

M I N U T E S
COMMITTEE-OF-THE-WHOLE WORK SESSION
February 16, 2010
City Hall Conference Room
5:00 pm and
6:52 pm (Immediately following council meeting)

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

ABSENT: None.

STAFF PRESENT: Public Works Director Jon Erichson, Community Development Director Jon Erichson, Assistant City Attorney Steve Hovey, Administrative Services Director Tom Dankert and City Administrator Jim Hurm.

ALSO PRESENT: None.

Item #1 – Closed session for a personnel evaluation pursuant to M.S. 13D.05, Subd. 3. See DVD in Human Resources office for minutes (meeting was from 5:00 pm until approximately 5:20 pm).

Mayor Stiehm opened the meeting at 6:52 pm.

Item #2. – Closed session to discuss acquisitions of property relating to the Mower County justice center development: Motion by Council Member Austin, seconded by Council Member King to close the meeting pursuant to Minnesota Statute 13D.05, Subd. 3. Carried 7-0.

See DVD of closed meeting in the Administrative Services Director's office.

Motion by Council Member Pacholl, seconded by Council Member-at-Large Anderson to reopen the closed meeting. Carried 7-0.

Item #3a. – Open discussion – Report on cars being hit by plows: Mr. Erichson reviewed the actual claims paid out by our insurance company as they relate to snow plowing accidents. Mr. Erichson noted we had four claims in 2008 totaling \$9,937.32 that were paid out, and another one claim that was paid out in 2009 for \$1,305.08. Unfortunately, we have already had five claims filed this year against the city that are pending.

Mr. Erichson reviewed pictures of areas where the accidents occurred and also outlined the bigger trucks we have are designed to get more done with less people. Unfortunately when citizens leave their cars on the street, especially on both sides of the road it may get difficult to plow areas of our community. Mr. Erichson noted we are reviewing each accident with staff to see why it happened such that this training may prevent the accident from happening again. Mr. Erichson also noted the deep freeze we had early in the season has created ruts in the streets, and on occasion the trucks get pulled into the ruts and swipe parked cars. Mr. Erichson stated they are and will be providing additional training for the employees on this issue.

Council Member McAlister questioned the street miles we have to cover as a city. Mr. Erichson stated there are 140 road miles to plow within our city limits.

Council Member Pacholl stated if we did not have people parking on both sides of the road we would not have as much of a problem. Council Member Martin stated that was not entirely true, as the Police Department does not want to tow cars as the court system is too backed up has been explained by the prior Police Chief. We are not enforcing our snow emergency ordinance aggressively enough stated Council Member Martin. Council Member Martin stated the guys in the snow plows may appreciate us enforcing the existing ordinance.

Mayor Stiehm questioned if more enforcement is needed. Mr. Erichson stated that enforcement is a welcome thing, but we may not always be having a snow emergency when these accidents are happening.

Mayor Stiehm questioned if it is the same driver that is causing the accident. Mr. Erichson briefly reviewed the claims and stated no, but one driver did hit two or three cars when he went between them (this would be the same event).

Council Member Pacholl questioned if the plows may be going too fast. Mr. Erichson stated with the heights of the current snow banks, we need to maintain a certain speed in order to push the snow off of the streets. Mr. Erichson stated we need to do some more training as we are pulling staff from other departments that do not drive a truck that frequently.

Council Member Martin questioned if the accidents are happening in the same areas of town. Mr. Erichson stated probably most accidents are happening in areas where the streets are narrower, which could be in many different parts of the city. Council Member Martin questioned the ability of taking the wings off on occasion and then putting them back on. Mr. Erichson stated it is a big job to take a wing off and then put it back on.

Council Member King stated it sounds like we are doing the best job we can under the current circumstances. We should keep training our employees.

Mayor Stiehm stated he has heard of lasers being mounted on top of trucks such that plowing at night gives you a line to follow to maybe reduce accidents. Mr. Erichson stated he has heard of these, but we do most of our plowing in the daytime, so the lasers would not work then.

After further discussion, it was decided to leave this item on open discussion such that we can be updated later on it.

Other Item – Flood Walls: Mr. Erichson questioned if council members are hearing from their constituents about the options for the flood walls that was recently presented. No council noted any comments from the public regarding the option that should be chosen, but Council Member Clennon stated that residents in her neighborhood are concerned over the water backing up into her neighborhood. Council Member Clennon stated the last big flood came within two feet of her property. Mr. Erichson stated they used some computer modeling to show there would be a negligible impact upstream or downstream with the wall.

Concerns over the current snowfall and the spring thaw were discussed. Mr. Erichson stated the last major flood (top ten flood events) we have had as a result of spring thaw was in 1965, otherwise all of the others are a result of high rain events.

Item #3a. – Open discussion – GreenSteps Cities seminar: Mr. Hurm stated the city is sponsoring a seminar to help municipalities go green. This voluntary program helps the municipality set priorities, target savings, and implement policies and practices to operate more efficiently and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Mr. Hurm noted the seminar is scheduled for February 24 from 3:00 to 4:30 and from 6:00 to 7:30. Mr. Hurm stated we are going to try to record the meetings and get them on the website as well.

Mr. Hurm noted as part of this we have identified a grant opportunity of \$3,000 to \$4,000 to provide some bike racks around the community.

Council Member Martin stated Excel Energy converted two coal power plants northwest of Minneapolis into alternate energy plants that were more eco-friendly, however this may have cost them in excess of \$10 million. Council Member Martin questioned what the Austin Utilities will do with our two power plants.

Other Item: Council Member-at-Large Anderson questioned what the Austin Utilities was going to do with the upcoming retirement of Jerry McCarthy (General Manager), and asked if the City of Austin has any influence over this decision. Mr. Hurm stated we would need to talk to the Austin Utilities Board on this matter, and more interaction with this Board may be needed on a regular basis.

Mayor Stiehm agreed, noting we need more information back and forth. Council Member-at-Large Anderson stated she would like to know their succession plan. Mayor Stiehm suggested this item be put on the next agenda to discuss, and that maybe Mr. McCarthy could be here to address council. Council Member-at-Large Anderson stated maybe a Board Member or two could also meet with us.

Council Member McAlister noted his disagreement, stating that the city already has enough on its plate, and we should not be involved with this.

Council Member King stated he would just like to have an update, not to be presumptuous on the issue.

Mr. Hurm stated it sounds like Council would just like an update on what is going on at the Austin Utilities. Mr. Hurm requested council email specific questions that they would like the Austin Utilities to respond to, in order for them to research or involve other staff. Item will be added to an upcoming work session agenda.

Open Discussion: Council Member Clennon stated she would like to see AED (defibrillators) located at each city building. We could request funding for these through the Hormel Foundation. Cost estimates should be reviewed and then future discussion could be scheduled.

Open Discussion: Council Member McAlister questioned Mr. Dankert regarding Governor Pawlenty's unallotment. Council Member McAlister stated there is a good chance that the Governor's February proposal will not stick, but it is conceivable our reduction will be substantial. Council Member McAlister asked Mr. Dankert his thoughts on meeting with employees on budget reduction ideas. Mr. Dankert stated the city does need to change the way we do business if we are going to survive long term state aid reductions. However Mr. Dankert stated the last few years of cutting a few hundred dollars here and there is not a long term

solution. We cannot continue to reduce capital outlay and expect our facilities and property to be in fine operable condition. Additionally, Mr. Dankert noted it does not seem very productive for us to have the employees come in and take “potshots” at other departments in order to save their own departmental budgets. Mayor Stiehm agreed, noting the last session we had with the employees was not very productive. Mr. Dankert reiterated his stance that we need to operate as a city differently through combining and consolidating, or we need to find additional revenue sources to fund the reduced LGA.

Council Member-at-Large Anderson stated that is why it is so important that a wage freeze be stuck to by the council. Council questioned how much a 3% increase would cost the city in 2011. Mr. Dankert noted an estimated \$250,000 would be saved by getting a salary freeze. Council noted their unanimous agreement of a wage freeze, even in the upcoming mediation with the Police Department.

Council Member King noted his agreement with waiting on the budget situation. Council Member King stated we should wait for the legislative process to take shape before we jump to making cuts that may not be needed.

Open Discussion: Council Member-at-Large Anderson questioned the emerald ash borer problem and our trees. Rochester is cutting a lot of trees down because of this. Council Member-at-Large Anderson requested future discussion on this issue with Park and Recreation.

Adjournment: Motion by Council Member Austin, seconded by Council Member King, to adjourn the meeting. Motion passed unanimously. Meeting was adjourned at 8:16 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Tom Dankert