



Programs & Services Committee Report

City of Newton In City Council

Wednesday, April 20, 2016

Present: Councilors Rice (Chair), Leary (Vice Chair), Auchincloss, Kalis, Hess-Mahan, Sangiolo, Schwartz and Baker

City Staff Present: Seth Bai (Veterans' Services Officer), Phil McNulty (Director, Newton Free Library), Lisa Dady (Director, Historic Newton), Bob DeRubeis (Commissioner, Parks & Recreation), Carol Stapleton (Recreation Manager), Marc Welch (Director, Urban Forestry), Dori Zaleznik (Chief Administrative Officer), Karyn Dean (Committee Clerk)

Referred to Programs & Services and Finance Committees

#139-16 **Appropriation to pay final installment for a quadrant of veterans graves**
HIS HONOR THE MAYOR requesting authorization to appropriate fifty-six thousand dollars (\$56,000) from Free Cash to the Veterans Department's Veterans Benefits Account to pay the final installment for the purchase of the quadrant of graves located in the Newton Cemetery. [04/11/16 @ 11:27 PM]

Action: **Approved 3-0-1 (Councilors Kalis abstaining; Hess-Mahan, Sangiolo, Schwartz and Baker not voting)**

Note: Seth Bai, Veterans' Services Officer joined the Committee. He explained that three lots were purchased from the Newton Cemetery for use by veterans, and the City has been paying for them in installments. This appropriation is for the final payment which is due at the end of the year.

Dori Zaleznik, Chief Administrative Officer explained that in order to be qualified to use a burial plot, the veteran had to have been deployed; have lived in Newton during the last three years; or been drafted from Newton. Some veterans choose not to take advantage of the plots because spouses cannot be buried with the veteran in those areas. There are other nearby municipalities that do offer that choice.

Councilor Auchincloss moved approval and the Committee voted in favor with Councilor Kalis abstaining as he joined the Committee near the end of the discussion.

Referred to Programs & Services and Finance Committees

#140-16 **Appropriation from Free Cash for tree services**
HIS HONOR THE MAYOR requesting authorization to appropriate and expend three hundred thousand dollars (\$300,000) from Free Cash to the Parks and Recreation Department for the purpose of funding the removal of all known dead or dangerous trees. [04/11/16 @ 11:32 AM]

Action: **Approved 7-0 (Councilor Baker not voting)**

Note: Bob DeRubeis, Commissioner of Parks & Recreation joined the Committee. He explained that Marc Welch, Director of Urban Forestry does a “windshield” survey throughout the City based on USDA standards which determine the condition of a tree. The trees are ranked from 3-11 with 11 being the worst. There are 300 trees rated at 10 and 11 that need to be taken down for safety reasons and also about 400 trees which need to be pruned which are rated at 9 and 10. These are trees that have already been classified and rated and another survey will be done in June at which time more trees may be identified.

The Mayor has been concerned with the number of injuries and even deaths that have occurred related to falling trees around the state. The Executive Department, therefore, asked the Commissioner how quickly Newton’s unsafe trees could be addressed. The Commissioner felt that using in-house services would allow the trees to be taken down by September, 2016, considering all the other work and services that generally need to be provided as well during that period of time. There have also been more limbs down in February than had been down as a result of Hurricane Irene which has added to the workload. Waiting for the work to be completed by September was untenable considering the risk so the decision was made to bring in contractors to provide the services and reduce the timeframe to 6 weeks. The Executive Department has allocated \$400K in the emergency services line item, which will allow some funds for any new trees identified in the June survey. The line item has increased for FY17 as well.

Committee Comments/Questions

It was asked how many trees are removed in an average year. Marc Welch explained that during a typical fiscal year, about 500-800 trees are removed and that has been the trend since he joined the City about 14 years ago. Looking at historic data, that uptick began in the 80s which would correspond to the age of the trees in the City.

The Committee asked about stump grinding. Commissioner DeRubeis explained that stump grinding was not included in this cost and is a separate operation which requires a completely different set of equipment. The priority for this money is to remove the trees that pose a risk. Ms. Zaleznik noted that stump grinding is done in a more fallow time period when pruning or planting is not being done.

A Committee member asked how homeowners are involved in this process. Mr. Welch said the majority of the trees identified are the result of service requests from residents and therefore there is an expectation of some response from the City. A letter is sent to inform residents up to 6 months in advance of a tree being removed in their neighborhood. They are instructed to look for the tag on the tree and call the department with any concerns.

A Councilor asked how the contractor is vetted and what sort of qualifications are required. Mr. Welch said he has developed his standards and requirements over a long period of time based on what he has seen in the field as excellent work and based on problematic experiences as well. One set contract is put out every year and is renewable up to 2 times. Because the contract mostly

serves as the City's emergency response team as well in the event of a storm, the requirements are strict. This work does not have to go out to bid as it is part of the larger contract already in place. The current vendor isn't always the lower bidder but the department has learned through experience it needs a contractor who has the fleet of equipment and number of skilled workers necessary to meet the City's needs. The contractor is on-call for Boston, Brookline and other communities as well, is well-known and has an excellent reputation.

Mr. Welch said 2,000 "things" have fallen from twigs to large limbs to entire trees this year so far, and the yearly average is about 1,200. One hundred of those items are entire trees and the vast majority is not trees that have been identified as needing to be cut down. The issues can be internal or below grade and those problems cannot be seen. However, the trees that currently have been identified will fail at some point and it is just a matter of time.

The motion to approve was made and the Committee voted in favor.

The Committee continued to hear and discuss the budget presentations. Those are detailed in the forthcoming budget reports.

Meeting adjourned.

Respectfully Submitted,

John R. Rice, Chair