



Sep 16 2021 12:12 pm

**City of Fitchburg
Massachusetts 01420**

CITY COUNCIL

Councilors at Large

**Marcus L. DiNatale
Amy L. Green
Thomas C. Hughes
Samantha M. Squailia
Anthony M. Zarrella**

President

Anthony M. Zarrella

Vice President

Elizabeth R. Walsh

Ward Councilors

**Ward 1 – Bernard J. Schultz, III
Ward 2 – Paul R. Beauchemin
Ward 3 – Andrew J. Couture
Ward 4 – Andrew J. Van Hazinga
Ward 5 – Marisa R. Fleming
Ward 6 – Elizabeth R. Walsh**

Finance Committee

A meeting of the Finance Committee was called to order by Chairman DiNatale on Tuesday, September 14, 2021 at 6:05 PM in the Legislative Building, 700 Main Street, Fitchburg, MA.

Committee Members present: Councilors Paul Beauchemin, Marcus DiNatale, Thomas Hughes, Elizabeth Walsh, and Anthony Zarrella. Committee Members absent: None.

The chairman read an announcement regarding the recording of public meetings, noting that FATV was recording and broadcasting the meeting. No other person stated that they were recording the meeting.

The chairman announced that public comment would be allowed during the meeting as the committee takes up each agenda item.

144-21 **RESOLUTION:** to fund improvements to Lowe Park.

Discussion: The Chairman opened the meeting for public comment.

Andrew Van Hazinga, Ward 4 Councilor, stated that the city created a 40R Zoning District as part of the development of the Fitchburg Arts Community at the former BF Brown School, which made the project eligible for a bonus density payment. He wants to reinvest the payment into a fix-up of Lowe Park, the largest green space in North of Main section.

Shara Osgood, has been working on improvements at Lowe Park, in particular a renovation of the basketball court and the painting of a mural on the court itself. She has received a grant from NewVue Communities and is working with NewVue on a consensus plan for this project.

Marc Dohan, NewVue Communities Executive Director, first commented that it is wonderful to be meeting in the new Legislative Building. The work his organization will be doing at BF Brown School will be building on the legacy of the new city hall. He wants to follow up on the commitment to direct funds to a rehabilitation of Lowe Park. NewVue is putting sixteen

new parking spaces at the site. He is hopeful the neighborhood will provide input into the future of the park. NewVue is also reapplying for funding from the state to complete their work.

Angaw Kahassai, YMCA Director, said that his organization uses the park to run programs for about six weeks over the summer as well as for after school programs. Not much work has been done at the park in years, so it is a great opportunity for improvements.

Trisha May, Longsjo School Principal, said students and staff would take great pride in the work done at the park and are willing to partner in the improvements and maintenance.

Nick Erickson, Interim Public Works Commissioner, said that Lowe Park is one of the more frequently used parks in the city, but it needs improvement. They had tried to make improvements in the past, but were not successful. The DPW supports this resolution.

Rebecca Wright, Director of Development, Fitchburg Art Museum, stated that the museum abuts the park and has partnered with NewVue on the Fitchburg Arts Community project. They support park improvements and look forward to using it for future events.

Tom Skwierawski, Community Development Director, said that community members have already expressed value in Lowe Park and its improvement. The BF Brown driveway had actually been a part of the park, so the city had to get unanimous local approvals through the Conservation Commission, Parks Board, and City Council and special state legislation to grant a travel easement to NewVue. The city has already received the zoning incentive payment of \$75,000 and expects a second payment upon occupancy of about \$180,000. This resolution is a slight change from the original plan from the Parks Board, which required that the \$150,000 commitment had to come from these two funding sources. These funds have greater flexibility in use, so the language was changed to reiterate the commitment, but allow the City to be flexible in how the commitment is funded. The city has greater access to other funds more specific to park improvement.

Councilors stated that this park already exists and we are discussing its renovation and not building a new one. Other parks in the city also have issues, but this resolution is a start. Renovation will enhance the neighborhood, but in five or six years will we be able to maintain it, as well as all the other parks? They are concerned about future upkeep considering the current state of parks maintenance today.

Mr. Skwierawski replied that as a municipality we can only do so much. His department is looking for local champions who can help support park maintenance. Lowe Park will get that support from the Fitchburg Art Museum, the Fitchburg Arts Community, and the neighborhood, who can stand as stewards of the park. His department is also working with the DPW on an Open Space and Recreation Plan, which was funded in FY2022.

Councilors asked if the Community Development Department gets involved in any maintenance of the parks. Mr. Skwierawski replied that they cooperate with the Parks Board and the DPW to get work done. Block Grant funds do cover some of the costs, and Senior Project Manager Amy LeBlanc serves as the liaison to DPW and the Parks Board on these matters.

Councilors asked Mr. Dohan if NewVue would help maintain the parks. Mr. Dohan replied that he is willing to take a look at it. It would depend on park design and an eye toward easier maintenance. He would also look at partnering with other groups.

Councilors asked if NewVue is donating any money to the park improvement project. Mr. Van Hazinga replied that NewVue will be building the parking area for park use, plus their project is generating the funds for the park improvement.

Councilors expressed concern about the ability of the city to maintain the parks, due to funding and personnel shortages. They have no problem with parks, as long as they can be maintained. They expressed an interest in putting in a splash park there.

Councilors reiterated that the city has a lot of parks and a lot of maintenance needs. The city needs to start somewhere, so let's focus on the Lowe Park, which is before the committee with funds available to do the work.

Action: Motion to approve made by Councilor Beauchemin and second by Councilor Zarrella. Motion adopted. (5-0).

Councilor Beauchemin left the meeting at 6:44 PM.

152-21 ORDER: that the City of Fitchburg hereby approves the expenditure of funds from the Massachusetts Executive Office of Public Safety and Security, State 911 Department grant in the approximate amount of \$174,594.00 (ONE HUNDRED SEVENTY-FOUR THOUSAND, FIVE HUNDRED NINETY-FOUR AND 00/100 DOLLARS) for the purpose of said grant, which is to support salaries and provide repair and enhancement to the E911 service system in the Police Department.

Discussion: Chief Ernest Martineau was present. He stated that this recurring grant to the Fitchburg Police Department helps support salaries for dispatchers. It means the city does not have to use city funds to support part of the salaries.

Action: Motion to approve made by Councilor Zarrella and second by Councilor Walsh. Motion adopted. (4-0).

Councilor Beauchemin returned at 6:46 PM.

153-21 ORDER: that the City of Fitchburg hereby approves the expenditure of funds from the Massachusetts Executive Office of Public Safety and Security, State 911 Department Training Grant in the approximate amount of \$44,690.39 (FORTY-FOUR THOUSAND, SIX HUNDRED NINETY AND 39/100 DOLLARS) for the purpose of said grant, which is to train both Fire and Police Department dispatchers in medical and 911 emergency procedures.

Discussion: Chief Martineau remained. He stated that this grant goes toward training costs for 911 dispatch in both the Police Department and the Fire Department.

Action: Motion to approve made by Councilor Hughes and second by Councilor Walsh. Motion adopted. (5-0).

154-21 ORDER: that the City of Fitchburg hereby approves the expenditure of funds from the Massachusetts Executive Office of Public Safety and Security, Highway Safety Division grant in the approximate amount of \$3,300.00 (THREE THOUSAND, THREE HUNDRED AND 00/100 DOLLARS) for the purpose of said grant, which is to purchase federally approved child passenger safety seats.

Discussion: Chief Martineau remained. He stated that the city receives this grant each year. In prior years, the city has handed out bicycle helmets for the city's children. This year the department wanted to replenish its inventory of child car seats. This program has had a great effect on the community.

Action: Motion to approve made by Councilor Beauchemin and second by Councilor Zarrella. Motion adopted. (5-0).

155-21 ORDER: that the City of Fitchburg hereby approves the expenditure of funds from the Digital Federal Credit Union gift in the approximate amount of \$7,500.00 (SEVEN THOUSAND, FIVE HUNDRED AND 00/100 DOLLARS) for the purpose of said gift, which is to support the Police Department efforts in providing quality programs to our city's youth.

Discussion: Chief Martineau remained. The Chief thanked the partners at Digital Credit Union for providing funds to give back to the city's youth through several events, the big one being the Junior Police Academy.

Action: Motion to approve made by Councilor Beauchemin and second by Councilor Walsh. Motion adopted. (5-0).

156-21 ORDER: that there be and hereby is transferred from within the sum of FIFTEEN THOUSAND, SEVEN HUNDRED SIXTY-EIGHT AND 00/100 DOLLARS (\$15,768.00) same to be transferred from HEALTH, PERSONAL SERVICES, FOOD & MILK INSPECTOR and credited to HEALTH, EXPENSES, FOOD CONSULTANT EXPENSES.

Discussion: Public Health Director Steve Curry was present. He stated that the city is still working on getting the position filled, but this transfer should be sufficient to cover expenses until someone is hired.

Councilors asked how much a consultant costs. Mr. Curry replied that the range is \$100 to \$300 per hour. Councilors then observed that the position has been open since February, so we could be spending about \$100,000 just since February, if the consultant were working full time. Mr. Curry replied that he is using the consultant to do plan reviews and pre-opening and final inspections. He can cover routine inspections and some complaints with the current staff. The department is behind on some routine inspections.

Councilors stated that they are having a hard time with what is going on. People are not getting hired when they should be. How do we run a city without help? Why is it taking so long? If the law required a Food & Milk Inspector now, why was it not the law in February? The current situation is not good.

Councilors reminded the others that it is not in City Council's purview to get into hiring practices. That responsibility rests with the mayor.

Mr. Curry said that the job was posted on Memorial Day and they are closing in on a selection. They have interviewed two candidates and need to interview several more. Two-thirds of the applicants did not meet the job criteria.

Councilors noted that the city is doing what it can, but everyone is looking to hire. It is a national problem, not a Fitchburg problem. Also this transfer is from money already appropriated to Personal Services and needs to be moved to Expenses. There is a national labor shortage, and because of union contracts the city can't simply raise starting salaries or offer signing bonuses as can occur in the private sector.

Action: Motion to approve made by Councilor Hughes and second by Councilor Zarrella. Motion adopted. (4-1) Councilor Beauchemin opposed.

157-21 ORDER: that there be and hereby is transferred from within the sum of TWENTY-FIVE THOUSAND AND 00/100 DOLLARS (\$25,000.00) same to be transferred from RESERVE FOR OTHER MUNICIPAL PURPOSES, CAPITAL EXPENSES and credited to COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT EXPENSES, DOWNTOWN CLEANUP.

158-21 ORDER: that there be and hereby is transferred from within the sum of TWENTY-FIVE THOUSAND AND 00/100 DOLLARS (\$25,000.00) same to be transferred from CDBG YEAR 47 DOWNTOWN CLEANUP PROGRAM and credited to CDBG YEAR 47 STREETSCAPES PROJECT.

Discussion: The chairman announced that he would take up items #157-21 and #158-21 together. Mr. Skwierawski was present. He reported that the Downtown Cleanup Project was funded in the Year 47 Action Plan and the project began in earnest on July 1st. When the issue of planting annuals was discussed, they found it was not an allowable expense. Upon further review with Fitchburg State University and HUD, they concluded that most of the proposed budget was not allowable. Because Block Grant can fund some things well, like Parks and Streetscapes, the decision was made to ask for a transfer of funds from Downtown Cleanup to Streetscapes within the Block Grant and then use city funds for the cleanup, transferring a similar amount from the Main & Boulder Project general fund account to Downtown Cleanup. While River Street was initially included in the cleanup plans, it no longer is, because the actual costs have come in at \$33,000. Fitchburg State University will cover the \$8,000 difference.

Councilors expressed concern that we are cleaning up private property in downtown, but not in other neighborhoods around the city. Other councilors responded that without a way to bill property owners, the city has a choice of cleaning the property at its own cost, or leaving it and having downtown look dirty. City Council already made the decision to cleanup downtown when it approved the original Block Grant budget.

Mr. Skwierawski also noted that the original budget had been higher, but that the actual HUD allocation was less, so the budget had to be reduced.

Action: Motion to approve Item #157-21 and Item #158-21 made by Councilor Zarrella and second by Councilor Hughes.

Motion adopted. (5-0).

159-21 ORDER: that the City of Fitchburg hereby approves the expenditure of funds from the Massachusetts Department of Transportation, Shared Streets and Spaces Program grant in the approximate amount of \$197,950.00 (ONE HUNDRED NINETY-SEVEN THOUSAND, NINE HUNDRED FIFTY AND 00/100 DOLLARS) for the purpose of said grant, which is to convert Cushing Street into a pedestrian plaza.

Discussion: Mr. Skwierawski remained. He stated that this grant is from the third round of Shared Streets and Spaces Program, which supports activities in streets and parks. Cushing Street has to be closed due to the Two Way Main Street project, so these funds can be used to mirror the work done on Mill Street. The maximum grant was \$200,000 and the city received almost the max.

Councilors congratulated the department on obtaining the grant and feel the project will be a good expansion of the pedestrian area in that block. Councilors asked about who made the decision to close Cushing Street. Mr. Skwierawski replied that it was a local decision to

make the intersection safer, especially with the Two Way Main Street project. It will prevent drivers from trying to speed across Main Street from Cushing Street to Blossom Street.
Action: Motion to approve made by Councilor Zarrella and second by Councilor Walsh.
Motion adopted. (5-0).

160-21 ORDER: that the City of Fitchburg hereby approves the expenditure of funds from the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development, 40R Zoning Incentive Payment in the approximate amount of \$75,000.00 (SEVENTY-FIVE THOUSAND AND 00/100 DOLLARS) for the purpose of said grant, which is to target technological enhancements in the City's downtown parking system and implement accompanying signage changes.

Discussion: Mr. Skwierawski remained. He announced that the payment to the city was for completing a 900 page Smart Growth application, so he would like to target Smart Growth efforts. The city needs to get its parking plan right in order to encourage Smart Growth. He thanked Treasurer and Parking Clerk Anne Cervantes for her role in this process. This order is tied to Item #161-21 which was referred to the Economic Development Committee. The Parking Plan had already been presented to that committee in 2020. It calls for installing license plate recognition cameras at the two garages and one to mount on the parking control vehicle to monitor on-street time limited parking. Permit manager also has an on-line component for drivers to get their parking permits. The formal policy changes will be presented to City Council at a later date. Parking will be eliminated on Boulder Drive when the road goes to two way, so the city will need some availability in the Mill Street Garage lower level. The plan also calls for the removal of parking meters. The plan will not be revenue neutral; the plan will add about \$49,000 in costs due to lost revenue and increased expenses. It has been suggested that the City either subsidize this cost for a period of time, or that revenue could be found by raising parking fines or permit fees.

Councilors asked if supporting the order commits the city to following through on policy changes. Mr. Skwierawski replied that the city still has to work out the logistics for how the system will work in the Parking Clerk's office and in the field. At that time there will be a close examination of the financial aspects.

Councilors asked about the right to privacy, given that the cameras will be scanning and identifying license plates. Some felt there is no special right to privacy, as the license plate information collected is already part of the public realm; others expressed concern and asked that the matter be raised with the City Solicitor. Councilors noted that the plate identifies the vehicle, but does not identify the driver. They also noted that the parking control officer can already see vehicle information in their current system, so the new technology may not be a problem.

Action: Motion to amend the order by striking the words "for the purpose of said grant, which is" made by Councilor Zarrella and second by Councilor Walsh.

Motion to amend adopted. (5-0).

Action: Motion to approve as amended made by Councilor Zarrella and second by Councilor Walsh.

Motion adopted. (5-0).

162-21 ORDER: that the City of Fitchburg hereby approves the expenditure of funds from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Community Compact Best

Practices Program in the approximate amount of \$40,000.00 (FORTY THOUSAND AND 00/100 DOLLARS) for the purpose of said grant, which is for a review and analysis of the city's staffing levels in all departments, excluding public safety and school departments.

Discussion: Mr. Skwierawski noted that the Best Practices Program has funded several other projects in the city. The Mayor's Office had applied for this particular grant.

Councilors asked if the exclusion of certain departments was a grant requirement or the city's wish. No one present was able to answer the question. They did note that the School Department was under the control of the School Committee, so it was logical that it be excluded.

Councilors next discussed holding the order and requesting the mayor to meet with them at their next meeting. They would like to know why the Public Safety Departments were excluded from the study and they would like to better understand what is being reviewed and why.

Action: Motion to hold in committee made by Councilor Beauchemin and second by Councilor Zarrella.

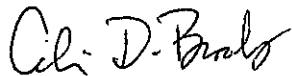
Motion adopted. (5-0).

Motion to adjourn made by Councilor Zarrella second by Councilor Walsh.

Motion adopted. (5-0)

The meeting adjourned at 8:03 PM.

Respectfully submitted,



Calvin D. Brooks, Clerk