M I N U T E S
COMMITTEE-OF-THE-WHOLE WORK SESSION
August 4, 2025
City Council Chambers

MEMBERS PRESENT: Mayor King. Council Members Paul Fischer, Rebecca Waller, Laura Helle, Oballa Oballa, Michael Postma, Jason Baskin, and Council Member-at-Large Jeff Austin

MEMBERS ABSENT:

STAFF PRESENT: City Administrator Craig Clark, Police Chief David McKichan, Fire Chief Jim McCoy, Public Works Director Steven Lang, Planning and Zoning Director Holly Wallace, Library Director Julie Clinefelter, City Attorney Craig Byram, Director of Human Resources Trish Wiechmann, and City Clerk Brianne Wolf

APPEARING IN PERSON: Austin Daily Herald

Mayor Steve King opened the meeting at 6:04 p.m.

Item #1 Hormel Foundation

Director of Administrative Services Tom Dankert requested the Council review and decide whether to submit all 13 requests to the Hormel Foundation. If they were in favor of all of the requests, they would need to rank them in order of priority and submit the ranking sheet to Mr. Dankert. Mr. Dankert noted he would bring results to the August 18 Council meeting for full approval.

Item #2 Administration Budget

Director of Administrative Services Tom Dankert presented to the Council the requested capital items for the Administrative budget. They had the following requests: A website remodification to bring it up to ADA compliance, a request for two poll pads, a housing study with the HRA, door controller replacements, an audio/visual system for conference room A, MS365 licenses, and the replacement of translucent panels over P&R offices. He also stated that the senior center had the following two requests: an air heating unit and an electric-eye front door.

Council Member Baskin asked if the City has been moving items to the Cloud, following the recent attack on the County with ransomware.

Mr. Dankert stated that we have been working on moving items to the Cloud.

Council Member Helle asked if this is a big enough project that we should employ a coder or a coding team.

Mr. Dankert stated that in the 1980s, the City had a programmer who created something for them, but over time, this became outdated and other cities shifted to subscription-based services.

There are not many municipalities that are using coders; they are using the subscription services. These are more user-friendly. It would be hard for the City to find an employee to create this.

Council Member Helle stated when you integrate a software system, you can get stuck if the software provider raises their rates. Would this software have enough capabilities to assist different departments with their specific needs?

Mr. Dankert stated that AI will have the capabilities in the future to assist staff. Mr. Dankert went over the budget spreadsheets with the Council.

Item #3 Police Budget

Police Chief McKichan went over his budget for 2026. His capital items were as follows: two police SUV interceptors plus build costs, an unmarked administration car plus equipment build out, employee mental health programming, and APD computers.

Council Member Postma asked what the current staffing level was.

Chief McKichan stated they would be at 35 this fall if all offers are accepted, leaving them one officer short of full staff. He would like to look at filling this position with an administrative or IT position to assist the police officers with administrative work. He would like to become more independent from Mower County after it suffered a ransomware attack.

Mr. Dankert stated they are working with LOGIS to get a quote for an independent server for the Austin Police Department. It may be approximately $200,000 to $300,000 to set up a server for the Austin Police Department to be independent from the County, and this would increase the need to have an IT person.

Chief McKichan stated he has increased his training budget because it is essential, as he is bringing on a lot of younger staff members.

Council Member Postma asked why the City pays for school crossing guards.

Mr. Dankert stated the school district reimburses the City for their wages.

Council Member Baskin asked what the communications budget was for.

Chief McKichan stated this would be for the Police Department's Microsoft 365 licenses.

Council Member Baskin asked if McKichan feels 36 would be the proper number of officers to budget for.

Chief McKichan stated yes, this allows them to complete their work properly. He also believes there will be retirements in the upcoming years and having a full staff will assist with this transition.

Council Member Baskin asked if we add an admin position, how likely would they be to add body cams?

Chief McKichan stated this would not be added in 2026, not until the records position would be more under the Austin Police Department's control.

Council Member Baskin asked if we would look into reinstating a police dog program.

Chief McKichan stated it is a great program, but it's a very costly program, and he doesn't believe he would be able to justify the cost to Council for restarting this program, as it would be approximately $115,000 for the first year.

Council Member Postma would like the Citizens Police Academy to come back.

Chief McKichan stated he would like to go back to it. He has had other departments reach out, but he has declined because the overtime adds up, and they need to save their staff from coming in on their days off. If they can get fully staffed, they would be better equipped to offer this program.

Council Member Baskin asked, as they look out over the next five years, are there items they should have on the horizon to improve the department.

Chief McKichan stated that the younger police officers are being asked to do more now than before. They are being asked to move more data than before. They are adding more items to their plate than before. He stated the explosion in RING cameras has been great for citizens and the police as they can identify more crime, but they are spending more time handling calls, reports, and other incidents.

Council Member Baskin asked about other AI opportunities and asked Mr. Dankert about these opportunities.

Mr. Dankert stated he would like to get employees on an electronic payroll system to reduce time spent on inputting and processing timecards. He stated there would be an extra cost for this type of software.

Council Member Helle asked if each department has their own payroll and has to input it.

Mr. Dankert stated yes, some departments input their payroll, while finance does most of this. Finance then does a double check to ensure it has been appropriately inputted.

Council Member Helle asked if there was a reason the City is not doing this.

Mr. Dankert stated the City is not set up to do that at this time. They are working on implementing this process. They are working on training staff in groups to use this system.

Council Member Baskin would like to reduce the burden of items on our staff. He would like to look at what items could be used to do this.

Item #4 Administrative Report

None

Item #5 Open Discussion

None

Moved by Council Member-at-Large Austin, seconded by Council Member Waller to adjourn the meeting at 7:37 PM. Carried.

Respectfully Submitted,

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Brianne D. Wolf, City Clerk