



**OFFICIAL MINUTES OF THE OXFORD MAYOR AND COUNCIL MEETING
WORK SESSION
MONDAY, MAY 18, 2020 – 6:09 PM
VIA TELECONFERENCE**

ELECTED OFFICIALS PRESENT:

David Eady – Mayor
George Holt – Councilmember
Jim Windham – Councilmember
Jeff Wearing – Councilmember
Lynn Bohanan – Councilmember
Laura McCanless – Councilmember
Avis Williams – Councilmember

APPOINTED/STAFF PRESENT:

Matt Pepper – City Manager
Marcia Brooks – City Clerk/Treasurer
Jody Reid – Utility Superintendent
Dave Harvey – Police Chief

OTHERS PRESENT: Laura Gafnea, Alice McKnight, Art Vinson

Agenda (Attachment A)

1. Mayor's Announcements

Mayor Eady reminded Councilmembers to go by City Hall and sign the Executive Session Affidavit from the May 4, 2020 meeting.

Guidance and instructions have been received from the Georgia Municipal Association (GMA) regarding COVID-19 issues. This guidance will be discussed later in the meeting.

2. FY 2021 Operating and Capital Budgets (Attachment B)

City Manager Matt Pepper discussed a memo summarizing revenue and expenditure projections for FY2021 along with an explanation of use of fund reserve to cover a portion of the FY2021 Operating Budget.

Mayor Eady stated that the revenue and expenditure projections are conservative, and it is hoped that the situation will improve and use of the fund reserve will not actually be necessary during FY2021. Mayor Eady expressed appreciation to Laura Gafnea and the staff at Oxford College for assisting with the projection estimates as they relate to operations at the college.

George Holt asked why the City of Oxford is spending \$720,000 more in FY2021 in the Operating Budget than was spent in FY2019. Mr. Pepper explained the FY2021 amounts are projected amounts, while the FY2019 amounts are actual amounts. Each year the Council plans to spend more than is actually spent. The City Council asked for the addition of a column for the budgeted amounts of the previous year when next year's documents are prepared.

Laura McCanless asked why the 4th of July parade line item is not reduced in the FY2021 Operating Budget, given that this year's parade has been canceled. She observed that it appears some of the funds each year are spent in the fiscal year prior to the parade event, and some are spent in the fiscal year of the parade event, so it would seem the line item could be reduced. Mayor Eady and Mr. Pepper explained that the funds originally on this line item are being left in the budget for next year's parade.

Jeff Wearing asked if our insurance company would be giving a rebate to municipalities due to reduced use of equipment/vehicles during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mr. Pepper and City Clerk Marcia Brooks stated they had not heard of any such rebate but will check with GMA.

Mr. Holt noted that the budget shows \$5,000 in the Electric fund for two employees and asked if the City of Oxford is paying that much each year in the Electric fund. He stated it looks like the cost for non-electrical personnel is about \$1,000 per employee, and thought it is somewhat odd that the cost is \$2,500 per employee for electric employees given there is not much electric work to do. Mayor Eady observed that the cost for FY2019 was \$4,822. The cost covers a uniform service. Jody Reid stated that the electric employees must wear fire resistant clothing, and it is more costly.

Mr. Pepper discussed a notation added to the Capital Budget since the last time it was discussed in a City Council meeting. It is anticipated that the city's line truck will have to be replaced within a few years, as it is not in the best of shape. This item is shown in the Capital Budget at a cost of \$205,000 for FY2023.

Mayor Eady stated that the proposed Capital Budget contains just over \$1 million of essential projects, including water main, sidewalk, drainage repair and street maintenance projects. Completion of some of these projects are contingent upon grant rewards. All others will be prioritized by the Council to determine which ones should be done based on fiscal health during the budget year. The City Council has always budgeted for more projects than it has completed each fiscal year and has spent about \$1 million each year.

Jim Windham suggested increasing the amount budgeted for replacement of the City Manager's vehicle in the FY2021 Capital Budget. He feels the City Manager represents the city, and in that capacity should have a somewhat nicer vehicle. Jeff Wearing agreed with Mr. Windham's suggestion and recommended increasing the amount to \$30,000 to \$35,000. Mr. Holt suggested putting the additional money into the City Manager's salary. Mayor Eady stated the City Manager's compensation will be discussed soon. Laura McCanless suggested the discussion about the vehicle may need to be postponed until the

compensation discussion is held, as it can be considered part of the compensation package for the City Manager. Mayor Eady recommended that this discussion be postponed, and to move forward with the amount as it is in the Capital Budget (\$20,000).

Mr. Windham commented that the \$200,000 for DDA Professional Services is difficult to justify given the current economic situation. He recommended pushing that expenditure out one or two years. He also recommended using some of that money to conduct an economic feasibility study for the center of town. He stated that each time a discussion about opening a business in Oxford comes up, the idea is abandoned because of the opinion that businesses are not sustainable in Oxford.

Mayor Eady stated that specific amount is budgeted in anticipation of a real project that has been put on hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The \$200,000 is targeted for an architectural engineering firm to design a development. Once that development is financed, the money would be repaid to the city. It can certainly be pulled out or pushed out, but the plan is to spend the money on a tangible project and would result in a net cost of zero for the city.

Ms. McCanless asked what the \$30,000 budgeted for the Downtown Development Authority is for. Mayor Eady advised it is for professional services they receive as well as legal costs to retain Frank Turner as their attorney. They have also had Historical Concepts under contract to work on items related to the Town Center.

Mr. Wearing asked if it is realistic to complete any of the city's planned projects within the next twelve months. Lynn Bohanan indicated she does not think they can make that determination at this time. Mr. Wearing agreed and recommended adding funding for another police car. He feels some of the money for non-essential projects should be diverted for this purpose. He expressed concern about the police department being left without a vehicle if one of the existing vehicles becomes inoperable.

Ms. Bohanan asked if there was research going on about leasing vs. purchasing a police vehicle. Mayor Eady stated that leasing is essentially financing a vehicle, and he is also not sure if SPLOST money can be used to lease vehicles. The leasing option turned out not to be economically feasible. The two vehicles were also pushed out during the last discussion, to FY2022 and FY2024. The Council may want to revisit buying a used vehicle for that purpose sooner than that.

In response to Mr. Wearing's earlier question, Mayor Eady stated he does not think the Whatcoat Street, E. Clark Street, Yarbrough House, and City Limits Sign projects will be worked on in the next twelve to eighteen months given the economic environment and projected revenue collections. He forecasted that the city will focus on the \$1 million or so of critical essential projects for which we have funding available from SPLOST collections, grant funds, and money already set aside for specific projects.

Ms. Bohanan indicated she has no comments other than that she shares Mr. Wearing's concern about the police department needing an additional vehicle. Mayor Eady indicated

that Chief Harvey is checking with other cities trying to find a used vehicle the city can purchase in the short term until a new vehicle can be purchased.

Ms. McCanless asked if we have any concrete plans for multi-use trails, which is budgeted for \$300,000. Mayor Eady stated that some plans were developed to do some further work on trails. This amount has been in the budget for several years. Mayor Eady stated at this point he would put this project in the same group with the other projects that will not be worked on for twelve to eighteen months. Mayor Eady asked Mr. Pepper to provide Ms. McCanless with the document detailing the plans.

Avis Williams stated that her concerns and questions had already been addressed.

For the benefit of those who are new on the City Council, Mr. Holt stated that other than vehicles and equipment, the city rarely completes projects in the first year they are listed in the Capital Budget, and they are simply placeholders for future goals of the city.

Mayor Eady asked the meeting attendees if they had any questions or comments. None were stated.

3. Penalties and Fees for May's Utility Bills

The Council suspended penalties and fees through April in a previous meeting. The decision to be made is whether to continue waiving penalties and fees for May and perhaps through the remainder of the fiscal year (through June). The staff has begun reaching out to customers to get customers on a payment plan.

Jeff Wearing recommended that the City of Oxford continue waiving fees through June 2020 and address the issue quarterly going forward.

City Clerk Marcia Brooks asked if this also applies to cutoffs. Mayor Eady stated the policy is not to cut off utilities because of the current economic crisis we are in due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Art Vinson asked if the city is emphasizing to customers the need to bring their accounts current. Mayor Eady indicated the staff are addressing that issue as they discuss customers' issues with them.

Mr. Wearing stated the staff makes judicious decisions about which customers are making an honest effort to bring their accounts current and which ones are not. Mayor Eady praised the staff for their professional and compassionate approach to the situation. Mr. Wearing and Jim Windham agreed.

Mayor Eady clarified that the waiver of fees will continue to apply to the utility statements due June 15th and July 15th. Plans for the utility billings after the one due July 15th will be discussed at the June work session.

4. Reopening City Hall

City Manager Matt Pepper requested the opinion of Mayor and Council on when to safely open City Hall and Asbury Park to the public. He wants to ensure that staff has time to adjust and that the city has adequate PPE and supplies to keep staff and customers safe while conducting city business.

Some other cities have begun reopening with varying degrees of precautions and measures. This topic is on the agenda to have the discussion as it relates to Oxford.

Mayor Eady stated that part of the discussions he has had with Matt relate to the staff's comfort level with providing services while maintaining a safe environment for themselves and customers. Their desks are far enough apart that they can work at a safe distance from each other. They are currently wearing masks while in the office as a precautionary measure when they are near each other.

They also have the safety glass separating the staff work area from the lobby which provides a safety barrier between customers and staff. Customers will be expected to take precautions as well. If a customer issue requires interaction beyond what can be addressed at the window, customers will be taken to the community room where staff can meet with them at a safe distance. In such instances, customers will be expected to wear a mask. These precautions are in line with those recommended by the Georgia Dept. of Public Health to safeguard the wellbeing of employees and residents.

Jim Windham stated he would not be opposed to staying closed through June 15th and discussing a reopen date in the Council Work Session meeting that evening. The information he has heard from Public Health indicates there may be an uptick in cases and would like to wait until June 15th to make a more informed decision about when to open. All other Councilmembers agreed with Mr. Windham.

Mayor Eady stated that hand sanitizer dispensers have been ordered for the lobby entrances. Mr. Windham commented that hand sanitizer should be at least 60% alcohol according to information he has heard. Laura McCanless asked if the dispensers will be wall mounted. City Clerk Marcia Brooks confirmed they would.

Mr. Pepper expressed his appreciation on behalf of the staff for the Mayor and Council's concern for their welfare and safety. Some employers have been more aggressive about requiring employees to come in even though the employees may be concerned about their health. The staff at City of Oxford have not felt any such pressure and it is appreciated.

George Holt asked Chief Harvey if officers are wearing masks during their interactions with the public. He has seen most police departments using them and feels it is needed at Oxford since officers must get much closer to individuals when interacting with them than the 6-foot safe distance recommended. Mr. Windham and Ms. McCanless agreed with Mr. Holt.

Chief Harvey advised they have separate bags of pens that individuals use to sign the citations with, and they keep the pens. They have masks and gloves. They are not required to wear the masks on routine traffic stops because the weather is getting hot and it is difficult to breathe in them. They approach vehicles from behind and keep their distance. They never put their head in the window and do not have direct contact with them. If they feel like they need the mask it is available to put on. He knows that very few officers wear masks with the City of Covington and Newton County.

Mayor Eady stated that what he is hearing the Council recommending a policy that when an officer approaches a vehicle after stopping it, the officer will be less than six feet from the occupant of the vehicle, and should therefore wear a mask in this circumstance. Art Vinson expressed concern that imposing this policy would endanger officers because it bypasses their ability to make discretionary decisions based on their training and their professional judgment.

Chief Harvey stated that no department has made it mandatory that their officers wear a mask in Georgia that he is aware of. Even one of the Oxford officers who was wearing a mask all the time has eased up on this practice.

Mayor Eady stated he believes in general if a person is going to be encountering other people in public, that person should be wearing a mask. As a matter of public health, it is good for the police department staff and the people they are approaching to wear a mask. However, he does not want to compromise the officers' safety by imposing this requirement. His opinion is they should be having their temperature checked at the beginning of each shift and documented, and they should be wearing masks under reasonable circumstances. However, he is deferring to the Chief's professional judgment as to what the policy should be. Mr. Windham agreed with Mayor Eady, and strongly recommended to Chief Harvey that his officers wear masks but would not recommend mandating it.

Mayor Eady stated the Council could strongly encourage officers to wear masks even for routine traffic stops if doing so would not put them at risk. Chief Harvey advised he would check with Sheriff Brown at Newton County and Chief Cotton and follow their lead so that officers county-wide are on the same page. He has a thermometer he has been using sporadically to check temperatures and will start doing this daily.

Mayor Eady requested that Chief Harvey report back to the Council his findings about this issue after talking with Sheriff Brown and Chief Cotton.

Mayor Eady raised the issue of the opening of the playground equipment and restrooms at Asbury Park. His proposal is to take down the yellow tape at the park. The pavilion would not be available for rental. Bathrooms would be available for use during daylight hours. Signs should be posted throughout the park – Do your part - practice safe distancing, wear a mask and wash hands frequently.

Mr. Holt asked if the city has any liability to sanitize the bathrooms and the playground equipment on a regular basis. Mayor Eady advised the guidelines from the Governor's office can be reviewed, although it addresses commercial businesses, and not public facilities.

Ms. McCanless asked if the signs that will be posted could have a statement advising patrons to use the facilities at their own risk. Mayor Eady advised that the bathrooms are cleaned once a week now. He has discussed with Mr. Pepper the possibility of having them come in twice a week with cleaners. However, he does not feel it is sustainable to have them come in daily. So, there is an implicit understanding that patrons will use the facilities at their own risk, and perhaps that should be explicitly stated. Mayor Eady stated the city will get an answer to the liability question.

Avis Williams stated the city needs to ensure there is adequate signage and asked if there will be additional sanitizer stations for park areas and if the cleaning company will ensure they are properly filled. Mayor Eady stated additional dispensers could be placed in the pavilion area and outside the restrooms. Matt Pepper advised that it has been very difficult trying to find hand sanitizer stations and sanitizer. There may be a delay before they can be placed at the park.

Ms. McCanless is reluctant to open the park just yet because she wants to see what happens as places reopen. She also believes it will not be possible to ensure consistency with children washing their hands. She does feel that putting out hand sanitizer at the park will reduce the city's culpability in spreading germs.

Jeff Wearing's recommendation is to wait until the June work session to decide about reopening the park.

Jim Windham agreed with Mr. Wearing. He feels that the recommendations made thus far are reasonable but advised that hold harmless clauses are not enforceable in Georgia, and the "at your own risk" proposed language on the signs is a hold harmless clause. Mayor Eady mentioned that once David Strickland checked into a somewhat similar scenario and determined the city was not liable. But David Strickland will be consulted on this issue as well as Georgia Municipal Association and any other relevant advisory organizations. He recommends not opening the playground and pavilion until at least June 1st, and possibly June 15th.

Utility Superintendent Jody Reid stated that at an EMA meeting, he and Chief Harvey were told the virus could live up to nine days on metal not in direct sunlight. Mr. Windham stated that alone is reason enough to wait until the work session to make a decision.

5. Change Order for Moore Street Sidewalk Project (Attachment C)

After work was started on the Moore Street Sidewalk project, it was discovered that a large section of pipe had become compromised similar to the situation on Longstreet Circle. To avoid laying sidewalk that would have to be torn out when the pipe completely collapses, a change order has been submitted by the vendor, HCS Services LLC, to replace the pipe at

an additional cost of \$10,000. The extra work would not add any time to the project. The vendor advised he could work on other things while waiting for approval on this. City Manager Matt Pepper would, however, like to advise the vendor if they can move forward without waiting for approval in the June regular session.

George Holt asked if a budget amendment would be required to accommodate the change order. Mr. Pepper stated that even before this change request was submitted, the approved contract was already greater than the budgeted amount.

All Council members agreed with allowing the project to proceed without formal approval. Mayor Eady stated that the change order and budget amendment will be brought up in the June 1st Regular Council meeting.

Jim Windham requested that Matt Pepper and Marcia Brooks investigate the legal requirements related to electronically signing documents to expedite the process for Council members to sign documents.

Jim Windham made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 8:13 p.m. Jeff Wearing seconded the motion. The motion carried unanimously (7/0).

Respectfully Submitted,

Marcia Brooks
City Clerk/Treasurer