



Office of the City Clerk

City of North Adams

10 Main Street Room 109
North Adams, Massachusetts 01247
(413) 662-3000 Ext. 1

Deborah M. Pedercini
City Clerk

Regular Meeting of the City Council

February 9, 2021

A meeting of the North Adams City Council was held at 7:30 p.m. via remote.

COUNCILORS PRESENT: Councilors Blackmer, Bona, Harpin, Hopkins, LaForest, Lamb, Oleskiewicz, Sweeney, Wilkinson.

OTHERS PRESENT: Andrea Kretchmer, Terri-Belkis Mitchell, Zenolith Partners

Council President Hopkins read the following statement regarding COVID-19. Pursuant to Governor Baker's March 12, 2020 Order Suspending Certain Provisions of the Open Meeting Law, G.L. c. 30A, §18, and the Governor's March 15, 2020 Order imposing strict limitations on the number of people that may gather in one place, this meeting of the North Adams City Council is being conducted via remote participation and in City Council Chambers. No in-person attendance of members of the public will be permitted, but every effort will be made to ensure that the public can adequately access the proceedings as provided for in the Order.

A moment of silence was held remembering Ernest Gamache, Sr, member and past chairman of the Zoning Board of Appeals and Alice Mirante, paraprofessional for the North Adams Public Schools.

The President called for a motion to approve the minutes for the meeting of January 26, 2021.

On motion of Councilor Oleskiewicz, duly seconded by Councilor LaForest, it was VOTED: to approve the minutes. Councilors Sweeney and Wilkinson abstained.

The President called for hearing of visitors.

Council President stated that there was a petition with over 125 names that was received by the Council regarding the sale of Sullivan School.

Michael Fierro, spoke against the sale of Sullivan School and Kemp Park; he stated he was speaking on behalf of several Kemp residents. He felt the thirty-year tax relief as well as

creating low income housing was not an appropriate use for the land. He would like to see the Kemp family's wishes for children and families to enjoy the land upheld.

Karen Bedard, 180 Meadow Street, stated that adding 75 new residents would cause a burden on water and sewer as the system is very antiquated. She thanked the councilors that responded to her inquiries

Carol Boucher, asked the Council to take time and not decide on this issue tonight, she stated she wanted to keep the land available for recreation and hiking, offering to purchase the property herself for \$10,000. She stated it should be discussed with the residents in this area.

Peter May, 119 Summit Avenue, stated that he opposed any more affordable housing in North Adams, other communities should step up and add their fair shares. He stated that the extra residents in this area will add much more traffic than this quiet neighborhood can handle as well as additional load on community's public services and safety. He had concerns about the 30-year tax abatement as well.

Jean Stone, she stated that this is a vibrant community and she has made North Adams her home. She stated she was disheartened that there has not been any resident input into this decision of sale and use of this property.

Stephanie Tatro, 171 Kemp Avenue, had concerns about the proposal, she asked the Council to reconsider the previous proposal of the trade school. She stated the city needs to take care of the failing infrastructure before adding more housing; she had concerns about the thirty-year tax abatement as well.

Cheryl Lefave, 12 Rich Street, echoed many of the residents' concerns, she stated that it is a quiet neighborhood and stated that this housing development would not promote the Windsor Lake area. She stated that going forward with the proposal would not be positive for the community.

John Bedard, 180 Meadow Street, thanked the Councilors who responded to him and for their replies. He stated that one of the replies stated "if not this, then what?" Mr. Bedard stated that many residents requested to purchase the land that was taken from them in the 1960's around Kemp Park area. He stated that many private developers have received money why can't we find funding to demolish the school? He stated that this property was given to the City by the Kemp family and was not for this use. He requested the Council vote no on this.

Bob Markland, Church Street, had concerns about the 30-year tax abatement, stating that the City is struggling now and that it would be putting the burden on residents and businesses and urged Council to give this a second thought.

11,938 The President presented Mayor's communication #13 recommending the reappointment of David Motta to the North Adams Human Services Commission for a term to expire February 1, 2024.

On motion of Councilor Oleskiewicz, duly seconded by Councilor LaForest, it was VOTED: to confirm the reappointment.

11,939 The President presented Mayor's communication #14 recommending the reappointment of Ashley Shade to the North Adams Human Services Commission for a term to expire February 1, 2024.

On motion of Councilor Blackmer, duly seconded by Councilor Lamb, it was VOTED: to confirm the reappointment.

11,940 The President presented Mayor's communication #15 recommending the reappointment of Michael Obasohan to the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art Cultural Development Commission for a term to expire February 1, 2024.

On motion of Councilor Lamb, duly seconded by Councilor Blackmer, it was VOTED: to confirm the reappointment.

11,802-1 The President presented Mayor's communication #16 recommending the sale of real estate located at 367 Houghton Street.

Without objection, the President filed the communication.

11,802-1 The President presented an Order authorizing the Mayor to sell property located at 367 Houghton Street, Map 34, Lot 35 to Kenneth Daly in the amount of \$12,000.

On motion of Councilor Lamb, duly seconded by Councilor Blackmer, it was VOTED: to adopt the Order.

The Mayor gave a description of the property disposition in general, in accordance with MGL, Chapter 30B, there are a number of state requirements that are overseen through the Office of Community Development. The steps include, declaration of property available for disposition and identifying any reuse of the property restrictions, the RFP is solicited for bids, the staff selection committee recommends to the Mayor, if the Mayor does not feel it is in the best interest of the City he can reject the offer, if he feels it is viable, proceed, if the property is at assessed value. If the proposal is not at assessed value, it goes to Council to determine if the proposal is agreeable. He gave examples of previous properties and how they were addressed.

Councilor Harpin inquired if the purchaser was going to pay the back taxes if owed. The Mayor asked Michael Nuvalle, Director, Office of Community Development to speak to the tax status.

Mr. Nuvalle gave a brief history of the property, stating that it was originally a North Adams Housing Authority's, Own Your Own Home program property. This property was returned to the City and there are no taxes due and is available for disposition.

Councilor Harpin noted that she researched properties in the same neighborhood that sold for over \$130,000 recently and stated that this offer was extremely low.

Councilor LaForest stated that there was an imperative improvement of putting a parking spot that would require a variance. The lot is over a tenth of an acre and the house is on a hill in a very busy area. If this is an imperative improvement for the sale, does this determine the sale if the zoning is not allowed.

The Mayor stated the owner would have to do some of this work himself regarding the parking, he stated that the closing should not be contingent on the parking space.

Mr. Nuvalle stated that the property had been out to bid four times with no bids received. He stated that the property has been vacant for some time, damage to the property is evidenced.

Councilor Bona stated that this property has been an eyesore for a long period of time, and hopes to see the property renovated in order to receive tax revenue and he is sure the neighbors will be happy to see it improved as well.

Councilor Blackmer stated she would support the sale of this property.

Councilor Oleskiewicz stated he would support the sale as well and would like to see the property back on the tax rolls.

Councilor Lamb stated he would support the proposal. He stated that there was a successful property auction over the summer on municipal property sales and inquired if this property is at risk to skew property values when selling for less. Councilor Wilkinson stated that these types of properties would not be used for that purpose and would not hurt values.

Mr. Nuvalle stated that the property was disposed of by RFP process instead of auction due to the fact that there is more control of the use of the property.

The Order was adopted by yea and nay vote, yea, Councilors Blackmer, Bona, Harpin, Hopkins, LaForest, Lamb, Oleskiewicz, Sweeney, Wilkinson, nay, none.

11,570-2 The President presented Mayor's communication #17 recommending the sale of real estate located at 151 Kemp Avenue, Sullivan School.

Without objection, the President filed the communication.

11,570-2 The President presented an Order authorizing the Mayor to sell property located at 151 Kemp Avenue, Map 169, Lot 1, Sullivan School to Zenolith Partners, LLC and Sano-Ruin Construction, LLC in the amount of \$10,000.

On motion of Councilor LaForest, duly seconded by Councilor Oleskiewicz, it was VOTED: to deny the Order.

The Mayor stated that the process that was used for this property, is the same process that was used for Houghton Street, as well as the other properties.

Councilor Wilkinson stated he was against the proposal, however he felt it should at least be referred to committee and then go from there instead of just denying.

Councilor LaForest stated that when the RFP was issued he felt that the administration would submit proposals that would coincide with the integrity of the neighborhood and for those that the gift of the Kemp family property would benefit. He went on to say that he felt there would be a return on all investments of the residents; instead this proposal sells North Adams short and disrespects the economy that we have helped create. He stated the Vision 2030 plan warned avoiding proposals such as this. He stated that the City's 13% subsidized housing makes the City 20th in the state. He stated this project would create three subsidized housing projects in less than one tenth of a square mile. He suggested renovating housing and offering low mortgages would be a much more inclusive option integrating and enriching neighborhoods. He questioned why this property is not being offered to the residents that lost their property by eminent domain years ago. He further inquired as to impact and traffic studies, capital outlay for infrastructure and environmental impact studies and questioned DPW and Public Safety's ability to handle the increase. He encouraged the Council to vote no on this proposal.

Councilor Blackmer thanked all the residents that reached out to her, she stated she would address them tonight. She stated that this is not a "done" deal, there are many issues involving character of the neighborhood crime in the area, deed to property, sewer and water usage and she felt that this project is too large for this area. She stated that a housing study was done by the Community Development office, in 2020, its findings were that there is a net loss of 588 units of housing, so it appears to be a misperception of the need. She went on to say that the City would have to spend over one million dollars to demolish the property, there is maintenance issues and expensive to insure. She stated she was not in favor of the project, but thought that it could have possibly been referred to committee, but it appears that this will be denied.

Councilor Harpin thanked Councilor LaForest and agreed with what he had to say. She stated that there was a petition with 125 signatures of concerned residents submitted to councilors telling the Council that they clearly do not want this project and she feels that we need to listen to the people, we represent. She stated she would be voting no on the proposal.

Councilor Sweeney stated she was struggling with this decision, stating that there was a lot of stigmatism and people that are struggling during a pandemic. She stated that there is a need for affordable housing in the community. She stated she was in favor of referring this to committee to have further conversation on this issue.

Councilor Bona stated that he researched the developer and there was not any negativity. He stated that initially he felt that it could be a project that could be discussed. He now is recognizing that negotiations will be difficult, that the size of the project is too large for the neighborhood. He stated that the tax return would not be sufficient and 30 years is not acceptable. He applauded the residents for taking a stand on this and getting involved and suggested that they get together with administration and Community Development to discuss the future of this property

Councilor Lamb thanked everyone that reached out, he stated that he appreciated Councilor Bona's response. He went on to say that mixed housing is what the 2030 Plan suggested, he had concerns about the tax abatement as well. He wanted to clarify that he is going to vote no on the proposal. He stated that as a Council, there have been two RFP's already, there needs to be a conversation as to what the neighborhood wants to see. He did state that there is a need for housing; a need to look at community need, neighborhood need, economic need. He voiced his concerns regarding the language that was used in the communications around our low-income community. Currently, the city has 22 people living in hotels because there is no room in the homeless shelters, due to situations that range from many reasons, not necessarily due to economic. We do need to be realistic, but need to be able to figure out structures and help residents to move up and purchase permanent housing.

Councilor Oleskiewicz thanked everyone for attending the meeting and making their voices heard.

Councilor Sweeney echoed Councilor Oleskiewicz and thanked residents to attending and for participating.

Councilor LaForest stated he did feel that there is a need for low income housing, just not this particular project.

The Mayor thanked the group that put the bid together. He shared some of the concerns that many had, he acknowledged the work of the team that put together the analysis.

Zenolith, suggested that they would be happy to discuss this plan further and she fully understands the neighbors' concerns. "They are open to variations or accommodations and would never try to tell North Adams what they need on this property"

11,941 The President presented a communication submitted by Councilor LaForest concerning the status of fire hydrants in neighborhoods and business districts in the city.

Without objection, the President filed the communication.

The Mayor stated that this is a critical issue, in light of the fire on Greylock Avenue addressing the safety of the residents. There are 631 hydrants in the City, 500 are fully operational, 100 plus that need replacement and 30 in need of repair. In 2010 there were approximately 200 non-

operative hydrants in the City, since then they have purchased 40 and installed 36 and worked on repairs to others; this is part of the long-term capital projection for the water system.

He stated that there were discrepancies with the Fire Department's number of hydrants and the DPW's number and they will be working on this to reconcile the list to make sure the numbers are accurate and tracking the hydrants and gates. There is an underlying issue, aligning the budget and capital priorities and outlay, additional support is needed, immediate step will be pursuing a community compact for support in the capital plan and development. He stated that he has had conversations with director Nuvalle, OCD, to include hydrants in the CDBG plan. He stated roadwork on Liberty and North Street will be done this year and replacement of hydrants would be included. Commissioner Timothy Lescarbeau stated that there were close to 300 non-working hydrants in 2011 with approximately 100 hydrants currently that need replacement. He stated that the costs would be about a quarter of a million dollars if they are installed by DPW, probably double that if out-sourced. We currently have a one-person Water Department, unfortunately that is the reality.

Councilor Bona stated that these numbers came up at the Public Safety Committee meeting, in 2011, the 20-year plan stated 300 hydrants. He stated that the last time the DPW flushed the hydrants, there were only 65 not working, however over a few months, there are several that became inoperable. The flushing is a good way to verify which hydrants are working properly. He inquired how the firefighters know which ones are working and which are not, stating that he thought it would be a time saver at the time of an event. He went on further to clarify that there was not any funding in the FY2021 budget for fire hydrant replacement, stating that usually there are five and they were removed and the budget was approved by City Council; stating that it is something that needs to have more attention.

Councilor Lamb thanked the Mayor and Commissioner Lescarbeau for the update and was happy to hear the progress being made. He stated the CDBG funding is a great way to upgrade and inquired as to the number of hydrants that will be addressed in the Liberty and North Street project.

Mr. Lescarbeau stated that they have been done in the 1990's in that area, the issue with that type of funding is that the monies are only available to low income neighborhoods. He stated he has worked with director Nuvalle in the past on this issue.

The Mayor did state that there are 4 hydrants in the Bracewell Avenue and would be assessed at that time.

Councilor Harpin stated the CDBG funding is a great option. She would also like to see a working fire hydrant analysis available to the firefighters as well as residents.

Councilor LaForest thanked the Mayor, Commissioner Lescarbeau and the Fire Chief for providing the update. The Local 1781 Fire Union submitted a communication to the Public Safety Committee; he read the communication, which spoke about the deficiencies in fire hydrants and the promises of administration to replace the hydrants that have not been upheld.

Councilor Blackmer inquired about Green Communities and Complete Street grants and whether or not hydrants were included. The Mayor stated he would look into it.

Fire Chief Stephen Meranti, stated that replacement of hydrants is all well and good, however, there is no preventative maintenance. When he started in 1987 there were seven people in the Water Department and a complete crew that maintained the hydrants. Most communities have a Water Department, we do not; currently there is only one person and he is overwhelmed. The City needs to replace its Water Department staff to be able to maintain the hydrants. If you cannot get a cap off, they are not usable, we are falling short on maintenance and there cannot be any more cuts to staff.

11,942 The President presented communication submitted by Councilor LaForest regarding an update status of the Public Safety building that houses the Fire and Police departments.

The Mayor spoke about the update on the Public Safety building, he discussed the on-going concerns as a group through two councils and administrations, the issues of money being spent on a building that has passed its useful life. He spoke about the roof replacement that is not fully complete and stated it was only a “band aid” approach. Most recently the concern for a heating system was cause to do an emergency procurement process with Inspector Meranti and Administrative Officer Angela Ellison to obtain a contractor and equipment to do the replacement of the failed systems on the police side. The equipment is on order and should arrive next week and will be installed immediately. There are water issues that have plagued the building as well.

On a positive side, due to creative work by Chief Meranti, they have been able to create a bunk space for the firefighters to have physical distancing with Cares Act funds.

The Mayor stated that there is a significant need to have a planning effort to address the needs of this building.

In terms of actions taken, in 2018, the City secured a 1,2 million capital bond, engineering, design and siting of a new Public Safety facility, those funds are not available to us at this time.

One opportunity that has come up is the Juvenile Court building for the Police Department. It is a promising site, there is however a need for a cost analysis and additional build out costs.

The Mayor stated that at his monthly public safety meetings, he now has invited the union members as well. There is a need to engage the departments and the unions along with Finance and Public Safety committees to address the future of the Public Safety department requiring a collaborative working group. In addressing the current immediate funding needs, the Mayor stated that we hold reserves for challenging times and we need to figure out what capacity we have in addressing critical needs while still being mindful of the DA requirement that we are required to meet and the limitations under the existing consent decree which dates back to 2010.

The Mayor stated in the medium term, as we advocate for the release of bond funds, there are steps that we can take, the housing study that the City worked with Berkshire Regional Planning

on the District Local Technical Assistance grant for the potential site analysis to narrow down pros and cons. Last year, there was discussion about the The Jarisch Paper Box site, other city site includes, the Windsor Mill, the Ashland Street salt shed, the parking lot in front of Disanty Field, as well as Sullivan School. Are we looking at separate options for Fire and Police, or one site for both. The operating model to be considered, County dispatch sharing.

Councilor Blackmer stated that there will be borrowing involved, a study analysis sooner than later would be effective as rates are low. She stated the juvenile court space is a good option, as there are holding cells as well as other options that would be compatible. She stated that she was an advocate for separating the departments, as there is no longer a Public Safety Commissioner and they currently are under separate authority. Councilor Blackmer spoke about the funding for the facility, a program similar to SBA for public safety or public works is in the works. The Mayor stated that he was aware of the funding and supports it emphatically.

Councilor Lamb stated that federal infrastructure funding is looking for “shovel ready” projects, he stated there is a need to put the project together and is concerned with missing funding opportunities. He stated that the City’s public safety departments are stepping up to assist other neighboring towns when needed and we need to provide them with what is necessary to do so.

Councilor LaForest stated the police department has made their concerns known for many years, he inquired when the meetings are going to take place to have a summit of sorts with the senators and governor and players at the table. He pointed out the Department of Justice mandated a series of corrective actions of ADA compliance in 2012. The public safety building was to be corrected in three years, these are decade old problems. We are still facing these issues, we cannot keep putting money into a building that is not salvageable.

Councilor Harpin stated in 2017 this was an issue and as well as 2019, she is advocating to borrow as it is a good time interest wise, she stated there is no need to put any more money into this building.

11,925-1 The President presented communication submitted by Council President Hopkins regarding update from the City Clerk Screening Committee

The President stated that he had hoped to give a report, however, he would like to call a special meeting at a later date, due to the Assistant City Clerk’s resignation. He thanked the Screening Committee’s efforts and time in this lengthy process.

The President presented an application from William H. Wheeler, 332 North Street, Williamstown, MA for a license to drive a taxi for RJ’s Taxi which was postponed at the meeting of January 26, 2021.

On motion of Councilor Oleskiewicz, duly seconded by Councilor Blackmer, it was VOTED: to approve the license.

The President called for Open Forum.

Bryan Sapienza, 113 Pleasant Street, wanted to applaud the Covid-19 vaccine clinic's operation stating it was run extremely well. He also inquired about the Notre Dame Church's ownership, the sidewalks have not been cleared in the past several storms.

Tom Ryan, Notch Road, questioned why the City is giving tax breaks to developers and not to older residents.

The President called for Mayor's Concerns.

The Mayor gave recognition to the COVID-19 vaccination clinic and the great work that they are doing. He stated the on-line registration has been difficult for seniors, he thanked Elder Services for their assistance. He stated to please continue social distancing, masking and washing of hands.

The President called for Committee Reports and Minutes. There were none.

The President called for Liaison Updates and Councilor Concerns.

Councilor Harpin thanked the workers at the vaccine clinic and all its volunteers on a well-run operation. She also inquired from the Mayor when another RFP would be going out on the Mohawk Theatre and why the proposal was denied. The Mayor stated there was no bid bond and that another RFP would be going out very soon.

Councilor Blackmer discussed the MMA and stated how well Western Mass was well represented.

Councilor Sweeney stated there are several events surrounding Black History month at MCLA.

The President called for a motion to adjourn.

On motion of Councilor LaForest, duly seconded by Councilor Blackmer, it was VOTED: to adjourn at 10:17 pm.

A True Record
Attest,



City Clerk