



## **Committee on City Services and the Northampton City Council**

### Committee Members:

*Chair: Councilor Maureen T. Carney  
Vice-Chair: Councilor Marianne L. LaBarge  
Councilor Dennis P. Bidwell  
Councilor James B. Nash*

### Meeting Minutes

Date: November 12, 2019, 4 p.m.  
Location: City Council Chambers  
212 Main St., Northampton, Massachusetts

Present: Councilor Maureen T. Carney, Chair  
Councilor Marianne L. LaBarge, Vice Chair  
Councilor Dennis Bidwell  
Councilor James B. Nash

#### 1. MEETING CALLED TO ORDER AND ROLL CALL

At 4 p.m., Councilor Carney called the meeting to order. On a roll call, Councilors Carney, Bidwell, LaBarge and Nash were present. Also present were Senior Services Director Marie Westburg and Administrative Assistant Laura Krutzler

Councilor Carney announced that the meeting was being audio and video recorded.

#### 2. PUBLIC COMMENT

There being no members of the public present, there was no public comment.

#### 3. CONTINUATION OF UPDATE FROM SENIOR SERVICES DIRECTOR MARIE WESTBURG

Councilor Carney thanked Ms. Westburg for coming back. She noted that Ms. Westburg reviewed her report at the last meeting but had run out of time to field questions.

Councilor LaBarge addressed the following questions to Director Westburg:

- From your report, you state that 390 members join the Senior Center each year. How many new members are Northampton residents?

Since April 30, 2018, the Senior Center has had 668 new members, Ms. Westburg responded. It now has 2,262 members; 2,015 of whom are residents and 641 non-residents. The year prior it had 1,194 members with 1,515 residents and 479 non-residents. As far as non-residents, 41 people are coming from Williamsburg and one or two are coming from as far as Worcester.

- How often, or what are the statistics, for home visits by the social worker and/or by you? What are some of the issues of the home bound that you address?

The social worker does home visits but because the senior center is a gateway for services and Highland Valley Elder Services is the service provider for Hampshire County, it is the primary provider of home visits.

The social worker does make visits for specific issues or crisis situations. This is short-term until Highland can perform an intake and provide services. Often, the social worker will speak to a family member or elder and assess their needs. If there is an issue that needs immediate attention she will pay a visit. They have one social worker so they don't really have the capacity to address [needs of home-bound residents]. She would like to have two social workers and an outreach worker like some senior centers. But because they work so closely with community partners there is a lot of collaborative care. When there is a breakdown in communication, a person may not be referred to the appropriate service. It is something they are working on; making sure they do a thorough assessment when someone calls. They are now asking a series of questions to make sure they make the right referral. As they tell people, if they qualify for one program it's likely they qualify for others and they want to make sure they have access to all services they are eligible for.

Councilor LaBarge asked how many social workers they have had since previous directors Patricia Shaughnessy and Linda Desmond were there.

Just one, Ms. Westburg said.

They want to make sure if they don't provide it they are making referrals for it and are educating people about what's available, she added.

- Councilor LaBarge asked if there are any specific programs or initiatives for the Hispanic population. She asks because Housing Coordinator Peg Keller, Mrs. Shaughnessy and she opened the doors because there were issues with some people not feeling welcomed, she explained.

Senior Center staff are working with Northampton Neighbors and have partnered on a few grants trying to target outreach to low-income people and Latino people, Director Westburg reported. They are also working with a Smith College person interested in older people who are minorities or LGBTQ. They are doing several projects, including launching the project with Northampton Neighbors. They are talking about having a monthly luncheon for the Hispanic community like the monthly LGBTQ luncheon. They will also be doing a 'city circle.' Northampton Neighbors is doing 'neighborhood circles,' she noted.

"We're very aware that there should be more diversity at the center," she confirmed.

As a general comment, Councilor Bidwell said he was very impressed with her presentation last week and the wide variety of services. For the resources available, the volume of activity is to be commended. He hears specifically from the YMCA and Northampton Neighbors about the robust nature of their offerings. However, there is some concern about there being a changed nature at the senior center, he observed.

The people that are happy aren't yelling that from the rooftops; it is usually the other way around - the people that are unhappy are vocal, Ms. Westburg responded. There's been change; change is hard. She said she thinks it is particularly hard for seniors. She thinks there have been shifts with every director. When they say it feels less welcoming, she thinks what they are actually upset about is that they don't have Mary's Mini Sales kiosk anymore and don't sell books. And there's good reason for that; it takes a lot of staffing and capacity to run those things. Also, because they have had a lot of staffing shifts since she's been there, [employees] are a little less out there in the fray, even though they would like to be out building relationships. She's had people say she never comes and visits them. None of the people who are complaining have actually talked to her; they're just going to the paper and calling the Mayor, and she's very willing to talk to them. There is some unhappiness about changes and she thinks there is also a lot of confusion about the way changes are made.

"We're trying to create better services, we're not trying to take away things people love," she assured. "I think there's just a lot of misunderstanding." She is having a coffee hour with the director [to facilitate communication], she related.

"I don't think we can make everyone happy," she acknowledged. She said she understands some people are coming to a council meeting. They will hear complaints but she does sometimes think complaining can take on a life of its own. "I do think it's a small group of people making a lot of noise."

She noted that the senior center is 'bustling.' There's a lot happening and a lot of people coming. She also thinks they are going through a shift in culture because there's more people coming and different people coming. She is making a real effort to go out and talk to people more often. She is in her office a lot doing a lot of work but it is not that she is not approachable or that she is grumpy and mean.

There have been some things misconstrued in the Gazette. They can't always explain things because of confidentiality. Some things have been in response to complaints they've received about how people treat each other and then, when they intervene, it's been misinterpreted. The paper is a misrepresentation of what's going on.

Councilor Bidwell asked her to talk about the role of the Council on Aging versus her role in management.

There's been a lot of confusion about this, Ms. Westburg acknowledged. The role of the council is advisory and they are the voice of the community. "I need them to give me feedback about how things are going and whether we are doing what is necessary to serve older adults in Northampton." However, they don't supervise her or authorize her. She definitely takes their feedback into consideration, she confirmed.

Councilor Bidwell expressed his understanding that it is not a board of directors to which she reports.

It is a body of representatives of older adults in the community that advises her in her role, she confirmed. Her boss is the Mayor, she clarified.

Councilor Carney voiced her understanding that if the Council on Aging made a demand of her, she would still need to ask the Mayor.

She is going to have 'Coffee with the Director' monthly, Ms. Westburg advised. She is hoping that people will come and hear and give her feedback and that it won't be an angry mob. "I don't think it's something that's unresolvable," she observed.

She will be rolling out a new complaint process at the next council meeting, she added. She thinks it hasn't been clear to people how exactly they can have a voice and that's why they go to the paper and why they feel frustrated.

Councilor Carney asked if an initiative such as a complaint process is something she would bring to the council for its feedback.

"Complaints should come to me," Ms. Westburg responded. The council doesn't really handle complaints, she asserted.

Regarding the meeting scheduled for November 18, 2019, Councilor LaBarge asked, "What's this all about?"

She is providing a forum for people to have the opportunity to talk to her without having to make an appointment, Ms. Westburg advised. It is basically an open forum for discussion. She thinks it will get some dialogue going. She doesn't think going to the paper is productive. She is hoping people who have complaints or ideas will come and that they will also use the process that she is outlining for complaints or suggestions.

Since the discussion was cut short last time, he didn't get a chance to thank her for coming in, Councilor Nash reminded. The level of collaboration that's going on with Northampton Neighbors and the YMCA is very impressive and is what is going to produce the most benefit, he proposed.

He expressed his recollection that when she was hired there was a lot of pushback and voiced his perception that some of that is still going on. He hopes that she can weather it a little bit. He admires and applauds her for taking the initiative to do outreach. It's really impressive, he said.

Councilor Carney apologized for not having talked to her yet and said she hopes they will be hearing from her more often. She asked how the city council or this committee could support her more in her delivery of services to elders.

Ms. Westburg suggested always encouraging [constituents] to ask questions – not just to jump to conclusions but to find out the reasons if they're upset. Often when they explain the reasons for something, members understand and say, 'oh, that makes sense.' She thinks the first reaction is often that they're losing something. "If you're encountering people that are upset, encourage them to explore the reasons" and reassure them of her good intentions, she recommended.

With all the constituents she has not heard a one of them say this is about Westburg being hired vs. Heather Cahillane, Councilor LaBarge remonstrated.

She thinks sometimes there are complicated layers of people and members of the community, Ms. Westburg commented. "Change is hard for people, and I represent change."

She thinks people are adjusting. They are focusing on food and transportation. "There's a lot of good stuff going on." She thinks it is human nature to focus on things that rub them the wrong way and not necessarily on what's going well.

She met with the duplicate bridge group and that went very well, Ms. Westburg reported. They may have lost a few with the upset, but the Y class is thriving. The picture being painted in the paper is not accurate, she stressed.

She is so right to point out there's always more disappointment about something that's lost than excitement about something that's been added, Councilor Bidwell agreed. There are always going to be folks that don't give people the benefit of the doubt before they go running to the newspaper. He thanked her for reminding them that they can encourage them to go directly to the source.

'Coffee with the Director' is 9:30 a.m. in the Bistro.

4. **ITEMS REFERRED TO COMMITTEE**

None.

5. **NEW BUSINESS**

Members discussed the possibility of recessing during the next regular council meeting on November 21<sup>st</sup> to take up the pending referral. If no other appointments are referred, it may be possible to forego the December meeting.

6. **Adjourn**

**Upon motion made by Councilor Bidwell and seconded by Councilor Nash, the meeting was adjourned at 4:45 p.m.**

*Prepared By:*

*L. Krutzler, Administrative Assistant to the City Council*

*413.587.1210; [krutzler@northamptonma.gov](mailto:krutzler@northamptonma.gov)*