

A work session of the Astoria Common Council was held at the above place at the hour of 6:00 pm.

Councilors Present: Nemlowill, Jones, Price, Brownson, and Mayor LaMear.

Councilors Excused: None

Staff Present: City Manager Estes, Community Development Director Cronin, Parks and Recreation Director Cosby, Parks Maintenance Supervisor Dart-McLean, Aquatic Center Supervisor Dennis, Recreation Coordinator Reading, Parks Communications and Office Manager Benoit, Finance Director Brooks, Fire Chief Ames, Police Chief Johnston, Public Works Director Cook, Library Director Pearson, and City Attorney Henningsgaard. The meeting is recorded and will be transcribed by ABC Transcription Services, Inc.

### **REVIEW OF PARKS DEPARTMENT BUDGET AND FUTURE IMPLEMENTATION OF PARKS MASTER PLAN**

City Manager Estes explained that the Parks Department budget was just one component of the City's entire budget and decisions made in the past have led to this need to discuss the department's current circumstance. The Parks Department can no longer afford to provide the same level of service because expenses have increased as levels of service have changed over time.

Director Cosby played a video that demonstrated the services currently being offered by the Parks Department. She gave a Power Point presentation that reviewed the history of the department's finances, staffing levels, services, and facilities; the historic events that led to the Parks Department's current situation; existing conditions, and options for moving forward. She also detailed Staff's recommendations for increasing revenues and making changes to levels of service, noting how each would result in implementation of the Parks Master Plan. Copies of the presentation were made available. Another video was shown describing the funding system for the parks system in the City of Tigard. Parks Maintenance Supervisor Dart-McLean, Aquatic Center Supervisor Dennis, Recreation Coordinator Reading, Parks Communications and Office Manager Benoit each gave short presentations specific to the areas of the Parks Department that they manage. During the presentation, Staff responded to questions and comments from Council with the following notable remarks:

- Deed restrictions on several City-owned properties were discussed in detail. Staff suggested the City hire a professional to find out how these deed restrictions would impact selling the Yacht Club property or expanding the Aquatic Center into the parking lot shared with the movie theater.
- The Northcoast Swim Club received a \$1,000 scholarship from the Parks Foundation for the club's low-income swimmers. The Parks Department can provide Aquatic Center passes to swimmers that qualify, but Staff needs direction from Council before negotiating a swim lane rental fee with the club. The club had indicated in December that \$2.50 per lane per hour was unacceptable.
- Staff recommended increasing revenue through a utility surcharge, which would be charged to all utility customers in Astoria. Revenues would be deposited into the General Fund.
- Any updates to the franchise agreement between the City and Recology would need to be approved by City Council.

Council and Staff briefly discussed the tennis court at Columbia Field, which is not lit so it is not used much. The school district owns the property, but Astoria maintains the grounds.

Councilor Price stated that the Master Plan prioritized core services, but it would be important to implement that prioritization. And while the Master Plan suggested eliminating services to decrease the demand on the department's resources, she believed this would be difficult to do. If a utility fee were approved, the fee would need to be \$7.00 or \$8.00 in order to maintain the current level of service.

Mayor LaMear called for a short recess at 7:42 pm. The work session reconvened at 7:49 pm.

Councilors Price, Jones, and Brownson were in favor of considering a utility fee of about \$8.00 per month. They also believed Council should discuss what to do with the least utilized parks. Eliminating underutilized parks would save on maintenance expenses, but could also reduce revenue.

Councilor Brownson understood the reason for selling the Recreation Center (ARC) to accommodate consolidation of services. However, there are issues with deed restrictions and problems expanding into the Aquatic Center. He believed the ARC could be used for housing or used in some other way to generate revenue. City Manager Estes said simply closing the ARC would detrimentally impact revenues, but Staff could still research potential issues with selling the property or expanding into the Aquatic Center.

Councilor Brownson suggested expanding the trail system, increasing revenues through a food and beverage tax, and creating a cemetery taxing district. Staff explained the difficulties with sales taxes and said past discussions about such a tax were highly controversial. City Manager Estes added that Mayor LaMear had suggested a cemetery taxing district at a joint meeting of all the municipalities in the county last year, but there was no support. He had suggested the City of Warrenton contribute some of its general fund dollars towards cemetery maintenance when Warrenton City Councilors expressed concerns about the condition of the cemetery.

Councilor Price reiterated that she believed prioritizing services was very important. Affordability is key, so if a utility tax is implemented some parks and services must be eliminated. Additionally, the tax will need to be high enough to offer more than just the basics and increase the scholarship fund. Director Cosby noted that scholarship money is provided by the Parks Foundation, not the City's General Fund. The Foundation uses the same eligibility guidelines that the school district uses for free and reduced lunches. No applicants have been turned away because the Foundation does such an amazing job fundraising.

Councilor Jones said he was in favor of eliminating some services. However, the City should continue to maintain Li'l Sprouts, even if it does not produce revenue, because it fills such a huge need in the community. Youth sports should also continue because Astoria does not have many other options.

Councilor Nemlowill believed Council should rely on Staff to set the priorities. The priorities should be those things the City can offer that no one else ever would, like the Aquatic Center. Other things, like the annual Monster Bash, do not impact people's daily lives and the downtown businesses put on quite an event handing out candy. So, the community would have other options if the City were no longer able to offer those types of events. The City should also look for community partners that can take over some of the services. For example, the school district could take over the after school program.

Councilor Nemlowill said Staff's burden on underutilized properties should be eased. Tidal Rock Park is a blight on downtown Astoria. The park is in an urban renewal district tasked with curing urban blight. However, deed restrictions on that site present challenges. She supported the exploration of a utility fee and suggested a percentage instead of a flat rate or charging residential customers different from commercial and industrial users.

Director Cosby confirmed for Councilor Nemlowill that the biggest savings could come from eliminating drop-in childcare. This would not affect the families who rely on full-time childcare. Special events could also be eliminated and Staff would try to get community partners to take over the events because they are so popular. The Master Plan prioritized athletics very low, but eliminating those programs would have a huge impact on the community. Staff explained that the City would need an adopted scholarship program before seeking sponsors for fields or facilities. If Staff had some additional capacity, a more robust sponsorship program could be developed.

City Manager Estes added that eliminating the free events creates concern among social service groups that the City is no longer serving the underprivileged.

Staff explained the Chip-In program would not continue because the Department's requirements exceed incoming resources. Participation declined as Staff dedicated less time to the program. Volunteer programs require full time employees, which the City cannot afford. Eliminating the program does not prevent the City from working with community groups looking for volunteer opportunities, but volunteer recruitment and the organization of planned monthly events will no longer occur.

Councilor Price said she had noticed an increase in chemical use since some of Parks services had been contracted out and she wanted this controlled. She also recommended the City consider growing and propagating its own plants instead of buying or receiving donations of plants.

Mayor LaMear invited members of the audience to speak. Their questions and comments were as follows:

- Has Staff surveyed the community to find out how high of a utility fee citizens would be willing to pay?
  - City Manager Estes replied no. Councilor Nemlowill believed it would be too costly to gather that data. Director Cosby added that out of 102 survey participants, 88 said they strongly or very strongly supported a utility fee.
- The price to sponsor athletic programs should be increased because the people who participate in those programs are very passionate about sports.
- Council confirmed that Astoria residents who own businesses would have to pay the utility fee twice, once as a business and once as a resident.
- If the City sold properties, where would the money go?
  - City Manager Estes explained that the money would typically go into the Capital Improvement Fund. City Council could allocate money from the sale of a park to a specific function, but it could also fund projects in other departments.
  - Councilor Nemlowill believed the sale of any City property should be designated to the Parks Department, which has at least \$3 million in capital improvement needs.

Staff confirmed they understood Council had come to a consensus on the utility fee and asked Council for direction on next steps. Staff is urgent to move forward because prolonging decision-making would impact the General Fund. If Council could provide some direction now, Staff could be prepared for a follow-up work session in a month. Director Brooks explained she and Director Cosby had been working on the budget since January and they were almost done. If changes need to be made, all of the information must be prepared in time for the budget hearings, which begin in a few weeks. Staff must prepare the best budget possible with current resources while anticipating challenges that may occur throughout the year.

Councilor Price said it would not be prudent to make a decision on the Parks Department without considering the entire City budget. Staff agreed. City Manager Estes said once Pacific Power learns that Astoria is interested in a utility fee, they will begin a due diligence process. Director Cosby asked for direction on City property sales.

Councilor Brownson said he wanted more information on the salability of each property. Director Cosby explained Staff would need outside resources to gather that information. Mayor LaMear and Councilor Nemlowill believed just a few park sites should be researched. Councilor Brownson wanted the Customs House and grounds to be researched because the house is a recreation, the original was not at that site, and it is not used. Director Cosby said the dedicated park properties would require a different selling process than the parks that are not dedicated.


Councilors Jones and Nemlowill agreed Birch Field should be considered for sale.

Councilor Nemlowill wanted more details on updating the franchise agreement with Recology. Director Cosby said Recology would charge residential customers \$0.55 for garbage and \$0.80 if recycling was added for service every other week. Weekly service would cost \$1.23 for garbage. City Manager Estes confirmed Staff would type out the details and send them to Council.

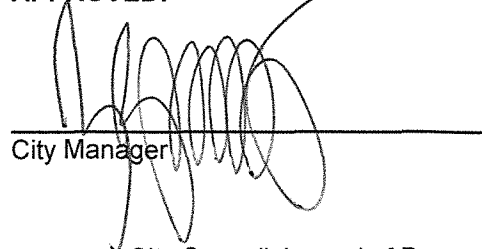
#### ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 8:40 pm.

#### ATTEST:

  
Finance Director

#### APPROVED:

  
City Manager