

**CITY OF BRIDGEPORT
BUDGET AND APPROPRIATIONS
COMMITTEE
SPECIAL MEETING
APRIL 7, 2022**

ATTENDANCE: Ernest Newton, Co-chair; Scott Burns, Co-chair; Jeanette Herron, Tyler Mack, Matthew McCarthy, Mary McBride-Lee (6:32 p.m.)

OTHERS: Council Member(s): J. Cruz, M. Pereira & F. Hodges; T. Gaudett, Mayoral Aide; Ken Flatto, Finance Director; Nestor Nkwo, OPM Director; Tom Gill, OPED Director; Bill Coleman, OPED Deputy Director; Dennis Buckley, Zoning Administrator; Lynn Haig, Planning Director; Arben Kica, Acting Building Official, Barbara; iPhone-DNPH80W00DXT; 203-880-5666; 203-414-0712

CALL TO ORDER

Co-chair Newton called the meeting to order at 6:03 p.m. A quorum was present.

Co-chair Newton said that the focus of the meeting was the budget and that off topic comments would not be allowed. Co-chair Burns said that Council Member Vizzo-Paniccia would be joining the meeting later.

OPED

Mr. Nkwo gave a brief overview of the OPED Capital Plan, which was displayed on the screen. Mr. Gill said that the parking garage addition had been delayed due to changes in the design. He added that they were working on stabilizing the Remington shot tower. The next phase will be to remove the Remington buildings, which are a hazard. The State will be giving the City \$10 million and there were also some Federal grant funding expected.

Council Member Newton asked about some lots that OPED had been responsible for cleaning, but were to be turned over the Public Facilities for maintenance. Mr. Nkwo said that this was so. Mr. Gill said that Mr. Nkwo was speaking of areas that need to be cleaned up or have the lawn mowed. However, the funding in the Capital Budget OPED had would be used soon because they had put out an emergency bid on the abandoned church that had a partial collapse. Mr. Gill said that he really appreciates the fact that the lawn maintenance was transferred.

Council Member Newton asked if the Amphitheater was paid up on their account. Mr. Gill said that they had paid the City \$167,000 last year. The minimum amount due was \$150,000. Discussion followed about how many concerts were held at the Amphitheater.

Council Member Newton said that he had heard that there was other funding State Senator Rosario had mentioned. Mr. Gill said that he had not heard anything about it.

Council Member McCarthy asked about the money that had been bonded last year for the Remington project. Mr. Gill said that they had used that money for the project. He said that if they can get the buildings demolished, DuPont will have to come in and take responsibility for the brownfield.

Council Member McCarthy asked about the bond situation. Mr. Flatto said that they had bonded last year and now the interest rates have climbed due to inflation. Mr. Nkwo updated the Committee on the allocations.

Council Member McCarthy asked if there had been some improvement on the blight since they allocated funding last year. Mr. Gill said that the funding will help the City aggressively go after the blighted properties.

Council Member Pereira asked why the 2020 column was missing from the table. Mr. Nkwo said that when he compiled the information last night he inadvertently omitted that column.

Council Member Pereira said that she did not remember OPED coming to the Council for permission to purchase property since 2019. Mr. Coleman said that there were items presented to the Council that would be similar to the NRZ request on the agenda for April 4th. He gave the details of how the process works. Specific properties will be presented to the Council.

Council Member Pereira asked if any properties had been acquired since she was on the Council in 2019. Mr. Coleman said that the line item also includes demolitions. The line items allows the Department to cover unexpected damage to buildings. Discussion followed.

Council Member McBride-Lee joined the meeting at 6:32 p.m.

Council Member Burns said that he was concerned about the fact that they bond money but there is a significant time lag before the funds are used.

Mr. Flatto said that he tends to bond funds in phases and gave examples of how this is done.

Council Member Newton then spoke about the condition of the parking garage across from 999 Broad Street. He said that it was a dangerous situation. Mr. Gill said that they had met with the garage owners repeatedly and the building inspector and the Fire Department have been there. The State Inspectors have issued a letter demanding action, but the owners have hired a lawyer. The Condemnation Board is starting up again and they may be able to facilitate acquiring the garage.

Council Member McCarthy said that he agreed with Council Member Newton on the garage condition. He asked for the same information on Blight that he requested for Land Acquisition.

Council Member McCarthy said that he had an investor looking at a property in downtown. The investor said that they did not have parking in downtown. Council Member McCarthy said that there was a lot of available parking downtown, but people don't know about it.

Council Member Newton said that there was supposed to be a marketing effort and asked for a status update. Mr. Gill said that he agreed with Council Member Newton and that they were looking to work on Economic Development marketing through DSS. Council Member Newton said that he felt that OPED should have their own press staff member. Discussion followed.

Council Member Pereira said that she wished to know about the Gateway to the South End. Mr. Gill said that the area ideally encompassed State Street south to Park Avenue.

Council Member Pereira said that she felt that there were duplicated funding lines and indicated where that was shown on the spreadsheet. She reiterated that the Council has not been presented with a property that OPED wished to acquire. It is not okay to bond for millions of dollars without the Council knowing where the funds were going. Mr. Gill said that there were pending condemnations and he was not able to identify those locations at this time.

Council Member Pereira asked about the parking garage. Mr. Gill said that they realized that there was a need for the parking lot there but there has not been a design done for it yet. Council Member Pereira said that there was no reason to allocate funding when nothing has been done yet. Mr. Gill said that they need to assemble a certain amount of allocated funding before they can move forward.

Council Member Pereira said that there are major parking issues in the 137th District and wished to have that noted on the record.

Council Member Cruz thanked Mr. Gill and Mr. Coleman along with the rest of the staff for their attention to the garage. He has been concerned about this for some time.

OPED BUDGET

Council Member Burns directed everyone to page 309 in the Budget Book. Mr. Nkwo then gave an overview of the revenue section, including the Seaside rental. Mr. Gill gave an estimate based on advanced ticket sales for the Sound on the Sound concerts.

Council Member McCarthy said that he had been told that the City would be receiving a percentage of the sales. Mr. Gill said that they would be receiving a percentage of the ticket sales.

Council Member Pereira said that they were also selling parking passes for City parking. Mr. Gill said that the City percentage was just for the ticket sales.

Council Member Pereira said that there was a 3% tax on ticket sales. She asked if the City would be receiving 3% on the seat tax. Mr. Gill said that the 3% was a seat tax. There will not be 35,000 seats there.

Council Member Pereira said that there was no exemptions in the City Charter and the Charter did not mention seats. She will be looking into this further.

Council Member Burns said that the Amphitheater was expected to pay monthly but there were a number of line items that showed zero. He also asked about the parking. Mr. Gill said that they had contacted the State about the parking and were waiting for a response.

Mr. Gill said that they had paid the back rent and were reconciling their books. They will be paying monthly soon. Discussion followed about the details of the contracts.

Council Member McCarthy asked how many concerts were held in the Amphitheater. Mr. Gill said that he would send that information.

Council Member McCarthy asked how the City knows how many tickets are sold. Mr. Gill said that they were given the figures from Live Nation.

Council Member Pereira then said that there was a flat fee for the ticket tax. She asked for the status of the maintenance fund. Mr. Gill said that due the fact that there was a limited season, there was no excess funding. He said that he will not have an answer until the end of the season.

The Committee then moved to the OPED Personnel Budget. Mr. Nkwo gave the Committee an overview.

Council Member McCarthy expressed concerns about the fact that the Department may need more staff because they are a revenue producing department.

Council Member Burns said that he was pleased to see that Communications had been separated out as an independent department. The positions are being filled.

Council Member Pereira asked about OPED speaking with the Inspector General in Washington D.C. about the \$876,353 that was listed in the CDBG funding. Mr. Gill said that all of the Housing staff were paid 100% with HUD funding. The HOME program specialist receives a small percentage of City funding for that salary. The Deputy Director is paid out of City funds. Discussion followed. Mr. Nkwo said that the HOME program only draws \$44,000 from the City funding. The other positions are paid from grant funds.

Council Member Pereira requested a list of positions and the salaries that were paid by HUD in the Department. She said that the guidelines were strictly governed. Mr. Nkwo said that they could provide that information with the HUD account numbers.

The discussion moved to the Operating Accounts.

Council Member Newton asked why the Department would need to have outside legal counsel when there are 14 City Attorneys. Mr. Gill said that they were fortunate to have Atty. Pacacha who has a long history with the City and is an excellent contract attorney. When there are environmental issues, they need special legal counsel. There are many aspects that require specialize knowledge. Discussion followed.

Council Member Pereira said that there were decreases in Social Security, Medicare because three full time positions were transferred. There is an increase in other costs. Mr. Nkwo said that there were salary increases.

Council Member Pereira asked about the \$2,000 for travel expenses. Mr. Gill said that there were times when the staff needed to attend events.

Council Member Pereira said that she agreed that the City Attorney's Office was the largest in the State and the third highest paid in the State. Their job is to provide legal service and they have an account for outsider services, so the Law Department should be paying for the cost of the outside counsel.

Council Member Burns said that the Bridgeport Chamber of Commerce felt that they were not in the loop in terms of what was happening in the City. Mr. Gill said that there had been meetings with them in the past. Council Member Burns said that he had gotten the feedback from the business owners.

Council Member Newton said that regarding the travel account, it was important to see what other cities are doing and what is going on in other parts of the country.

Mr. Nkwo said he had reviewed the figures for the pensions and other factors to confirm that the numbers were correct.

Council Member McCarthy asked if there was much input from the DSSD. Mr. Gill said that the staff interacts with the DSSD staff.

Council Member Pereira asked for clarification on the marketing staff position. Council Member Newton clarified his earlier explanation.

Council Member Pereira asked if Ms. Haig was interviewing a candidate for a Planner 1 position. Council Member Burns said that it was a recent vacancy. Mr. Nkwo said that the data was compiled at the end of January. It was stated earlier that two of the positions had been filled, but he was just informed that there was a vacancy. Council Member Pereira said that there was no Planner position that was open. Mr. Gill said that the employee that was in that position had left.

Mr. Gill said that they needed to fill two positions, a Special Project Coordinator and the Planner position that was just vacated.

The discussion moved to the contractors who were not paid promptly. The biggest issue with a delayed payment involved work done at the library. Council Member Newton said that the library was now open and that Mr. Coleman had done a great deal of work on that issue.

Council Member Newton said that he had asked about the Civic Block and the need for it to be lit up. Mr. Coleman said that it was in the process of being finished up.

The next department that the Committee reviewed was the Building Department.

Council Member Burns said that the Building Department currently had an Acting Manager. Mr. Nkwo gave a brief overview.

Council Member Newton said that he receives frequent complaints about the Building Department. Mr. Gill said that they have been trying to provide service, but due to the new portal, the number of building permits, and information for planning and the FOIA requirements the work load has increased. They have requested a floater or additional staff. Discussion followed.

Mr. Gaudett explained that they were taking payment after the evaluation review was because the applicant would often undervalue the project and make a payment up front.

The IT Department will be bringing Intergov online and there will be meetings with the Department heads in the coming weeks.

Council Member Pereira said that a constituent had made a payment through Intergov but there was no record of the payment in the Building Department. Mr. Gaudett said that this was the first time he was hearing about a problem like that.

Council Member Pereira asked why the revenue projects for the Building Department was so low despite the fact that there have been increases in the conveyance tax revenues and Building Department fees. Mr. Flatto said that with interest rates rising, he would prefer to be conservative with the projection.

Council Member Burns said that when the re-evaluation was done, the reval staff said that they had never seen so many properties that had been improved without permits. He asked if there was any way to claw back some of that lost revenue. Mr. Gill said that if reval staff had a list of addresses, they could look at it.

Council Member Newton said that they didn't have enough staff to catch people who are renovating without permits.

Council Member Pereira said that they also need more assessors. Discussion followed about the staffing needs for the Department.

Council Member Pereira said that it looks like there are 15 positions with three vacancies. That's a 20% vacancy rate. People start building in the spring. A discussion followed about whether there was a secretarial assistant that was part of NAGE. Mr. Nkwo looked up the current NAGE contract and said it had expired.

The Committee moved to page 322, which shows the Zoning Department budget. Mr. Buckley said that his revenue was down due to the fact that there was a period that they did not have hearings because the Commissions did not have quorums.

Council Member Pereira said that she was frustrated with the department because they have only one Zoning Officer and there are people who are running their businesses from their homes. Her constituents care about their quality of life.

Mr. Buckley said that there would be another Zoning Officer coming on, but he would be working for both the Building Department and Zoning. He said that he understood their frustration because the staff was also frustrated. He said that one person can't cover the entire City. When they go to court, the court is backed up and then tells them they need more evidence. Mr. Gill said that the Zoning Officers can't issue fines. Mr. Buckley said that there are ways to create a process. He said that he had been looking at Stamford and how they handle this. More staff would be helpful.

Council Member Newton asked Mr. Buckley to forward the information he found in Stamford to the Budget and Appropriations Chair along with Council Member Brown. Mr. Buckley said that he would send it tomorrow morning.

Council Member Pereira said that often people don't know the ordinances. She gives them copies of ordinances and many people stop what they are doing. However, there are those who just don't care and continue to do their thing.

Mr. Buckley said that a few years ago, Council Member Newton had helped them get another inspector and that new employee has worked out really well. He thanked Council Member Newton for that.

Mr. Gill said that the Department was frustrated about some of the overnight tractor trailer parking issues.

Council Member McCarthy said that it would be good to have new positions, but that also means that they will have to cut in other areas.

Council Member Pereira said that she had some success with tractor trailers by calling the non-emergency number and reporting them. She said that she did not think that tractor trailers should be able to park on any residential street. They should be on commercial corridors.

Council Member Burns said that there was a new Zoning Plan and a great deal of work had gone into it.

Council Member Newton thanked the OPED staff for their time. Mr. Gill said that it was one of the most informative sessions.

ADJOURNMENT

**** COUNCIL MEMBER BURNS MOVED TO ADJOURN.
** COUNCIL MEMBER MCCARTHY SECONDED
** THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

The meeting adjourned at 9:02 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Telesco Secretarial Services