

**City Council Workshop
December 20, 2022
Council Chambers
6:03 PM**

COUNCILORS PRESENT

Councilor Beaudoin
Councilor Berlin
Councilor de Geofroy
Councilor Desrochers (remote)
Councilor Fontneau
Councilor Gilman
Councilor Gray
Councilor Hainey
Councilor Hamann
Councilor Larochelle
Councilor Malone
Deputy Mayor Lachapelle
Mayor Callaghan

OTHERS PRESENT

Blaine Cox, City Manager
Katie Ambrose, Deputy City Manager
Terence O'Rourke, City Attorney
Susan Rice, resident
Dave Tinkham, VFW

Minutes

1. Call to Order

Mayor Callaghan called the City Council Workshop meeting to order at 6:03 PM. He reminded all those present that Councilor Desrochers was connecting remotely via Microsoft Teams. Councilor Desrochers had confirmed prior to the City Council Special Meeting that it was reasonably impractical for her to attend the meeting in person. Deputy City Clerk Cassie Givara had taken a roll call attendance prior to the Special Meeting. All Councilors were present except for Councilor Malone, who arrived at 6:09 PM.

2. Public Input

Susan Rice, resident, addressed Council in regards to the government transparency and the Rochester Economic Development Commission.

3. Communications from the City Manager

City Manager Blaine Cox gave a summary of operations at the Willand Warming Center. He reported that there had been nine activations since the last Council update, with the number of guests ranging from 19 to 43, and the number of guests who claim Rochester as their residence ranging from 7 to 18 per evening. The activations were primarily due to low temperatures, with some activations due to winter storms and weather. There were a total of 7 service calls to the Somersworth police Department during these activations for de-escalation, medical issues, or mental and behavioral health crisis. He stated that SOS is still recruiting for warming center volunteers and asked those interested to reach out to SOS directly. The Willand Warming Center will be open for the evening for December 20 and December 21.

City Manager Cox said that Peter Nourse, Director of City Services, had reported that Friday's storm resulted in 7 ½ inches of heavy, wet snow. DPW crews worked from 2:00 AM Friday through 2:00 PM Saturday. Director Nourse said that 25% of the plow operators are new employees, which resulted in slightly slower service, but they will continue to improve and become familiar with their routes over time. City Manager Cox gave a brief summary of calls resulting from the storm, for downed trees, downed wires, and motor vehicles off the road.

City Manager Cox reported that the downtown parking ban had been instituted the prior evening; Wednesday, December 19.

The City Manager said that Rochester had been informed by the US Census Bureau that there will be a representative in the City conducting a mandatory survey, The American Community Survey. The information given by residents will remain confidential, by law.

Councilor Beaudoin inquired how the Willand warming center budget is doing at this point in the season. City Manager Cox said he did not have the number right off hand, but would be able to get the information and report back. He clarified that the center was budgeted for 90-nights of operation, and they were well within the budget currently.

4. Communications from the Mayor

Mayor Callaghan announced that Waypoint had been nominated for a National Runaway Prevention Month (NRPM) Award.

Mayor Callaghan praised the work that has been done to make the downtown beautiful and to draw in both residents and visitors. He referenced the November police department report, which indicated that property crimes are down 16% since 2021 and violent crimes down 21% since 2020.

5. Discussion: VFW Property Taxes

Mayor Callaghan explained that there are specific criteria that need to be considered when discussing the VFW tax issue. The City Council does not have the authority to waive interest on tax liens; only the Tax Collector has the ability to issue such a waiver. If the Council does wish to pursue action, the process would be as follows: The VFW would sell the property at 43 Highland Street and pay the City the back taxes. The City Council could then vote to appropriate a donation to the VFW in the amount of the back taxes, which are currently at \$43,650.53, and there would be a check issued to the VFW.

Councilor Lachapelle asked if the \$43,650.53 was the balance due not including interest. He stated he would not want to donate the total balance along with the interest. Finance Director Ambrose said the number includes a small amount of fees. The actual amount of taxes owed minus interest and fees would bring the amount to \$43,542.03, which includes the most recent tax bill.

Councilor Beaudoin stated that had things gone as they should have and the VFW had not run into this issue, the City of Rochester would never have collected these taxes anyway due to their tax exempt status, and consequently there would have been no interest gathered. He said that for the Council to take the action to donate this money would not adversely affect anyone.

Councilor Lachapelle clarified that this is just a discussion and no action could be taken until the January 3, 2023 meeting.

Councilor de Geofroy asked if the building at 43 Highland Street was used at all during the 3-years in which these taxes were assessed. Dave Tinkham, District 7 Commander, said that the property was not used during this time and had remained vacant during these 3-years.

Councilor Fontneau explained that the VFW, a non-profit, tax-exempt organization, was at the 43 Highland Street property for many years. However, over the past 3-years in which they were no longer at the property, they inadvertently did not file tax paperwork that would allow them to remain tax exempt. This caused these back taxes in question to accrue. Commander Tinkham explained that the VFW post was not able to afford the property and decided to sell it. At that time, the post became inactive for a period of time and unfortunately the tax exempt forms were not filed properly, and the City began to assess taxes during this time. Commander Tinkham explained that if the City Council did decide to make this donation, the money would solely be used for veterans and their families, which is the VFW's primary mission.

Councilor Fontneau stated that this particular property had been used for many years as the polling place for Ward 1, so the City had benefited from use of the property as well.

Mayor Callaghan asked if there were specific programs or items this money would fund. Commander Tinkham stated that it depended on the current needs and demands; the VFW has multiple programs to assist veterans and their families.

6. Department Reports

No Discussion.

7. Non-Public/Non-Meeting

There was no non-public meeting scheduled for this evening.

8. Adjournment

Mayor Callaghan **ADJOURNED** the City Council Workshop meeting at 6:18 PM.

Respectfully Submitted,

Cassie Givara
Deputy City Clerk