



Committee on City Services and the Northampton City Council

Committee Members:

Chair: Councilor Marianne L. LaBarge

Vice-Chair: Councilor Karen Foster

Councilor Rachel Maiore

Councilor Michael J. Quinlan, Jr.

Meeting Minutes

Date: December 7, 2020

Virtual Meeting

1. MEETING CALLED TO ORDER AND ROLL CALL

At 4 p.m., Councilor Marianne L. LaBarge (Chair) called the meeting to order. On a roll call, Councilor LaBarge, Councilor Karen Foster (Vice Chair), Councilor Rachel Maiore and Councilor Michael Quinlan were present.

2. ANNOUNCEMENT OF AUDIO/VIDEO RECORDING

Councilor LaBarge announced that the meeting was being audio/video recorded.

3. PUBLIC COMMENT

None.

4. MINUTES OF NOVEMBER 2, 2020

Councilor Maiore moved to approve the minutes of November 2, 2020. Councilor Quinlan seconded. The motion passed unanimously 4:0 by roll call vote.

5. UPDATE ON DPW SEASONAL PREPARATIONS AND OVERVIEW OF SOLID WASTE COLLECTION/DISPOSAL SYSTEM

Presentation by DPW Director Donna LaScaleia

At the committee's request, Director LaScaleia gave an overview of the city's solid waste operations. She prefaced her presentation by noting that there tends to be a lot of misunderstanding about what the Department of Public Works (DPW) offers as it relates to trash within the city limits. Once the landfill closed some years ago, solid waste operations really changed.

The DPW operates two residential transfer stations, one on Locust Street and one on Glendale Road, she presented. The transfer station is open to residents only; the city does not accept trash from commercial and industrial clients and does not offer or control curbside pickup in any way. Items accepted at the Locust Street transfer station include household trash, recycling, food waste, compost and various hazardous materials like anti-freeze, motor oil and old mercury thermometers, and the site has a scrap metal dumpster. The Glendale Road transfer station accepts bulky waste such as mattresses and furniture and also has leaf and yard waste

collection area open seasonally. As far as the number of households that actually partake of these services, there has been a downward trend for the last decade to the point that they now sell just under 3,000 permits a year, less than 25% of households. There is a lot of choice in how to get rid of household trash and people definitely exercise that choice.

An access fee of \$45 gives access to both facilities and all the services that exist, and residents must buy trash bags separately. Other options in Northampton include Valley Recycling and curbside pickup from any one of the number of haulers serving the city.

As far as what 25% of Northampton's household's trash actually looks like, last year, the DPW took in 300 tons of recyclables, 505 tons of paper and cardboard, 103 tons of metal, 192 tons of compost and 864 tons of trash. Most notably from the standpoint of solid waste as an enterprise, with the decline in people using the service, the city has seen an imbalance in the enterprise fund. They have engaged in a lot of activities in the past couple of years to try to stabilize the enterprise primarily by adjusting fees which have not been adjusted since 2011. Northampton has the least expensive transfer station fee regionally. The geographical proximity of Valley Recycling, which does not have an entrance fee, has definitely cut into the market share. In trying to stabilize the enterprise, they are dealing with competition which is somewhat unusual for a municipal transfer station and external market forces outside of the city's control such as the price of recyclables. Two really significant things happened in calendar year 2020: they went from being paid for recyclables to having to pay to dispose of them to the tune of over \$100,000 a year and the DPW's long-time compost contract expired, leading to an increased fee.

On top of this, they have had the COVID crisis and so are dealing with an extremely small, tight footprint literally operating in the middle of a highway operation. People trying to dispose of kitchen trash are in conflict with DPW workers trying to get a snowplow on a truck. They were having a very difficult time maintaining the necessary social distancing and a lot of traffic congestion; and, as a result, tempers started to flare. They had multiple disturbances which were starting to become alarming in nature. They completely redesigned how the transfer station is laid out as a result, spreading things out and moving the containers so they could pull them out from behind the building. She is now only pulling one container (the paper compactor) from within the transfer station because people were both driving and walking around their roll-off truck. They were trying to pull the container and people were criss-crossing behind the container, and the concern was that somebody was really going to get hurt. Redesigned the operation necessitated her putting two employees on duty instead of one because everything is now so spread apart.

QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS

Councilor Quinlan said he is a weekly user of the transfer station on Locust Street on Tuesday mornings and has noticed the changes she described. In June around budget discussions, they discussed having a police officer there almost all the time but that doesn't seem to be happening anymore. He said he wanted to check in with her about that.

When COVID first set in and they had to limit the number of cars, they had disturbances at the transfer station which were very, very alarming. They were struggling to maintain peace and order and struggling to get people to obey very basic instructions from employees, Director LaScaleia explained. She actually had to pull a restraining order on someone and had situations that escalated to an undesirable level to the point where her employees felt threatened.

When she built the budget for this year it was very difficult to forecast what was going to happen and how things would unfold. Her priority was to keep services open and running and to support her employees and make them feel safe, so she asked for the ability to hire police during operating hours. She has actually revisited this on a weekly basis and tapered this down over a period of months to where they no longer have a police presence except on Saturdays. She will revisit this on December 31st. They just took traffic counts and are seeing 1,100 cars a day. Spread over nine hours, this is about 100 or 120 people an hour. She is very pleased to report she has had no further disturbances. The people whose transfer station privileges were revoked are no longer with them. She is pleased with the traffic flow and how people are treating her employees, so it does not appear necessary at this time.

Councilor Quinlan said he's glad to hear it's been alleviated.

The DPW changed the schedule this year and took traffic counts before and just after, Director LaScaleia related. They are still the regional transfer station with the most available hours. She wanted to pull counts and see how traffic has organized itself over the days they are open. What she's seeing primarily is the transfer station having a pretty good slug of traffic on Saturday – 1,100 cars - and 700 or 800 the other days which is exactly what she would expect. There is obviously a cost associated with being open in terms of employees, trucking, etc.

Councilor LaBarge asked if the city is making money at the transfer station or losing money.

Generally, the way the budget is built this year, they are pulling from stabilization in order to balance the budget so that is a net loss, Director LaScaleia advised. They have increased the fee but sold fewer permits this year. All of the enterprises are seeing a decrease in revenue – they have sold about 200 fewer permits but with the increase in the fee they have actually seen more revenue. Her goal is to stabilize this enterprise so they are breaking even through a combination of operational belt-tightening and fee adjustments. "This is definitely not a moneymaker for us," she acknowledged.

Regarding recycling, Councilor LaBarge referred to a Gazette article last fall reporting that the City of Holyoke had hired a consultant because they were told recycling was going to cost the city over \$600,000.

This is what she referred to when she said Northampton used to be paid for its recyclables but that, as of July 1, 2020; they are now paying \$92 a ton to get rid of them, Director LaScaleia explained. This was a huge shift from getting revenue to paying.

There are a lot of differences between Northampton's recyclables and Holyoke's recyclables, she added. Holyoke produces considerably more recyclable material than Northampton. Since the new contract took effect July 1st, she requested \$110,000 in this year's budget for recyclables but is pleased to report they are actually spending less than anticipated. Springfield Materials Recycling Facility (MRF) operators are giving them a discounted rate based on the market for recyclables recovering so they have spent less than expected. If the market improves, ultimately they will not need to budget that kind of money.

Councilor LaBarge expressed her understanding that residents using the recycling center are required to wear masks and maintain social distancing. She asked if any employees have been stricken with COVID-19.

She has to comply with HIPAA laws and so is not able to give medical information about specific employees, Director LaScaleia reminded. She can say they have had multiple employees in the DPW who have tested positive and multiple employees who have had to be quarantined due to contact with those employees or with family members who tested positive. It happens very quickly. When she loses one person she loses seven.

A couple of weeks ago she actually had seven people out simultaneously due to both positive tests and quarantining because of close contact. We have to adapt, we have to adjust, we have to overcome it, she observed. It has affected the transfer station as much as every other division in the department.

Councilor LaBarge thanked Director LaScaleia.

Director LaScaleia confirmed that Glendale is open on Saturdays.

SNOW OPERATIONS

The DPW maintains 160 miles of roadway, Director LaScaleia presented. A lot of municipalities choose to contract out their snow and ice operations, but Northampton does not. They supplement with contractors but it has become increasingly difficult to get contractors. They have 49 plow routes meaning they need 49 trucks with plows and 49 people with commercial driver's licenses (CDL's) to drive those trucks. She also has support staff that log the roads as they've been plowed and communicate with the drivers. She has multiple supervisors on duty, including a highway superintendent who oversees the operation, foremen, general foremen, fleet mechanics and a contingent of people available to drive loaders and specialty equipment. In addition to plows, loaders are needed to load salt into the sanders on back of the plows. The number of employees involved in the snow operation is probably in the mid-60's.

A fairly significant topic of conversation during the override was the discussion of why the DPW has all of these trucks and why they are all new? The DPW maintains 160 miles of roadway and has 49 plow routes. The average width of a city street is about 30 feet. They can't be running trucks from the year 2000, they're not going to be reliable. They're going to break down; they're going to need a replacement. When they lose a truck, they have to have a replacement. If they break down, they need to be fixed fast or a road doesn't get plowed. A frustrating part of the override conversation was people saying we have too many trucks, the trucks are too new, etc. What she would say to people is how fast do you want your road cleared? "That's the dance we have to dance."

The fleet has close to 200 pieces of equipment, all of which are active because they have to be. They have to be able to swap out equipment as it's needed, especially dump trucks used to salt the city and push the snow on King Street, Route 66, etc. "We cannot plow Route 66 with a pick-up truck." Those trucks cost about \$250,000. No matter how well they maintain them, they are very expensive to fix.

Typically they have about 65 people in for any given snow storm. It is very challenging during COVID because she has to keep every separate; they don't want to be swapping out equipment. She compared trying to figure out how to keep everybody separate and give everyone their own vehicle to a giant logic puzzle.

They will monitor the weather forecast days in advance. She is the one who declares a snow emergency. She tries to err on the side of caution because if they can't salt the road because cars are parked on top of it, she's the one who is ultimately responsible. They have to be mindful that Ward 6 and 7 are at a higher elevation and so have a completely different micro-climate there than at city hall. For a typical storm event, they pre-treat all the roads, meaning they salt everything because they don't want the snow to bind with the road and turn to ice. They pre-treat everything, plow everything and then will salt again.

Depending on the storm's duration, "we're there before it starts and we're there long after it ends," she observed. This time of year, the department has a second and third shift on Monday through Friday so they're staffed 24/7 and also a weekend watch, someone on duty patrolling the entire city and manning the sander. They use between 60 and 100 tons of salt in a typical snow storm and can use between 150 and 200 tons in an ice storm. They pay \$68 a ton for treated salt and their storage capacity is 3,500 to 4,000 tons. She stockpiles it to make sure there are no supply chain issues.

They have definitely been affected by COVID and quarantines. As an example, she said they were expecting snow over the weekend and she lost three plow drivers on Friday to COVID.

"This winter's going to be very challenging," she acknowledged. What she has to do is dissolve that plow route into the plow route next to it. Depending on the extent of the outbreak, they could end up with some delays in clearing roads. Plow operators have to have a CDL and be able to operate an airbrake, etc. so they cannot just pluck someone out of the office and throw them behind the wheel of the truck.

Councilor Maiore said she is really glad to be having this briefing. One thing she can be doing is give a heads up to her residents about possible delays. She asked if plowing is always paid in overtime hours.

According to the union contracts, union employees' regular hours are 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. [Monday through Friday] and anything outside of that is overtime except for employees working second and third shift, Director LaScaleia explained. They have a second shift guy and a third shift guy. Anything outside of that, any weekend or holiday work, is overtime per the union contracts.

Councilor Maiore asked about a grant that was going to go toward a generator.

The project to replace the generator at the Wastewater Treatment Plant (WWTP) is still ongoing, Director LaScaleia said. The generator is still in-service. It's 1950's-era. It is very much still alive and has not yet been decommissioned.

In terms of delays in plowing, what she would tell people is things are stable until she says they're not, Director LaScaleia added. It's always business as usual for them. In the event she

were to lose a chunk of people because of a COVID problem, that's something she would communicate to the mayor and he would communicate it to residents. Her goal is that their operations are opaque to the residents. She has six vacancies right now. They have a little elasticity here but not an infinite amount. She would never tell people they can't provide a level of service or keep the streets safe unless she really means it.

Councilor Maiore commented that she lives on Chesterfield Road in Leeds and clearing is always faster there than she thinks it will be.

She always has one employee on duty on the weekends so there is 24-hour coverage Saturday and Sunday by one person unless she needs to call in more based on weather conditions, Director LaScaleia confirmed. This weekend she had six people salting the roads.

Each person works one eight-hour shift. Employees check in and communicate with dispatch at the beginning of their shift and she typically she talks to them at the beginning of the shift.

They're excellent, especially in Ward 6, Councilor LaBarge attested.

When they mobilize plow operations, they have 49 plow routes so all 49 drivers go to their routes, Director LaScaleia advised. They have it split up so it's as equal as possible. They try to make it very equitable. As a general rule, every area of the city is being plowed simultaneously. Typically they take care of plowing with their own employees and own vehicles. When they start contracting something out, there's less control over the operation. Generally the bulk of the plow routes are covered by internal employees.

Much of this information is on their website, she confirmed.

Councilor Foster thanked Director LaScaleia, saying she really appreciates the overview. With regard to the override, a question addressed on their tour was about DPW employees who take vehicles home. She said she understands that's to respond to emergency situations.

They are obviously running an operation that never shuts down so they have employees that are on call in all divisions - water, sewer, streets, forestry, etc., Director LaScaleia responded. It is standard operating procedure for emergency response to be provided with a pick-up truck with tools in it to respond to whatever the emergency is. They have an employee in the water department who is paid to carry a pager and be on call 24/7, and that employee would have a vehicle with tools to shut off a water valve. They don't want an employee driving past a water main break in his own vehicle to go get a city vehicle to respond to an emergency. Many of their employees do not live in the city, so if someone lives in Leeds, she doesn't want the employee to have to drive through Leeds to get a vehicle to double-back to Leeds to respond. A water main leak can do a lot of damage in a short amount of time. People driving city-owned vehicles home are those they expect to respond to emergencies and to be able to respond fast. This is standard for utilities, power companies, gas companies and other municipalities - any company in charge of infrastructure has arrangements like this for the reasons stated.

Councilor LaBarge thanked Director LaScaleia and her staff for working tirelessly and being here and giving a great presentation. She asked her to thank all her employees on behalf of the city council and residents.

6. **ITEMS REFERRED TO COMMITTEE**

A. **20.145 Appointments to Northampton Housing Authority and Housing Partnership, referred by City Council - 11/5/2020**

Councilor LaBarge reviewed the recommendations for appointment to the Northampton Housing Authority and Northampton Housing Partnership.

Housing Partnership

Ace Tayloe, 14 Fruit Street, Apt. 1, Northampton, MA - **Councilor Quinlan**

Term: November 2020-June 2023

To fill a vacancy

Ace Tayloe (they/them) was born in Colorado but has been here in Northampton for about 10 years and recently purchased a home here, Councilor Quinlan reported. They felt as a renter they wanted to have more of a renter community here but the opportunity came to purchase a home with some other people so they did that, so now they're a homeowner and a stakeholder that way. They applied in March with a list of seven boards and committees and all had to do with helping others. He really liked about Ace that Ace is 30 years old and wanting to be involved, a relatively younger person. They had a very good conversation and he felt that Ace wanted to do this for all the right reasons.

Councilor Quinlan moved to forward the appointment of Ace Tayloe to the Housing Partnership with a positive recommendation. Councilor Foster seconded. The motion passed unanimously 3:0 by roll call vote.

Housing Partnership

Hannah Shaffer, 115 Milton Street, Florence - **Councilor Foster**

Term: November 2020-June 2023

To fill a vacancy

She had a great conversation with Hannah Shaffer, Councilor Foster reported. Hannah, similar to Ace and many of the appointees they have been seeing, is younger, in her early 30's. She said she's been really interested in getting involved locally for a while now. She has been attending housing partnership meetings and, as a renter, is keenly aware of the challenges facing renters. They talked about the steep, steep costs of moving in, not just first and last month's rent and security but often the fee to rental agencies. She said she feels like the time is now to step up and take a role in local government. She is really interested in what resources are available for public housing, both to support existing public housing and what opportunities may exist for additional public housing. They talked about how Northampton is out of reach financially for many people.

Councilor Foster moved to forward the appointment of Hannah Shaffer to the Housing Partnership with a positive recommendation. Councilor Quinlan seconded. The motion passed unanimously 3:0 by roll call vote.

Northampton Housing Authority- Board of Commissioners**Edgardo Cancel, Northampton Housing Partnership appointee - Councilor LaBarge**

Term: November 2020-June 2023

To fill a newly-created position on the NHA Board of Commissioners

Councilor LaBarge said she had a very lengthy talk on the phone with Edgardo Cancel. He no longer lives at Hampshire Heights or Florence Heights; he lives in Ward 6 on Indian Hill. He is a former resident of Florence Heights and founder/president of the Hampshire Heights Tenant Association. He has a lot of experience and important perspectives to bring to the table when it comes to public housing in Northampton. In recent years, he was very instrumental in getting the Hampshire Heights community organized in collaboration with Healthy Hampshire and the Northampton Housing Authority (NHA) to build a community garden onsite, and he also initiated the project and helped to secure funding for building a new playground in that community on November 7, 2020. He has organized yearly community block parties at both Florence Heights and Hampshire Heights. Needless to say, he is well known and regarded by residents of these two wonderful communities. He would love the opportunity to continue to serve and advocate for the Northampton housing community on the NHA. He believes the NHA management team and board of commissioners are doing an outstanding job in improving the quality of life for low-income citizens and would like to continue that success by offering his expertise and personal experience as they move toward a more equitable and diverse city. He credits all of his success to family members and community mentors who came before him and provided him with the tools and loving support needed over the years.

He feels blessed to have grown up in the city and to have been nurtured and loved by so many. "My passion for serving the community comes from an abundance of gratitude and respect to those who taught me the way and the many who are still dedicating their lives to serving the residents of this beautiful city," Mr. Cancel wrote.

Councilor LaBarge moved to forward the appointment of Edgardo Cancel to the NHA Board of Commissioners to the full council with a positive recommendation. Councilor Foster seconded.

Councilor Maiore said she had the pleasure of working with Edgardo over swimming holes over this summer. He is a very gracious, upbeat individual and she is very glad he is getting more involved. The motion passed unanimously 3:0 by roll call vote.

7. New Business

Members discussed ideas for upcoming departmental presentations. Councilor Maiore offered the suggestion of having a presentation related to the operation of city shelters such as the community shelter at First Churches. She said she thought there was also talk of a warming center at the senior center. She gets a lot of questions about those operations.

Members discussed which departments are involved in oversight of the shelters. Mrs. Krutzler offered to ask the mayor's office who would be best to speak about the shelter. She would say members are interested in learning more about shelter operations.

Councilor LaBarge said she would also like to have Ann-Marie Moggio come in.

Councilor Maiore said she was thinking about seniors and thought it would be interesting in the early spring to talk to Senior Services Director Marie Westburg.

Councilor LaBarge suggested having Marie Westburg in March to check in on how it's going to keep seniors connected virtually. She mentioned that Northampton Neighbors is also involved in outreach.

Councilor Maiore said when they roll out vaccines, they may want to talk to the health department.

8. Adjourn

There being no further business, Councilor Foster moved to adjourn. Councilor Quinlan seconded. The motion carried 3:0 by roll call vote. The meeting was adjourned at 5:07 p.m.

Prepared By:

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