects and if the City should do less projects each year.

Mr. Dankert noted less street projects may mean less need for staff in the engineering department.

Mr. Dankert proposed \$318,000 to cover other items including \$206,000 for additional contribution for health insurance.

Council Member Postma asked how and when will the Council discuss the insurance item.

City Attorney Craig Byram stated the Council could have a public conversation or close it for union negotiations.

Moved by Council Member Postma, seconded by Council Member Baker, requesting a closed session for labor negotiations on September 5, 2023 at 4:30 p.m. Carried.

Elaine Hansen with the Austin Area Chamber of Commerce thanked the City Council for their work. She asked the Council Members to keep the employers in mind when setting the tax levy.

The item will be discussed at the September 5, 2023 work session.

Item No. 2 – Asbestos Removal in City Hall

Director of Administrative Services Tom Dankert stated the floor tile adjacent to the council chambers is cracked and it was found that it contains asbestos. He received a bid in the amount of \$20,820 to remove the tiles in the different areas of the basement of City Hall. Mr. Dankert stated it is the goal to get the asbestos removed in 2023 and flooring installed in 2024.

Moved by Council Member Baker, seconded by Council Member Fischer, approving a bid with Asbestrol for City Hall asbestos removal with funding from the Building Fund. Carried 7-0.

The item will be placed on the September 5, 2023 Council agenda.

Item No. 3 – Whitewater Project Presentation

Nate Smit presented the results of the Whitewater Project Feasibility Study. He stated Recreation Engineering and Planning completed the study and found that the project was feasible. A series of five hydraulic features would be added to enhance the river experience for kayaking, surfing, swimming, rafting and more. The Mill Pond would be preserved as part of the project.

Assistant City Engineer Mitch Wenum stated the estimated cost of the project is from \$7 million to \$15 million. He noted the estimate may be on the high end. The next step would be to determine City funding participation and apply for grants for the project. Community fundraising would also be involved. The DNR, FEMA, US Army Corp of Engineers and the Cedar River Watershed would all need to approve the project.

Mr. Wenum noted the dam is over 100 years old so there will be some costs in the future for maintenance.

Council Member Baker stated he felt this is not his personal priority for the City.

Council Member Helle asked who would be the long-term owner of the project and who would be responsible for maintenance.

Mr. Wenum stated the City would be the owner of the property because it already owns it and there is very minimal maintenance.

City Administrator Craig Clark questioned if there was sediment in front of the dam.

Public Works Director Steven Lang stated there is some sediment by the dam but it clears upstream very quickly.

After additional discussion, moved by Council Member Postma, seconded by Council Member Baskin, to apply for a grant from Hormel Foundation for the Whitewater Project. Carried 5-1 with Council Member Baker voting nay.

Item No. 6 - Administrative Report

None

Item No. 7 – Open Discussion

None.

Moved by Council Member Baskin, seconded by Council Member Baker, adjourning the meeting at 8:11 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,

Ann M. Kasel
City Clerk