

24-045
COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE
MEETING REPORT
WEDNESDAY, MARCH 6, 2024 @ 6:00 P.M.

To participate remotely outside of Zoom, please e-mail AHurtubise@medford-ma.gov.

Attendees: Council President Isaac “Zac” Bears; Council Vice President Kit Collins; Councillor Anna Callahan; Councillor Emily Lazzaro; Councillor Matt Leming; Councillor George Scarpelli; Councillor Justin Tseng; CPC Manager Theresa DuPont; CPC Chair Roberta Cameron; Assistant City Clerk Sylvia DiPlacido; other participants as noted in the body of this report.

President Bears called the meeting to order at 6:13 p.m. on March 6, 2024 in the Medford City Council Chambers on the second floor of Medford City Hall, and via Zoom. The start of the meeting was briefly delayed by technical difficulties. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss Councillors’ budget priorities for the upcoming budget.

President Bears thanked participants for attending. He highlighted the tentative budget process going forward.

Councillor Lazzaro said she wanted to ensure that baseline, we are not losing any departments serving the basic needs of our residents, including our most vulnerable. She said she would like to see increases in the budget. She said she wants protections for people with mental health and addiction issues. She said that the school budget needs an increase and at the very least does not need to decrease.

Vice President Collins said she wants to meet the school budget request. She said she wants to make sure that departments are properly funded. She said she would like to see a Solicitor and Assistant Solicitor, and to have the Elections Manager elevated to Elections Director, with appropriate salary increases for these positions as well. She said she would like to see new software for the Finance Department. She said she doesn’t think there will be a lot of bandwidth to establish new positions. She specifically mentioned the Health Department and the Office of Outreach and Prevention.

Vice President Collins said we need to increase the salaries for City Solicitor and Assistant City Solicitor. She said she does believe that this is a tough position to fill during these times. She said Malden has a budgeted salary of \$117,000 and in Somerville it is \$189,000. She said she suggested increasing the salary for our solicitor to be competitive. She said she used the same rationale with the Assistant Solicitor and in elevating the Elections Manager to Elections Director. She said she wants to implement a family and medical leave program for the city.

Councillor Leming said he wanted to be a little more focused. He said he wants money set aside for studies critical to our long-term financial health. One is a linkage study. Another is a nexus study to determine how much to charge developers. The third is a transportation demand management study.

He said we need more permanent elections staff. He said we need a permanent salary for one community social worker. He said we need to increase salaries for part-time library workers.

Councillor Scarpelli said we need a City Solicitor and an Assistant Solicitor, plus additional people in DPW including a hard-top crew. He said that you only apply for a job as a City Solicitor is if the Mayor wants a City Solicitor. He said that the Mayor seems happy having KP Law instead of a solicitor, and KP Law says that they work for the Mayor and not for us. He said a City Solicitor would work for us. He said that hiring a solicitor would be a cost savings. He said we could have a crew at DPW but every year we get a request to approve bonds for sidewalk repairs.

Councillor Scarpelli said that Recreation Director Kevin Bailey does a terrific job. He said some department heads spend twenty hours a week answering phones. He said elections are another issue. He said he wants the Administration to be creative and have people work in two departments, such as elections and recreation, if there is availability for part-time work in both departments that could end up being full-time if combined into two jobs. He said he also wants to see funding for after-school care in the Recreation Department. He said we work closely with the YMCA, but that there is still a huge need. He said he is hearing disturbing things in the community about elections. He said we do not spend enough money or time in making sure our election workers are properly trained. He said we all want the schools at least level funded. He said that the school system is in a spending freeze right now.

Councillor Tseng mentioned the Youth and Gender Equity Commissions, maintaining investments in our public schools, translation services, hiring a new prevention and outreach manager, increasing election staff, raising salaries to meet regional standards. He said he wants small-dollar increases to improve public services. He said he wants to preserve important spending programs. He said he would like to see the Administration get us to a place where we can fund our most important priorities.

Councillor Tseng said we will need a real budget number to get to a point where we have a Youth Commission. He said we would need about \$20,000, which also includes \$800 stipends for members. He said he would also like to see a Gender Equity

Commission. He said that would cost about \$9,000. He said he wants to get to the right standards on things such as repaving. He said he wants to see increased staffing in the Elections Department. He said that going from more FTEs to fewer FTEs shows how we are reducing services. He said he wants to maintain health equity and outreach positions. He said he wants to update the City's financial software and help the Finance Department and the Assessor's Department. He said a City Solicitor is really, really important to helping us get our work done. He said he would support any action to bring those salaries up to a place where we can draw good candidates.

Councillor Callahan said she agrees with many other points, including funding for the schools. She also said she agrees with Councillor Scarpelli's request for a hard-top crew. She would like funding for prevention and outreach, more staff in the Elections Office, and other areas. She said she wants to see money allocated to plant trees to replace trees that Medford loses every year. She said she would like to see our five-year plan, particularly on our roads and sidewalks. She said the road and sidewalk budget should come with an explanation.

Councillor Callahan asked if there is a fund where small funding items like \$2,000 to \$4,000 can come from. President Bears said he was not aware of anything in the general fund but that there may have been something in ARPA.

President Bears said he wanted level-service funding for our schools, retaining ARPA-funded staff. Like Councillor Leming, he said he would like to keep the part-time staff at the Library funded, and that that group should see increases. He asked for increased funding for Code Enforcement. He said we have a number of civil code violations and very few resources available to address them. He said he would also like to see at least seed money for new financial software. He said that recent troubles with the Fire Department were caused in part by retro pay after the Firefighter contract was passed. He said we are spending hundreds of thousands of dollars, if not millions, on finance issues that could be automated.

Vice President Collins said she is happy that there is cohesion across so many issues. She said she sees the problems that result from the lack of in-house legal support. She said we would see a difference in our workflow if we had an in-house legal department. She said we also need investments in our Finance Department. She said we are already spending a lot on inefficient processes.

Councillor Scarpelli said that we used to get updates on a pretty regular basis in the past. He said now our updates from the Chief of Staff are sparse and redacted. He said that the software that Aleesha Nunley had is the same software we have today,

and she would give us a detailed breakdown of our spending. He said two years ago we didn't even get an actual budget book. He said in the municipality where he works, he gets regular updates and they have already started pre-budget meetings. He said that there is no transparency here. He said we started getting redacted actuals for the warrant articles but we haven't seen one since June or July. He said that the biggest news is what is happening with our Fire Department. He said he spoke with Deputy Chiefs in other municipalities. He said that the absences wouldn't be an issue if the department were staffed at the level at which it is supposed to be staffed. He said if we had a team in the Finance Department that can bring forth the information we need, we could pay our retro in a timely fashion. He said we are reaping the negative ramifications from the lack of investment and lack of growth in our community. He said we are passing up millions of dollars just in permit fees. He said one project that walked away had \$6 million in permitting fees alone. He mentioned former Prevention and Outreach Manager Penny Funaiolo and the great work that she did. He said we need to look at creative ways of funding. He said he is happy that the Council President and Vice President are meeting with the Mayor on these topics.

President Bears said he was talking about the payroll system software, not the rest of the financial system software. Councillor Leming said that the problem is not misallocation of funds, it's that we are not funded enough. He said he would like to insist on having money for the linkage fees studies. He said that this will help us get more revenues in the future.

President Bears said we could submit this to the Mayor by March 22. He said he could share a copy of the document and hone the list to the top five recommendations, or that the Council could vote to have the President hone the list.

Councillor Lazzaro asked if we could do this over e-mail if it was not a violation of the Open Meeting Law. President Bears said he could send a list through the Clerk and Councillors could return them through the Clerk.

Vice President Collins said that our positions are very clear. She said it could be a similar process in a future committee of the whole. She said she wanted to give Councillors time to digest suggestions heard tonight.

Councillor Tseng said he concurred with Vice President Collins. He said he didn't want to be too rushed. He said he would like time to think about these proposals.

Councillor Callahan asked what our boiled-down recommendations are supposed to look like. She asked how many is too many. President Bears said we probably have 25

to 30 recommendations. He said many of the recommendations in the “prevent cuts” category are similar. He said sending 30 priorities to the Mayor, who is looking at 300 things, might not get the attention it deserves. He said he wants increased funding for Code Enforcement, but that is probably not in his top five. He said he wants to look at zoning funding and solicitor funding.

Vice President Collins suggested talking about our shared priorities and coming to some form of consensus. She said there could be thirty things we want, ask for 5 and hopefully get one or two. She said she thinks we included Councillors’ individual memos and the reports of these meetings. She said she would like to have a follow up committee of the whole on this topic. She said she could move to circulate the aggregated document among Councillors by Monday for Council leadership to schedule a follow-up committee of the whole topic, and to submit Council records and other documents to the Administration by March 22 (Councillor Leming second)—approved.

Vice President Collins moved to adjourn at 7:28 p.m. (Councillor Leming second)—approved.

President Bears adjourned the meeting at 7:28 p.m.