

A work session of the Astoria Common Council was held at the above place at the hour of 5:30 pm.

Councilors Present: Brownson, Herman, Rocka, Hilton, and Mayor Jones.

Councilors Excused: None

Staff Present: City Manager Estes, Parks and Recreation Director Dart-McLean, Parks Recreation Manager Bowker, Aquatic Center Supervisor Patterson, Parks Maintenance Supervisor Moritz and City Attorney Henningsgaard. The meeting is recorded and will be transcribed by ABC Transcription Services, LLC.

REGULAR AGENDA ITEMS

Item 3(a): Parks Department Resources and Activity Prioritization and Discussion

Director Dart-McLean gave a PowerPoint presentation on current resources and assets, the challenges with childcare and aquatics programs and the efforts to alleviate those challenges, as well as recommended solutions to Parks Department issues. During the presentation, Staff confirmed that the City loses about \$600 per month, per student. However, cost was not the only issue. The City is struggling to fill vacant staff positions, reduce employee turnover or keep employees trained. This year, instead of raising rates, the facility was closed so the City could provide in-service training. The City's rates are on par with other childcare service rates in the area, and City employees get a 20 percent discount. Staff also explained why the City was not eligible for grant funding, much of which was pandemic related. The families that Astoria serves are not within the income thresholds that would allow the City to be eligible for low-income programs. It was also noted that in response to many private childcare facilities closing, the County created a childcare taskforce to look at how to sustain private childcare services.

Mayor Jones noted that while childcare was not a core mission of the City, the City recognized that the private sector was incapable of meeting the childcare needs in the community. He asked if anyone involved in childcare in the County wanted to comment.

Kevin Leahy, Director of Clatsop Economic Development Resources (CEDR) said he spoke with Dan Gaffney about moving forward with the taskforce. Employee recruitment is complex for the public and private sector, but he was encouraged by the taskforce's discussions and meetings with the Governor's Office.

Jenny Pool, Consejo Hispano, stated lower income families cannot afford Astoria's childcare costs and that is why Astoria's childcare services are only used by families who make too much for the City to qualify for State grant funding. There are many families in the community that need Astoria's childcare services, but cannot afford it. She believed the subsidies would allow the City to pay higher wages, which would lead to consistent staffing.

Staff explained that the services provided by the City did not align with the funding source, so the childcare program did not receive any subsidies for low-income programs. The City is not eligible for grant funds because the State's guidelines cannot be met. Current staffing levels are already insufficient, so expanding the program and committing to a higher level of service would not be possible.

Ms. Pool stated the grant money needed to come first, but the City had to apply for it and be able to put forth a pilot program to show that the childcare program would be expanded. She understood that hiring full-time employees would be a bigger expense, but if the City put a proposal together, the City could apply for the grant funding. The City would have to take a risk, but she believed the City should try.

Councilor Brownson explained that the City already had a waiting list because the City could not currently accommodate full enrollment, so, inviting even more families and setting aside a certain number of spots for low-income families creates a complex problem.

City Manager Estes noted the only way to stabilize the childcare program would be to staff it with full-time employees, which would be paid for out of the General Fund.

Councilor Brownson added that federal and state funding comes and goes. If Astoria expands the childcare program, the City would need to fund it for the long run.

Councilor Rocka said the school district used a cooperative model that required a parent to commit to work a set number shifts in order to get a reduced cost for the program. He believed low-income families would be willing to work some shifts and he encouraged the City to consider a similar model. He did not believe that implementing such a model would create much of a burden on City Staff.

City Manager Estes stated Staff could look into grant opportunities and ways to allow parents to help. However, the issue was complex enough that adding parents to the mix would not solve the problem.

Ms. Pool stated that employers should contribute if they are able. Astoria's childcare needs to be a full-service, full-time program. Otherwise, Astoria will become a city for rich, white people and the city will not have people who can work in restaurants, hotels, and canneries. The added expense of staffing the program with full-time employees would be worthwhile.

Mayor Jones said everyone agreed that childcare was a critical service, but the City could not afford to permanently shut down the Aquatic Center in order to fund childcare, so the City would continue to look for other solutions.

City Manager Estes noted that service levels at the Aquatic Center would be reduced when the City's high school and college age employees go back to school.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 7:00 pm.

ATTEST:



Finance Director

APPROVED:



City Manager