

Governing Body Minutes – July 10, 2021

CYRUS K. HOLLIDAY BUILDING, Topeka, Kansas, Saturday, July 10, 2021. The Governing Body members of the City of Topeka met in special session at 9:00 A.M., with the following Councilmembers present: Hiller and Emerson -2; and the following Councilmembers participated remotely: Valdivia-Alcala, Ortiz, Naeger, Dobler, Duncan and Lesser - 6. Deputy Mayor Padilla presided -1. Absent: Mayor De La Isla -1.

AFTER THE MEETING was called to order, Brent Trout City Manager provided opening comments. He reported the 2022 budget was the ninth consecutive budget presented without a mill levy increase making every year more challenging to balance the budget. He stated this budget would be particularly challenging with the implementation of Senate Bill 13 and House Resolution 2104, requiring the Governing Body to vote to allow the City to capture property tax revenue growth. He noted if the Governing Body decides not to capture the 2022 tax base growth, then difficult decisions would be made in order to maintain a balanced budget. The current budget distributed to the Governing Body assumes a property tax growth capturing the new valuations on all properties. Despite the challenge of increased personnel costs and challenges associated with the 2020 public health emergency, the COVID-19 pandemic, they are confident they will be able to provide the citizens of Topeka with the services essential to improve the quality of life in the community. He welcomed questions from the Governing Body members as they begin a general overview of the budget followed by departmental presentations.

Stephen Wade, Interim Administrative and Financial Director, provided an overview of levy rate calculations, breakdown of taxes as it relates to a home appraised at \$100,000, as well as 2021 property taxes by entity. He highlighted the 2022 budget priorities including fiscal sustainability, developing neighborhoods, investing in infrastructure, public safety and quality of

life. He reported the Public Safety Budget consists of the Fire Department, Emergency Management Services, Police Department and Municipal Court making up 77% of the General Fund. He also reported Neighborhood Relations has been reorganized under different departments and includes Community Engagement under the Executive Department; Housing Services under the Planning and Development Department; and Property Maintenance under the Police Department.

Bryan Wheelles, Interim Police Chief, provided an overview of the increase in operational budget and the need for additional full-time employees requested by the Police Department. He reported the following:

- Initially, the City planned to continue collaborating with Shawnee County for efficiencies in animal control services; however, significant differences have surfaced regarding the processes related to dangerous animals. Shawnee County Animal Control Officers are not empowered to enforce City ordinances, and the County uses District Court to process violations as opposed to City Municipal Court, which tends to be less laborious. He stated they are requesting two additional full-time animal control officers to address the issue in a more efficient manner for public safety needs.
- The additional \$200,000 requested for the Property Maintenance Blight Remediation Fund is to address the backlog of demolition orders. He reported there were 11 property demolition orders postponed in 2020, bringing the total to 23 properties with demolition orders as of July 8, 2021; and there is a potential of adding 10 more property demolition orders by the end of 2022.
- The funding for the Body Camera Tracking Mechanism would be moved to the Police Department budget.

Councilmember Hiller inquired on deputizing Shawnee County animal control officers providing authority within city limits to perform services if necessary.

Councilmember Valdivia-Alcala spoke in support of hiring two additional animal control officers to address the serious dangerous dog issues in the Oakland area. She stated she believes additional animal control officers would serve as a good alternate plan if the partnership with Shawnee County has become ineffective.

Interim Police Chief Wheelles reported that Shawnee County was not interested in altering their processes.

Councilmember Emerson asked if there was funding available to address blighted commercial buildings through repairs or cosmetic improvements instead of demolition, specifically along SE 21st Street between Topeka Boulevard and Washburn Avenue.

In response, Brent Trout reported the following:

- The City-County Animal Control partnership was created as a solution to budget cuts in 2021; however, it has been determined the partnership is not effective in the handling of dangerous dog cases in city limits.
- They anticipate needing the additional \$200,000 again in 2023, to address the blight remediation backlog. The City does not typically improve buildings without pursuing ownership. The cost for demolition of commercial buildings tends to be excessive. It was noted there are properties located on 17th Street and N. Kansas Avenue that need to be addressed and will be costly to demolish.

Councilmember Hiller questioned if Staff was expecting the blight remediation budget to be \$400,000 every year; if blight remediation was an eligible use for American Rescue Plan (ARP) funding; and if the proposed budget amount allows full staffing for the Police Department.

Brent Trout reported all 2020 demolition funding has been expended; they do not anticipate the need for an additional \$200,000 of blight remediation funding every year; ARP funding could not be used for demolition purposes unless the property was being replaced with affordable housing; however, there may be some additional CARES Funding available for use for any type of expenditure; and the Police Department budget as proposed supports a fully staffed Police Department.

Craig Duke, Topeka Fire Chief, provided an overview of the 2022 Fire Department operating budget. He provided an update on the Fire Academy, which includes EMT classes starting in 2022, with the hopes to draw more recruits. He noted the Fire Department has

collaborated with the Police Department to conduct public safety recruitment and allow applicants to test for both entities.

Councilmember Naeger inquired on the details of recruitment efforts.

Councilmember Lesser requested the Fire Department implement a ride-along program similar to the program that has been implemented in Wichita, Kansas. He also asked Staff to increase efforts of recruitment of high school students.

Chief Duke reported the Fire Department has implemented a ride-along program and recruitment initiatives are in place; however, recruitment initiatives slowed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Deputy Mayor Padilla requested Staff provide a comprehensive presentation on the Fire Department recruitment program to the Governing Body and citizens.

Councilmember Valdivia-Alcala requested that the Fire Department increase outreach efforts to middle school and high school students through school activities.

Councilmember Naeger stated she concurs with Councilmember Valdivia-Alcala about increased efforts for recruitment in local schools. She suggested having fire fighters speak with students to help them understand the program and what it has to offer.

Councilmember Duncan reported the Policy and Finance Committee has discussed recruitment efforts for all City departments. He stated the recruitment ideas proposed are great; however, Staff needs a budget to support those efforts. He expressed concern with fuel cost estimates being too low at \$3.00 per gallon in comparison to the current national average. He questioned why the Fire Department was requesting to add a Deputy Fire Chief position, a position eliminated in 2020, and why funding has been decreased for Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

Chief Duke reported there was an error in the budget book as published. He stated the position being requested is an Assistant Fire Marshal and Plan Reviewer not a Deputy Fire Chief; and the funding for PPE has been reduced because they are using CARES Act funding to purchase equipment.

Councilmember Duncan cautioned Staff against decreasing budgets and noted CARES Act Funding should only be used for one-time expenses to avoid budget shortfalls in out years.

Councilmember Emerson asked what new duties would be performed by the position and how many plans are reviewed annually.

Councilmember Hiller questioned the need for the position and if the fire fighters that are stationed in less-active fire stations could perform the duties.

Chief Duke stated the newly requested position is a full-time position and fire fighters could not conduct the necessary inspections of buildings because they could not leave their assigned station.

Brent Trout reported the position would be responsible for reviewing plans on a full-time basis. He stated they would distribute a detailed explanation of the need for the position to the Governing Body.

Bill Fiander, Planning and Development Director, reported the position will review approximately 500 plans annually and requires a significant amount of pre-planning review meetings.

Discussion ensued by Governing Body members on improved services as it relates to the inspections and requirements of Fire Work Stands.

James Jackson, Public Works Director, provided an overview of the Public Works Department budget. He highlighted curb and gutter allocations, Traffic Operations, and Save Our Street Sales Tax program enhancements.

Councilmember Duncan requested Staff perform an assessment of operational costs as it relates to privatizing forestry, mowing and street cleaning, *etc.*

James Jackson reported the City Manager has directed Staff to evaluate street operations specifically as it relates to a hybrid approach for services.

Deputy Mayor Padilla stated he concurs with Councilmember Duncan. He asked Staff to provide a cost savings analysis for second party vendors that perform specialized services to help with the appearance of the city.

Councilmember Hiller questioned the cost of assessing a digital inventory of City trees versus using Forestry Department employees or Google Earth to assist with performing the task.

Hannah Uhlrig, Deputy Public Works Director, reported Staff plans to leverage data already collected from the assessment of streets as it relates to trees located in easements and public right-of-ways.

James Jackson stated they do not have a set cost at this time, and a detailed assessment of each type of tree needs to take place to have a full understanding of the City's tree inventory. He stated they are hopeful they will be able to obtain a highly accurate count of the trees located in public right-of-ways and public spaces utilizing the tools available to them through technology.

Hannah Uhlrig reported they did undertake driving city streets when collecting the Pavement Index Condition (PCI) data, which included the imagery of all right-of-way assets. She stated she would need to review the cost structure to provide an accurate count in terms of how much it would cost to obtain the specific tree inventory data.

James Jackson expressed the importance of identifying the species of each tree to ensure the viability of the city's urban tree canopy.

Hannah Uhrig, Deputy Public Works Director, provided an overview of the Technical Support, Business Services, Facilities Management and Fleet Services operating budgets.

Councilmember Ortiz reminded Staff to implement a plan to cover the cost of lost parking revenue for the long-term because of more people working from home.

Councilmember Hiller asked if Staff was still working towards the preparation of an overall growth plan for parking as they work through deferred maintenance issues and if they could use American Rescue Plan (ARP) funds for improvements to parking infrastructure.

In response, Hannah Uhrig reported the following:

- Parking garage occupancy hovers close to 20% and lease occupancy remains low at 70% providing opportunity for parking options downtown as it expands.
- The parking revenue forecast and budgets for 2022 were decreased to support sound fiscal responsibility by making certain they can cover costs associated with fixed expenses and allocate capital expenditures and improvements as needed.
- They are projecting a loss of approximately \$400,000 in parking revenue for 2022 based on a monthly forecast trend at current parking rates. She reported the State of Kansas as well as other organizations have notified the City that they will not be purchasing parking leases at the same capacity as before; therefore, they remain conservative with revenue forecasts and budgets due to the unknown at this time.
- Discussions will continue over the next couple of months regarding the substantial impact deferred maintenance and capital improvements will have on the Parking Fund. It was noted, that while they would like to discuss what this would look like from a financial and rate increase standpoint moving forward, the 2022 Parking Division budget was built on the assumption of the same model and what they are seeing at this time and projecting as best they can over the next year.
- They are cautiously moving forward with parking enhancements that can be included in the overall growth plan by addressing infrastructure safety issues first as well as lighting and security concerns in 2021 and 2022. More in-depth conditions of each parking garage and the parking system in totality will be discussed at the next Public Infrastructure Committee meeting. She noted they plan to continue some incremental improvements.

Brent Trout reported ARP funds could only be used to reimburse loss of revenue in the General Fund.

Stephan Wade, Interim Administrative and Financial Services Director, provided an overview of the County Wide Sales Tax portion of the Sales Tax Fund and the Save Our Streets Sales Tax Fund. He noted they are seeking authorization to use contingency amounts for both funds as work capacity allows.

Councilmember Emerson questioned the funding source of the County Wide Sales Tax contingency funds.

Brent Trout reported from time to time, a contingency fund balance is carried based on project projections.

Councilmember Hiller asked for confirmation that the fund amount did not include the allocation of Joint Economic Development Organization (JEDO) funds in the amount of \$5 million for contracted services.

Braxton Copley, Utilities Department Director, provided an overview of the Water, Waste Water and Stormwater operating budgets. He reported on challenges related to cost of chlorine and PVC piping as well as shortages and cost increases due to the COVID-19 pandemic. He highlighted efficiencies in overall customer service center upgrades, meter services and operations.

Councilmember Valdivia-Alcala inquired on the shortage of Water Department employees due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Councilmember Ortiz thanked Utilities Director Copley for implementing upgrades to the customer service portal system.

Braxton Copley reported the drastic shortage in staff has transpired over the past six months due to people making more money collecting COVID-19 pandemic unemployment

benefits than working a regular job. He noted the City has contracted the services of temporary employment agencies to assist with staff shortages.

Councilmember Hiller suggested offering bonuses based on increments of time a temporary employee remains employed with the City, encouraging them to become permanent employees. She expressed concern with the financing of projects (bonding versus paying cash) and encouraged Staff to continue to reduce overall bonding amounts. She inquired on how the repair of water mains is being improved to avoid multiple breaks within the same city block.

Braxton Copley reported in 2017, the City implemented an asset management plan which outlines the size of pipes and the type of pipe material used when the waterlines were constructed, which helps Staff understand how to prevent multi breaks within the same city block when repairing water main breaks.

Councilmember Emerson commended Utilities Director Copley for implementing technology that allows the reduction and/or repurposing of employees. He encouraged other City departments to do the same for improved efficiencies.

Jacque Russell, Human Resources Director, provided an overview of the Workers Compensation Fund; and the Risk Fund that includes a 15% anticipated market driven increase in property insurance rates over 2021. She stated the Health Insurance Fund included a 4% increase in 2021; however, a clinical savings of approximately \$150,000 is anticipated due to a change in management from Healthstat Inc. to Everside Health. She noted the Unemployment Fund expenses exceed revenues at this time due to the 2020 reductions in force. She reported the City only pays 50% of the unemployment costs associated with the COVID-19 pandemic due to quarterly reimbursement payments paid to the City from the State of Kansas for unemployment expenses.

Councilmember Hiller expressed concern with the \$2 - \$3 million paid in workers compensation and if those funds carry-over from year to year. She asked if the City recognizes outstanding safety practices in field operations.

Jacque Russell reported the fund remains fluid depending on the type of claims each year; however, there are some death claims that carry over from year to year.

Brent Trout, City Manager, provided an overview of the Mayor and City Council operating budgets and reported no significant changes for 2022. He noted there would be minimal additional expenses associated with the election of a new mayor.

Brent Trout, City Manager, provided an overview of the Executive Department operating budget. He reported the Deputy City Manager position was eliminated in 2020 and replaced with the newly created Chief of Staff position in 2021; and the Community Engagement Division, now under the Executive Department, would require additional funds to support the newly negotiated contract with the State of Kansas for the inmate program, a vital service to the City to address blight.

Councilmember Naeger inquired on the hourly compensation for inmate crews being paid by the City.

Brent Trout stated inmates would receive \$10 an hour.

Councilmember Valdivia-Alcala requested more information on the details of the inmate program. She encouraged Staff and the Governing Body to be mindful of the actual benefits the program offers inmates.

Monique Glaude, Community Engagement Division Director, reported private sector companies are offering \$14 to \$16 per hour, and in order for the City to be competitive, they

must offer something similar. She commended the Public Works Department for sharing the costs of the inmate program.

Councilmember Lesser requested additional information on the details of the inmate program. He stated the program provides an opportunity for full-time employment for inmates upon release of the correctional facility.

Councilmember Ortiz spoke in support of the program and its successes. She requested Staff keep the Governing Body apprised of drastic changes in programs such as this.

Brent Trout stated Staff would provide a detail report on the inmate program. He reported budget discussions would continue through July and he encouraged Governing Body members to send questions to Staff.

Deputy Mayor Padilla requested all question and answer documents be distributed to the Governing Body.

NO FURTHER BUSINESS appearing the meeting was adjourned at 12:19 p.m.

(SEAL)

Brenda Younger
City Clerk