

MINUTES
COMMITTEE-OF-THE-WHOLE WORK SESSION
November 17, 2025
City Council Chambers

MEMBERS PRESENT: Mayor King. Council Members Jason Baskin, Oballa Oballa, Paul Fischer, Michael Postma, Rebecca Waller (left at 6:48 p.m.) and Council Member-at-Large Jeff Austin

MEMBERS ABSENT: Council Member Laura Helle

STAFF PRESENT: City Administrator Craig Clark, Police Chief David McKichan, Fire Chief Jim McCoy, Assistant City Engineer Andrew Sorenson, Planning and Zoning Director Holly Wallace, Library Director Julie Clinefelter, Parks, Recreation, & Forestry Director Jason Schon, Human Resource Director Patricia Wiechman, and City Clerk Brianne Wolf

APPEARING IN PERSON: Community Members, Paul Wagner of Wagner Construction

Mayor Steve King opened the meeting at 6:02 p.m.

Item #1 Overnight Shelter Discussion – Holly Wallace

Planning and Zoning Director Holly Wallace relayed they discussed overnight shelters at the previous work session, and this was a carryover to this work session. The community group presenting to Council on this topic has had some changes to their plans and location and would like to present the new information to Council.

Shelly Hovland, a case manager at SEMCAC, stated she is in contact with homeless individuals in her line of work. This year she has made contact with sixty eight homeless individuals and eight homeless families. She is assisting with the overnight shelter project, which is being modeled after the existing overnight shelter in Winona. She stated she reached out to the Police Chief in Winona to get his thoughts on their shelter and the Police Chief stated this is a great resource for the officers when someone doesn't have a warm and safe place to stay.

Mayor King asked how often the Mower County Homeless Response Team meets, as Shelly is a member of this team.

Ms. Hovland stated they are only meeting quarterly.

Council Member Baskin wanted to know when individuals or families come to SEMCAC, what the process looks like for connecting them with resources to find housing. He would like to know if the issue is that there isn't enough housing, or that people may choose not to find housing.

Ms. Hovland stated she does have the ability to direct people to many different resources but there is an issue with finding affordable housing. She stated motel vouchers from the Salvation Army make an impact and are not highly funded. A person could be in need of assistance on a Saturday night when they

would need to contact the Salvation Army. This is where the motel voucher would come into play. She stated in Mower County, SEMCAC cannot distribute motel vouchers as the motels do not accept SEMCAC's payment method. Therefore, the only way to distribute motel vouchers is through the Salvation Army.

Mayor King stated there is a wait list for affordable apartment units at the Twin Towers. This is something they are trying to address, as he is a part of the homeless response team.

Ms. Hovland stated they are trying to get more landlords involved and to have more landlords accept Section 8 vouchers for rent.

Pastor Vickie Spyhalski, 111 6th Street NW, stated people regularly come to her church for assistance. She stated finding housing is a huge issue due to the shortage of affordable housing. Pastor Spyhalski stated she has heard concerns about opening an overnight shelter and wanted the public to be aware that the Winona shelter serves mainly local residents. People worry about an increase in violence with opening an overnight shelter. With Catholic Charities, they have protocols in place to assist in avoiding these types of situations. They provide training for all volunteers and workers at the overnight shelters. She stated the cost to host a person in an overnight shelter is \$25 per night, and the cost of a hotel voucher is \$70 per night. She stated unhoused individuals statistically are more likely to experience crime against them.

Paul Wagner, owner of Wagner Construction, stated he has been in conversations with Catholic Charities about bringing an overnight shelter to Austin since the fall of 2024. He stated Catholic Charities stated that in order to open an overnight shelter in Austin, they would need support from the City, the Community and a location to open the shelter. They did identify a location for the overnight shelter; the previous Knights of Columbus building. Mr. Wagner stated they have been looking at other buildings for a possible overnight shelter as the previous Knights of Columbus building has many accessibility issues and would require approximately \$200,000 in repairs.

Mayor King asked if the group will still focus on the Knights of Columbus building as he thought they were looking at a new location due to the costs involved with repairs.

Mr. Wagner stated the owner of the Knights of Columbus building is reevaluating the lease as the overnight shelter would only need to rent the space for five months of the year. The group is also looking to see if maybe a church location in town would be a viable option.

Council Member Oballa asked what can be done long term. What services will be offered and how would people be made aware of them? Are they going to try and assist these individuals in finding permanent placement? Overall, he is in favor of this.

Mr. Wagner stated that a question for the City would be about what they plan to do with these individuals once they are in the warming shelter. It's the committee's job to get them out of the cold, and then it is up to the City to go further.

Mayor King asked Council if they are in favor of creating an ordinance to allow this type of structure and or entity within the City.

Council Member-at-Large Austin asked for clarification. He would like to know if they are opening a warming shelter or an overnight shelter. Are they planning on being open only five months of the year, and if so, does that mean they're only going to be open at night when it's certain temperatures or are they going to be open every night?

Mr. Wagner stated this is experimental. They would open an overnight shelter and be open every night for five months.

Council Member-at-Large suggested using the old Salvation Army building as a test site.

Ms. Wallace stated this building is currently being tested for asbestos and in the process of being torn down in addition to being located in the flood plain.

Council Member-at-Large Austin stated if they are only operating during the cold months, how are they able to justify the property sitting empty for seven months of the year?

Mr. Wagner stated these are all ideas they have been talking about. They have spoke about a day shelter in the future as well.

Council Member Postma stated he appreciates the community's engagement on this project. He understands this is an issue; he serves on many boards in the community that are addressing different issues related to this project. He is struggling to see the benefits of bringing an overnight shelter to the community. He doesn't think this is the right answer for Austin right now. He has concerns about an overnight shelter and how it can grow into a day shelter. He understands there is a problem, but he believes there are other opportunities and groups where the community can provide assistance which would benefit individuals immediately.

Council Member Baskin stated he believes there is a well-intentioned effort behind this project, but he needs more details and information on how this would play out. He would like to know more about the security plan and how it fits into the City's Comprehensive Plan. He would need more details, and at this time, he is not comfortable supporting this.

Council Member Fischer is also serving on boards in the community that address issues related to unhoused individuals and he is aware of the problem in the community. He stated at this point in time he is not in favor of this project.

Council Member Waller appreciates the effort and sees the need for this. She wants to ensure the Council is doing what is right for the community. She would be in favor of doing a test pilot before they go through all the ordinance changes. She would like to see more concrete plans and a building location. She believes there is more work to be done, but they can get there if they continue to work on this project. She would like to explore more locations to host this type of project and also wants to know what programs

can be offered to these individuals for more immediate assistance. She also asked what the City can do in terms of assisting these individuals. She would like to find a program that fits the needs of the City of Austin.

Mayor King stated he endorses what is happening and would like to see more collaboration with Mower County, as they have a Housing Stability Committee. He would like to see security, rules, and social workers available, and he believes collaboration with the County is a step in the right direction. The County has resources available. He believes there are still a lot of questions surrounding this project and they need to be answered before moving forward.

Ms. Wallace asked if she could get a decision from Council on whether the ordinance would be amended to include an overnight shelter.

Moved by Council Member Baskin, seconded by Council Member Postma for no changes to the current ordinances to include an overnight shelter. Carried 4-1 (Council Member Oballa, Nay)

Item #2 – Administrative Report

City Administrator Craig Clark stated they had no employees requesting the early retirement incentive. Council will have to decide on any alternatives related to the budget as they will have to adopt the budget on December 15th, 2025. They can discuss this more on the December 1st, 2025 work session.

Council Member Baskin stated he would like to be presented with options on how to bend the cost curve from an FTE standpoint and what the pros and cons are.

Mayor King stated they would have a discussion at the first work session in December.

Open Discussion

Ms. Wallace invited the Council to attend the Comprehensive Planning Open House from 5pm-7pm to view the final version of the Comprehensive Plan. It will be held at the Ruby Rupner Building.

Moved by Council Member-at-Large Austin, seconded by Council Member Oballa, to adjourn the meeting at 6:54 PM. Carried.

Respectfully Submitted,

Brianne D. Wolf, City Clerk