

(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 12, 2021
(BUDGET HEARINGS)

A special meeting of the Finance Committee was held on Monday, April 12, 2021 via Zoom Webinar.

CALL MEETING TO ORDER:

The meeting was called to order at 6:05 P.M. by the Chair.

Present Councilwoman Jessica M. Marino
 Councilwoman Nicole Renzulli
 Councilman John P. Donegan
 Councilman Matthew R. Reilly
 Councilman Robert J. Ferri, Vice-Chair
 Council Vice-President Edward J. Brady, Chair
 Council President Christopher G. Paplauskas

Also Present: Councilwoman Lammis J. Vargas
 Councilwoman Aniece Germain
 Anthony Moretti, Director of Administration
 Christopher Orton, Assistant City Solicitor
 Robert Strom, Finance Director
 David DiMaio, City Council Budget Analyst
 Leanne Zarrella, City Clerk
 Rosalba Zanni, Assistant City Clerk/Clerk of Committees

Council President Paplauskas stated that there was a request to take “Care of Trees” out of order due to a resident who wanted to speak and take Public Works first.

CARE OF TREES

Director Strom stated that this year the whole department is doing very well. Expenses are at 75% where they should be. Revenues are at 90% for the fiscal year. for next year, FY 22, there has been a status quo as far as expenditures. Engineering seems to be down because of one position for next year. One position was taken out of Engineering and added to the Sewer Department. As to “Refuse Removal”, we signed a one-year extension with Waste Management, which generated approximately \$200,000 savings.

Councilman Donegan stated that there is a project going on from a student at Cranston High School East who has set a goal to get a certain amount of trees planted in the City by mid to end of this month and they cost approximately \$4.80 per tree. He reached out to the Parks and Recreation Director and was told it would take cooperation from other departments. He questioned if the City would be able to maintain those trees if private residents were willing to purchase trees and if we plant them on public grounds. Director Mason stated that he understands that these trees are approximately 12-18 inches tall, which would put them at a small tree. He does not know where we could plant them in the City right of way and have them survive. He thinks that they should be planted in some sort of park.

Council Vice-President Brady stated that maybe all nine Council members can come up with a location.

Councilman Donegan stated that he will forward the information to the City Clerk for her to distribute to the City Council members.

Public Speakers:

Heather Thibodeau, member of Cranston Tree Planting Program, appeared to speak and asked that Angie Koziara speak regarding this issue.

Angie Koziara, 11 Hall Place, appeared to speak and stated that the Cranston Tree Project started in 2014 and has been ongoing with more than 200 trees. They are requesting an increase of \$3,000, which would allow the project the ability to contribute at least seven more trees a year.

Councilwoman Germain asked for explanation of “Spraying and Care of Trees”. Director Mason stated that spraying of trees Councilwoman Germain is referring to was the spraying on the bike path last year by the Parks and Recreation Department and that, he believes, has been halted. This is basically trimming and removal of trees that are either damaged or blown down by windstorms.

PUBLIC WORKS DEPARTMENT (Highway Maintenance, Building Maintenance, Engineering, Fleet Maintenance, Bureau of Traffic Safety, Refuse, Care of Trees) SEWER ENTERPRISE FUND

Councilwoman Marino indicated to Revenues projected in the proposed Budget for this fiscal year, “Highway Maintenance – Miscellaneous”, and stated that it is more than prior fiscal year and asked what Director Mason sees in the forecast that this figure is based on. Director Mason stated that the majority of the money that we get from this line item is payment to Providence Water because of our Interjurisdictional Agreement that we have with Providence Water.

Council President Paplauskas asked what the specific reason is why “Street Opening Permits” Revenue is down. Director Mason stated that most of the monies has to do with utility permits issued to various utilities.

Council President Paplauskas asked for an update on “Rodent Control Program” and questioned the increase on the Expense side. Director Mason stated that a new employee from the Laborers Union was recently hired and he started today.

Councilman Ferri questioned the small increase in some categories of “Salary Schedule” for the Department of Traffic Safety. Director Strom stated that to make it easier and clearer for everyone, he suggests discussing any laborer’s contract in Executive Session.

Councilman Donegan stated that there is a line item in the Budget entitled “Labor Contingency”. He asked if that is what that is used for. Director Strom stated that that is correct, but again, he would rather discuss this in Executive Session. The Administration is formulating thoughts regarding negotiations and once they have solidified those thoughts, they would like to share those thoughts with the City Council.

Councilwoman Vargas indicated to “Sidewalk Program” and asked if Director Mason is finding a large amount of people taking advantage of that program and how many people took advantage of this program. Director Mason stated that last year, they had approximately 20 people that took advantage of that program.

Councilwoman Renzulli questioned the reduction in “Salary Schedule” in the Engineering Department. Director Strom stated that we reorganized one of the positions that is now in the Sewer Department. Director Mason stated that there have been two retirements in this department. We are proposing to bring one position and one to the Sewer Enterprise Fund to handle the stormwater.

Mr. Dimaio asked if one of the positions going to the Sewer Department will be paid out of the Sewer Enterprise Fund. Director Strom stated, yes.

Councilman Donegan indicated to the “Refuse Removal and Disposal” and asked if the contract extension has been executed by the Administration. Director Mason stated, yes, it has. Councilman Donegan asked if BOCAP has approved it. Director Mason stated, yes, it has.

Councilwoman Marino asked for the list of independent report of what roads were graded for transparency to the public and maybe list it on the next Council Docket.

Council President Paplauskas stated that there are members of the public who would like to speak regarding Parks and Recreation and asked if there are no objections, we take that out of order. Director Strom stated that the Director of Parks and Recreation is not present yet. Chair stated that we will stay in order of the agenda.

No one appeared to speak from the public.

PLANNING AND CAPITAL BUDGET

Director Strom stated that for this year, this department's Revenues are running at approximately 52% and Expenditures are running at 75%. For next year, we level-funded Revenue at \$70,000 and added another \$70,000, which is based on a grant.

Jason Pezzullo, Planning Director, was present on the call.

Council President Paplauskas asked for more detail on the grant. Director Pezzullo stated that they applied for \$125,000 from the Commerce Corp. and the maximum was the \$125,000.

Public Speakers:

Fred Vincent, Planning Commission Vice-Chair, appeared to speak and stated that the last Plan that Cranston did was under former Director Kevin Flynn and that cost approximately \$150,000 and that was about 30 years ago. When he was Planning Director in Cranston in the 1970's through 1985, there were six positions in the Office and today, there are three with a Clerk. Adopting the Plan is the important first step, but then executing and explaining it to applicants to land owners, that takes effort and time as well. He strongly supports the Planning Commission budget and hopes the City Council will give it serious consideration.

BUILDING INSPECTIONS

Director Strom stated that he has David Rodio, Building Official, present to answer any questions.

Director Strom stated that this year the Revenue for this office is extremely high at 92% and on the Expense side, they are below budget. For next year, we increased the budget a little due to Hospitalization. Revenue side for next year, it is pretty much the same as this year.

Councilwoman Renzulli asked if "Electrical Permits" are on target for this year. Director Strom stated, yes.

Councilwoman Germain asked for an explanation of department expense line item. Director Rodio stated that this is for such items as the copy machine, rental, phones and licenses.

No one appeared to speak from the public.

PARKS & RECREATION

Director Strom stated that Director Tessaglia is present with him to answer any questions. He stated that for this year, Revenues for this year, due to COVID, we did not generate Revenues that would equate to what we normally get, which is approximately \$350,000-\$400,000. We budgeted \$225,000 and right now we are at 60% (\$135,000) and we would more than likely should hit the \$225,000 because we are going into our busier time and there is more rentals. We are renting both stadiums both on the West and the East. We should generate more Revenues for that. For next year, we budgeted conservatively and also for shortage of Revenue we can use the American Rescue Plan for any short Revenues due to COVID like the pool being shut down or like some of the summer programs that we did not implement. On the Expense side for this year, 2021, it is running a little overbudget, they are at 72-73% and it should be around 75% and his staff is still the same. There has been no increase in staff. Part-time help, pool attendant wages, which we did include last year because we were not sure if the pool was going to open or not when we did the budget last year, but obviously it did not and some pool supplies that have not been used and pool preventive maintenance. All that has constituted where this department is underbudget and for this year we have reduced those line items again and have eliminated pool attendant wages, but we did keep in the playground attendant wages because we feel that is going to come back. Expenses are down from last year from what we budgeted compared to 2021.

Raymond Tessaglia, Director of Parks and Recreation, appeared to speak.

Chair stated that total budget for Fiscal Year 2021 has been reduced by \$31,718, which is great. He indicated that the line item for “Replacement of Vehicles” for 2020 budget is -0- and the amount spent is \$43,859.44. He asked what that was spent on and was the appropriated adjustment made. Director Strom stated that at the time, a truck was needed. It was advised by our Fleet Maintenance Director that one of the trucks should not be on the road, so we went out and got a vehicle and after his discussion with the department head, he feels that our fleet right now for Parks and Recreation are in very good shape. Chair asked if there are any plans for the \$2 million bond that was approved in this last Election. Director Strom stated that we do not have any specific plans at this time. We have some money that is available from the old bond. We have approximately \$93,000 in cash as of March 31st and we have another remaining authority of approximately \$500,000. We plan on going out to bond in the next month or so for our normal bonding and we will probably bond \$500,000 to clean that old authority up and to give the Director some additional capital money for any other project he may be doing in the Capital Budget.

Councilwoman Renzulli indicated to “Pool Attendant Wages” being taken out for 2022, but “Pool Preventative Maintenance and Supplies” is still the same. She questioned why that is if the pool is still closed. She asked what needs to be done that we need \$10,000 for. Director Strom stated that we kept it the same because there was some discussion that we might do something else near the pool and we wanted to keep that line item available. It is approximately \$9,000 and pool supplies was dropped to \$1,000 just as a reserve. The \$9,000 is there because as the weather gets warmer, when the Director goes and checks out the facility, if there is anything that is not functional or a pipe broke, we have a little bit of money to replace any damaged equipment or filtration system that is there.

Even though we are not using it, we still want to make sure we can maintain it. Councilwoman Renzulli asked if the \$9,000 has been used from last year. Director Strom stated, no, it has not. If the Director feels there are any repairs, after checking it out, that have to be done, we can use that as a backup. Councilwoman Renzulli asked what falls under “Community Programs and Events”. Director Tessaglia stated that that would be for summertime activities, such as tennis lessons, arts and crafts and daily field trips for the camps. Councilwoman Renzulli asked if we always do the camps because she does not see that in 2020, 2019, 2018 and 2017 so she is just confused. Director Tessaglia stated that he can’t answer for the previous years, but in speaking to his Assistant, they thought it was necessary to have that in there for the upcoming camps that we do plan on running at a different structure then last year with more sites and less kids and according to the rules and guidelines the State sends us. Councilwoman Renzulli asked if there have been any grants sought from our new City Council Grant Writer and, if not, she is excellent and anything she can get would be very helpful for camps or any kind of programming. Director Tessaglia stated that he has not sat down with her yet, but he will make it a point to do so.

Councilwoman Marino addressed the “Community Programs and Events” Expenditures line item and stated that the discussion this evening centered around camps, but specifically in the packet the Council received and it is specifically mentions six adult concerts and two children concerts in the summer plus Halloween parties in the fire stations, so questioned which is it that this money is going to be used for. Director Tessaglia stated that those are the events that they sponsored in the summer. He was not with the City when they did them in the past, but in speaking to his Assistant, that is what that line item is for, special events in the summer for kids. Director Strom stated that usually that is for some of the summer events for the children.

Councilman Donegan indicated to “Fertilization Program and Maintenance of Trees and Shrubs” line items and asked if those are both contracted out. Director Tessaglia stated that, from his understanding, a lot of the big jobs that are too big for us or too time consuming are contracted out. Councilman Donegan asked who those are contracted out to. Mr. Tessaglia stated that a few of the vendors that are on the existing list that he has been going over are Central Turf, Evergreen and Fence America.

Councilman Donegan indicated that Council President Paplauskas has brought up in the past the issue of spraying herbicides along the bike path and Councilman Ferri has also been involved in that. Last year the City Council passed an Ordinance to prohibit spraying of herbicides along the bike path. He asked that Director Tessaglia ensure that whoever is doing any work on the bike path that no synthetic chemicals are being sprayed along the bike path. Director Tessaglia stated that the vendors used in that capacity have been notified that that is no longer an option for them.

Councilman Donegan indicated to the \$200,000 in the Capital Budget for splash pad. He asked Director Tessaglia to address this and what the status is of the project that was included in last year’s budget for a splash pad in Ward 3. Director Tessaglia stated that we have discussed where it would fit best. He and Councilman Donegan have spoken before and with the site there were some concerns. We are still open for discussion and we want to get it done very badly. We are just trying to make sure it is the right fit.

Councilman Donegan asked where the \$200,000 is going in this budget. Director Tessaglia stated that we are looking in the Budlong area to develop a portion of the Budlong Pool or area near the pool to make it a nice opening in 2022. Councilman Donegan stated that it is great to expand and it would be a tremendous addition to Budlong. He also stated that he worked on last term and still working on it in making sure that we utilize the funding for a splash pad in Ward 3 that the previous City Council earmarked in the budget and passed an Ordinance to utilize Eastern Recreation Impact Fees. He stated that there has been discussion of possible Dyer Ave. at Calise field for a splash pad. He asked if there is a status of that going out to bid, since it has been a year since the budget passed. Director Tessaglia stated that we have not gotten to that point yet. He is kind of concerned about security issues in both those sites. We are trying to look into it a little more. He stated that Dyer Ave. is a tough spot. He would rather see it at the other place, but security in both those places would really have to be addressed before they are put in there. Councilman Donegan asked if there are specific concerns about security at the Bain track that occurs there now. Director Tessaglia stated, not particularly, but something like that we would have to be concerned about people climbing the fences when no one is there, but he is open for discussion and getting this going. Councilman Donegan stated that he feels like we have had the same discussion for months now and we need to get this project going.

Council President Paplauskas stated that one splash pad in the City is great. He thinks two is better. He does like the location at Bain. Parking at Bain might be a little bit better than the location that was originally earmarked. He also stated that Stone Hill field is a great location and is underutilized and it was discussed in the past for using it for various things. He asked Director Tessaglia if this is on his radar for possibly lacrosse fields or any type of sports. Director Tessaglia stated that he and the Mayor walked that area a few months ago. He stated that you could fit a usable field just barely. There is some concern about the low wet grounds on the far side to the left. Council President Paplauskas stated that a few years ago, there was discussion of possibly putting in a dog park there and there was a lot of pushback from the neighbors. They also supported future use for that for the children. This is something he would like to bring in the neighbors for discussion and asked that it be put under Director Tessaglia's radar. Director Tessaglia stated that he would be more than willing to sit down with the neighbors to discuss possible plans.

Councilwoman Vargas addressed the splash pad issue. She asked if the funds budgeted is enough for two splash pads in the City. Director Tessaglia stated that he believes so. Councilwoman Vargas asked Director Tessaglia what the security issues are that he is concerned about in Ward 3 Oak St. area. Director Tessaglia stated that the concern is after hours and vandalism. Councilwoman Vargas questioned if there is not a security issue or could there not be a security issue in the Budlong Pool area. Director Tessaglia stated that that area is fenced in and seemed like it would be safer than at Oak St., but with the possibility of having two now with the new monies in this year's budget, we could work on both of them. Councilwoman Vargas stated to Director Tessaglia that, with all due respect, if the splash pad was potentially in Ward 3, had a fence around it as well as the one at the Budlong Pool, she asked if that would still be a concern of his? Director Tessaglia stated, no, not at all, if it is a secured facility, then he would not have a problem with it. We would have to see how we could fence that in with the parking lot there. Councilwoman Vargas indicated to Director Tessaglia that she just wants to make sure that his words were not taken out of context because when he is saying there was a security issue, she suggested he choose his words selectively next time he says that his concern is security in that particular area, but it really came across as he if is concerned with the population that lives in Ward 3. She understands that there could be security issues all around the City, but it seems that it was particularly this area within this area of the City. Director Tessaglia stated that he understands Councilwoman Vargas's concern and understands her statement, but it wasn't meant to be that way if that is the way she took it.

Councilwoman Vargas asked if we are still planning on having a summer program for the kids, as of now, within this budget. Director Tessaglia stated yes, we are waiting for more guidance from the State as to the number and pods. In the past, they have had four sites for the camps. We have talked about having 8-10. They won't have the same amount of kids then previous camps, but they will be spread out at our elementary schools and do the same thing they have done in the past within the guidelines of the State for safety.

Director Moretti stated that Director Tessaglia is not in a position this evening to announce a particular location or locations as to the splash pads. He stated that within the next several days, he believes the Mayor would be in a position to give his position of what the locations will be for the splash pad or splash pads.

Councilman Donegan stated that the budgets are not just financial statements, they are insights and it is incredibly important to show how we spend our money. There is a reason why he advocated so much for a splash pad in Ward 3. It is about creating a more equitable City. The reality of the matter is that Ward 3 is the poorest part of the City. People do not have access to pools or places to cool down in the summer. A splash pad at Budlong Pool before we finish the project that is in the works for Ward 3 does not resolve the issue in lack of access that people in this part of the City do not have. As we talk about racial equity and building an equitable community, whether it is based on race, gender, income class or whatever it might be, building that splash pad in Ward 3 does all of those things. Mayor Hopkins voted a year ago for the Resolution in support of a splash pad in Ward 3, he voted for his amendment to put it in the budget and the Ordinance he introduced for the Impact Fees. Security concerns were not an issue then. It is something that everyone supported and hopes that we can all work together to do this because it feels like this is being taken away from the community.

Director Tessaglia stated that he believes that he was the one that brought up the Oak St. facility. He thought it was a great spot. He is just looking for the best option, but he has no problem about putting it anywhere in the Ward. It is not a dead issue. We are still trying to make it work.

Public Speakers:

Ivy Swinski appeared to speak regarding the splash pad in Ward 3 and stated that she is very excited to have a splash pad in this area. She shared Councilman Donegan's concerns about trying to do one too many things. Doing one in both Wards at the same time, she just wants to make sure that this Ward does not get forgotten in the shuffle.

Grace Swinski appeared to speak regarding the splash pad in Ward 3 and stated that a group of people worked on this with Councilman Donegan to get a splash pad in Ward 3. \$152,000 was designated to Ward 3 to the park on Dyer Ave., it was for Ward 3. She pointed out that the \$200,000 is for next year's budget. Ward 3 deserves this. She has spoken to the Mayor about the Ward 3 splash pad and if the first splash pad is not in Ward 3, it is going to disappoint a lot of constituents not just in Ward 3 but the whole City.

BOARDS & COMMISSIONS

Director Strom stated that there are various organizations and every year we contribute to the Pawtuxet River Authority and Cranston Arts Commission. The Tax Assessment Board of Review does receive compensation for the work that they do in the meetings. Also, there is the Conservation Commission and Historic District Commission. The Pawtuxet River Authority has received their full allocation as well as the Cranston Arts Commission. The Tax Assessment Board of Review is still ongoing. The Historic District Commission changes from year to year and they have not used any money from last year's budget.

Councilman Donegan stated that last year the Chair of the Conservation Commission was adamant that that funding be maintained for them. He asked Director Strom if he thinks that they will use that. Director Strom stated that he has not heard from them. They have only spent \$20.99 so far this year. Council President Paplauskas stated that he will reach out to the Chair to see if they plan to spend the money this year and going forward, and for him to send an e-mail to the City Clerk regarding this and it be forwarded to the City Council members.

Council President Paplauskas asked how we would determine if a Board should have a budget or not. Director Strom stated that he thinks it is done by Ordinance.

No one appeared to speak from the public.

CITY COUNCIL

Director Strom stated that the Expenses are running slightly over budget mostly due to possibly the increase for the Grant Writer.

No one appeared to speak from the public.

CITY CLERK

Director Strom stated that the Revenue side has done very well in collections. They are at 91%. On the Expense side, they are at 80%, a little over budget. All other line items are inline where they should be. For next year, we went up in some items because we think next year we will be stronger. On the Expense side, we did just about the same thing.

No one appeared to speak from the public.

PROBATE

Director Strom stated that this is level-funded every year. This year we level-funded it for next year based on activity.

No one appeared to speak from the public.

The meeting adjourned at 11:02 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

/s/ Rosalba Zanni
Assistant City Clerk/Clerk of Committees