

**CITY OF BRIDGEPORT
BUDGET AND APPROPRIATIONS
COMMITTEE
SPECIAL MEETING
APRIL 14, 2021**

ATTENDANCE: Scott Burns, Co-chair; Ernest Newton Co-chair; Jorge Cruz, Matthew McCarthy, Mary McBride-Lee, AmyMarie Vizzo-Paniccia, Jeanette Herron (6:05 p.m.)

OTHERS: Council President A. Nieves, Council Member(s): M. Valle, E. Martinez, S. Suliman, M. Pereira, M. Lyons & R. Roman-Christy, Ken Flatto, Finance Director; Mr. Nkwo, OPM Director; Bill Coleman, Deputy Director, OPED; Tom Gill, Director, OPED; Lynn Haig, Planning Director, OPED; Bruce Nelson, Building Department Director; Dennis Buckley, Zoning Official; Rowena White, Communications; Isolina DeJesus, Central Grants Director; Tyler Mack, Barbara, 203-209-1143; 203-414-0712; 203-880-5666; 203-685-1457; 203-209-1058

This meeting was conducted by Zoom/Teleconference.

CALL TO ORDER

Co-chair Burns called the meeting to order at 6:02 p.m. A quorum was present.

He said that OPED provided the Committee Members with an organizational chart.

Council Member Herron joined the meeting at 6:05 p.m.

OPED – (Planning/Communications) Central Grants

Council Member Newton thanked everyone for submitting their requests and went on to remind everyone to focus on the department that is presenting. He said that they should be respectful and courteous.

CENTRAL GRANTS

Ms. DeJesus said that her department presented a flat funding request.

Mr. Nkwo said that the personnel and operational requests were presented. There are four positions, and there is one vacant grant writing position which should be filled next week. Ms. DeJesus said that there were two vacancies listed when the book was compiled. She said that the interviews for the grant writer interviews were scheduled for April 16th.

Council Member Newton said that he was glad to hear them moving in the right direction.

Council Member Pereira said that 50% of the staff was vacant. She wished to know how long the positions were vacant. Ms. DeJesus said that the grant writer took a FLA and then had decided not to come back. The other position had also been vacant since the Fall of 2020.

Council Member Pereira said that it was not right that there was only 50% staff in the Department. There is a great deal of money expected from the Federal Administration in the coming months.

Council Member Burns said that it would be important to fill these kinds of positions. Ms. DeJesus said that with only one grant writer, they were only getting by with standard grants. They can't apply for competitive grants.

Council Member McCarthy asked why they hadn't filled the position sooner. Ms. DeJesus said that they had not been able to move forward due to delays in other departments.

Mr. Flatto said that Ms. DeJesus had been doing a wonderful job and has reached out to other departments regarding information for grant applications.

Council Member McBride-Lee asked how the grants were selected. Ms. DeJesus said that they try to apply for every grant that they can qualify for that doesn't require matching funds.

Council Member McBride-Lee asked if they had applied for grant funding to employ young people. Ms. DeJesus said the City does not qualify for most of those grants. However, if one did appear, they would apply.

Council Member Newton asked if the Grants Department tells other departments about grants that they may be eligible for, or if the various departments come to the Grants Department to let them know. Ms. DeJesus said that many times, the departments hear about the grants while she also has a list of grants available that comes directly to her.

Council Member Newton asked about the grants that have matching funding. Ms. DeJesus said that they bring the department team together and discuss the details of the requirement. If they can do it, they apply.

Council Member Lyons asked Ms. DeJesus if they should send information about grants that they are interested into her. Ms. DeJesus said that they should.

OPED

Mr. Nkwo said that the Arena Naming Rights payments were still outstanding. The Lamar revenue remains constant. He reviewed the remaining revenue details with the Committee.

Council Member McCarthy asked about collecting the Arena rent last year. He also wished to know what would happen if the Arena were not able to open this year.

Mr. Gill said that there has been litigation and they are close to a settlement on the past due rent. However, Mr. Gill said he was not free to discuss the details at this time.

The event surcharges have been shut down by COVID, but they should start to receive their \$250,000 when the Arena reopens.

Mr. Gill said that there were three sources, the Zoning Department revenue, the Building Department revenue and the events revenue. He added that they anticipated making their revenue goals since they had over 91% of the amounts due. Discussion followed about the PILOT payment details.

Council Member Newton asked about the status of the Steel Point bond payments. Mr. Gill said that this has been a long standing, tedious issue. The Christoff's expect to be finished with the agreement later this month and the City should be receiving the payment soon.

Council Member Newton said that the City has been waiting for 2 to 3 years to complete the bond issue. Mr. Gill said that the City Attorney's Office and the Christoff's legal team have been working on this. He repeated that they believe they are very close to issuing this bond, and the underwriters are working on this.

Mr. Flatto said that they had budgeted some funding based on this revenue. He explained that it was very difficult for a Special District to issue bonds. Mr. Flatto said that Mr. Gill and Atty. Pacacha were working hard on this.

Council Member Newton said that the Christoff's indicated to him that they were ready to go and were waiting on the City. Mr. Flatto reviewed the details with the Committee members. Mr. Gill said that it was not the City that was holding up anything. The reimbursables were sent out a few months ago.

Council Member McBride-Lee asked Mr. Gill about the vacancies in his Department. Mr. Gill said that there was an open position for a Design Review Coordinator. The position originally was in the Zoning Department and has now been moved over to OPED under Mr. Coleman.

Council Member McBride-Lee asked about the Director of OPED and Deputy Director of OPED. Mr. Gill said that he was the Director of OPED. There are two Deputy Directors, one of which is Mr. Coleman, who handles Zoning, Planning and a few other areas. The vacant position oversees housing.

Council Member Cruz asked if anyone had applied for the vacant positions. Mr. Gill said that they had received applications. Certain positions are union positions and those have to be interviewed first. The City Planner position has just been posted within the City. The Zoning Inspector positions was advertised among the general population.

Council Member Lyons said that they had been asking for another Zoning Inspector. Mr. Gill said the positions was in the Zoning Department and was advertised, but stalled off because of COVID.

Council Member Lyons said the Jewish Home payments had been outstanding. She wished to know if the Jewish Home was current. Mr. Flatto reported that they were current.

Council Member Burns asked what the hindrance was to advertising and filling the vacant positions. Mr. Gill said that Ms. DeJesus had been quite thorough in her explanation about vacant positions. He added that the Department staff spends an exorbitant amount getting the work done.

Council Member Burns said that some of the positions like the Planner 2 have been vacant for a while. Mr. Gill said that they had just received the paperwork for that position.

Council Member Pereira said that Council Member Lyons was not a member of the Committee but had been allowed to speak before she was. She wished to have that on the record.

Council Member Pereira asked if Wonderland of Ice was included in the OPED budget. Mr. Gill said that he believed that it was covered under Public Facilities.

Council Member Pereira stated her concerns regarding a number of details involved in the Amphitheater contract such as the fact the Amphitheater developer had announced that they would not be charging parking fees. The developer said that the attendees simply had to show their tickets.

Mr. Gill explained that there would not be fees for concerts, but other types of events there would be fees. The parking garage is owned by the State and the State and the City split the fees 50/50. The surface parking lots are owned by the City.

Council Member Cruz said that he noticed that the salary for the Deputy Director of OPED would be subsidized by CDBG funds. Mr. Gill said that the position would be working with housing and would be partially paid with HUD funding.

Council Member Burns said that he was concerned because there were possible HUD violations. Mr. Gill said that his Department has regular communication with HUD. He preferred not to address the details at this time due to potential legal issues.

Council Member Burns repeated his concern about the vetting process.

Council Member McCarthy asked why it took so long to get the paperwork for the Planner 2 position.

Mr. Gill said that the approval had a number of departmental sign offs and he did not know why it took so long.

Council Member Pereira asked what defined the line on titled Other Financial Uses. Mr. Nkwo said that on page 326, the funds would be listed as Debt Service and other uses like environmental clean-up.

Council Member Pereira asked for a list of all the bonded debt service. Mr. Flatto said that the bonds often run for 20 years and there may be items that were bonded 15 years ago. A discussion followed about the details.

Council Member Pereira asked about the Personnel summary. She noted that there were 17 positions and they would be increasing the staff to 19 staff members. She said she did not understand how a department could operate with 20% to 25% of staff positions vacant and wished to know who was responsible for the delays. Mr. Flatto gave a quick rundown on the various departments that have to sign off on new hires.

Council Member McCarthy said that a few months ago, OPED came to discuss their various projects and he would appreciate doing this again after Budget season.

Council Member McCarthy asked who manages the various properties that the City owns.

Mr. Gill said that there were a number of parcels listed on the spreadsheet. He said that there were parcels like Honey Locus properties, which have been combined into one lot for development. The smaller parcels are often offered to abutters for sale or auctioned off. Many of those properties are handled by Max Perez and he just submitted a list of parcels for approval to sell.

Council Member Newton said that he believed that the hiring process was created so that the Mayor could not just sign off on positions. It is a check and balance process, but maybe it is time to have the discussion about streamlining the process because it should not take a year to fill a position.

Council Member Cruz said he would like to understand how \$6 million dollars was transferred to purchase the UB property for Bassick High School. He said that the property purchase was never presented to the Council. Mr. Gill said that there was \$7.5 million bonded for the High School. The City Attorney's Office believed that the School Building Committee had the authority to identify a site and the negotiations were done by OPED. Ultimately, that decision was made by the School Building Committee.

Council Member Cruz said that he did not agree with the School Building Committee having the authority to spend \$6 million without Council approval.

Mr. Flatto said that when they had discussed the \$5 million dollar bond, they had been told that the BOE School Building Committee had approved the site and the BOE approved the funding.

Council Member Cruz thought that it was unfair that the School Building Committee had the authority to do this without Council approval.

Council President Nieves said that the School Building Committee has Council Members on it. The Committee had already gone through the process about renovating Bassick in 2017. Then it looked like they would acquire the State Street property and that fell through. The Committee has members of Finance, Public Facilities and a variety of other departments. There were a number of public meetings. This was not done without notification.

Council Member Cruz said that he felt that the full Council should be notified and there were many questions that need to be answered regarding how the money was transferred. This process needs to be changed.

Council Member Newton reiterated that there is a Building Committee and their function is to handle the issues like they did with Harding High School. The Council approved the bonding for Bassick. The issue was where the site was going to be. If the BOE wants the school at Council Member Brantley, the Council's job is to find a spot at UB. The Council voted for the funding for Bassick High School. There are BOE members, Public Facilities and Council Members on the School Building Committee. There are people who are spreading conspiracy theories about the school building funding.

Council Member Brantley said that she was there in 2017 and the Council did vote to approve the funding. There were extensive debates about this at that time. The money was already earmarked for Bassick and people decided for new construction. No one did anything underhanded.

[Loss of call]

Council Member Pereira asked about the Congress Street Bridge, which has not been in operation for 20 years. She said that it appears that all the funding to replace the bridge is available. Mr. Nkwo said that part of the funding is there but there is funding for engineering.

Mr. Gill reviewed the details of the grant funding and updated everyone on the Federal permitting process. He said that they hoped to start construction for the bridge in the fall.

Council Member Pereira said that in the CT Post it stated that the State issued \$47 million for affordable housing. Hartford got \$11 million and New Haven received \$12 million in funding, but Bridgeport did not get one dollar.

Council Member McCarthy said that they had exhausted the discussion regarding the Grants and OPED. He asked to move forward to the Building Department.

Council Member Burns said that there had been extensive discussion about moving Communications to OPED and that they should be distributing information to the Council members.

Mr. Gill said that the Department had been working on COVID most of last year regarding establishing communications dining and health regulations.

Ms. White said that the Department had been working with the CDBG HOME program and they work with HUD on the funding. First Time Home Buyers program is also handled through her department. The Department is looking forward to getting back on track and they hope to launch a new website. The RFQ should be released soon. The website will drive OPED and give a new look to the City.

Ms. White said that she did not realize that the golf course has benefited from the recent marketing. It is already at \$1.5 million last year and they have already generated \$1.5 million in revenue.

Mr. Flatto said that the administration has been working on the Congress Street Bridge. He said that they believed that work would begin this year.

Council Member Newton said that he had read the article also and that the question should have been directed to the City's legislative delegation.

Council Member Pereira said that no one should be working in silos. She added that she had sent the article to the Council members. The Council members are supposed to be working together for the residents, so they should be in touch with the delegation.

Council Member Pereira asked where the Communications Department was located. Mr. Gill said that it was immaterial where the staff members were located. The Communications Department is located in the Mayor's Office, just like the Zoning Office is located at 45 Lyon Terrace.

Discussion followed about the transfer of the Department from the Mayor's Office to OPED.

Mr. Nkwo said that no employee of the Communications Department were listed on the Mayor's Office budget at any time.

BUILDING

Mr. Nkwo directed everyone to page 328 for the revenues. He said that the Department did okay under the COVID restrictions.

Mr. Gill said that they identify projects and project the expected fees. This plays an important role in the budget.

Mr. Nkwo then reviewed the Personnel listing. Mr. Nelson said that the mechanical inspector retired at the end of the year. The Assistant Building Inspector will be switched to a Plan Reviewer. There will be no change in salary.

Council Member McCarthy asked about alterations to the homes because the mortgages were so low. He felt the Alteration fees should be higher.

Council Member McCarthy said that he was still hearing about how difficult it was to deal with the Building Department.

Mr. Nelson said that the Intergov program for the public is currently being reviewed in order to identify potential programming problems. Eventually, the contractors will be able to upload their information from their location.

Council Member McCarthy asked what the turnaround time was for the permits. Mr. Nelson said that they were trying to expedite the simpler permits quickly.

Council Member Newton said that he also was hearing that the Bridgeport Building Department was difficult. With the market today, there are people who are building homes, remodeling homes and selling homes. This department should be the one that they look at to generate more revenue.

Mr. Gill said that in between the customer and the department is the contractor. When a set of plans is submitted, there are often questions and when the customer asks the contractor, he says “Oh, it’s the Building Department that is the problem.” Sometimes projects are delayed in the Fire Marshal’s Office or the Engineering Department.

Mr. Nkwo reminded everyone that the Council had approved two new positions last year and those positions were still vacant.

Council Member Newton said that when the Council allocates positions, they should be filled. This happened long before COVID. These people need to be hired.

Council Member Burns said when the re-evaluation was done, the agents said that they had never seen so many renovations that had no permits. He asked if there was a way to recoup the missed fees.

Mr. Flatto said that it was a problem and they had asked for a listing of those unapproved remodeling.

Mr. Gill said that when they are aware of remodeling’s, they send the Zoning Officer out with a cease and desist order.

Council Member McBride-Lee asked where the open positions were posted.

Mr. Nkwo said that the first thing is that the position is requested, it goes to OPED to make sure the position is funded. He said that his Department processes the requests within three days. Some Departments hold the request for six months before submitting it to him.

Mr. Nkwo then listed the other departments that have to sign off on the request, which includes the CAO’s office, Civil Service and the Mayor’s Office.

Council Member McBride-Lee said that if funding was allocated for a position but the department does not turn the request into OPM, then it should not be funded the following year. She said that having so many people having to sign off on hiring request needs to be looked at.

Council Member Herron said that Council Member McBride-Lee was right on the mark about hiring. Council Member Herron said that people were hired during COVID and paid to sit at home while COVID was underway. She said that she was disheartened to know that these positions were still vacant but the money was being used elsewhere.

Council Member Burns said that he felt they had made their point about the hiring process.

Council Member Cruz thanked Mr. Nkwo for calling it like it is. He agrees that if the positions remain unfilled, then they should remove the position. This is not being honest and needs to stop.

Council Member Pereira said that on the revenue side, Mr. Nelson posted \$3 million but the Mayor cut it down by \$400,000. She wanted to know why that number was reduced.

Mr. Flatto said that Building fees had significantly under performed for the last few years, and this year is a bit of an anomaly.

Mr. Nkwo said that 2019 revenues was attributable to PSE&G. He reminded everyone that although the housing market is very active right now, people who are flipping houses are doing a lot of unpermitted work.

Council Member Pereira said that this was one of the worse answers she had heard in 12 years. She said that they need more building inspectors in the field so they can catch these unpermitted projects. They should be investing in appraisers and inspectors. She said that unpermitted electrical work or plumbing cause safety issues.

ZONING DEPARTMENT

Mr. Nkwo reviewed the Zoning Revenues on page 339 and gave a brief overview of the Personnel Summary.

Mr. Coleman then spoke about the Plan Bridgeport update. The Zoning Code will be updated. The neighborhood waterfronts, such as Johnson's Creek, Yellow Mill and others have been allowed to slide into lower class uses, such as contractor's yards, asphalt processing and other similar types of uses. Zone Bridgeport encourages clean uses along the river.

Mr. Coleman then spoke about the downtown Bridgeport and Congress Street Plaza and 880 Broad Street development.

Ms. Haig said that they would be producing a complete Plan for the public to review within the next month.

Council Member Newton asked about the fact there were three Zoning inspectors and only one Zoning Enforcement Officer. Mr. Buckley said that the Enforcement Officer will follow up on the Inspector's cases in order to bring them to court.

Council Member Newton said that he would hope that the B&A Committee would review the Building and Zoning Departments. Having only three inspectors handling all the building inspections is impossible.

Council Member Pereira said that this was the most frustrating department. Residents really care about their neighborhood regarding blight, or vehicles with out of state plates or no plate at all. She said that she had reported many of these violations, but nothing ever happened. The Department needs to do their jobs. One Zoning Enforcement Officer is not enough for the city.

Mr. Buckley said that he would like another Zoning Enforcement Officer. He has discussed the City of Stamford's Blight model with Atty. Toms. The courts cherry picks the cases that they want to review. If they are able to issue blight fines, people take notice.

Council Member Pereira said that there were vehicles on their property without plates and this is illegal. The out of state plates generate revenue.

Council Member Lyons asked that if they had hired another Zoning Staff member. Mr. Buckley said that the position was still unfilled and the job posting was done internally. They had a few candidates for interviews, but on March 15th, City Hall closed. Now it's a year later, and they are still waiting.

Council Member McBride-Lee asked Mr. Buckley about the Zoning Commission. Mr. Buckley explained that he was the Clerk to the Commission.

Council Member McBride-Lee asked if the Zoning Inspectors were the staff that go to a site to see if some construction is permitted. Mr. Buckley said that this was correct.

Council Member McBride-Lee said that she and Council Member Roman-Christy have gone to the Commission to give their concerns and their concerns have been heard.

ADJOURNMENT

**** COUNCIL MEMBER MCCARTHY MOVED TO ADJOURN.**

**** COUNCIL MEMBER MCBRIDE-LEE SECONDED.**

**** THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

The meeting adjourned at 8:32 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Telesco Secretarial Services