

M I N U T E S
COMMITTEE-OF-THE-WHOLE COUNCIL RETREAT
March 5, 2019
Jay C. Hormel Nature Center

PRESENT: Mayor Stiehm, Council Member-at-Large Jeff Austin, Council Members Steve King, Laura Helle, Paul Fischer, Rebecca Waller, Joyce Poshusta and Jason Baskin

ABSENT:

STAFF PRESENT: City Administrator Craig Clark, Director of Administrative Services Tom Dankert, City Clerk Ann Kasel, Park and Rec Director Kim Underwood, Public Works Director Steven Lang, Police Chief David McKichan, Fire Chief Jim McCoy, Planning and Zoning Administrator Holly Wallace, Library Director Julie Clinefelter and Human Resources Director Trish Wiechmann

ALSO PRESENT: Austin Daily Herald

Mayor Stiehm opened the retreat at 4:00 p.m.

“This Is Where You Belong” Book Discussion

City Administrator Craig Clark and George Brophy led a discussion on the book “This Is Where You Belong.” The discussion centered around “place attachment” and how it is built in a community.

Flood Mitigation and Local Option Sales Tax Discussion

Public Works Director Steven Lang stated the Local Option Sales Tax was implemented in 2007 and will continue a maximum of 20 years or until all the projects are funded. The tax generates an average of \$1.375 million per year. He stated local flood projects have been around \$25 million and \$10.7 million of that has come from local option sales tax. The maximum length the tax can be collected is until 2027.

Mr. Lang reviewed the different project that are projected in the future and reviewed the different properties that have turned down the City for flood acquisition.

Mr. Lang presented five different options for the duration for the Local Option Sales Tax.

Mr. Lang recommended option 5, which includes funding for sanitary sewer trunk main improvements along Turtle Creek, the Cedar River and Dobbins Creek along with acquisition projects in Wildwood and Lions Park. The projects would be constructed through 2024 but the City would “turn off” the funding in 2023.

Mr. Dankert stated the Local Option Sales Tax expires in March of 2027. The group discussed the Wildwood Park project and stated generally they would support acquisition in that area.

The group stated the Lions Park project would be better as a levy so the property might be able to be utilized in the future.

Mr. Lang stated in his opinion the flood plain is not the place to redevelop for new housing. The group discussed the different funding sources for projects which may go beyond the original projects identified in the Local Option Sales Tax.

Mr. Clark stated he would like to build a levy in Lions Park to be able to develop a housing complex in the area.

Mr. Lang stated it would still turn off in 2023 or 2024 to be able to fund all the projects Council as currently identified.

Mr. Dankert stated that if the LOST turns off in 2024 then the issue for renewal would have to go to the voters in November of 2022. He stressed the importance of planning ahead for projects.

Planning and Zoning

Planning and Zoning Administrator Holly Wallace stated she would like to educate residents about different opportunities in the City. One project she is working on is neighborhood revitalization and trying to build pride in the neighborhoods in Austin. She also stated the Planning Department is looking at a zoning code update.

Public Works Department

Public Works Director Steven Lang stated his biggest upcoming challenge is the permit for the operations of the Waste Water Treatment Plant. There are many regulations with the plant that are still being determined by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency. The City received a draft permit in late 2018 and was pleased with the conditions set forth in the permit.

Mr. Lang also reviewed the sanitary sewer user fund fees. This fund provides the funding for the operation and maintenance of the domestic waste water treatment plant, sanitary sewer collection system along with capital funds for both of those systems. He proposed a 7% increase to the sanitary sewer user fund for the next five years to meet the City's needs. Mr. Lang reviewed the proposed \$37 million worth of improvements at the Waste Water Treatment Plant.

Library

Library Director Julie Clinefelter presented her strategic plan for the Library. She stated she would like to grow literacy skills and the ability to use library and information resources; engage the community; and match infrastructure to meet community needs.

The Library is also planning a remodeling project. She presented the different options for the project but stated the plans are a work in progress. The main things were updating the children's area with a project room with a garage door, an amphitheater between the library and the park, and a drive up book drop.

Fire Department

Fire Chief Jim McCoy stated staffing is the Fire Department's number one issue for the future. He stated it is difficult to hire paid on-call firefighters. He stated the City may need to hire additional full-time firefighters to meet the needs for calls. There is a grant right now that would pay for full-time staff for the first couple of years.

He stated there is a lot of backing at the State level for fire departments that split staff between full-time and paid on call.

He stated the City is looking to replace the ladder truck, which will be over \$1 million dollars. He discussed building a new station in the future which may be designed as a "clean station" where the gear is located away from the living area.

Human Resources

Human Resources Director Trish Wiechmann stated the Compensation and Classification Study progress. She stated the study should be completed sometime in the spring and the Council will need to review and approve the results. From there, the City will need to develop a plan for implementation which will include meeting with bargaining groups and making sure the study complies with pay equity standards.

Mayor Stiehm stated he would like to be able to tell employees when the study is going to be completed.

She also stated she would like to increase the ways the City recruits employees.

Administrative Services and Clerk

Director of Administrative Services Tom Dankert provided a financial update for the City. He stated the financial department includes 225,000 lines in the last year. From the investment side, the markets have dropped over the last year. He stated there is money in the Building Fund for projects, especially since the Hy-Vee distribution center is not coming. He noted the bond rating was reaffirmed at Aa2. He noted different cost savings the department has made including the cell phone bill.

Mr. Dankert noted the revenues hit 100.7% of the projected budget and the expenditures were 94.5% of the budget. He noted that \$81,000 of contingency budget in 2018 was not used therefore those funds can be used other places. He noted that the City has some additional funds in the general fund and there will be some decisions made as to what to do with those funds.

City Clerk Ann Kasel reviewed the Austin-Mower County Homeownership fund. She stated people can apply for 2% interest loan for up to \$4,000. The program has loaned \$2.8 million for purchases of homes in Mower County. She also stated she would like input and ideas from Council as to topics for blogs and additional ways to connect with the citizenry through new mediums.

Police Department

Police Chief David McKichan stated the Police Department stated hiring is a large issue in the police department and he would like to expand how the department hires. He also stated the Department has had issues trying to retaining candidates and he would like to see that improve.

He stated police vehicles tend to be very expensive. He stated Ford has unveiled new police explorers that are hybrids that will save money on fuel.

Chief McKichan discussed body cameras and the privacy issues that they may cause including staffing costs to work with the data.

Parks and Recreation Department

Director of Parks and Recreation Kim Underwood stated she has been working on the master plan for the Nature Center. There was a meeting recently for the public to give input of the master plan and it will eventually come to Council for approval. She noted once the master plan is approved and the regional park status is affirmed, the Nature Center will construct an amphitheater.

Economic Development

City Administrator Craig Clark stated he is continuing to work with developers on sites for housing. He noted the housing tax abatement program expires at the end of the year and may be renewed.

He stated the Port Authority currently levies \$40,000 and he would like to see the Port levy additional funds in the amount of \$212,000, which would be the maximum they could levy.

Mr. Dankert noted the Port Authority levy would need to be tied to the City tax levy.

Moved by Council Member-at-Large Austin, seconded by Council Member King, adjourning the meeting at 8:28 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,

Ann M. Kasel
City Clerk