ROBBINSDALE

City Council Work Session
Wednesday, August 14, 2024

MINUTES

CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION CALLED TO ORDER

Mayor Pro Tem Wagner called the meeting to order at 7:08 PM.

ROLL CALL

Present: Member Parisian, Member Murphy, Mayor Blonigan, Mayor Pro Tem Wagner
Absent: None.
Staff: Tim Sandvik, City Manager; Richard McCoy, City Engineer/Public Works Director; Heather Rand, Community Development Director; Diaa Tahoun, Finance Director; Rachel Leen, Communications Coordinator

DISCUSSION

Mayor Pro Tem Wagner took a moment to welcome Jason Greenberg, who won the Special Election for Councilmember Ward 2 on August 13, 2024.

A. 2025 Budget Discussion

Sandvik provided background on the topic and explained that Council will be required to approve a Not-to-exceed, preliminary budget by the end of September. He emphasized that the levy can be reduced in the following months, but the numbers that are approved in September will be shown in tax statements. He stated that Council will formally approve the budget in December.

Sandvik shared that the proposed budget includes a 12% increase of $1,056,106 to the General Fund Levy, which includes a deficit of $373,821. Sandvik explained that the proposed increase seems high this year, which is in part due to fiscal disparities decreasing by $895,571. Sandvik continued by explaining that the City did not see an increase in Local Government Aid (LGA) this year. Sandvik noted that 2024 has an estimated surplus of over $800,000, but Sandvik called out that the 2024 budget included a $240,785 deficit.

Member Murphy asked if the surplus is related to positions not being filled, and Sandvik confirmed that the surplus is related to the Police Department being short-staffed. Sandvik called out the proposed positions that are shown in the budget, which includes a GIS Technician, a Facilities Maintenance position in Parks, and an Administrative Assistant for Public Safety. Sandvik highlighted that the 12% increase is heavily related to personnel changes and accounts for the ongoing class and compensation study. Sandvik concluded his presentation by stating that his goal tonight is to walk away with initial feedback from Council on items to keep and remove, as well as feedback on the percentage.

Member Murphy expressed that he would like to see the percentage closer to what was done last year, and that he would like to hear more specifics about the other percentage options shown in the 2024 Tax Levy Options graph. Mayor Blonigan stressed that he would like to go down to at least a 10% increase, and that he would feel comfortable using a portion of the $800,000 surplus projection to lower the percentage.

Mayor Pro Tem Wagner asked Council to consider revisiting empty positions in the future and reallocate funds elsewhere if positions are left open for years. He explained that he would be okay with keeping the 12% increase for now in order to increase public engagement surrounding the budget, but eventually lower it. Member Parisian agreed that 12% is high and stated that 10% would be a good target instead. She proposed the idea of reexamining the priorities that Council set this year in order to help determine which budget items should stay. Sandvik confirmed that staff will come back with versions of the budget at 8% and at 9.9% increases to discuss at the September Work Session. Mayor Blonigan asked to see the original 12% increase again in September too.

Greenberg asked if it's typical to add 3 employees each year, and why positions such as the GIS technician or the K-9 department are needed right now. Sandvik explained that one of Council's 2024 goals was to support a fully staffed Police Department, which the K-9 department could support. McCoy explained that the GIS Technician is needed for the functionality of the Engineering department. Tahoun emphasized that the K-9 department would add one more Police officer, but it is only reflected in the budget as $30,000 since the department is already short-staffed. Mayor Blonigan stressed that he supports hiring new staff. Tahoun and Sandvik highlighted the Cadet program and explained that a Cadet will soon become a full Police Officer for the first time since the program started. Sandvik expressed that the Cadet program is a long-term path to a fully staffed Police department.

Sandvik summarized that he will bring a chart back to Council that includes 8% and 9.9% increases. Sandvik reminded Council that the preliminary budget decision will be made at the September 17 Council meeting.

B. Assessment Policy Discussion

Sandvik introduced the topic. He emphasized that today is not the time to rework the whole Assessment Policy, but that it could be done long-term if desired. Sandvik explained that the assessment roll for the project indicated a range from $3,882.52 to $12,584.71. He reminded Council how the challenge with the 41st Avenue project is that it deals with the long side of people's properties, and assessments are based on lineal footage. Sandvik highlighted that the two major issues that residents had with the process were the short amount of notice they were given and the cost of the assessments. Sandvik emphasized that the goal of tonight is to walk away with a set interest rate percentage and a lineal footage rate for the 41st Avenue project.

Sandvik explained that staff advocate for a slow reevaluation of the Assessment Policy over time, since suddenly changing the policy would not be fair to those who have recently paid special assessments. McCoy emphasized that the Special Assessment policy has been used as a model example, and that there have only been 3 cases where folks challenged the policy over 20 years. McCoy summarized that the policy works well, but he supports looking into various ways of phasing the assessment out over time.

Member Murphy stressed that the Assessment Policy might work well for staff, but it does not seem to be working well for residents who are receiving $10,000 bills. He agreed that the policy should be changed over a longer period of time. McCoy reemphasized that this project is not typical due to all of the side lots. Member Murphy explained that he thinks the current policy is regressive since it does not take into account property values or income levels at all.

Sandvik and McCoy reminded Council that they still need to approve an assessment roll for the 41st Avenue project, and that Council has the authority to reduce the lineal footage rate for this project,

Mayor Blonigan expressed support with the existing policy, since he does not support raising property taxes on everyone. Member Parisian stated that she supports a phase out plan of the current policy over 15 years. She agreed with the staff recommendation of a 0% interest rate through 2025 and a 5% interest rate starting after 2025 for the 41st Avenue project. She stressed that she wants to improve our communication of assessment notices in the future. Mayor Pro Tem Wagner agreed, and echoed that folks need more notice and more time to pay their special assessments. He expressed openness to the idea of phasing the policy out over a long period of time.

The Council agreed upon a 0% interest rate for the first year, and an interest rate of 5% after 2025 for this project. Council also agreed upon the totals that were originally in the assessment rolls. Member Parisian asked if residents on this assessment roll will receive any further communication, and McCoy confirmed that he will send out another letter. Member Murphy thanked staff and Council for taking the time to discuss this topic.

C. LRT Municipal Consent Process

Sandvik reminded Council of important upcoming dates: the Open House at Elim Lutheran Church from 6:00 PM - 8:00 PM on August 21st, the public hearing at the first meeting in September, and the municipal consent vote scheduled for the second meeting in September. Sandvik also highlighted a legal opinion included in the agenda packet that shows that there are three options for municipal consent: take no action which results in municipal consent, say yes to municipal consent, or say no to municipal consent, which then requires Council to provide a list of amendments. Sandvik pointed out the inclusion of updated ridership numbers that the project office uses to support a parking structure in Robbinsdale. Sandvik explained the goal to frame up two resolutions tonight, with one providing consent and the other withholding consent. Sandvik reminded Council that they still need to come to a consensus on elevating the structure and supporting a parking structure downtown. Sandvik also stated that some of the smaller requests could come off the list of considerations, so that the focus of the list is on the top priority requests.

Mayor Pro Tem Wagner recommended putting non-design requests into an MOU, so that the resolution for a no vote only includes design-related items. Greenberg stated that the statute is specific in that the amendments be related to the route and station, and he questioned if the parking ramp fits into that category. Sandvik advised Council to err on the side of being expansive by including all top priority requests in the list, as well as drafting an MOU. Sandvik asked that each Councilmember identify what their top priority requests are so that the list of considerations can be narrowed down. Mayor Blonigan expressed his support for elevating the structure.

Member Murphy asked to get a count on whether Council would be willing to vote no. Mayor Blonigan expressed hesitation about voting yes despite supporting the idea. Member Parisian stated that she is willing to explore the idea of saying no, but she feels most strongly about getting anti-displacement efforts addressed. She explained that she does not feel strongly about elevation, and that she supports having a parking structure. Mayor Pro Tem Wagner expressed a desire to show support for the project and feels as though voting no would be antithetical to why he was elected. Member Parisian echoed the sentiment of feeling like constituent support is tied to the project.

Mayor Blonigan stated that he wants a parking ramp, and that a 300-car ramp seems like a fair number. He also requested that the ask for the turn lane into the boat launch to remain, and that removing other small items from the list is fine. Greenberg added that the Council should ask for a substation staffed with Metro Transit police be placed in the parking ramp. Member Parisian appreciated the idea of a substation but wanted to consider it more. Mayor Blonigan stated that he is okay with asking for a substation.

Mayor Blonigan stated that he wants language included in the list of considerations regarding anti-displacement funds.

Sandvik suggested that Council now transition into discussing specific language considerations for the "no" resolution. He asked Council for more specific feedback on the Lowry station. He explained that since the station is in five jurisdictions, there are questions about who will respond to emergency calls at this station. McCoy shared that from an engineering perspective, the parking structure, elevation of the structure and work on County Rd 9 are his big-ticket items.

The Council discussed Lowry Station. Greenberg expressed that he would be open to moving the Lowry Station fully into Minneapolis to deal with some of the jurisdiction issues. Mayor Blonigan stated that he wants the Lowry Station to remain in Robbinsdale to get folks to North Memorial. Member Parisian strongly agreed. She expressed that she wants to see improvements to pedestrian safety near the station as well. Mayor Pro Tem Wagner agreed with keeping the stop in Robbinsdale. Blonigan summarized that he needs better information from the project office on the exact placement of the station, as well as information on pedestrian safety and public safety. Member Murphy explained that in order to justify this station placement, he would like to see more data on how many North Memorial workers are expected to commute using the light rail. He clarified that he is indifferent about the exact site of the station, but he believes that the Council should think more critically about how the station will serve the hospital. Greenberg asked if Councilmembers would be open to the idea of putting the station underground and building a tunnel. The Council and staff agreed that a tunnel is not likely to be feasible, and that there are other requests that they want to prioritize more.

Sandvik asked for feedback on the downtown station. Mayor Blonigan stated that he wants to keep the station on the south side of 40th Avenue. Member Parisian agreed. Greenberg shared that Ward 2 residents have strongly expressed the desire to see the station on the north side of 40th Avenue. Sandvik provided context that staff advocated to put the station south of 40th Avenue to better serve residents, since it is closer to multifamily housing units and residential areas. Member Murphy stated that the station being north of 40th Avenue would still serve residents of the area while also being closer to the proposed parking ramp and downtown. Sandvik shared that an additional concern with moving the station north is that it would further limit turn lanes into the parking structure. The Council discussed staff considerations and agreed upon the original plan of keeping the station south of 40th Avenue.

Sandvik shared that he plans to create two resolutions for the September work session, with one providing consent and the other withholding consent.

Greenberg explained that there are 3.1 acres of land being taken for this project, and that Council should ask for the right of first refusal in the list of considerations. The Council agreed to add it.

STAFF UPDATES

A. Other

Sandvik shared a letter from the City Attorney regarding a Charter Commission amendment that removes some of the ambiguity surrounding the "commission" of a crime language in the City Charter. He stated that the Charter Commission meets tomorrow night, and if all goes well, the second reading of the ordinance will go in front of Council next week. The Council agreed that they trust the attorney's opinion on the correct language to include.

McCoy shared photos of the solar panels at the Water Treatment Plant that are starting to be installed.

Member Murphy asked for an update on the water tower lights, and McCoy shared they should be coming soon.

COUNCIL UPDATES

A. Charging and Fueling Infrastructure Grant - Letter of Support (Blonigan)

Mayor Blonigan asked for confirmation from Council that they support the letter of support for a Charging and Fueling Infrastructure Grant.

Mayor Blonigan asked if it would be possible for the totaled recreation vehicle to be replaced with an electric vehicle. McCoy explained that the vehicle needs to be replaced soon, and that staff are looking into options.

Sandvik returned to the conversation on the letter of support, and reminded Council that the letter is due on August 19th. Council confirmed that staff can execute the letter.

B. Community Garden Concern (Blonigan)

Mayor Blonigan expressed concern about frequent theft at the community gardens and emphasized that staff should do what they can to limit it. Sandvik noted that staff have taken steps to address the issue, but staff are not at the point of placing fencing. Sandvik shared that staff are adding more signage at the gardens and clarifying language in the community garden rules. Sandvik highlighted the City's farmer's program that has been providing folks with limited access with fresh produce.

ADJOURNMENT

Mayor Pro Tem Wagner adjourned the meeting at 10:09 PM.

Rachel Leen, Communications Coordinator

Aaron Wagner, Mayor Pro Tem