

M I N U T E S
COMMITTEE-OF-THE-WHOLE WORK SESSION
February 2, 2009
City Hall Council Chambers and Conference Room
6:35 p.m.

PRESENT: Mayor Stiehm, Council Member-at-Large Anderson, Council Members McAlister, Austin, King, Martin, Clennon, and Pacholl.

ABSENT: None.

STAFF PRESENT: Public Works Director Jon Erichson, Police Chief Paul Philipp, Parks and Recreation Director Kim Underwood, City Administrator Jim Hurm, and Administrative Services Director Tom Dankert.

ALSO PRESENT: Bonnie Rietz and Terri Stough, Austin Post Bulletin, and Austin Daily Herald.

Mayor Stiehm opened the meeting at 6:35 p.m.

Item No. 1: Ticketing/towing during snow emergencies. Council Member Martin started off the meeting by showing council some pictures (on his laptop) of areas in his ward where the snow has been plowed around vehicles. This is a safety issue as we should not have to go around the vehicles. Council Member Martin questioned why some of these cars were parked in the same spot for three to six days and were continued to be plowed around instead of being ticketed and towed. Additionally, Council Member Martin stated that he has seen a school bus have a hard time seeing around these snowed-in vehicles. They need to be towed. There seems to be no consistency in how we ticket and tow vehicles in our community, he said. Council Member Martin noted that in some communities, they have odd/even parking 365 days per year.

Chief Philipp stated he has been in Austin for 30+ years, and there have been no huge changes to our policy regarding snow removals. The Street Department should be praised for the job they do. If there is more than three inches of snow, then the City Engineer calls the snow emergency. The police officers then go around town and drop the snow emergency signs that are placed around the community. Additionally the media is notified of the snow emergency, which is usually in effect for the next 72 hours. Chief Philipp stated the downtown area is plowed first, and then the residential area is done. Chief Philipp stated the first snowfall we had this year resulted in 169 tickets being issued

Chief Philipp stated it is not the primary responsibility of the Police Department to write tickets during a snow emergency. However, usually the first snowfall results in a more than usual ticketing campaign by the Police Department to remind citizens of the emergency snow ordinance.

Council Member Martin stated two cars sat plowed around for one week plus, and in one block up, a car was just towed. Council Member Martin stated he understood that this was not their primary job, but questioned why there was a different treatment within the two adjacent blocks.

Chief Philipp stated some cities do not allow parking on the streets from November to April. We could even adopt an odd/even parking ordinance. Each one of these policies carries their own set of burdens for homeowners.

Mr. Erichson stated our streets are narrower and we are buying bigger equipment to do more with less.

Council Member-at-Large Anderson asked if the Police Department gets calls from citizens on this issue. Chief Philipp said they did; citations are issued plus they also get calls. Council Member-at-Large Anderson questioned if Council Member Martin has ever called. Council Member Martin responded by stating he quit wasting his time on this. Eventually on day three or four, somebody will get a ticket.

Council Member King noted everybody appreciates the Police Department and their aggressiveness is impressive. Our Police Department is twice as busy as Albert Lea's, and I understand the concerns stated Council Member King; however, we need to function as a city. We shouldn't ask for more money, he said, this cannot be a moneymaker for us.

Council Member McAlister suggested that we call the bus company to ask them to help us identify areas that we could tow cars in order to make their job easier. Chief Philipp stated he would contact them.

Chief Philipp stated he contacted eight communities: Four have parking fines that are higher than ours, three are the same (\$10), and one has a complicated sliding scale. Chief Philipp suggested that we increase the fine from \$10 to \$15. Council Member McAlister stated the ticket price is small compared to the towing (\$86.50 day, \$96.50 night, and the storage charge of \$30 per day). Council Member King suggested leaving the parking ticket prices as-is with no change.

Council Member-at-Large Anderson questioned if schools are a priority in snow removal. Mr. Erichson stated the downtown area is first, and then the main avenues and secondary streets come next. We try to avoid the schools during their starting and closing times, he said, as we don't want to make more congestion in the area.

Chief Philipp stated the City keeps all of the parking ticket money.

Council Member Martin questioned some of the insurance claims that have been filed lately, and also if our plow drivers need to be retrained. Mr. Erichson reiterated that we have upsized all equipment and are doing multiple operations with plows and wings. We are trying to do more with less.

After further discussion, motion by Council Member Martin, seconded by Council Member King to recommend, to Council the removal of the ticketing/towing issue from Matters In Hand. We will leave it as is. Carried 7-0.

Item No. 2: Austin/Mower County police reserves – budget transfer. Chief Philipp gave some history of the police reserves, noting Mower County used to pay the coordinator and pay for all of the expenses, and then we would reimburse Mower County one-half of this cost. Now, a Sheriff's deputy is the coordinator, hence payroll has to run through the City to avoid an overtime issue for Mower County. Council has already approved this. However the County's auditors are now stating the city should take over the budget also, to avoid a potential argument as to who really employs the coordinator. Mr. Dankert noted it is proposed that Mower County would transfer the minor fund balance they have to the city, and then we would pay all of the bills and in turn, Mower County would reimburse us half of the annual cost. Chief Philipp stated he would now oversee the budget and expenditures.

After further discussion, motion by Council Member McAlister, seconded by Council Member-at-Large Anderson, to recommend to Council the approval of the transfer of the budget for the police reserves to the City of Austin. Carried 7-0. Item will be added to the next council agenda.

Item No. 3: Building permit revised schedule. Mayor Stiehm noted we will discuss this at the next council work session. No objections noted.

Item No. 4a: Budget restraint items due to LGA cutbacks – Flower basket program. Ms. Rietz and Ms. Stough discussed the flower basket program for 2009, noting nearly \$20,000 has been raised in private donations from the community. Additionally the city has \$20,000 budgeted for this. Ms. Rietz stated in these tough budget times, she understands the need to reduce some costs, and she noted it would be appropriate for the city to reduce their allocation. However, Ms. Rietz noted her desire to use all of the \$20,000 or so in donations, along with \$10,000 of city funds to do the flower baskets and flats. The baskets would go on Main Street from Oakland Avenue down to Jerry's Other Place, along 4th Avenue from the Historic Hormel Home to City Hall, 3rd Avenue by the Town Center, in front of the LEC, and then the regular flats and planted areas would continue as normal. Ms. Rietz stated this helps the local economy as Dolan's Nursery has the bid for planting the flowers, and these flowers are a "mark of Austin". Ms. Stough noted she works downtown and the visitors really appreciate the beauty of the flowers.

Council Member Austin stated he was not a big fan of the flowers to start, but now he is. If we drop our contribution from \$20,000 to \$10,000 and still not offend the donors that contributed the other \$20,000, then this would be a good start in realizing some savings here with the impending LGA cuts.

Motion by Council Member Austin, seconded by Council Member-at-Large Anderson to recommend to Council to cut the city's budget from \$20,000 to \$10,000 for the flower basket program. Before the vote could be taken Council Member-at-Large Anderson noted that one of the businesses that looked at locating into Austin commented on our downtown and how nice it looked. This is a quality of life issue and it is prudent to reduce the budget, but not eliminate the program.

Council Member Pacholl stated he thinks the flowers are lovely but coming on tough budget times ahead thought maybe we should look at putting them on every other pole. Ms. Rietz stated

they looked at this option but determined that just eliminating the flowers on the Mill Pond would be a better option.

Mayor Stiehm noted his support for cutting the budget in half from the city. Mayor Stiehm stated he was once a critic of the flower basket program, but he hears a lot of great comments about our flowers.

Council Member Martin stated his constituents haven't called him to tell him they like the flowers. In fact the calls to eliminate the flowers have increased since the discussions on LGA reductions started. It is not our job to grow flowers or fund any of it.

Council Member McAlister stated the people he talks to like the flowers. Reducing our cost by half seems reasonable.

Council Member Clennon stated she has the same reaction as Council Member Martin, but that may be because the Third Ward is too far away from downtown. Ms. Rietz noted East Side Lake in the Third Ward has a beautiful flower bed planted annually.

Council Member King stated it is reasonable to cut the program, and it would not be reasonable to eliminate the program altogether. We need to honor those that gave.

The voice vote was then taken on the original motion. Carried 6-1. (Council Member Martin – Nay). Item will be added to the next council agenda.

Mayor Stiehm noted there is an urgency to get the flowers ordered. Ms. Underwood stated Tom Graff of the Parks and Recreation Department is meeting next week with the growers. Mayor Stiehm stated this will not be official until the February 17 council meeting, but he is willing to stick his neck out and get the flowers ordered ahead of time.

Item No. 4b: Budget restraint items due to LGA cutbacks – Agency Allocations. Mr. Dankert noted that with the impending LGA cuts, he wanted to ensure that Council was still authorizing payments to the agencies we support on an annual basis. Mr. Dankert noted this is the time of year that we make those payments to these agencies. Council Member McAlister stated that the KSMQ budget of \$25,000 is in its fourth year on a \$100,000 commitment, so that should go away next year. Mr. Hurm stated he believed it was an indefinite commitment, but he would check on it. As for the Coalition and the League of Minnesota Cities, we really need both agencies right now. He added that we have also already cut most of the other agencies.

Council Member Martin suggested giving these organizations a heads-up on the funding issues and to start making contingency plans for 2010 as it will be tough funding budgets if LGA is reduced.

No objections noted with paying the organizations as originally budgeted for. No action needed.

On another note, Council Member Clennon questioned the status of the budget reductions requested by all of the departments. Nothing in writing has come from the Police, Fire, and Public Works departments yet. After further discussion, motion by Council Member Clennon,

seconded by Council Member McAlister to inform department heads they have until February 9 to get the requested budgets to Administration. Carried 7-0.

Item No. 5: Administration matters. Mr. Hurm questioned if Council wanted to hold work sessions on Tuesdays if the council agenda looks like it will be a long night. Both Council Member King and Council Member-at-Large Anderson stated they preferred to hold both the council meeting and work session on the same evening. No objections noted.

Council Member-at-Large Anderson asked if we should hold off discussing goals at the retreat tomorrow until Council Member Martin can be present for the meeting. No objections noted.

Other Item – Austin Daily Herald letter. Council Member Pacholl asked about the letter that Kevin True of the Austin Daily Herald wrote regarding the city and the official newspaper. Mr. Hurm stated City Attorney Hoversten gave his opinion on the topic and that is what we are relying on. The Austin Post Bulletin has been officially designated as our newspaper for 2009.

Other Item – Abandoned house and broken water pipe issue. Council Member-at-Large Anderson stated an abandoned house had some running water, but the Utilities stated they could not enter the house since the doors were locked. Eventually a neighbor that had a key opened the door and there was three feet of water in the basement as a pipe had broken. In the future Mr. Hurm stated he could be called or Mr. Hoium up in the Community Development office could be called to resolve the problem.

Other Item – Representative Walz meeting in Rochester. Council Member Martin asked why the information on the Tim Walz and his economic recovery meeting in Rochester didn't get out until late Friday. Mr. Hurm stated he thought all of the council received the email directly. Some council members stated they had received it earlier in the week.

Council Member-at-Large Anderson asked if we should ask Mr. Walz to come and visit with us and Mower County. Council Member Martin stated that is a good idea, as Mr. Walz is not happy that all of the foreign companies are putting up the windmills, and we are doing nothing. Mr. Hurm noted he would invite Mr. Walz to a community meeting with the Mayor and Council.

Other Item – County Commissioner pay. Council Member-at-Large Anderson questioned if we should request that the Mower County commissioners rescind their 3% pay raises for 2009. Council Member King and Mayor Stiehm noted that was their own business, and we should stay out of it. No other discussion ensued.

There being no further business, motion by Council Member Austin, seconded by Council Member Clennon, to adjourn the meeting. Motion passed unanimously. Meeting was adjourned at 7:50 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Tom Dankert
Director of Administrative Services