

**Minutes of the Montpelier City Council Meeting
December 18, 2012, 6:30 PM
City Council Chambers, Montpelier City Hall**

In attendance: Mayor John Hollar (presiding), City Manager Bill Fraser, City Councilors Andy Hooper, Angela Timpone, Thierry Guerlain, Alan Weiss, Anne Watson, and Tom Golonka. City Clerk John Odum acted as Secretary of the Meeting.

The Mayor called the meeting to order at 6:32PM and thanked the Council for its flexibility in rescheduling the meeting.

12-306. Marge Power rose to speak about the Senior Center budget, expressing concern that budgetary needs relating to the new facility may merit particular consideration by the Council.

John Bloch rose to comment on consent agenda item (c), characterizing it as “giving Sovernet a subsidy.” He shared his opinion that their request was inappropriate.

Mary Alice Bisbee, a former Board member of the Senior Center, asked that the Council approve the Senior Center budget. She added that she would prefer the Senior Center be un-attached from the city and be an independent entity. She also believes that the Council should re-orient itself towards those 60 and above. She also objected to changes to the mission statement specifying the Center’s service to Montpelier.

Jane Kast spoke in favor of the Senior Center budget, but is also concerned about tax rates and would like to see the Senior Center’s increase be offset elsewhere in the budget.

Jane Osgatharp also spoke in support of the Senior Center budget, noting the benefits beyond the individual seniors.

Esme Sobel empathized with the challenges of building a budget before speaking in support of the Senior Center budget, characterizing it as part of a greater community health and wellness strategy.

Samara Mays, Director of the Children’s House on Barre Street, spoke supportively of the GMTA circulator. Councilor Weiss raised a point of order, given that the subject was a pending agenda item. Mayor Hollar allowed for the comment at the time, prior to the agenda-driven discussion.

12-307. City Manager Fraser noted item (c) of the Consent Agenda, given that Mr. Bloch had risen in opposition. Fraser indicated he did not believe it constituted a subsidy, as it had been characterized. Todd Law rose and introduced Karen Kotecki of Sovernet (contractor) who explained that Sovernet did some work in

Montpelier this last year attaching some hardware/fiber to poles, and the item was a simple permit for the anchors, to facilitate the procedure (part of a federal grant to deploy high speed internet).

Councilor Hooper moved approval of the consent agenda, seconded by Councilor Watson.

John Bloch shared his view that the staff time spent on the Sovernet project constituted a subsidy. Mayor Hollar countered that any time anyone wants to do business in the city; it would attach city staff time. Mr. Bloch rejected the comparison.

The motion passed 5-1 at 6:50PM, with Councilor Weiss voting nay.

Passage of the consent agenda provided approval for the following corrections to the 2012 Grand List (errors and omissions) as requested by the Assessor's Office (items below designate the property owner, parcel number, listed value, corrected value, and the reason for the change):

1. Back, Katie, 801-285000, \$2,000, \$0 - Duplicate entry under owner & business name, *Balance of Being*.
2. Black Sheep Books, 801-003000, \$912, \$0 - Business closed.
3. College Hill Psychiatric Svcs, 801-203000, \$2,880, \$0 - Business closed.
4. Fig Rig Web Crafters, 801-162000, \$1,728, \$0 - Duplicate entry under owner & business name, *Carter Stowell*.
5. DeLage Landen Operational Svcs, 800-750000, \$123,680, \$109,788 - Incorrect listing of equipment leased to Northfield Savings Bank which was not located in Montpelier.

12-308. Meredith Birkett, Harold Garabedian, and Tawnya Kristen addressed the Council on the GMTA bus routes. Birkett was very appreciative that the base support was included in the proposed budget, and then broached the topic of the circulator (circ) bus – noting that it would be a burden to collect the signatures.

At the Mayor's request, ridership and cost statistics were passed out to the Council. Councilor Guerlain asked for clarification on the federal support for the circ. Ms. Kristen indicated that ridership had grown and broadened demographically in the last year. Councilor Timpone asked for and received more detail on the utility of the routes.

Councilor Weiss felt that the ridership was too low to merit the circ's inclusion on the proposed budget and advised that they should work through the ballot process.

Councilor Guerlain had questions about the numbers, and noted he had come up with an average cost per rider of approximately \$8.60, which was distinctly lower than numbers in circulation.

Councilor Golonka expressed concern that other funding sources (CCMTA?) would disappear and that the city would be expected to make up the difference in the future, characterizing it as a “bait and switch.” Birkitt indicated there was no deadline on this funding, but that were statewide benchmarks that could have funding implications.

Garabedian noted that the genesis of the circ was a citizen-driven process, and that GMTA had been approached to implement it.

Councilor Timpone spoke supportively of the circ, but felt that it should be on the ballot given the budget challenges.

Councilor Guerlain wondered if the circ needed to stay free indefinitely. Birkett indicated that comparable routes and services elsewhere were free. She also indicated that many of the grants GMTA receives require local matching funds.

12-309.

Councilor Weiss asked for, and received permission to discuss the school resource officer. Weiss questioned whether the city’s share of the position could be transferred to the school budget, where state money could partially offset the costs to city taxpayers. The Mayor concurred that it was a good question, and the City Manager responded that he would have the conversation with the superintendent, adding that it was a topic that had been discussed, and the 50-50 split reflected what they felt was a reasonable split given the duties of the position, but that it was a conversation worth having.

Fire Chief Gowans addressed the Council on the challenges of level-funding the budget, and spoke to the impacts of reducing staffing to what he felt were unprecedented levels, and during a time of increasing demands on the department. He suggested it would impact the department’s ability to respond appropriately to crises, and to manage overtime costs.

Gowans suggested that outreach programs – such as those in the schools and the community – will likely have to be cut as a result of the reduced staffing.

Councilor Guerlain responded that the budget controls were necessary. Councilor Golonka asked if there were other revenue sources that could be examined, and Chief Gowans identified a couple options that had been unsuccessfully pursued in other towns.

Councilor Weiss asked about plans for ambulance billing, and the Chief outlined the options being looked at, and indicated that the future was uncertain, given that the staff may be in flux due to a potential retirement.

Councilor Guerlain wondered about ambulance billing unpaid debt. Gowans did not have specific numbers, but responded it was being looked at. Fraser indicated that some of the unpaid debt was a phantom figure, indicating some monies that perhaps should not have been billed, but were as a matter of bookkeeping.

Councilor Watson wondered whether the average resident would notice the impacts of the proposed staffing reduction.

Jake Larabee, president of the Montpelier Firefighters Union read a statement in strong opposition to the proposed staffing cuts, indicating that the union intended to mount a door-to-door campaign on the issue.

David Beatty asked if volunteer firefighters were an option. Gowans replied that there was a call force they had been working with, but it had not been very successful. He granted that Waterbury had been very successful in recruiting a volunteer force, but that it was a cultural difference. Beatty followed up, asking if the potentially retiring administrative position could be filled by volunteers. Gowans indicated it had not been discussed.

The mayor asked Gowans if he agreed with the statement that response times would be effected. Gowans would not agree or disagree with the characterization (but suggested that second or third calls could conceivably be affected), while City Manager Fraser indicated he would not have been comfortable proposing the budget if it would drastically change the response time.

Larabee noted that he was referring to second and third call impact, and Gowans agreed with the concern.

Councilor Golonka emphasized that the Council was looking to level-fund the budget, rather than cut budgets. He also had questions about budget spending to date. Finance Director Sandra Gallup reviewed the numbers and explained why spending was down as compared to the previous years at this point. Golonka suggested that, factoring those reductions in, that the FY14 proposal could be considered a budget increase in real money. Gowans indicated that some of that difference was sustainable, and some related to the pace of filling vacant positions and the like. Gallup noted the increases in such things as Worker's Comp as an offset. A brief discussion of the city's workers compensation insurance followed.

Councilor Weiss, noted the comment by the union president, and asked about the allowable political activity of the unionized staff. The City Manager indicated there were no limitations on political activity on individuals' personal time.

The Mayor called for a five minute recess. The meeting resumed at 8:05.

Department of Public Works Director Todd Law spoke about the DPW budget, noting its decrease in staffing under the FY14 budget, and expressing concerns about the expected increased workload, given the Council's increased emphasis on road and pedestrian infrastructure upkeep.

Director Law suggested that a mild winter would make for a minimal impact. Councilor Timpone asked in more detail about the impacts of staffing, and probed further about seasonal staffing, external contracting, and potential seasonal staff sharing with the recreation department. City Manager Fraser noted that there is some staff sharing with the cemetery.

At the mayor's request, Law indicated that the position to be eliminated (by not filling a staff vacancy) is a truck driving position during the winter months. He related the challenges under the current staffing.

Councilor Weiss asked about the staff impact of the District Heat project. Law indicated that he, himself was currently the project manager, and that some of his time would be taken up working with the resident engineer the project will need to pick up. He noted that DPW staff would be on call in the case of questions or unanticipated incidents during the district heat construction.

Mayor Hollar noted the tremendous amount of salt the sidewalk plows leave behind. Law replied that the City Manager had brought this to his attention recently. He indicated that the hardware on the salt spreading mechanism left much to be desired.

Councilor Guerlain relayed an email complaint about a sidewalk plow passing by a constituent home repeatedly. He also expressed concerns about the amount of salt in use, suggesting that the driver was not being diligent enough in monitoring it.

Law indicated that he also receives concerns about inadequate sidewalk clearing and salt coverage, suggesting there are two sides to such issues. Councilor Golonka also expressed frustration with the large amounts of salt and the commensurate costs. Law reviewed with Golonka the department's salt monitoring procedure, and the related standards.

Councilor Watson asked if a sand/salt combination would be more appropriate, and noted the potential environmental impacts. Law responded that the sand had a higher environmental impact on regional waterways, while noting that sand was used on back roads as the primary agent.

Councilor Weiss asked the City Manager if any of the staff time costs related to district heat would be reimbursed to the department. Fraser indicated most of them would be.

Councilor Guerlain asked for clarification on where the proposed budget increase targeted for street and sidewalk maintenance is reflected. City

Manager Fraser indicated it was in the capital fund, and that any increases that may appear in departmental budget lines are accounted for in the \$129,000 increased revenue projected. Guerlain further asked about the choices made on the accounting sheets to reflect these numbers. Fraser replied that the approach had been discussed previously, but that the numbers could be displayed differently.

The Mayor asked where the position cut was reflected in the department's budget. Law replied that it was in the DPW street operations budget line.

Councilor Watson asked for clarification about the equipment replacement costs.

The Finance Director took a moment to highlight a fund transfer to the capital improvement fund reflected in the budget book.

Planning and Development Director Gwen Hallsmith discussed the impact of staffing changes proposed for the department. Some of the technological responsibilities will be moved to DPW and IT, while the reduction in the zoning administrator position to half time will have unknown impacts (and Hallsmith indicated she would return to the Council and report if it became untenable).

Councilor Hooper wondered if a half time position would attract qualified applicants. Hallsmith replied that applicants for the full-time position had responded well to the change to part-time, and were still interested in the position.

At Councilor Weiss's question, Director Hallsmith reported that the Building inspector position has been filled, and the department had been working with the state to insure the fees stay in the city. She spoke positively about the new hire.

Director Hallsmith's largest concern was with the loss of GIS expertise in the department.

Councilor Guerlain opined that Director Hallsmith's department seemed to be shortchanging the economic development portion of its mission. The City Manager answered, reviewing some of the city's work to develop the grand list, and referred to the previous Council discussions on the issue which delineated economic and community development tasks in the context of the Council's goals.

Councilor Guerlain indicated he was not seeing "payback" on the efforts. Director Hallsmith countered that the department had brought in grant monies of \$14 million over her tenure, based on what was available. She cited the growth center designation, and the residential tax stabilization work underway – while noting the economic slump since 2008.

The City Manager added that the city has struggles with its role as an economic development engine, and whether it should be primarily supporting the private sector, or directly involving itself. He indicated that the Council could give guidance in this capacity.

Councilor Guerlain reiterated his feeling that economic development is being given insufficient priority, and offered Barre as a positive model.

The Mayor suggested the Council should continue the conversation, but added his own opinion that – as the City Manager had said – the city should play a support role, rather than an active one. At Councilor Guerlain’s questioning, the Mayor suggested that Barre had a more developable downtown. Director Hallsmith also indicated that Barre City was ahead of Montpelier on Tax Increment Financing in light of decisions made not to pursue it by the City Council in the past. City Manager Fraser also noted that Barre put up \$610,000 on their redevelopment.

Councilor Watson asked whether economic development can be addressed with such a large budgetary decrease. Hallsmith indicated that helping to make that budgetary room for the Assistant City Manager would yield dividends in this way.

- 12-310. Councilor Watson expressed her feeling that she was not opposed to providing the Senior Center with their full budget request.

Councilor Guerlain asked for clarification on the coming budget discussion process and schedule. A brief back-and-forth review followed.

Councilor Weiss reported on the Washington County Budget presentation attended by himself and the City Clerk. Tomorrow at 4:30, the Charter Committee will meet to discuss portions of the charter relating to indebtedness and utility rates.

- 12-311. The Mayor reported that he and the City Manager met with the VTRANS Director on the bike path and received a status report. He indicated it was likely that the project would be approved in a modular way, allowing the City to go forward on its segment before concerns in other towns’ segments are worked out.

On the Carr Lot, the Mayor indicated that discussions continue with the lot owner.

Councilor Guerlain moved for adjournment, and Councilor Hooper seconded. The motion passed unanimously at 9:17PM.