

(The following is not a verbatim transcript of comments or discussion that occurred during the meeting, but rather a summarization intended for general informational purposes. All motions and votes are the official records).

SPECIAL FINANCE COMMITTEE – APRIL 6, 2019
(BUDGET HEARINGS)

A special meeting of the Finance Committee was held on Saturday, April 6, 2019, in the Council Chambers, City Hall, Cranston, Rhode Island.

CALL MEETING TO ORDER:

The meeting was called to order at 9:45 AM. by the Chair.

Present Councilmember Paul J. McAuley
 Councilmember John P. Donegan
 Councilmember Edward J. Brady
 Councilmember Christopher G. Paplauskas
 Councilmember Kenneth J. Hopkins
 Council Vice-President Michael W. Favicchio, Chair

Also Present: Councilmember Lammis J. Vargas (left meeting at 2:40 p.m.)
 Councilmember Steven A. Stycos
 Daniel Parrillo, Director of Administration
 Christopher Rawson, City Solicitor
 David Iglizzi, Assistant City Solicitor
 Robert Strom, Finance Director
 Maria Medeiros Wall, City Clerk
 Rosalba Zanni, Assistant City Clerk/Clerk of Committee

FINANCE DEPARTMENT (ACCOUNTS & CONTROL, ASSESSMENT, CONTRACT & PURCHASE, TREASURY & TAX COLLECTION); INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY REVENUES

EXPENSES

Director Strom appeared to speak and presented Revenue and Expenditure reports and stated that there are some increases to the Finance Department, one being in Claims – contributing to the Claims Department. This increase is to an anticipation of some settlements this coming Fiscal Year. The other increase in the Finance Department is for 3% Admin increase and also contractual increases. In the IT Department, there are some increases, such as two-year plan to update the telephone system, new or upgrade of the City’s website and updated security cameras in the Tax Collections Office and outside of the building.

Councilmember McAuley asked what the increase is in claims. Director Strom stated that this is being increased to \$1.2 million for next year. This is not based on claims, it is a contribution to the Claims Department.

Councilmember Stycos asked why \$4,000 is budgeted for Unemployment Compensation. Director Strom stated that the City tries to be as conservative as possible. This amount is budgeted just in case there is someone that goes out on unemployment compensation, there is some funding there.

Councilmember Stycos asked what the amount is for security cameras. Director Strom stated that the allocation is approximately \$25,000, it may not be as much.

Councilmember McAuley questioned why line item #51100 – Claims Salary is -0-. Director Strom stated that that was for the former Claims Examiner, who has since retired. The Claims Clerk, who was hired to replace the Claims Examiner, is under his department.

No one appeared speak from the public.

REVENUES

Director Strom stated that he bases the numbers on the Governor’s budget. What we have in tax revenues reflects the phase-out, which we will be getting 100% collection on that from the State. We are getting a reduction of approximately \$500,000 in Pilot money, which he does not agree with. We budgeted over \$700,000 in Interest Income for next year.

Councilmember Brady asked for clarification in line item #42162 - Solar Permits. Director Strom stated that the Inspections Department used to collect those fees and were placed under Electrical Permits and now they will go into the proper line item.

Councilmember Vargas asked for explanation of the Johnson and Wales Aide we are receiving. Director Strom stated that he believes the City has a 10-year agreement with them that they give the City \$220,000 per year. That agreement started in March of 2012 and runs to 2027.

Councilmember Vargas questioned the allocation for “Admin Penalties and Zoning Certificates” under Zoning. **Stan Pikul**, Acting Building Official, appeared to speak and stated that they anticipate a rise in both of those line items since the City is planning to hire another person to handle Code Compliance.

Councilmember Vargas questioned line item #49130 “Other Revenues” and asked what is included in this. Director Strom stated that this would be non-anticipated, either State or other agencies. Councilmember Vargas asked why the drastic decrease from last year. Director Strom stated that he will have to check into this.

Councilmember Paplauskas asked why line item #415200 “Restaurant Taxes” is level funded. Director Strom stated that this comes from the Governor’s budget.

Chair asked if Pilot money is by contract. Director Strom stated, no, that is a formula that the State does and we get a percentage of that which changes from year to year.

Chair asked if Municipal Court Revenues will exceed what is budgeted. Director Strom stated that he spoke to Chief Judge Smith and he budgeted \$580,000 and they are at approximately 50% right now, that is through March. He is looking to exceed \$600,000.

Councilmember Donegan addressed line item #52933 and asked if those updates are going to be done in-house. Director Strom stated that some will be done in-house and some with outside vendors.

No one appeared speak from the public.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Director Strom appeared to speak and presented Revenue and Expenditure reports.

Stephanie Susi, Acting Director, appeared to speak and introduced Al Storti, former Director, who also works in this Department part-time. Ms. Susi presented a handout of estimate allocations for this coming Fiscal Year.

Councilmember Paplauskas, questioned the allocations for the St. Vincent DePaul. Director Susi stated that this covers their overhead expenses.

Councilmember McAuley questioned street improvements. Director Susi stated that through the years, this department allocates funds for street improvements, which is subject to restrictions. She presented a handout of list of streets that have been paved in the past five years with those funds.

Councilmember Vargas asked what kind of scholarship services this department provides. Director Susi stated that this is done in-house. \$1,000 is allocated per year for low moderate Cranston resident and with other requirements. They advertise in the Cranston Herald and provide applications in person to each of the High Schools and also on the website under 'hot topics' of when the applications are available.

Councilmember Stycos questioned 'After School Remedial Classes'. Director Susi stated that those funds are for direct costs for the certified teachers that perform those programs for the children.

Councilmember Donegan questioned Housing Rehab Program. Director Susi stated that this program is designed to correct Code violations and roof repairs and energy efficient windows. It is not for construction repairs.

Councilmember Vargas questioned 'Affordable Housing Acquisition Program'. Director Susi stated that the department purchases distressed or foreclosed homes, rehabs them and brings them up to Code and sells them to low moderate income families. She presented a list of homes that were rehabbed and sold over the last fourteen years. Councilmember Stycos asked if there is any City funding for this. Director Susi stated, no, this is all federal money and all the salaries are paid from the Grant. She also stated that this department also gives \$10,000 to CCAP for rental assistance.

No one appeared speak from the public.

BUILDING INSPECTIONS

Director Strom appeared to speak and presented Revenue and Expenditure reports.

Acting Building Official, Stan Pikul, appeared to speak.

Director Strom stated that “Inspections Review” is up considerably and with the extra positions the department should run more smoothly and efficiently.

Director Pikul stated that the department has lost at least five key employees and with the new personnel brought on, training has been trying at times.

Councilmember Paplauskas stated to Director Pikul that with him and new person being shared with the Planning Department, he asked how he envisions seeing that work. Director Pikul stated that that person will be keying in on the zoning aspects. That person would help in identifying zoning violations.

Councilmember McAuley stated that with the new Director coming on board, he would like representation at each Council meeting. Director Pikul stated that that would be up to the Administration to approve.

Councilmember Stycos stated that he would like a breakdown of how many positions are in this department. Director Pikul stated the following: two full-time people in the Code Enforcement; one full-time Building Inspector; one Electrical Inspector and one Plumbing/Mechanical Inspector. Currently, there is no Code Compliance Officer. There is a proposal for one in this budget.

Councilmember Stycos asked Director Pikul if one Minimum Housing Inspector is enough. Director Pikul stated, yes, if that was all that that person did. A third person would be a great help, especially if one of the Inspectors is on vacation, then their work would get backed up. There was a third Minimum Housing Inspector in last year’s budget, and it was filled last year, but after six months, he quit. The plan is to fill that third position. The City has tried to hire, but no one accepted the position. Councilmember Stycos asked what the reason for that is. Director Parrillo stated that one reason could be the salary may be too low. The list has expired and we will be advertising for that again.

Councilmember Hopkins addressed Director Pikul and stated that he needs to be thanked because he has been wearing three or four hats and has been overburdened. He also stated that Director Pikul has been addressing the homes in the City that have been abandoned for 3-7 years and nothing gets done. He questioned where the disconnect is and how can we get it fixed. Director Pikul stated that it is frustrating even for the office. The Office goes by the Assessor’s information to try to contact the owner, but most of the time they have no avenue to reach that owner and it is frustrating.

Chair stated that he thinks that maybe the Council should look at ways in possibly changing some of our Ordinances in notifying the property owners.

Councilmember Hopkins asked if there is a record of how many homes are abandoned in the City. Director Pikul stated, no, but he can try to have the Inspectors keep a log. Councilmember Vargas asked if the City Council can be provided with this list. Director Pikul stated that he can try to compile a list.

Councilmember Brady asked how the solar moratorium would affect our projections. Director Pikul stated that he would see an increase on the residential side, the uptick was not solar.

No one appeared speak from the public.

SENIOR SERVICES

Director Strom appeared to speak and presented Revenue and Expenditure reports.

Jeffrey Barone, Director, appeared to speak and introduced Mary Cronan, Bookkeeper.

Director Strom stated that there is no increase in personnel in this department. The increase is based on contracts. Two major increases for this department is to replace one Transvan and add a used vehicle in the Nutrition Program.

Director Barone stated that there is an increase of \$2.50 per hour for the four part-time nursing staff. The department has one nurse who is full-time and is part of the Teamsters Union.

Councilmembers Paplauskas and Hopkins complimented Director Barone of the efficiency of the facility and the great work the department does for the elderly. Director Barone thanked the Councilmembers for their compliments and stated that that is all due to the staff. He has stated it before that he has the best staff in all the City departments.

Councilmember McAuley asked Director Barone to explain what Adult Day Services does. Director Barone stated that if an elderly person, suffering from early stages of Dementia or Alzheimer's, lives with family members and they work and cannot be home with them, Adult Day Services provides transportation, meals, therapy, yoga and arts and crafts. They also have trips to Misquamicut to attend plays. Director Barone stated that they have three part-time RN, a full-time RN and two full-time CNAS who are City employees and a thirty party who provides three more CNAS.

Councilmember Brady asked how the City is advertising the department's services and is the department operating on capacity or could it take in more seniors? Director Barone stated that they definitely have more room to grow, but that would require more staff. They are always coming up with different programs and different activities.

Councilmember Stycos asked if the Center does anything with the Artist's Exchange rather than go to Misquamicut and it is also closer. Director Barone stated that they have not done it in the past, but they can look into it. The attractions to those trips, it is a trip and then they go to lunch at certain places, such as Iggy's.

Councilmember Stycos questioned the increase in Adult Day Care and Nutrition. Ms. Cronan stated that those increases are for the part-time nurses.

Councilmember Donegan asked how many Transvan vehicles are in this department. Director Barone stated that currently, there are five that are in operation and two that are used for spare parts. He also indicated that the Nutrition Program generates approximately \$1.3 - \$1.4 million per year and they service other Senior Centers throughout the State and that is done through numerous contracts.

Director Strom stated that, besides getting Grants, the department charges a fee to the elderly that attend the Center as well.

No one appeared speak from the public.

CRANSTON COMMUNITY ACTION PROGRAM (CCAP)

Director Strom appeared to speak and presented Revenue and Expenditure reports and stated that this department is looking at some increases this year.

Joanne McGunagle, Director, appeared to speak.

Councilmember Stycos questioned how the Rental Assistance Program works and is it just the \$10,000 that Community Development gives CCAP. Director McGunagle stated that there used to be an emergency rental program that went by the wayside. Last year, a donor through the Rhode Island Foundation gave approximately \$17,000. There is also a significant criteria for the person to qualify for this assistance. The \$17,000 has already been spent and they are hoping the donor from the Rhode Island Foundation comes through again. She also stated that approximately \$20 million of the \$33 million budgeted goes to health centers.

No one appeared speak from the public.

BOARDS & COMMISSIONS

Director Strom stated that all boards and commissions were level funded last year. Unless the City Council knows of a board or commission looking for additional money, he feels what is budgeted should be sufficient. He also stated that he has not received any requests for additional money.

No one appeared speak from the public.

PARKS AND RECREATION

Director Strom appeared to speak and stated that as to the increase in Expenses, Salary is contractual, Playground and Pool Attendant wage went up due to minimum wage increase. Overall, this budget is pretty much the same. Revenues dropped slightly only because of the Drum and Bugle Program ended due to competition.

Anthony Liberatore, Director of Parks and Recreation, appeared to speak and stated that the excellent job of the department is all due to his staff, Laborers and Teamsters. They are the ones that do all the work.

Councilmember Brady questioned the Ice Rink operation. Director Liberatore stated that the Ice Rink has not been the responsibility of Parks and Recreation since 2009. Director Strom stated that the Ice Rink runs by itself and it is not part of this budget. The City does not run that operation at all. The funds are through rentals and other programs there.

Chair stated that the Ice Rink is not part of this department and maybe should be discussed at another hearing. Director Strom stated that he will discuss the Ice Rink at another hearing since he is aware Councilmember Stycos has questions regarding this.

Councilmember Brady questioned possibility of project at Wildflower.

Councilmember McAuley thanked Director Liberatore for expediting the emergency repairs to Doric Ave. track and the amazing job done at Eden Park Playground.

Councilmember Stycos questioned whether the \$70,000 for Doric Ave. for this coming Fiscal Year is needed since the Doric Ave. track is already done. Director Liberatore stated that he was planning to use those funds for something else. Director Strom stated that if the Council wants to designate those funds for Wildflower, then this would have to be amended, if not, then you would have to take that out.

Councilmember Stycos asked if the appropriation for the Cranston West baseball field is just for the turf and the lights. Director Liberatore stated, yes. He also stated that the Cranston West Alumni Association will pay for the concession and the stands.

Councilmember Stycos asked how rental fees are decided. Director Liberatore stated that the fees depend on what sport it is and how many staff members are needed during the game.

Councilmember Donegan asked what the plans are for the work that is going to be done at the batting cages at the Stadium and where is the funding coming from. Director Liberatore stated that the plan is to build a steel structure with enough space inside for four batting cages and pitcher's mound. It is all privately funded at no cost to the City.

Director Liberatore indicated that Sanders School closed years ago and we have a playground there. If that property is sold, he questioned if we have the right to pull that equipment from there. He also stated the same for Chester Barrows School, which will be closing. He also stated that in this budget, he requested two additional employees and he strongly asks that it be approved.

No one appeared speak from the public.

CANVASSING

Director Strom appeared to speak and presented Revenue and Expenditure reports.

Nicholas Lima, Registrar, appeared to speak and stated that in the last year, his department conducted voter registration drives and 150 voters were registered. This year's drive will be held in early May in the High Schools. His department is also working closely with the Postal Service directly where they have some streets either in the wrong City or spelled wrong. Since January 1, 2018 to yesterday, the office has processed 33,562 voter record changes. Those are processed by two staff members. There is a part-time staff member that was added last year and he has been a great help to the office. Mr. Lima also addressed cyber security. He also stated that there is funding to implement a new State Voter Registration System. The anticipation is to have that new system ready for the next election in 2020. The State is also looking to modernize election laws. This year, his office will be starting a new project with Hope/Fiskeville areas of voters with bad Zip Codes and PO Box to make sure they are registered to vote in the correct City or Town.

Councilmember Paplauskas questioned increase in "Elections". Mr. Lima stated that this is for Presidential Primary next year. He is also looking to open six to nine more polling locations. Those funds will also cover staff, poll workers and security.

Councilmember McAuley questioned increase in "Part-Time Help". Mr. Lima stated that he anticipates elevating the part-time staff member to seasonal help for the Primary, probably starting in March of next year.

Councilmember Hopkins asked how the Cranston Registrar's salary compares to Warwick or Providence. Director Strom stated that he does not have that information, but he is certain it is much lower than others. Councilmember Hopkins stated that he thinks that, as a body, this salary should be really looked at. This office is very professional and for the work the Registrar does, this salary should be really looked at.

No one appeared speak from the public.

CITY COUNCIL

Director Strom appeared to speak and stated that this department is level funded. Only difference is the video streaming.

Maria Medeiros Wall, City Clerk, appeared to speak.

Councilmember McAuley indicated to 'Stenographic' line item and asked that since we are going to live streaming, he questioned if we will be able to reduce that cost. City Clerk stated, not really. We do receive requests for transcripts from the Stenographer at times. Even though the Clerk of Committees takes minutes, they are not word for word minutes, they are just a synopsis. If the Stenographer is eliminated, those transcripts would not be available.

Councilmember McAuley questioned why ‘Audit of City Books’ is under City Council and not Finance. Director Strom stated that the City Council approves the contract.

No one appeared to speak from the public.

CITY CLERK; PROBATE

Director Strom appeared to speak and presented Revenue and Expenditure reports and stated that the actuals this year are tracking at 75% for the first nine months. Next year, a few areas were raised. Next year’s expenses include salary increase in Clerical Assistance and also contractual raises. Revenues are pretty much equal. He does not foresee any negative variance.

Maria Medeiros Wall, City Clerk, appeared to speak.

Councilmember McAuley stated that with the retirement of the City Clerk, he asked if that would not be at a savings. Director Strom stated that it depends on the person the City Council hires and he does not believe you would have to hire at a Step 1. He also stated that he believes that Ms. Wall will be working a few months more to help with the transition and there will be a cost factor there.

No one appeared speak from the public.

The meeting adjourned at 3:30 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Rosalba Zanni
Assistant City Clerk/Clerk of Committees