

Pre-Council Meeting - Final
August 6, 2018
6:00 PM

Present: Mayor Pro Tem Derek Norton Maryline Blackburn Susan Wilkinson
Andrea Blustein Charles "Corkey" Welch Tim Gould
Ron Fennel

Absent: Mayor Max Bacon

Also Present: Scott Cochran (City Attorney), Tammi Saddler Jones (City Administrator), Scott Andrews (Assistant City Administrator), Terri Graham (City Clerk), Ken Suddreth (Community Development Director), Rusty Martin (Community Development Senior Planner), David Lee (Police Department Chief of Police), Jennifer Bennett (Community Relations Manager), Ashley Youmans (Management Fellow)

Mayor Pro Tem Derek Norton called the Pre-Council Meeting to Order at 6:00 PM.

Mayor Pro Tem Derek Norton advised that Mayor Bacon was not feeling well and would not be at the meeting.

City Administrator Report:

City Administrator Tammi Saddler Jones informed that the Birthday Celebration was a success even though it rained briefly everything went well.

Scott Andrews advised the Historical Society planned to recognize Harold Smith for his work in the community. They were also in agreement with naming one of the exhibits in his name to honor him.

Mr. Norton welcomed Council-member elect Tim Gould to his first Council meeting. He began with the Council goals from the last Council/Staff Retreat. He had planned to go over Council goals several times, but there were other topics to discuss that ran the work session meetings late into the evenings and there was not time. He continued that the committee for council goals, Council-member Corkey Welch and Council-member Susan Wilkinson had met and discussed Council goals; they determined seven (7) items to be worked on; communication, growth management, housing, infrastructure, staffing, school engagement and charter review. The committee for council goals identified their four (4) top areas as, communication, staffing, growth management and infrastructure. They decided that school engagement, housing and charter review were ongoing areas they could concentrate on down the road.

He started with communication and what they outlined they wanted to do and if any of it had been done or started. One of the communication goals was city to public communication. During the retreat they discussed starting a newsletter; Ms. Saddler Jones has implemented the City Administrator's newsletter.

The IT (Information Technology) committee has met one time; they would like to see that committee meet more often.

Mr. Norton felt that over the nine (9) months since the retreat they have made accomplishments. Council-member Ron Fennel spoke of a template for Council to communicate with constituents. He suggested that Ms. Saddler Jones's newsletter would be a good template for Council communication with constituents. The website is as an area that needed attention.

They have accomplished several things with staffing. He spoke of the job-posting brochure that Ms. Saddler Jones had suggested was implemented for several open positions. They formed a best practices and peer review committee. They worked hard with all employees to bring their findings to Council. Council did implement some of the employee's most requested incentives. The task force brought forward the salary study, the incentives requested by employees, police officer hiring incentive packages. Mr. Fennel brought forward that they need to focus on the loss of employees and determine why they are leaving and make sure the city is competitive. He felt Smyrna was not the only organization that was losing people, it was a wide spread issue.

Everyone agreed there was a need to keep evolving concerning staffing needs and continue with incentives to make the city an attractive place to work.

Infrastructure is moving in the right directions the city has been looking at sidewalks and trail connectivity. Council was presented with a sidewalk map. They have begun the widening of sidewalks on Atlanta Road near Createwood down toward the city limits. They are starting at different parts of the city.

Mr. Welch spoke on behalf of Tim Gould and asked if someone could get him a copy of the sidewalk map. People have already started talking to him about sidewalks and trail connectivity; there was discussion about getting the sidewalk study to Mr. Gould.

Councilmember Susan Wilkinson mentioned the South Cobb Drive Corridor Study where people said they would walk more places and ride the bus if they felt safe. She felt the connectivity was important for the South Cobb Drive area. Mr. Welch reminded that South Cobb Drive has a sidewalk all the way down it. Ms. Wilkinson replied that a multi-use trail would be used more. She mentioned that the Corridor study showed ways to access the sidewalks.

Storm Water management inspection, Mr. Norton noted that City Engineer Eric Randall was not there so he moved passed that topic until Mr. Randall was present to discuss.

Mr. Fennel mentioned the many projects already bid out and started when Scott Stokes retired from the city. He also kept so much in his head and knew where everything was and didn't share much. It is going to be difficult for staff to pick up where he left off. He continued to emphasize the importance of electronically storing all the information that is currently in paper form. He mentioned that Terri Graham had been making this suggestion for several years to get all the information scanned to protect the city's information and to make it easier to locate information. He felt that Frank Martin is doing a great job of making sure everything in Public Works is moving forward.

Ms. Wilkinson inquired about the flooding issues in Bennett Woods. Mr. Welch talked with Eric Randall about Bennett Woods and the report has been completed. He explained that the flooding is getting worse due to the private pipe between the two (2) yards. The issues are internal to the property owner and the adjacent property owner. A hole in one of the yards fills up with water and uses the private pipe to drain off the water. The pipe is crushed and the water cannot flow through it. It is not a city pipe it is private. It was his opinion that this is not a city issue.

Mr. Fennel talked about Bennett Woods when he represented that section. They had met over the flood plain that exists and if Bennett Woods were built today there would be about 50 fewer homes built due to the flood plain that exists in the neighborhood. Mr. Suddreth confirmed that there would be fewer homes built if the homes were built today.

Ms. Saddler Jones interjected that she has a meeting with Interim Public Works Director Frank Martin for an update on overall projects. She planned to ask him about the Bennett Woods flooding.

Growth Management – Mr. Norton talked with Community Development Director Ken Suddreth about zoning. Mr. Suddreth noted that Community Development was beginning to bring zoning amendments to Planning and Zoning and then they would go before Council.

Mr. Suddreth cannot do anything until the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) gives him the paper work on the transit study. They are waiting on GDOT; they want to work through the fiscal year. It is a waiting game on GDOT.

Mr. Norton came back around to communication from council to staff which was a topic of discussion at the retreat. They discussed boundaries and respect for staffs' time. He felt that if Council wanted to get in contact with staff they should go through Ms. Saddler Jones by letting her know or copy her in an email. He does not believe they are doing very well with this topic, he asked for comments from anyone. He said the feedback that he has gotten personally has not been favorable. He went on to explain that the feedback that he has received from staff is that there are pressures on staff by certain Councilmembers to stay after 5:00 PM or meet for long periods. They are getting into the weeds on some issues. As part-time Council Members they are getting too far into the weeds and spending a little bit too much time utilizing staff time. He felt it was worth general discussion since he has heard from just about everybody that this is an issue. Staff is worried that they cannot say "no" it is just an issue.

Mr. Welch said he met with Mr. Suddreth last week for a few minutes. He does not meet with staff very often but saying "no" is acceptable. He felt that the council should be respectful and he wanted staff to know that he is one of seven and they should not feel they are under pressure to stay after hours or meet for long periods.

Mr. Fennel stated that Ms. Saddler Jones should take the pressure off the department heads and then Scott Andrews should step in when necessary. He felt that there is times he needs a little more clarity when and if a constituent needs something. He expressed that the council are policy makers and they should not need to meet with department heads much.

Mr. Fennel was concerned about proper protocol. Ms. Saddler Jones needs to know when the department heads are engaged with Council-members. There are assignments that she has assigned with expected deadlines and she needs to know when someone or something is taking them off task. He continued for the benefit of new Council-member elect Tim Gould, that he saves his conversations for Ms. Saddler Jones and/or Mr. Andrews. When he has conversations with department heads he tries to provide department heads with support in what they are trying to accomplish.

When he has an issue from a constituent he will send an email to the department personnel he would most likely receive the information from and copy Ms. Saddler Jones and Mr. Andrews. He felt council needed clarity on how to handle constituent's complaints or questions how best to reach the answers sought. He thought that his method of emailing the person who could best answer his question, while at the same time keeping Ms. Saddler Jones and Mr. Andrews in the loop so they are aware.

Ms. Blustein suggested that staff set aside a set time on a certain day of the week that council can meet with them. Ms. Saddler Jones replied, what works best for her is to set a time or appointment, and then she can schedule and set aside time to talk about concerns, issues, and constituents' questions. She felt council should not just pop in on any staff member. She would also like council-members to make direct contact with the department head to schedule appointments then copy her that they are meeting. Department heads and staff are all busy doing the work of the city.

Mr. Norton conveyed that there is a problem and he felt the conversation needed to happen. He requested that all council-members respect staff's time don't pop in, and if a staff member doesn't give the answer you are looking for don't go to the next staff member. He suggested they go to the City Administrator's office either Ms. Saddler Jones or Mr. Andrews. He expresses that Ms. Jones should have staff's back and she should stand behind them.

Mr. Fennel mentioned a conference that he and Ms. Wilkinson went to last year. He commented on the course matter, which was to force every council-member to identify their problem solving skills and methodology. He and Ms. Wilkinson learned that they were on opposite ends of the spectrum, as to how they input information, how they discern and how they expect to have a problem solved.

Ms. Wilkinson spoke of the same conference that they also learned that they put everyone into four (4) different categories. Each category was important and was part of the team. Mr. Fennel stated that their role as policy makers was not to impair the day to day work load that is already robust for the professional that the city has hired. He does think they need to have the conversations from a broad base so they can get it all on the table. Some Council-members want to talk for an hour about a subject when others may talk about the same subject for five (5) minutes. If someone wants to take an hour, that may not be in the best interest of the staffs time.

The policy discussion is worthy of the broader time input, but may not be at staff level. It is a point he felt Council should not miss.

Mr. Welch added that he does not want to get to a point where he cannot call an employee with an issue. He wanted to maintain interaction with employees and department heads. He wants to have relationships with employees, but not take up unnecessary time. He suggests that if they all want to meet with a particular department head three (3) times a day, they may get to where they cannot maintain interaction with staff. He doesn't want to get to that point.

Ms. Wilkinson added that she sees council roles as more than policy makers; she thinks they help citizens solve their issues. Mr. Welch replied that he had an issue where he needed to call Code Enforcement. He called the Lead Marshall's cell phone, left a message with the address, what the issue was and asked that they check it out. Ms. Wilkinson said she does better than that, she takes a snap shot and emails the picture to code enforcement. Mr. Fennel commented on doing the same thing, he saw something that wasn't in his ward, but thought it might pose a problem. He took a picture and emailed it to the Lead Marshall. By the end of the next day the problem was taken care of, there was no need for a follow up phone call.

Mr. Norton stated that staff has respect for Council in their roles and Council should have respect for the staff in their roles. Council needs to understand that the positions staff holds are full time positions and they sometimes work long hours.

Mr. Norton moved on, to the agenda. He read from the agenda each item. When he came to item C under the Mayoral report he advised they would table the Mayor's Council Committee assignments when Mayor Bacon is present.

Ms. Blackburn asked about the rezoning on Spring Street, she started to state her understanding of the zoning and Rusty Martin explained the zoning changes. He explained that the land use plan was updated; the community stakeholders were involved in the process. From Foster Street and to the west is in need of redevelopment. Staff saw the need for higher density in the area. The current land use plan is mixed use. The proposal meets the current land use plan. Rusty noted that Keith Bentley the HOA president sat in on the stakeholder meeting and was interviewed.