

CITY OF NEWTON

IN BOARD OF ALDERMEN

ZONING AND PLANNING COMMITTEE REPORT

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 29, 2003

Present: Ald. Yates (Chairman), Ald. Lappin, Mansfield, Johnson, Lennon, Baker, Gentile, and Sangiolo

Also present: Ald. Lipsitt, Merrill, Parker, and Fischman

City officials: Michael Rourke, Chief Administrative Officer; Michael Kruse, Director of Planning & Development; Mark Gilroy, Commissioner of Inspectional Services; Linda Finucane, Chief Committee Clerk

ITEM RECOMMITTED TO ZONING & PLANNING ON 10/20:

#354-03 HIS HONOR THE MAYOR submitting pursuant to Sec. 6-2 of the City Charter a proposal to reorganize the Inspectional Services and Planning & Development Departments.

ACTION: APPROVED 4-1-2 (Baker, Gentile, Johnson, Yates in the affirmative; Sangiolo opposed; Lennon, Mansfield abstaining; Lappin not voting)

NOTE: Alderman Lennon, as one member who had favored recommitment of the item to allow all members to get their questions answered, expressed his disappointment at the few number of non-committee members present on a meeting night that had been chosen to avoid meetings of the Land Use and Finance Committees. Alderman Johnson was grateful that the item had been recommitted because she had missed the previous Committee meeting on this topic, but completely agreed with Alderman Lennon's disappointment in the paucity of non-committee members. She then asked Chief Administrative Officer Michael Rourke about what provisions had been made to manage the change in both structure and processes, i.e. to help the staff members of both Departments to change their thinking in accordance with the new ways of doing things in the Departments. She was particularly concerned that staff members should feel that there was something in the re-organization that was to their benefit. Mr. Rourke assured her that the detailed outline of the re-organization had been developed with active participation from the affected staff. She asked Inspectional Services Commissioner Mark Gilroy about the state of mind of the Inspectors and other affected staff. Mr. Gilroy said that the Inspectors were highly sick of the current situation in which they spend a major part of their time at the front desk, in large part answering questions that a less technical staff could answer. When a technical question does come up, the time spent answering it means that the line of applicants and citizens piles up. When they can spare a few hours from the desk to inspect newly approved projects in the field to make sure

they comply with their permits, their voice mail from citizens and relevant officials accumulates so much that they are never able to catch up. The Inspectors want to be able to inspect, not inform and refer. The longer the re-organization is delayed, the more frustrated and distressed the Inspectors will be. Later on, in response to questions from other Aldermen about if the re-organization was the ideal structure, she said that there was no perfect structure and that the success of a department depended on the abilities of the employees and how well they are trained and supervised.

Alderman Parker thanked the Administration for focusing on the paramount issue that he saw in the department – the enforcement of the ordinances and follow-up on citizen complaints. He extensively questioned Mr. Rourke on the assertion in his memo that less than one FTE was devoted to enforcement and that more than three and a half FTEs would be focused on enforcement under the re-organization. After some discussion on previous information Alderman Parker believed he had gotten from the Administration, Mr. Gilroy briefly repeated the explanation of the chart of the Inspectors time before and after the re-organization. At one point, it became clear that Alderman Parker had misunderstood the Land Use and Zoning Enforcement Agent position in ISD. He believed that this was the replacement for the position held by Mr. Bronson before it was eliminated. It was pointed out that in fact the replacement position was the Code Official in the Planning Department. Alderman Parker subsequently urged that one of the proposed district Inspectors be re-assigned as an assistant Enforcement Agent. The Administration agreed that an additional agent might need to be considered in the future, but that taking one of the district Inspectors to do it would leave the others with districts that are so large that they helped cause the backlog of complaints and long delays for applicants.

Alderman Yates urged the administration to develop Outcome Measures for dealing with the backlog of complaints so that even in the few months until the budget session, progress could be measured. Obviously the resolution of complaints would be the best outcome, but for the more complicated ones, at least the complaint should be entered into the new computer system and the new Administrative Assistant should contact the complainant. All new complaints should be put in the system and complainants contacted. As much of the backlog as possible should get at least preliminary attention.

Alderman Parker, Lipsitt, and committee members questioned why the Agent position funded in the budget had not been filled. Mr. Rourke said that lengthy union negotiation had recently ended with a union determination that the position need not be in the union. The position has been posted within the city, and some targeted recruitment mail has been sent out.

Several Aldermen still found the reporting relationship of the Customer Service Clerks dubious. Some questioned how well the Supervisor from Planning could determine how well the clerks were doing their jobs if she was not always present. Just as the bookkeeper from Planning will assume the bookkeeping duties from ISD at comparatively little incremental time increase, the current Executive Assistant supervises

all the intake functions in the Planning Department so the addition of the supervision function of the ISD permits can be added at comparatively little increase in time. Alderman Johnson said that her supervisor is in London and that properly trained employees can be supervised by a person not immediately present if a large amount of initial time has been invested by the supervisor in establishing a relationship with the subordinate and systems that allow for accountability. Alderman Lipsitt pointed out the importance of substantive knowledge. The clerks should be able to perform a wide range of functions and clearly refer applicants to the technical staff behind them or the specialized staff down in Planning. A proper attitude of helpfulness is needed. So is detailed knowledge to enable first class information and referral. Some Alderman did not understand why the Commissioner could not maintain direct Supervision of the Customer Service Clerks.

Mr. Rourke said that a chief benefit of the re-organization was the reduction in the number of people who report to the Commissioner so that the time now spent in supervision could be spent in using his expertise and authority to resolve cases. Alderman Yates suggested that this might be made clearer by a chart comparing the Commissioner's time now and after he is removed from direct supervision of the Wire and Plumbing Gas Inspectors and even indirect supervision of the Customer Service Clerks.

After two hours of discussion, Alderman Gentile moved approval. He and Aldermen Baker, Johnson and Yates felt that though the re-organization might not solve all of the Department's problems, it was a good start and a basis for further improvements. Aldermen Mansfield and Lennon were not convinced that it would not need to be re-done in the near future, further disrupting two fractured departments. Alderman Sangiolo felt that the changes did not need to be done by re-organization and that the failure to fill the Agent's position by now was unacceptable. Aldermen Lappin had to leave before a vote was reached although she had participated actively in the meeting.

Upon a motion by Ald. Gentile, the item was approved 4-1-2, with Aldermen Baker, Gentile, Johnson, and Yates voting in the affirmative, Alderman Sangiolo opposed, and Aldermen Lennon and Mansfield abstaining.

Respectfully submitted

Brian Yates, Chairman

Attachment

Zoning & Planning Committee report dated 10/9/03