

A work session of the Astoria Common Council was held at the above place at the hour of 1:00 pm.

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

Councilors Excused: None

Staff Present: City Manager Estes, Parks and Recreation Director Dart-McLean, Community Development Director Leatherman, Finance Director Brooks, Fire Chief Crutchfield, Police Chief Spalding, Deputy Chief Halverson, Sergeant Randall, Public Works Director Harrington, Library Director Pearson, and City Attorney Henningsgaard. The meeting is recorded and will be transcribed by ABC Transcription Services, LLC.

REGULAR AGENDA ITEMS

Item 3(a): Discussion of Expulsion Zone Ordinance and other Programs to Address Quality of Life Issues

City Manager Estes said one of the Council's goals was to explore an expulsion zone and other methods of addressing quality of life issues. There has been discussion in the community and among the Council about ways to address issues with camping, loitering, and other issues in parks and rights-of-way. The business community planned to hold meetings in March to discuss this and other topics. Staff had encouraged interested parties to attend this work session or review the video of this work session.

Chief Spalding, Deputy Chief Halverson, and Sergeant Randall gave a PowerPoint presentation on Staff's research into expulsion zones and other programs. The presentation included a brief history of Astoria's quality of life issues; court decisions, laws and other challenges with addressing these issues that impacted the City; items that will need to be addressed and prioritized by the Council; and Staff's recommendations about how to move forward. The information collected for this presentation was collected from a variety of expert resources. CIS Insurance's legal department has agreed to assist Staff when responding to questions about the homelessness problem. Chief Spalding emphasized that the issues being discussed were caused by a very small number of individuals and was not representative of the entire homeless population.

City Manager Estes clarified that emergency shelters are regulated by the State Fire Marshall. Some building codes are bypassed in order to allow the shelters to operate, but there are criteria that must be met. Emergency shelters are only allowed to operate for 90 days. He noted the First Methodist Church as an example where people are sleeping in the fellowship hall, but that did not meet Building Code and the time limit is a factor.

Councilor Hilton said there was a restroom across from the old YMCA with the Clatsop Behavioral Health (CBH) office next door. The City should investigate the availability of those types of spaces because they could be resources that would allow the community to get ahead of the curve. He liked the idea of requiring community service in lieu of citations and fines because it could be an impetus for change in behavior and would encourage people to police the areas and pick up trash.

Councilor Brownson said he wanted Staff to prioritize dealing with aggressive behaviors. He also liked Staff's recommendations for handling personal property. City Manager Estes explained that the Council would need to consider the financial implications of storing property.

Mayor Jones stated the Garden of Surging Waves was Astoria's most highly visible park and for some reason, more people have chosen to camp there lately. He agreed that if updating the ordinances on delinquent vehicles was easy for Staff, that would definitely make a difference to the community. He would also like to restrict aggressive panhandling the way Wilsonville has. He asked if an ordinance directed at panhandling could also address any other type of aggressive approach. A lot of citizens have said they have been aggressively approached with a verbal barrage of some sort that may not have been related to asking for money.

Chief Spalding responded that laws were already on the books addressing unruly behaviors. Deputy Chief Halverson explained that disorderly conduct could apply depending on the behavior, but freedom of speech could be an issue. Police do respond to calls regardless of whether they believe they could charge someone just to keep the peace. Sergeant Randall added that asking someone for money using aggressive behavior makes panhandling unique from disorderly conduct. The courts have ruled that just yelling, shouting and insulting is protected by freedom of speech. However, the addition of asking for money raises the behavior to an offense.

Mayor Jones said it would be great if the Police Department could work with store managers to address the issues with grocery carts. Otherwise, he would be in favor of an ordinance. He was also in favor of expulsion zones.

Chief Spalding confirmed he was clear about what next steps the Council would like to see.

City Manager Estes also confirmed that despite the technical difficulties, both the audio recording and the PowerPoint presentation would be made available to the public.

Mayor Jones called for a recess.

Item 3(b): Discussion and Prioritization of Parks Services – Sprouts Learning Center and Other Activity Programs

City Manager Estes said this was a follow-up discussion on Parks Department services, capacity and priorities specifically focusing on Li'l Sprouts and childcare issues, most recently discussed at work sessions in the Fall of 2021. Staff had issued a request for expression of interest (RFEI) in a public private partnership. The following presentation would update the Council on the results of the RFEI and Staff's evaluation of options that were discussed at the work session.

Director Dart-McLean gave a PowerPoint presentation that included an overview of previous discussions, updates on the current staffing and financial situation with a focus on the viability of childcare services, and options for next steps. Labor shortages, the housing shortage, and the City's limits on part-time Staff greatly reduced the capacity of aquatics and childcare programs, which were the main focus of the Parks Department after the pandemic began. Both of the program's expenses are increasing while Staffing continues to decrease. Only one group responded to the RFEI, but after working with Staff, the group found it would not be able to meet the financial burdens and could not guarantee adequate staffing. He provided details about current staffing levels, which were critically low. He also updated the Council on his work with the Clatsop County Childcare Advisory Workgroup to provide funding, services and programs that supported childcare providers throughout the county. As he presented options for moving forward, he explained how each option would impact staffing, City funds, and families receiving childcare from the City. He asked the Council to provide Staff with direction on priorities and strategic guidance for allocating resources.

Mayor Jones said he had always felt childcare was one of the most important community health components. Childcare is also one of the most difficult services to provide without significant subsidies. It was disappointing that the federal government has never made childcare a top national priority. When the Li'l Sprouts program was first created, the City stepped in because the need for childcare was not being met by the private sector. Unfortunately, he believed that it was unsustainable for the City to continue providing childcare service. Childcare has been at offered at the expense of other equally important community health programs that benefit many more people. He believed it was time to terminate the program. He did not want the City to have to make that choice, but he did not see any viable option.

Councilor Hilton stated he agreed with the Mayor. The City has to move forward with the reality of the situation. He had heard that citizens want to have youth sports, a swimming pool, and outdoor activities. The choice is difficult to make, but it is fiscally responsible to the citizens to terminate the childcare program.

Councilor Herman said she agreed as well. The Parks Department has provided an outstanding childcare program for a number of years with very limited resources. The strain on the budget and on staffing have increased exponentially to the point that childcare is no longer sustainable. The Council needs to be mindful of the City's limited dollars and fund programs that serve the greatest number of people.

Councilor Rocka asked if Staff had conversations with the hospital, school, and Coast Guard about participating in childcare services.

Director Dart-McLean said Staff had asked Columbia Memorial Hospital (CMH) if they had any desire to a long-term relationship and pay into a designated space. CMH was not sure they would have enough staff.

City Manager Estes added that Mark Kujala works for CMH and serves as chair of the County Commission. He confirmed that Director Dart-McLean had been speaking about these issues as part of the county-wide process.

Director Dart-McLean stated he made it clear to Commissioner Kujala and Commissioner Bangs, who were also on the County's advisory group, that Astoria's childcare program had been on a downward spiral. He had also explained to them why the shared services model would not benefit Li'l Sprouts.

Councilor Rocka noted that number of families being served was quite small and he wondered if childcare for those families could be handled on an individual basis. Unfortunately, he did not see any way to continue the program.

Councilor Brownson agreed and said other childcare providers in the city had already gone out of business. The City is too small to take this on. Since being on the Council, he had seen the Parks Department struggle at all levels and the struggle would not get any easier. Cities do not have opportunities to increase revenues and inflation would not cover the expenses as demands increase. The school district as well had been cutting back on extracurricular activities.

Councilor Rocka asked how much time families would have to find new childcare. Director Dart-McLean said that would depend on how quickly the Council wanted Staff to act. He recommended that changes coincide with the end of the current fiscal year.

City Manager Estes agreed that the end of the fiscal year would be a good time to transition with a new budget proposal that would start July 1, 2022.

Craig Hoppes, Astoria School District Superintendent, stated the need for childcare was huge but there was also a huge need to keep youth active, especially after the last two years. The school district held sports camps all summer long and added a basketball program over the winter. About 300 children were served over the summer and 350 were served over the winter. He agreed that the City's model was not sustainable, and help needed to come from the federal government because the resources are so limited in rural communities. The school district continued to work on their own staff's childcare issues, which will impact the ability to bring staff back.

Dan Gaffney, Clatsop County Childcare Advisory Workgroup member, said nine years ago as an elementary school principal, he saw the need for childcare. Ten years ago, when he retired, he started working in early childhood advocacy and continued to do so. He was disappointed that the County had not moved faster. People and groups were stepping forward, but leadership was not strong enough. He believed that if the workgroup could show other cities what Astoria had already done and what the County was willing to do, the other cities would be willing to participate in a cost sharing model. However, that would take time. He understood Astoria's challenges and understood that tough decisions needed to be made. He would continue to advocate and be a resource. He knew of one entity in the county that had expressed interest in providing funds and another entity would be approached soon. He would keep Staff informed about how that moves forward. He thanked Staff for filling such a huge need over the years.

Councilor Brownson said he hoped the City would continue supporting and advocating for childcare services in any way possible.

Mayor Jones noted that public comments would not be taken during this work session. However, members of the public could send written comments to the City Manager, who would forward the comments to the City Council. Additionally, the public could comment at the regular City Council meeting where the action items would be discussed. All written comments would be available at the meeting.

City Manager Estes understood that the Council supported transitioning out of the Li'l Sprouts program at the end of the fiscal year and look for ways to continue supporting childcare services in other ways. He

recommended that the Council be receptive to allowing an outside entity to take over the program and remain in the current facility. Low or reduced rent could incentivize such a partnership. He asked if the Council would be willing to offer financial assistance for childcare services.

Director Dart-McLean noted that financial assistance, like direct payments to local childcare providers, had not been discussed in great detail by the County workgroup because it is an abstract idea. The workgroup has discussed a shared service support model that would help pay for a subscription to childcare service software. City Staff could provide coaching and low rent or free use of Astoria's childcare space would be very easy for the City to provide. Partnerships with large employers could help alleviate costs to families or provider's expenses.

Councilor Rocka said he wanted the City to discuss all of the options mentioned by Director Dart-McLean.

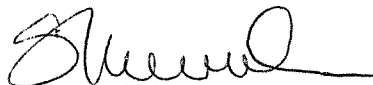
City Manager Estes confirmed there was consensus among the Council that Staff should continue exploring alternative options for supporting childcare and present ideas and opportunities to the City Council for implementation.

Director Dart-McLean added that he would begin working on the budget for the next fiscal year. He would also ask the County workgroup at their next meeting how the City could best support childcare providers in the county. He confirmed that Staff and parents would be notified tomorrow about the Li'l Sprouts program.

ADJOURNMENT

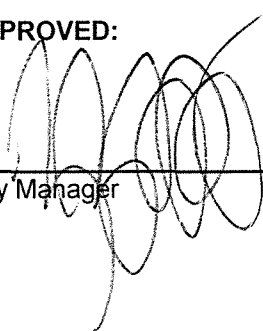
There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 4:00 pm.

ATTEST:



Finance Director

APPROVED:



City Manager