

Proposed City Budget Public Hearing
May 28, 2014

Mayor Grenier opened the duly scheduled and advertised public hearing in the City Hall Auditorium at approximately 6:30 p.m. Present were Councilors Remillard, Otis, Morgan Allain, Benski, Higbee, Rozek and Theberge. Councilor Nelson was absent due to recent surgery. Also present: City Manager James Wheeler, Police Chief Morency, Deputy Police Chief Valerino, Lt Buteau, Fire Chief Randall Trull, Deputy Fire Chief Soltys, Fire Department personnel, Corinne Cascadden, School Board Members, City Department Heads, Outside Agencies, citizens and the press.

Mayor Grenier laid out the ground rules stating that everyone has the right to speak either for or against a matter. There is no debate and there should be no specific questions directed to Council. Questions will be directed to the Mayor as Chair of the City Council. The Mayor will only allow comments from Berlin residents and they need to state their name and address so the City Clerk can enter their information into the record. There are many accounts to cover and this budget raises the proposed tax by 89 cents. The Mayor and Council had informal discussions on the budget and do not want to raise taxes another 89 cents so they will look to make more cuts and justify revenue projections. The community is struggling and right now out of roughly 4600 parcels, the City Comptroller reports that 384 properties are currently under tax lien for overdue taxes and pay 12% interest. Currently \$665,251 is owed to the City in back taxes. We have the highest unemployment rate in the state, one of the oldest populations and struggle with demographics which are part of the discussion on how to manage going forward. The Schools report that 58% of students are on free or reduced lunch. The Mayor emphasized these facts to let the public know the thought process the face while factoring the budget.

The Mayor will present each account, explain what the current appropriation is and what the 2015 appropriation is and will ask for comments after each account. The citizens were asked if they had any questions about the ground rules, there were none.

Mayor Grenier introduced the Council, City Manager James Wheeler, City Comptroller Patty Chase and City Clerk Deb Patrick.

Budget line items as follows:

M&CC: Pays benefits, worker comp and municipal audit. No comments

Administration: No comments

Elections: Two elections in this fiscal year. No comments

CH&OB: Includes upkeep, heat and maintenance of the building and courthouse. No comments.

Special Funds: Patty Chase explained this new line item covers the electric bill for the court house for the year. No comments

Property/Liability Insurance: No comments.

Central Services: Tax rate neutral, allows the Finance Department to track City purchases. No comments.

Discounts/Abatements: Set by the state and depends on veteran, blind exemptions. No comments

Personnel Benefits: For retirees and folks drawing retirement benefits. No comments

Contingency: Unappropriated money used for special community events. No comments.

Outside Agencies: No comments

Cemetery: For the operations, care, maintenance and mowing of cemeteries. No comments.

Police Department: The major change is the grant taken 3 years ago to fund officers and they must fund those 2 positions because if not funded, they need to pay the grant back. After this year, they will take a look at those appropriations.

Fire Department:

Tim Hallgren, 349 High Street, asked for the purpose behind the Fire Department budget reduction. The Mayor replied that the proposed City Manager budget does not include replacing 2 retired firefighters. The City Manager and Fire Chief will need to put together a plan to staff 4 people but they will need to get creative. Mr. Hallgren has lived here 27 years and understands the financial difficulty facing Berlin. He urged Council to continue the current staffing level which is integral to safety of both the staff and community.

Mayor Grenier stated that we will be in the middle of a revaluation next year and don't know what the property values will be, don't want to give the taxpayers a \$3.00 tax increase and don't want to be unattractive to new investors coming to Berlin.

Kristin Labonte, 4 Victoria Lane, watched a building burn in a fatal fire in Berlin last year. She and her husband were there with three young kids before any firefighters arrived. There were not enough firefighters on the line so her husband helped. She was standing next to a firefighter's wife who was worried about the safety of her husband because they were short-staffed. That said, Ms. Labonte realized that with her three young kids at home, she would pay anything for their safety.

David Roberts, 153 Cates Hill Road, agrees that we need to replace the 2 firefighters. Living on Cates Hill, he needs to know they are there for him since he is 1.6 miles from the nearest hydrant. With only 3 firefighters on shift, that would not be enough. He would like to know there are 2 firefighters to come save his family and 2 to save his house as well. We need a full staff to protect our citizens. He is willing to pay a tax increase for that protection.

Justin Jacques, 515 Willard Street, went to school here and came back to the community to raise his family. The firefighter cut would make his job expendable and he has an 18 month old to support. He like the other firefighters will risk anything for the City. He came back to give back through his job and hates that it is always the most expendable department.

Paul Ingersoll, 49 Gordon Avenue, while living in the south years ago was the recipient of a house fire that burned his home to the ground and lost everything to this devastating fire. He would like to see staffing remain the same and that they need to find extra money because we need an active fire department to protect our houses.

Fire Chief Trull, 25 Franklin Street, thanked the Mayor/Council for the time and hours spent to make a decision on what the community footprint should be. He respectfully disagrees about reducing 2 retirees and asked to please put them back in. He is concerned not only with the safety of the public and staff but also the negative effects on an investment to the City. It is their duty to assure the safety of the community and they understand the economic conditions of Berlin. The Fire Department is not recognized or appreciated for activities that happen outside the Fire Department. Besides their normal duties they worked for parents for playgrounds and placed new equipment, planted trees, built the snack shack at Community Field, made the stairs at Gaydo Field and also raised money to give to BHS so they could play at the Fisher Cats Stadium. All these activities bring value to the community. We could lose another business and lose another elderly person without the right staffing but these are all things that are not talked about. They are proud of taking care of the community. Recently there was an apartment building fire on a stove and the Fire Department responded within 3 minutes. That proves the value of responding with the right amount of personnel operating efficiently. With firefighters missing, vacations and sick leave

are challenged, survival will diminish, the loss of critical functions will have effects and there will be increased psychological stress on the firefighters. We need to remember that we have St Regis, Northern Lights and multi-family dwellings that are labor intensive and require more staff and they are building another 33 unit housing facility at NDHS on School Street. The Chief asked Council to please replace the 2 firefighters and keep the same staffing level and thanked them for their time and efforts.

Noah Hallgren, 1849 Riverside Drive, read a letter submitted by Kelly Poulin owner of the Hall of Greetings. Ms. Poulin wrote that the Fire Department saved her business on three separate occasions and each time resulted in success. She trusts the local Fire Department and wants to make sure we keep the same staffing levels and asked Council to keep that in mind.

Noah Hallgren, 1849 Riverside Drive, said they are not here just to fight for jobs but to fight for the safety of our citizens. To do the job they must have normalcy. He and his coworkers face real and dangerous situations and must put safety first.

Craig Gilchris, 449 Madison Avenue, agrees we need a strong department. We pay taxes so we must have services. They had a volunteer fire department where he came from because and you need backup but it is hard to find volunteers. If you ax 2 positions, it will make it harder to get call firefighters. The Fire Department should be proud they represent Berlin well and work hard. If taken away, it will be difficult to get it back. Vacant buildings go up fast in a fire. He doesn't know the cost but we need to keep those positions and keep everyone safe.

Margo Sullivan, 181 Madison Avenue, speaking for the agency she represents, they had three separate instances where the Fire Department responded to their calls within minutes. No injuries were sustained which is a testimonial to the Fire Department. You can go years when nothing happens but when it happens it is quite sobering.

Roland Berthiaume, 380 Norway Street, proud firefighter 14 years, handed out a graph showing how Fire Department staffing has 728 tours of duty per fiscal year. They provide 24 hour coverage, 365 days per year. They have 730 shifts with four firefighters per shift. It breaks coverage into 4 groups, with 4 firefighters per group working a 12 hour shift. A fifth man, or floater, is used to cover vacations, injury or sick time. Each floater works 183 shifts each year. The 2 floater positions are used to cover 364 shifts per year. The City Manager's proposed cut would be disastrous to the City and citizens. He asked the Council to please reconsider funding the Fire Department.

Gary Peters, 15 Arthur Street, proud 5 year firefighter, emphasized that every year at budget time they have to fight for their jobs again. They are in a position where they are working way beyond due to lack of staffing and give everything they have but keep on giving more. There is no time out during an emergency and it could lead to serious injury and workers comp claims. Statistics show that more than 100 firefighters die yearly. He asked Council how many times people die doing what they do for work. The City firefighters are more aggressive than the majority in the rest of the state due to the density of neighborhoods and age of our buildings. He gets it that Council doesn't want to raise taxes but this is his life and he wants to be able to go home to his family.

Kyle Carrigan, if they are cut down to less personnel than they have, which one on the Council will call a family to tell them their firefighters is not coming home. They do normal things to fight fires and are there for anyone or anything but if they cut the force down to less, they can't do their jobs. If they go into a big fire with 3 guys only one person is inside which is not a good thing. Does Council want to go to a family and tell them "sorry, we didn't want to raise taxes but your loved one is dead due to staffing cuts."

Firefighter Donovan handed out a copy of the Berlin Fire Department Emergency Response Report from 12/31/2013 – 5/25/2014 which showed the rapid response time from the 4 man crews.

Mike Couch, 29 Tenth Street, 13 years in the department, saved many buildings. Anytime there is a fire, cover response times are based on professional experiences. Last month there was an apartment fire on a Mason Street, with a quick response, the business was opened the next day. That is the reason they need 4 at all times. The results could have been different.

Bill Maddalena, 28 Haven Avenue, Fire Captain on the job 25 years. Alarm and arrival times are critical within 3 minutes of the call. All calls have the potential to be serious. We are different that most in the state because captains are the first person back in the fire. However, 25 years of working in sub zero weather have taken a toll on his body. As captains they are the 3 oldest and an effective crew needs 4 men. Northern lites needed an elevator rescue and the command was effective with 4 men. If taken away, do they risk a life or wait for others to help. That is a question you have to ask and put yourself in that situation. The Fire Department could potentially lose 3 senior captains. They are not asking for anything more, it is less than \$1.00 per week per house. He asked Council to please keep a full staff for their sake and for safety of the citizens of Berlin.

Tim Hallgren, 349 High Street, said a picture is worth a thousand words. The next time they see a house fire on the news, pay attention to what they see. There is usually an average between 6-8 pieces of equipment and a mutual aid system. We have an old and dense housing stock and have 4 guys and 2 trucks at a fire and we don't have others in muntal aid to help. We only have the guys on duty and small call fire department that stand between saving buildings and lives.

Justin Jacques added that 44 cents more in taxes would get 2 young people from the area to stay in Berlin and they would not be unemployed. We hire 2 local guys and they stay here and buy houses and pay taxes.

Street Lighting: No comments

Ambulance Service: No comments.

Special Public Safety: Roland Berthiaume asked what this is. The Mayor explained this is crossing guards, a line item for the Police Department crosswalk and special detail for construction. The corresponding revenue does more than offset the increase.

Housing Coordinator: No comments

Public Works: Gary Peters asked if they are ever going to change windows at the Public Works Garage to save money.

Engineering: Gary Peters confirmed that Jim Wheeler was the former City Engineer and asked how much engineering he can do to save money to do extra jobs.

Solid Waste: No comments.

Health Department: No comments.

Welfare: No comments.

Parks: No comments.

Recreation: No comments.

Library: No comments.

Debt Services: Mayor Grenier explained that 5 years ago the previous Council voted to borrow 5 million on a 5 year bank note. Realizing that was not good fiscal policy, this Council renegotiated a better bond and this was the first payment of the new bond. Main Street and many others projects are slated to be done next year from this bond issue. No comments.

Capital Improvement: No comments.

School: A citizen asked what the total student population was. The Mayor replied 1300 which is a little more than last year.

School debt service: No debt this year. Roland Berthiaume asked if not paying any debt was the reason behind the \$900,000 increase in the school budget. The Mayor confirmed that is correct.

Corinne Cascadden, 1787 Hutchins Street, thanked Council for their hard work on the school budget which is always challenging. Since public safety was a topic of conversation tonight in terms of election, she asked Council to consider removing the polling site at Brown School for safety reasons. There is no good way to separate the children which puts them at risk. The Middle School is a good working site where the children are separated from the public. She realizes that Council can't make that decision tonight but asked that they consider that request while moving forward with elections.

School Cap Imp: No comments.

County Tax: No comments.

Transfer out: Patty Chase explained it is a subsidy to the Airport, Sewer Fund and BIDPA to help balance the budget.

Mayor Grenier thanked all for coming tonight and concluded that the folks who spoke agree about the Fire Department. He is constantly working with Dave Lang to secure funds to offset these positions but the City is struggling. We are not doing better than we were three years ago. Lots of commercial businesses are struggling and in the middle of a revaluation might see a tax increase without doing anything. Council is not insulated and they have families and understand the tough decisions that have to be made. The median age in Berlin is 50 years old. We have old people living in old houses who can barely make ends meet and some pay 12% interest. The Mayor challenged all instead of begging for more to be creative and find ways to come up with the money.

There being no further comments or questions on the floor, Mayor Grenier declared the proposed budget public hearing closed at approximately 7:41 P.M.

A TRUE RECORD, ATTEST:

Debra A. Patrick, CMC
City Clerk