

MINUTES
COMMON COUNCIL WORKSESSION
MARCH 5, 2001
4:00 P.M.
CONFERENCE ROOM

MEMBERS PRESENT: Mayor Rietz, Council Member-at-Large Chaffee, Council Members Goodnature, Christopherson (left at 5:13 for fire call), Poppe, Nordin, and Lang.

MEMBERS ABSENT: Council Member Jorgenson.

STAFF PRESENT: Patrick McGarvey and Tom Dankert

Mayor Rietz thanked all for being able to come to the worksession. Mayor Rietz noted Council Member Jorgenson was not able to attend the meeting due to a family emergency.

Mayor Rietz opened the discussion by referring to the recent article in the League of Minnesota Cities monthly magazine, titled Highly Effective Councils (attached). Ten items were highlighted in this article as things that effective city councils use. Mayor Rietz noted she wanted to discuss several of the issues as to how they related to Austin's city council workings, as follows:

Think and act strategically – city councils should achieve citizens desires, meet the challenges, and have decisive leadership. Council Member Lang noted the city uses joint powers agreements and going forward on projects we say we are going forwards on, unlike other governments in the area. However, Council Member Lang noted that unfortunately the city council ends up sharing the blame in the press when the County fails in their projects such as the arena.

Mayor Rietz noted things have gotten better than they were a few years ago with the County. Council Member Lang noted the monthly meetings are going well, but the city has still been picked apart with their use of tax increment financing and other issues. Mayor Rietz noted the progressiveness of the two entities is different. Council Member Lang noted the 18th Avenue NW project could cause problems for the County.

Council Member Poppe noted the city council needs to set out expectations (timetables and priorities) ahead of time and communicate these expectations to the County. Council Member Lang agreed, noting we should not find fault, but should request timeliness. Council Member Goodnature noted we should maintain a professional manner in everything we do.

Understand and demonstrate teamwork - Mayor Rietz questioned if everybody felt the city council members were working together as a team. Council Member Poppe noted the city council does do this well, we respect each others opinions and our disagreements are okay to have. Also, Council Member Poppe noted that everybody has come prepared for all of the meetings, which makes the teamwork that much better.

Council Member Goodnature noted some people may occasionally be unprepared due to some extreme circumstances. Council Member-at-Large Chaffee noted good information comes from the committee meetings. Mayor Rietz noted our system for agenda's, minutes, etc. works well. Council Member Lang noted the staff does an excellent job researching the different issue so that council may be well prepared.

Council Member Poppe noted the city council needs to act collectively. We may all have differing opinions, but we should come to some agreement before we meet with the County or others. Mayor Rietz also noted that if you are the chairperson of the committee where a topic is, you should be the one addressing the media on the topic in most instances. It may be also easier for residents to talk to their ward's council person on an issue, even if the issue is not one for which the council member is on the committee. Mayor Rietz noted we should make it easy for the residents of Austin to communicate their issues.

Council Member Goodnature noted if an issue is clearly a committee issue, forward it onto the committee, but if it is a small issue handle it yourself.

Mastery of small group decisionmaking – Mayor Rietz questioned if the committee structure was working. Council Member Goodnature noted that in the future he would like to see less meetings. For example, the Fire Committee and its current issue. Once the consultant is done, everything should be left up to the Fire Chief to handle, meetings should not be required.

Council Member Lang noted he liked condensing the meetings down into one day. Council Member Poppe suggested that the Finance/Personnel Committee may want to meet on the first and third Monday's of each month before the council meeting to discuss matters. Council Member-at-Large Chaffee noted at the City Council meetings things may look quick. That is because the items have been hammered out for many hours at the committee level.

Clearly defined roles and responsibilities – Mayor Rietz questioned if anybody had any questions as to their roles. Council Member Goodnature questioned the meaning of the strong council, weak mayor phrase. Mayor Rietz noted she cannot vote, but she can veto items. This method is different amongst the many cities in Minnesota. Council Member Lang noted the city council could overrule a veto. Council Member Lang noted by charter the Council Member-at-Large is responsible for organizing committees.

Establish and abide by council-staff partnership – Mayor Rietz noted this principle may create more hassles between the council, city administrator, and staff. Council Member Lang noted things are working well here, if we want an answer we can get one. Council Member Poppe noted the department heads will set the agenda and gather the information. Mr. McGarvey's role is for guidance, to give some background, and history. Council Member Poppe noted the City Administrator should sit back at the council meetings until his input is needed. Mayor Rietz noted things are different in Albert Lea. In Albert Lea, department heads do not go to meetings, the City Manager does all of the meeting discussion. Council Member Lang noted there were some advantages to having a City Manager versus a City Administrator. For example, many issue may be resolved by a City Manager, that a City Administrator needs further approval from the governing body to do.

Council Member-at-Large Chaffee noted going through Mr. McGarvey works well. Council Member Goodnature questioned if Austin had a City Manager, would we still have the problems in the fire department? Council Member Lang noted, in his opinion, that the problems would be gone at the fire department if we had a City Manager.

Mayor Rietz noted the advantage we have now is that the department heads bring forward the recommendations. If the City Manager were to do this, interaction could be lost with some key people. Council Member Poppe noted Mr. McGarvey is very visionary and multi-task oriented, and also a good manager of people. Council Member Lang noted things are going well right now as we have great department heads, who also have a lot of history. Mayor Rietz asked what the department heads thought of the process. Mr. Dankert noted he had not heard any complaints about the way things are run.

Mayor Rietz questioned if the city was getting the word out to the community. Council Member Goodnature noted the internet is improving, such as the eforum that will be going on line shortly to discuss community issues. Mayor Rietz cautioned that we will probably hear a lot about negative issues in the community. Mr. McGarvey noted the city may want to hire a professional consultant do a survey on a scientific selected random sample basis. The public opinion on such survey questions is accurate within a plus/minus 3 percent range. This is one way to see how a broad sample of the constituents thinks on various issues.

Continuous learning and development – Mayor Rietz noted we need to remember this, and talking to other communities is a great way to see what is going on in other parts of the state.

Mayor Rietz brought up three more issues she wanted to discuss:

1. Administrative Secretary Jeanne Howatt does not usually hear from council if they are going to a meeting outside of town, where registration is required. Mayor Rietz requested prompt responses to the registration issues from all council.

2. Council Members attending the Planning Commission meetings should be there for input only, not to partake in the discussions. If asked to comment, we should just say we are here to take input from the citizens, and our public comment time will be at the city council meetings.
3. The agenda's go out on Thursdays, with packets to follow on Fridays. Council Member Lang noted he was okay with one trip on Friday to deliver all items. Mr. Dankert requested that to be considerate for Ms. Howatt and the time she needs to create the agenda's and copy them, that staff should have all documents to Ms. Howatt by 5:00 p.m. Thursday for the agenda's and meetings. Mayor Rietz noted this will allow for all items to be available to be picked up on Friday at noon (if council wants to stop in person), or to be delivered at 4:00 by the Police Department.

It was also noted that if the council has reimbursable expenses for travel, etc. please do not feel shy about turning these in for reimbursement. There is a budget for these sort of items.

Council Member Lang requested some food on occasion be brought in for the committee meetings if there are several meetings stacked up that go late into the evening.

Moved by Council Member Nordin, seconded by Council Member Poppe, to adjourn the meeting at 6:00 p.m.

Adjourned: 6:00 p.m.

Approved: , 2001

Mayor: _____

City Recorder: _____