

CITY COUNCIL MEETING

MUNICIPAL COMPLEX
DATE: MONDAY, MARCH 8, 2021

PORTSMOUTH, NH
TIME: 7:00PM [or thereafter]

Per NH RSA 91-A:2 III (b) the Chair has declared COVID-19 Outbreak an emergency and has waived the requirement that a quorum be physically present at the meeting pursuant to the Governor's Executive Order 2020-04, Section 8, as extended by Executive Order 2020-24, and Emergency Order #12, Section 3. Members will be participating remotely and will identify their location and any person present with them at that location. All votes will be by roll call.

I. WORK SESSION – A Work Session was held at 6:00 p.m. regarding Islington Street Corridor Phase Two (2) Project.

II. PUBLIC DIALOGUE SESSION [when applicable – every other regularly scheduled meeting] – POSTPONED

III. CALL TO ORDER [7:00 p.m. or thereafter]

Mayor Becksted called the meeting to order at 7:03 p.m.

IV. ROLL CALL

Mayor Becksted recited that this is a Remote Meeting via Zoom Conference Call. Per NH RSA 91-A:2 III (b) the Chair has declared COVID-19 Outbreak an emergency and has waived the requirement that a quorum be physically present at the meeting pursuant to the Governor's Executive Order 2020-04, Section 8, as extended by Executive Order 2020-25 and Emergency Order #12, Section 3. Members location. All votes will be by roll call.

Councilors Present: Mayor Becksted, Assistant Mayor Splaine, Councilor McEachern, Councilor Whelan, Councilor Lazenby, Councilor Kennedy, Councilor Huda, Councilor Tabor and Councilor Trace. All Council members participated via zoom from their perspective homes.

V. INVOCATION

Mayor Becksted shared some personal stories in remembrance of Vernon Boardman, Coach Murphy, Coach Parr and Billy Adams, all Portsmouth residents who passed away recently. A moment of silence was held in their honor.

VI. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The Pledge of Allegiance was led by Mayor Becksted.

VII. ACCEPTANCE OF MINUTES – *There were no minutes on for acceptance*

VIII. RECOGNITIONS AND VOLUNTEER COMMITTEE REPORTS

A. Presentation from the Recreation Board Regarding Edge Sports Facility and Tennis Court Update

Recreation Board Chair Carl Diemer introduced Brian DeVellis and Chris Collins of Edge Sports Group along with Adam Kozlowski of the Portsmouth Police Department who provided a power point presentation on various facilities and projects they have done and have planned for the future.

Councilor Kennedy asked what provision will be given to include public input as had been done in the past with SIPP and the indoor pool. She stated there are other sports that may want to be included in this as well and she wants us to be pro-active in including public participation.

Chairman Diemer stated that they are planning a public input session to identify the most popular and best utilization of a facility.

Councilor Kennedy stated she would want that to be done before an RFP goes out.

Councilor McEachern thanked everyone for the presentation and explained that as the Council representative to the Recreation Board he and the other board members are flexible. He stated that there will be public involvement going forward, but the Recreation Board has brought this forward for the Council to move ahead.

Councilor Tabor stated his son played hockey but stopped playing due to lack of local ice time and having to travel out of town. He stated he would like to know if there has been a study on how much demand there is for hockey and turf activities here.

Mr. Devellis stated that Portsmouth has everything that they are looking for to be able to grow into the facility as there are already hotels, restaurants, shops etc. that will bring people here for various sporting tournaments and activities. He addressed the question of demand stating that they utilize "Survey Monkey" online to get input on what people are looking for in a facility.

Discussion ensued regarding current fields and facilities, who the users would be and time allotment for groups and residents, how much property and parking would be needed, etc.

Chairman Diemer stated they are looking for a minimum of 5 ½ acres and explained that they had already reached out to the PDA who did not show any interest. He stated that if we look to a surrounding town, then it becomes their asset and under their control.

Mr. DeVellis stated he will supply an example of the ground lease and a list of facilities within an hour radius of Portsmouth for those who want to visit a location.

Mayor Becksted opened up the discussion to the public:

Jackie Cali-Pitts – stated she hopes Mr. Diemer is speaking as a citizen and not representing the Recreation Board as this wasn't vetted and she had no idea that an RFP was being requested tonight. She stated that there needs to be public input before an RFP because this is going to be expensive and will affect everyone with the loss and use of land.

Jonathan Sandberg – stated he supports a new sports facility as some of the facilities and fields in Portsmouth are sub-standard compared to other communities. He suggested the stump dump off of Route 33 as a potential location as it is more centrally located and accessible than the community campus area.

Judy Miller – stated as a senior citizen she is able to use Spinnaker Point for \$9.00 a month and it is very affordable.

Arthur Miller – stated he works in Middleton, Massachusetts and is involved with their Chamber of Commerce and explained that there was a similar proposal in that town which sounded great, but feels that the Council should do their due diligence and look at the finances of the company as there were issues even prior to COVID-19.

John Pendelton – stated he is a coach and parent who drives kids around to other towns to use their facilities. He is in favor of bringing a sports complex to Portsmouth and feels it will also help the hospitality industry by bringing more people into town.

Michael Derhammer – stated that he would like to make sure that there wouldn't only be organized sports teams using the facility and that it would be open to the public for other activities. He also asked who would be on the hook if something were to happen and it goes under.

Ned Reynolds – requested that the process not be bogged down with public input until the idea is more fully formed. He stated that every other city around has an ice arena but not Portsmouth. He stated that 3 fields have been approved for behind community campus and only one has been funded. Finally he stated that we recently opened a new Senior Center and doesn't want to see this become a seniors vs. family issue.

Matt Hester – Coach of the combined Oyster River/Portsmouth girls hockey team, stated we all know we need more playing facilities and has gone to ESG facilities and they are excellent. He stated that Portsmouth softball also has a shortage of space for pitchers and catchers to practice during the winter and this would help.

Mitchell Foster – stated that his kids are older now but feels this facility is needed.

Crystal Nersesian – stated she has to travel with her kids to other cities and towns to participate in sports and feels this facility is needed.

Mark Brighton – stated whenever he hears “public/private partnership” he knows it is going to cost the tax payers money.

Gary LaCamara – stated there is no harm in going out for an RFP but feels we need to protect our interest as 100 years is a long time.

Derek Rolfe – stated he is in favor of exploring this concept not just for the kids but for adults as well.

Mayor Becksted closed the public input.

TENNIS COURT UPDATE

Recreation Board Chair Diemer gave a brief presentation regarding a proposal to covert 2 existing tennis courts at Leary Field into 8 Pickle Ball Courts.

Councilor Kennedy stated that this is a well thought out plan except that there was not input from tennis players who would be losing 2 courts. She suggested there may be other areas to put pickle ball courts and suggested behind the new senior center.

Mr. Diemer stated the land behind the senior center is not level and would cost more money to put them in there. He stated he had not heard from any tennis players other than an anonymous letter and one JV tennis coach.

Councilor Kennedy stated some people are not comfortable putting their opinions out there in writing.

Councilor Huda asked if the Middle School has been consulted on this as they also use the area.

Mr. Diemer stated Barry Foley attends the Recreation Board meetings and is the Athletic Director for the Middle School so he is aware of the proposal and has no issue with it.

Councilor McEachern stated the new Recreation Director Todd Henley will be starting on the 15th so he will be brought into the process as well. He stated he likes the idea of the pickle ball courts being in the downtown area because it brings people out.

Mayor Becksted opened up the discussion to the public:

Michael Miliken – stated this is not only a sport for senior citizens and will only grow in popularity so the Council needs to prepare to add even more courts in the future.

Jackie Cali-Pitts – stated we need to be careful who we displace and that fads come and go. She also feels that tournaments in the downtown can cause problems.

Andrew Bagley – stated that the pickle ball players use the courts even in the winter and feels that the courts can be shared.

Arthur Bruinooge – stated there are a lot of tennis courts in Portsmouth, 71 including private courts. He stated that in order to do pickle ball tournaments the courts need to be regulation and by making the 8 courts it will allow tournaments that will bring in players and guests to the downtown and will also be used by the Middle School who do play it as well.

Michael Derhammer – feels that there should be flexibility of use of the courts such as for badminton as well and also install concrete table tennis.

Thomas Smart – suggested that another location for the courts could be under the I-95 Bridge at Atlantic Heights as there used to be basketball courts there. Mayor Becksted explained that we are no longer able to use that area as there is debris falling from the bridge and it is unsafe.

Kevin Semprini – stated he is in favor of the pickle ball courts at the South Playground as this would allow multi-use, multi-generational activities and socialization and will help the downtown economy.

Lucia Von Letkemann – stated that the courts can and should be shared. She stated that the tennis courts at New Franklin School are deteriorated but could be upgraded.

Michael Milliken – stated that the idea to make the courts flexible for other uses would work against being able to have regulation courts for tournaments. He stated that 8 dedicated courts will result in a great payback to the city.

Wayne Semprini – stated he recently played in a pickle ball tournament in Florida and this sport is here to stay. He explained the positive economic impact of having tournaments in the downtown area.

Carol Clark – stated that she wants to make sure that the pickle ball courts are meant for everyone to use and it is not just about tournaments. She stated it will have a positive impact on the downtown businesses and the sport is not going anywhere.

Mayor Becksted closed the public input.

Councilor McEachern stated the excitement around pickle ball is real and he is learning more about the sport and tournaments and needs more information. He discussed the tennis courts at the high school stating that they do need repair and that is an issue they should be looking at because those players should be able to play at their school and not necessarily at the South Playground.

Councilor Kennedy stated she is not against pickle ball but was concerned that there was no outreach to the tennis community and wants to make sure all voices are heard.

Councilor McEachern gave his cell phone number for people, i.e. tennis players, to call him with their input regarding the tennis courts. He stated he feels it is critical to bring pickle ball downtown.

Mr. Diemer stated his phone number and e-mail are available on the city website to receive feedback as well.

Mayor Becksted stated that there are other issues that will need to be addressed as well such as parking.

Mayor Becksted called a brief recess at 9:20 p.m. Meeting reconvened at 9:27 p.m.

IX. PUBLIC COMMENT SESSION – (Via Zoom)

Mayor Becksted opened the Public Comment Session:

Annie Poubeau – first acknowledged several staff people in recognition of International Woman's Day. She then stated she is opposed to changing back the Middle Street Bike Lanes especially in light of having to return money to the State. She stated that the School Department is being asked to reduce their budget but we can give back \$300,000.00 for the bike lanes.

Effie Malley – asked the Council to oppose modifying the Middle Street bike lanes as there has already been an exorbitant amount of time spent on this issue and other things that need to be addressed such as COVID-19 reopening.

Andrew Bagley – stated his 13 year old daughter will be using the Middle Street bike lanes to bike to the High School and feels it will be less safe if they change it back.

Nicholas Kirsch – asked if the City Council is only concerned with vehicle drivers and not bicyclist, pedestrians, etc.

Seamus Durkin – stated he and some others have started a petition to redo the Greenleaf Skate Park and have 500 signatures so far. He stated that it is illegal to skate downtown and they need a place to be able to skateboard. He stated that the Tony Hawk foundation will give money towards the renovation and there are many people willing to volunteer their time.

Oliver Sieve – spoke on the need for a new or renovated skate park especially since Rye Air Field has closed. He stated the Greenleaf Park is unsafe and dangerous.

Gerald Duffy – spoke opposed to the proposed changes to the Middle Street Bike lanes and stated it is not clear whether the money would have to be given back or not. He stated he and the other members of SABR would rather work with the city and collaborate on the issue instead of trying to change what already exists.

Patrick Dailey – spoke in favor of a new skateboard park as they closest parks are now in Dover or Hampton and feels that Portsmouth residents, young and old, need a place to go locally.

CJ Fleck – requested that if there is data showing that the current bike lanes are unsafe, to please show it and not just anecdotally. He stated that the proposed changes are contrary to the experts and wants to see the documentation that the city will not have to pay back the money to the State.

Don Jeka – spoke in favor of a new or upgrade skate park as the Greenleaf Park is not safe for skateboarding.

Byron Matto – stated that all of the experts and the Parking and Traffic Safety Committee support the current bike lanes and feels this subject matter is tired.

Michael Derhammer – stated he works in the bike industry and many bikes have been sold during the COVID-19 so there are a lot of new cyclists who need safe routes.

Adaline Derhammer – stated she will be a freshman at the high school next year and will be riding her bike on Middle Street and feels safe with the current bike lanes.

Paula Bedard – President of the Bike/Walk Alliance – stated she is in favor of keeping the current bike lanes and feels that they shouldn't have to fight to keep what they already have.

Ben Gamari – spoke in favor of keeping the current Middle Street bike lanes as the separation of bikes and traffic is the best way to mitigate cyclist accidents. He stated voting to change it will simultaneously cost the taxpayers \$300,000 and put cyclists in danger.

Greg LaCamera – stated he likes the enthusiasm of the skateboarders coming together and feels that the city should help them. Secondly, he discussed Islington Street stating this has been ongoing since 1997 and it is in terrible condition for the residents and appreciates the Council moving it back up to 2022.

Dave Cosgrove – stated he benefited from skateboarding throughout his life and feels that the Greenleaf Park is not salvageable. He stated the replacement should not be pre-fabricated and needs to be suitable for other uses such as scooters, BMX bikes, etc. He stated he will gladly make himself available to help.

Lucia Von Letkemann – stated it is short-sighted, dangerous and fiscally irresponsible to undo the Middle Street bike lanes. Secondly she supports the skateboarders and their need for a new skate park and related the same efforts being undertaken in Stratham. She suggested that poured concrete is safer than pre-fab and maintenance cost is also much lower with the poured concrete.

Mark Brighton – stated that the bike enthusiasts have a problem in that the residents hate the bike lanes which were passed during John Bohenko's era with no public input. He stated that the Council needs to keep their campaign promise.

Matthew Glenn – stated he and the residents of Portsmouth are sick of having to speak on the Middle Street bike lanes and that both fire and police are in favor of these lanes. He stated there are other riders who are not able to speak during the meetings and he also appreciates Mayor Becksted having spoken with him on the issue. He stated he does not favor moving the lane to Lincoln Avenue without engineering design.

Thomas Smart – stated there is still a risk of being “doored” and it would be into moving traffic if they reconfigure the lanes back.

Dave Allen – stated he is opposed to Councilor Kennedy and Councilor Huda’s motion to remove the Middle Street Bike Lane. He reviewed the history and procedure of having this put in place which included various plans and 8 public meetings which culminated in the installation in 2018. He stated there were 2 more years of “tweaking” and recommendations of minor improvements to the current configuration. He stated that the issues being brought forward by the Councilors regarding driveways is minimal. He concluded that expecting that this be undone by April 15th and a new engineering study accomplished is unreasonable and will result in having to return the grant funding.

Sebastian Bowden – spoke in favor of a new skate park as the current one is unsafe and it is illegal to skateboard downtown.

Kate Hatem – stated the Middle Street bike lanes have already been studied and should not be moved back to the curb. He stated we should trust the science and defer to the experts and not cost the taxpayers hundreds of thousands of dollars to make it unsafe again.

Mayor Becksted closed the Public Comment Session.

Councilor Kennedy moved to suspend the rules to bring Mayor Becksted Items 2, 3 and 4 forward on the agenda. Seconded by Councilor Trace and passed on a 9-0 roll call vote.

3. Request to Schedule a Public Informational Session Re: Great Bay Total Nitrogen General Permit on Thursday, March 11, 2021 at 6:00 p.m.

Councilor Kennedy moved to hold a Public Informational Session regarding the Great Bay Total Nitrogen General Permit on Thursday, March 11, 2021 at 6:00 p.m. Seconded by Councilor Huda and passed on a 9-0 roll call vote.

4. Request to Reschedule City Manager Check-in to Tuesday, March 16, 2021 at 6:30 p.m.

Assistant Mayor Splaine moved to reschedule City Manager Check-in to Tuesday, March 16, 2021 at 6:30 p.m. Seconded by Councilor Whelan and passed on a 9-0 roll call vote.

2. Appointment of Liaison/Representative from Reopen Portsmouth 2021 to the Arts & Non-Profit Blue Ribbon Committee

Mayor Becksted announced Martha Fuller Clark as the Reopen Portsmouth 2021 Liaison representative to the Arts and Non-Profit Blue Ribbon Committee.

Assistant Mayor Splaine moved to adjourn the remainder of the agenda to March 15, 2021 at 6:30 p.m. and to continue the Capital Improvements Plan (CIP) Public Hearing. Seconded by Councilor Kennedy and passed on a 9-0 roll call vote.

Meeting adjourned at 10:27 p.m.

Valerie A. French
Deputy City Clerk