

**WORKSHOP MEETING
OF THE COUNCIL OF THE
CITY OF VADNAIS HEIGHTS
SEPTEMBER 1, 2020**

The workshop meeting of the Council of the City of Vadnais Heights was held on the above date and called to order by Mayor Gunderson at 5:30 p.m.

The following members were present: Mayor Heidi Gunderson, Council Members: Greg Urban, Patricia Youker and Bob Morse. The following member was absent: None.

Also present were: City Administrator Kevin Watson, Assistant City Administrator Tim Sandvik, Planning/Community Development Director Nolan Wall, Finance Director Bob Sundberg, Public Works Director Jesse Farrell, and City Attorney Caroline Beckman.

1. Update on 2021 Budget

Finance Director Bob Sundberg noted that after Council feedback at the August 26th Workshop, staff are proposing to spend additional funds for a total of \$240,000 and to move some CIP items up to 2020 from 2021. With those changes, staff are now proposing about a 3.39% increase in the levy instead of a decrease.

Mayor Gunderson asked if anyone had any comments. Council Member Urban said it sounds like Ramsey County is keeping their taxes flat. Staff confirmed that is true. Urban said he thought Ramsey County would be going up 6 to 10% so a 3.39% increase in the City's levy wouldn't matter much, but if they are only going up a little, it could be good for us to come in at around 2% instead of 3.39%. Mayor Gunderson said that she appreciates the list from staff, and suggested that the Council look at the list of items and see what it wants to move up so that we can stay around 2%. The Council discussed which of the three pieces of equipment they feel would be the most needed.

City Administrator Watson asked Finance Director Sundberg what 3.39% would mean to the average home. Sundberg said the medium value home would go up about \$5.00. He said that the tax base in the City has gone up by about \$1.6 million this past year. Residential values increased more than commercial values. Therefore, some of the tax burden will be shifted to residential properties from commercial properties. Sundberg said there is not much of an impact with a 3.39% levy increase. Council Member Morse said he would make a recommendation that any increase be communicated well with the public because it's all how you message it. Gunderson said she took another look at the draft budget after the last Workshop and there is not a lot of fluff. She said no one likes to raise taxes, but at the end of the day, the City has needs and 3.39% would only mean \$5.00.

Urban said he is curious how parks are seeing an increase in use and that this is seen as a real value to the residents. He asked if we are seeing more usage in our City parks this year. City Administrator Watson replied yes and that there is an eagerness to see Kohler Park improved.

Gunderson said if we went down to a 2% levy, what would the increase be to individual property taxes? Sundberg replied right around zero. Morse again said if we go with the 3.39%, we would need to communicate it well. Watson said that the percentages are for the Council, we could just say we are going to increase the rate by \$5.00, the percentage is just part of the story the Press tells. Gunderson said we are not proposing to buy new fountains, we are only taking care of vehicles that need to be replaced, and while they can be pushed off, they will still need to be replaced in the near future. Public Works Director/City Engineer Farrell noted that everything that was shown for purchase in 2019 and 2020 has been supported by the Council, so if all these items are purchased this year, we would stay on schedule. He said that everything staff are asking for is what is needed, and he would be concerned if we don't get it next year, then there becomes a backlog.

Gunderson said that she can see that the proposed needs coming up are big. \$2.5 million in 2025. She said she doesn't see how kicking down \$80,000 for a couple years would help.

Urban said he would like to see a 2.5% levy but would be fine with a 3.39% levy. Gunderson noted that at this time, the Council just needs to set the maximum. Sundberg replied yes, not tonight, but at the next City Council meeting. Gunderson said the City's residents care about streets, parks and public safety. She said maybe we set the maximum at 3.39% and then talk about it again at the next Workshop.

Morse said he really likes the path that this Council has set and how staff has responded to things nimbly and quickly, we don't have a lot of fat, the City is very trim. Streets are getting fixed, we are getting some amenities such as pickle ball courts. Gunderson said that she appreciates all the work that goes into developing the budgets each year.

2. Community Engagement Committee

Assistant City Administrator Sandvik noted that before the Council is an ongoing discussion about how to better communicate and engage with citizens. He noted that the original deadline for application was August 16, and because of limited numbers, the Council extended the deadline. Sandvik reviewed the path taken and noted that staff are now looking for direction on moving forward. Mayor Gunderson said that typically the sweet spot for a Committee in a City of our size is around seven. She mentioned that Pastor Chris from Christ the Servant Church sent in a letter of interest. Gunderson questioned that, if the goals of this Committee is to strengthen our communication with our residents, perhaps someone from a community partner whether a school (student) or someone from a non-profit that is based or services our City, should be recruited.

Gunderson asked if anyone has a preference in how the Council chooses the committee members. Council Member Youker said that she would prefer to do it by location. Gunderson asked if we can get addresses for all the applicants. Council Member Morse asked if it would make sense to utilize the precincts that are in place. Gunderson said we could. Youker asked if the voting precincts break it down evenly. Sandvik said that the precincts are roughly broken down by population.

Gunderson said that it would be good to get more information about the geography and maybe that will make things more clear when making selections. She also asked Sandvik to reach out to Pastor Chris. She asked what the Council thought about a high school student. The Council agreed. Gunderson said that she would reach out to the two school districts and to the non-profits.

Sandvik noted that there may be some areas or gaps in the letters received. He said that some letters were a little more robust and asked if the Council would be okay with him reaching out to get additional information from those that submitted letters.

Morse said he would be interested in having a defined problem or problems within the City from the Committee.

Gunderson said again that she is thankful for the amount of people that have applied.

3. Parks and Rec Update

Assistant City Administrator Sandvik gave a handful of parks updates. He noted that in the past the Parks Commission would come forward with an update, but because they have not met since the spring, staff are providing the update.

Westfield Rink and Puzzle Exchange

Sandvik noted that is a swampy park which makes for challenging accommodations. He said that the boards on the rink at Westfield have been falling apart. Staff are recommending taking the boards out. Sandvik noted that staff have done participant counts over the past couple years, and there are only a limited number of people that utilize the park in the winter. He said that he is looking at how the City might be able to do a skate path concept through the park with a pleasure rink. He said that both projects, grading and taking the boards down, could be done this fall. Mayor Gunderson asked how and what piece of equipment would be utilized to maintain that. Sandvik replied the groomer with the sweeper attached would probably be the best. Gunderson asked how you would flood something like that. Sandvik replied that you start with a base and identify what the path will be, start with a couple of inches once the ground has frozen deep enough. Gunderson asked if these types of skate paths have been well received in other communities and how would the City promote it. Sandvik replied that it is very popular and that most communities don't have this type of open space that would allow them to put in a skate path.

Council Member Urban asked if we are going to remove the boards, would it be done before winter. He also asked why we need water service at this park. Sandvik replied that the water is for the restroom in the warming house. Urban said this is a neighborhood park and he's not sure that a winter restroom is that important. He also asked about the usage of the park and what is the desire of the local neighborhood. Sandvik said on a busy Saturday they would see about a couple dozen kids. Urban asked why it has to be staffed. Sandvik said that staffing it allows them to open the warming house but the City could put out a port-a-john and benches. Urban said he doesn't think it needs to be staffed and also that the warming house doesn't need to be open but he's not sure this is the time of year to take it down, he said we should leave it as is and engage the community on what they want at the park. Sandvik said that staff is not asking for direct feedback from the Council at this time and that they could seek out feedback from the neighborhood. Urban said if he was a hockey player he would be dressed for it and wouldn't need the warming house. Public Works Director/City Engineer Farrell noted that the time of year that the skating rinks are open is typically the coldest part of the year. Gunderson said that she agrees with what Council Member Urban is saying but she doesn't see the logic in spending much to fix it if we are only getting a dozen kids a day, however, a skating trail might be enough novelty, with enough promotion, to increase the use of that park. She said that she's not sure that City residents are even aware of this park because she didn't know it was there until she became a Council Member.

Gunderson asked about the cost of making a skate path, and if we make it and promote it, would we see an increase usage at the park, and if so, maybe then we could make updates to the warming house. Sandvik replied that the primary expense for putting in a skate path would be for staff time because they would be starting with a simple concept. Sandvik said there may be some value in some of the boards that would be taken down. Sandvik said the cost of doing the skate path may be a week's worth of work, at an hour or two a day, and then use of the equipment?

Urban asked if staff are supporting taking down the boards at this time. Sandvik replied yes. Urban asked why after looking at the boards all summer they want to remove them now when they will be used soon. Sandvik replied that they would be removing the broken boards strategically, to allow the use of the rink to those using the skate path and leaving an area for hockey. Urban said he would like to see some sort of engagement with the neighborhood about this proposal. Gunderson asked if we can we leave the boards alone this year, or are the boards such a bad safety issue that we need to take them down now. Sandvik said it is staff's recommendation to take them down this year. He said that they could send a postcard the neighborhood to get feedback from the residents in the area.

Council Member Morse said that he is very appreciative of having the two rinks in town and that hiring high school students to work at the rinks would make little difference to the City's budget but perhaps a big difference to them to get experience. He said that he would like to hang onto the two rinks because they are a part of the community.

Gunderson said that she thinks that two rinks are a great number to have, but the City needs to look at the use of the rink at Westfield and if it's not being used, it's probably not necessary to replace the boards.

City Administrator Watson suggested writing a letter to the residents in the neighborhood explaining the issue, giving them the history of the park, and ask them if they want the City to invest in the boards and the warming house. Also tell them that if they want that this year will be a test winter, to see how much the park is used to help the Council decide whether to invest \$100,000 or more in the park. Urban said it should be formatted based on the continued use of what is there.

Morse asked about using knee boards instead of the high boards? Sandvik again noted that it is staff's recommendation to take down the failing parts of the boards and leave ones on the one end that are okay and expand the path. Sandvik said that he thinks we can get the letter out to the residents this year and get feedback from them and still have enough time to do some work on it yet this year. Urban said if we have to remove some boards because of the shape they are in, fine, but that he would like the City to leave as many as possible.

Block Party Trailer:

Sandvik said that the Block Party Trailer with tables and chairs and games is seeing some age and it has not been used this year due to COVID. He noted that the trailer is getting older and will require some investment if the City wants to continue offering it for use by residents and there are some liability concerns also. He said that the equipment inside the trailer is aging and the City would have to make some investments in that. Mayor Gunderson asked if anyone had any comments. There were none. Sandvik said that it is staff's recommendation to discontinue use of the block party trailer. The Mayor said it could come back in the future if it the Council decides to bring it back.

Kohler Meadows Playground:

Sandvik handed out information about the playground grant application submittal. He noted that the City has received \$39,161.50 in a grant. He reviewed what equipment is eligible to purchase using the grant funds. He said if the Council approves receipt of this grant, staff will move forward with the playground improvements. Mayor Gunderson asked if there were any questions. There were none. Sandvik said that the Kohlers Meadow playground was budgeted for in the 2020 Approved Budget and that the total cost to the City is \$132,984.26.

Sandvik noted that the Parks Dedication fees can't be spent on ongoing maintenance of the parks and staff time, but can be spent on park improvements. He said that the City currently does ongoing maintenance to the tennis courts that comes out of ongoing maintenance dollars. Staff are proposing using the funds budgeted but not being spent on Kohler Meadows to be dedicated for pickle ball courts. Mayor Gunderson asked for

questions or comments. There were none. He said if the Council is good with this, staff will pursue some ideas and come back to the Council with a recommendation.

4. Staff Updates

Assistant City Administrator said that due to the canvassing elections laws, the Council will need to canvas the results within 3 to 10 days. There has been a decree that says that votes will be taken for up to 7 days following the election. This leaves the Council only two days to canvas the election results, the 12th or 13th of November and would only need about 20 minutes.

There being no further information, the meeting adjourned..

Approved