

# **CITY COUNCIL PROCEEDINGS**

## **BEMIDJI, MINNESOTA**

### **Work Session – November 9, 2009**

Pursuant to due call and notice, a work session of the City Council of the City of Bemidji, Beltrami County, Minnesota, was held on Monday, November 9, 2009, at 5:30 p.m. in the Room C of the Holiday Inn Express, Mayor Lehmann presiding.

Upon roll call, the following Councilmembers were declared present: Lehmann, Johnson, Negard, Downs, Meuers, Waldhausen, Hellquist

Staff Present: City Manager John Chattin, City Clerk Kay Murphy  
Other Present: Jeffrey Thompson, Innovations in Quality Consulting

Mayor Lehmann stated that the purpose of the work session was to discuss the council and manager's relationship with Jeffrey Thompson, a consultant from Innovations in Quality Consulting.

Thompson stated that he had an opportunity to interview each councilmember prior to the work session and has made recommendations based on those interviews and management and leadership measures. He stated that the report and recommendations are no good if not implemented, it is a waste of time and money and disappointing if no improvements are made. He stated that council and manager are the governance level which understand the principles and oversee the oversight of the mission of the City of Bemidji. He stated that the mission statement is not memorable and much too long. The council's role is for oversight of the policies and procedures and hiring the city manager who in turn hires department heads that are competent in their positions. Discussion continued on the City Charter which Thompson stated was like the council's by-laws and the role of the council is to make sure it is adhered to. He stated that everything that the council and manager do is for the citizens of Bemidji.

Thompson stated that there exists a low degree of trust in the council-manager relationship due to unclear roles, scattered performance expectations, loose organizational structure and communication gaps. These barriers are created primarily by a system and structural issues that are being followed by the council and manager, which allows for people to question intent and motives and opens up avenues for emotional responses that only serve to get in the way of doing business.

Discussion continued regarding communication and the need for both the council and manager to make efforts to communicate. It was noted that each person has different communication styles and expectations. Thompson recommended that the council meet two times a year on an extended visit with the manager.

Chattin agreed that he had been remiss in scheduling one on one visits with the council. However, he has heard that some councilmembers do not trust him. He stated that he has never lied to any councilmember. The council is divided and he has tried to accomplish what they want. However, there is a barrier that both sides need to overcome. He challenged any of the councilmembers to visit with staff, the chamber or the DDA and they would confirm that he is a man of integrity.

Meuers stated she has trust issues with Chattin and on several occasions he has said to her that it is easier to "ask for forgiveness than ask for permission". She stated at every review that Chattin states that he will try harder but no improvement is made. Meuers stated that she believed that Chattin has been working behind the scene regarding the elimination of the CDD regardless of the vote.

Chattin stated that he believed the council violated the intent of the City Charter regarding the elimination of the CDD and had the City Attorney review the decision. Chattin stated that the decision to eliminate the CDD position is done, he does not like it; however, he will adhere to it. He stated that since that time, he has done nothing to oppose the council's decision but he cannot get in line to support it.

Discussion continued regarding the CDD's blog and links to other blogs in the community which they believed chastised the council's decisions. Chattin stated that he had not read the blog but would follow up with Ms. Albrecht.

Thompson stated that he understood that the council had some grievances in the past but did not feel that it served the purpose of this meeting. He referred to his recommendations stating that the council and city manager need to build more consistent, predictable structure into their relationship.

Discussion continued regarding the possible need for a planner. It was noted that the JPB has two certified planners and will be considering the need for a part-time planner in the future.

Waldhausen stated that to make the statement that the CDD position was eliminated for budget reasons was false. He recalled that the four councilors that voted in favor of the elimination of the CDD gave the following reasons: budget; she doesn't do anything; the job did not turn out the way they thought; and no reason at all. Waldhausen then went on to question how much value the council puts into its commissions. The CDD has been working with the HPC seeking grants to rehab the Carnegie Library. The volunteers should not have to do this. He further stated that the Sustainability Committee recently created by the council has a lot of positive things happening and a group of citizens that are interested in moving ahead. These two groups, among others, rely on City staff support. He stated that he understood that these are tough times, but the City cannot simply lock the doors. He suggested that the elimination of the CDD position should be relooked at. If the council is not satisfied with the outcome of the position, it should be changed.

Chattin stated that each councilor has different reasons or motivations for the elimination of the CDD. He stated that his position is the division between governance and management. He would never walk into anyone else's business and eliminate an employee. He stated he was hired to manage the City of Bemidji and he believed that he has done that. He has built a team that includes all the gifts that he believed are needed to manage the City. He stated that Rita Albrecht has gifts and perspectives that he and other department heads do not have and that is why she is on the team. It has taken him two and half years to build a management team to carry out the vision and goals of the council. If it is a budget issue, the Council should have come to Chattin and say to cut the budget. He would have then worked with his staff to come up with recommendations to where to cut the budget most effectively. He stated in the last three years, staff has cut the workforce by 10% and staff continually looks at ways to trim the budget and economize and make government more efficient; then the council came in and stated they do not like a position and eliminated it. It completely ignored what Chattin was hired to do and the City Charter which says that the council will not interfere with the personnel management of the City.

Hellquist stated that there are a number of things on the CDD's job description and questioned her performance. He stated that information on three positions was asked from Chattin on more than one occasion and was ignored completely. He stated that the CDD position was eliminated for budget reasons as the City was considering turning off lights and taxing people for street lights.

Thompson recommended that a leadership support committee be created that would be the evaluation process for Chattin. This committee would be the coaching process to meet with the manager to catch issues before they start to pile up.

Discussion continued regarding the duties of the administrative/legal secretary position. Chattin stated that the administrative/legal secretary is responsible for three people and does not have the same gifts as the CDD and the two positions cannot be compared. Chattin commented that staff can attend the HPC meeting but the administrative/legal secretary would merely be there to take notes. He stated that without a point person the downtown study may not get implemented. Chattin stated that if the Council does not like the way he manages the City of Bemidji and he is not accomplishing what they want accomplished, get rid of him. He makes the personnel decisions not the council. If the council wants to move ahead without the CDD position, those are his marching orders but he will inform them on what will not be accomplished.

Hellquist commented that the City's priority is to provide public safety, streets and infrastructure. The rest of it is peripheral, niceties. He then questioned the need for the Heritage Preservation Commission and Sustainability Committee. He further stated that the Sustainability Committee is a "hot" topic and did not feel it was necessary to be done by government. Hellquist further stated that the downtown study will not get done and may sit on the shelf.

Mayor Lehmann agreed with Hellquist that the City's charge was to provide public safety and infrastructure, however, the council also decided to do the QNI Study, Sustainability and rehab the Carnegie building. There was a point person on staff to do the work, the council has not taken away the work but have taken the workers away.

Thompson asked why the Council was talking about personnel decisions. If the Council does not like the personnel decisions, get rid of the manager not other people. Thompson stated that the council needs to be aligned with their vision.

Johnson stated that he has concerns about the loss of the CDD and what will get accomplished, in particular, the southshore development, which is important for the City. He stated that there are things told to the council by the manager and asked if the council does not trust him, then why is he still here. Johnson wanted to know why the council is worried about personnel issues and felt it was micromanaging.

Meuers responded that the council was not micromanaging as the CDD position was eliminated for budgetary reasons.

Mayor Lehmann recommended that the council needed to review and reprioritize their goals at a work session given the staff available to work on the priorities.

Chattin stated that at the February retreat, he proposed seven committees that are regular standing committees and would meet on a regular basis, i.e., police, public works. The reason for this was to enhance communications. He cannot tell the council every single thing that is going on in every department. This would give council an opportunity to meet with the department heads regarding what is going on and make recommendations to the larger body.

Meuers stated that Chattin is simply turning around the communication issue on the council this does not help her trust issue with him.

Chattin stated that is Thompson recommended a communication plan so that the expectations are laid out for the council and manager. He encouraged the council to come to him first with questions and not department heads.

Thompson commented that if individuals are not communicating effectively, people can attach all kinds of motives. The council has had these discussions before and if Chattin does not do the job, the council should remove him from the job next year.

Negard stated that communication has improved but expressed concerns about some things that were not shared in a timely manner.

Thompson commented that there are sensitivities on personnel issues; however, there is a way to convey it. He highly recommended a phone call or discussion. Thompson provided three additional handouts for the Council's reference.

Discussion continued about the need to re-prioritize the goals for the City especially with the elimination of the CDD position.

Hellquist noted that there are councilmembers on the various committees and commissions and it is their responsibility to report back to the full council on issues. He felt that the duality of having staff and council at the meetings was unnecessary. He noted that he quit attending the DDA meetings as the CDD has been attending. He commented that it was not fair that the council was asked three times whether they wanted Chattin to continue or not, but the question should be, does Chattin want to continue as the city manager.

Waldhausen stated that his role on the HPC was to convey to the council on what the Commission was doing back to enable the council to make an informed decision. He has no interest in writing grants. He pointed out that there are councilmembers that do not report back to the council.

Hellquist suggested that there are other options for writing grants and a staff person was not necessary. Hellquist stated that councilmembers attend the meetings to be objective and make sure the city's goals/objectives are met and not advocate everything that commission members may want.

Thompson reminded the council and manager to remember to celebrate the successes. It is easy to say what is not being done.

Discussion continued regarding concerns about current projects, in particular, the southshore development and sale of land.

Hellquist stated that being a councilor is difficult as they start with little or no education. He commented that Chattin called the mediation session and picked the consultant and he felt this was all indicative of the underlying problem. His issue on the CDD and what is done under the heading are the job description which is vague and expansive. If the person is good at attending meetings or other things, that is what they do unless there is direction from someone else. He stated he has a different management style and as much or more experience in the field than Chattin. Communication is different for each person but the key is listening and not listening with an answer ready.

Downs stated that Chattin needed to build consensus and follow the “marching orders” of the council. If not, Chattin should move on.

Waldhausen commented that councilors cannot take decisions personally but need to move forward. He stated that the council all have good intentions and everyone needs to focus on respecting each other’s opinions.

Thompson stated that if you cannot say it, you cannot solve it. It is helpful to get it out on the table to take a look at the problem. He stated that the bottomline is if the council is satisfied with the results from the projects, programs, and the best use of funding, they need to celebrate those successes as a team with the city manager.

**ADJOURN**

There being no further business the meeting adjourned at 7:50 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,



Kay M. Murphy  
City Clerk