



MINUTES OF THE COMMON COUNCIL

TUESDAY, JULY 2, 2024 AT 6:30 PM

COUNCIL ROOM, MUNICIPAL BUILDING, 450 S. MAIN ST., RICHLAND CENTER, WI 53581 & VIRTUALLY

CALL TO ORDER: Meeting was called to order by Mayor Coppernoll at 6:30 PM. Members present were Ron Fruit, Karin Tepley, Tom McCarthy, Mark Chambers, Melony Walters, Kevin Melby, Steve Downs, and Ryan Cairns.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES: Minutes for the June 6, 2024 regular meeting and June 25, 2024 special session not available prior to meeting for review.

APPROVAL OF AGENDA: Motion by Alderperson Tepley to approve the July 2, 2024 council agenda. Seconded by Downs. Motion carried 8-0.

CITY AND UTILITY DEPARTMENT HEAD REPORTS AND CONCERNS: Economic Development Director Jasen Glasbrenner reported the acquisition of 7 city lots in the area of West Court, West Mill, Jefferson, and Orange Streets for continual development of the downtown area. After months of conceptual planning the purchase was completed the prior day.

Utility Commission President Scott Sawle, with 30 years of experience on the commission and 2 years as the president, requested that the council either stop or delay the action of proposals #2 and #3 made by the city attorney until the council can have time to study the complexities of running the city utilities and develop a plan of how to run the city utilities. If the council does decide to proceed with either of the proposals, Mr. Sawle requests time for the city utilities to present a defense showing reasons why they should continue to run as they currently are doing so. Mr. Sawle did not agree with some of the wording of the investigation report of the City Administrator but the recommendations of the report have been the goals of Mr. Sawle and Utilities Manager Vanessa Mueller.

Utilities Office Manager Vanessa Mueller reported that she will be resigning her position as of August 2, 2024 due to the City Administrator.

MAYOR AND ALDERPERSONS: Alderperson Ron Fruit reported the Greater Richland Area Tourism is moving in a positive direction with sustained growth.

Alderperson Karin Tepley reported that she received confirmation from the State Historical Marker Program Coordinator that they have the application for the Vernon Thompson Memorial Marker.

TREASURER'S REPORT: Motion by Alderperson Walters to approve the Treasurer's Report as presented. Seconded by Downs. Motion carried 8-0.

PAYMENT OF BILLS: Motion by Alderperson Melby to pay the July 2, 2024 bills as presented. Seconded by Melby. Motion carried 8-0.

FINANCE COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTION:

2. Additional Service Engagement with Johnson & Block:

Administrator Oliphant requested to receive additional services from Johnson & Block, the city's auditor, to assist with monthly reconciliation along with assisting the treasurer moving forward and be better prepared for the yearly audit. The additional services would be on an as needed basis at an hourly rate of \$150 or \$242; anticipated need would be 1-2 days a month to utilize

the additional services. Motion by Alderperson Cairns to approve the additional service engagement with Johnson & Block. Seconded by Alderperson Tepley. Motion carried by 8-0.

- 3. Modify Contract for Ongoing Services with Southwestern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (SWWRPC):** Motion by Alderperson Cairns to amend the existing contract with Southwestern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission for short-term financial and accounting consulting to extend the terms to 2-3 days a week for up to 3 years with a 90-day withdrawal period. Seconded by Walters. Motion carried 8-0.
- 4. Review and Status Update on Aquatic Center Donations:** Mick Cosgrove with Southwest Partners reported 87.9% of Aquatic Center Donation pledges have been collected to date for a total of \$665,932.31. Six major pledges have yet to come this year, Mr. Cosgrove is contacting the businesses and individuals with outstanding pledges and is confident that those will be paid.

ITEMS FOR DISCUSSION AND ACTION:

- 5. Public Hearing on the Future of the Utility Commission:** Motion by Alderperson Chambers to approve opening of the public hearing. Seconded by Melby. Motion carried 8-0.

Time Opened: 6:45 p.m.

- Alan Madison, 1097 Valley View Dr, Richland Center – Resident of Richland Center for 8 years, questioning urgency to disband City Utilities Commission due to conflicts with city administrator. Recent closed council meeting discussed personnel issues, including an investigation involving the city administrator. Concerns raised about roles, responsibilities, and the need for a city administrator over a city manager.
- Bill McCorkle - Not intending to target anyone but to prioritize the council and Utility Commission's best interests. Concerns were raised about the city administrator's limited attendance at utility meetings, potentially leading to uninformed decisions. The Utility Commission has a 50-year history overseeing electricity, wastewater, and water operations. Richard Steiner held key roles during this period.
- Sheila Troxel - Richland County resident and former downtown business owner, expressed concerns about the proposal to dissolve the Utility Commission, commenting on the lack of transparency in the decision-making process and emphasized the Commission's history of successful operation. Sheila called for a clear explanation for the decision amid existing internal issues within the city. She urged for community input and resolution of current issues before supporting the recommendation to dissolve the Utility Commission.
- John Collins, 2155 Hillside Dr, Richland Center - Current Utility Commission member, advocated for keeping the Utility Commission despite imperfections. He highlighted the value of a dedicated body overseeing utilities, emphasizing the time and expertise required. Collins stressed the importance of maintaining the Utility Commission's role in managing utilities based on his experiences and interactions with other utility professionals.
- Dale Bender, 19755 Castrol Ridge Ln, Richland Center - Not a resident of the city but served as an electric superintendent for 34 years, working with multiple mayors, council members, and Commissioners. Despite disagreements, meetings were held to resolve issues in the past. The

recent lack of resolution surprised him. He appreciated the support from the Utility Commission and urged decision-makers to educate themselves. Reflecting on past challenges, like those in the early 1990s, could provide valuable insights for current decisions regarding utilities and business impacts.

- Jim Heiar, 2160 E Preston Dr, Richland Center - Long-time member of the Utility Commission, questions the current state of operations. The commission faced challenges after Act 10, leading to a wage decrease. To retain workers, they offered a raise, becoming a model for the state. Recent interactions with Mr. Windle raised concerns about potential changes in leadership, highlighting uncertainties in the commission's future.
- Judy Shireman, 515 S. Preston Dr, Richland Center - Served 12 years on City Council without issues with Utility Commission. Questioned sudden revelation in a newspaper article, expressing frustration over unresolved problems.
- Mike Kauffman, 855 Panaroma Ct #305, Richland Center - Saddened by the state of the city he believes has been overrun by bureaucrats. Although he had a speech prepared, he wanted to focus on the employees he worked with as mayor of Richland Center. He recently received messages about city issues and reminisced about resolving problems with employees. He recalled only having to write up an employee once and deeply regretted it now. His passion lay with all current and former employees.
- Vanessa Mueller, 19091 Kestrel Ridge Ln, Richland Center - Expressed surprise at her name being included in the investigation report despite assurances from Attorney Samantha Wood. She addressed issues raised in the investigation regarding the utility commission's future, highlighting alleged resistance to change by the utility and the city administrator taking credit for software upgrades. Mrs. Mueller defended the utility's initiatives like payment system upgrades and automatic meter reading, refuting claims of resistance to change. She questioned the attorney's recommendation to disband the utility and urged a thorough understanding of the situation before making any extreme decisions.
- Brett Schuppner, Reedsburg Utility Commission, 501 Utility Dr, Reedsburg - General Manager of the Reedsburg Utility Commission working closely with Richland Center Utilities on Mutual Aid due to their respected staff and commission members. Reedsburg Utilities faced challenges in 2014-2016 due to an administrator's control attempts leading to communication breakdowns and a hostile work environment. A commission offers non-political management of utilities, ensuring decisions benefit ratepayers and customers. Council members sit on the commission for oversight, and diverse knowledge among members enhances decision-making capabilities.
- Marsha Machotka, 165 E 8th St, Richland Center - Was on the city council and Utility Commission, initially feeling unqualified but learned through the process. Department heads researched project funding, requirements for bids, and company backgrounds. Dissolving the committee risks losing dedicated employees who had done a good job.
- Kent Adsit, 27105 Maple Ridge Ln, Richland Center – Together with his wife are local business owners. They faced electrical issues when setting up a bakery, contacted JJ Klatt who efficiently resolved the problems. The city's utilities service excelled, and the hardworking team impressed with their dedication and quality work.

- Bill McCorkle - Not advocating for the firing of the city attorney and suggest that the council should not take any action until the issues are resolved.
- Dave Fry, 29001 Snow Valley Ln, Richland Center - Worked for the city for many years, engaging with various commissions and colleagues. It's crucial to maintain boards and commissions as they provide the public with additional avenues to address concerns beyond the city council, fostering public engagement.
- Rod Perry, 445 E Haseltine St, Richland Center - After 40 years on the Utility Commission, unexpected events led to the Commission's potential dissolution by the Common Council. Recent strange proceedings and lack of confidentiality in closed sessions have caused confusion and concern among members, including possible reprisals for speaking out. Outside advice is influencing decisions despite local knowledge being disregarded. The utility employees, led by Vanessa Muller, have effectively collaborated with city departments for years. Dissolving the Utility Commission abruptly as proposed could risk losing experienced staff and disrupt essential services. The commission has a long history dating back to the mid-20th century. Such a decision warrants thorough consideration to avoid negative consequences, as seen in other cities. The Common Council should not take over the duties of the commission due to the long-standing experience of current members totaling 58 years. Utility funds are largely allocated for bonding and other purposes. The Water and Electric utilities contribute over half a million dollars annually. Previous achievements under the utility president include adding electric substations, a wastewater treatment plant, and a water reservoir for improved water pressure and fire protection. Transitioning duties may lead to regret for the city and residents.
- Larry Ferguson, 27490 Pauls Hill Dr, Richland Center - As a business owner in Richland Center since 1988, described positive experiences with the Utilities Department. There is minimal bureaucracy, and tasks are efficiently handled without hurdles. The department heads for water, sewer, and electric have been proactive and responsive, often addressing issues before being contacted. Expressed concern that the proposed changes may lead to losing department heads who may end up being micromanaged by individuals lacking necessary expertise. More time should be taken before making this decision.
- Cole Mueller, 19091 Kestrel Ridge Ln, Richland Center - Previously worked for the utility and been consulting with them and his wife also works there. Issues at the city level include delays in financial reporting and minutes, leading to additional costs. Concerns were raised about false statements, lack of succession planning, and misplaced graves. It's suggested to focus on resolving current issues before taking on more tasks due to limited leadership capacity.
- Lenny Short, 3290 Holman Dr, Richland Center - Praised Richland Center Utilities and shared his pride in serving on the Utilities Commission. He highlighted the importance of ensuring everything functions correctly. Additionally, he discussed his experiences in Mexico regarding water contamination and emphasized the need to grow the city.
- Christy Adsit, 27105 Maple Ridge Ln, Richland Center - Owner of Chrisy's Sunnyside Bakery and President of the Greater Richland Area Chamber praised the Utility and Police Departments support during local events. Emphasized the importance of simplicity in governance to avoid disruption and build community cohesion.

- Casey Garner, 1186 N. Park St, Richland Center - Limited information about the Utilities commission and prefer not to speak negatively about them. Three presented options are unsatisfactory, and more alternatives are needed. Acknowledged personnel issues discussed but lack details. Commended the City Administrator for her assistance and professionalism. It's important to consider different options and preserve generational knowledge.
- Travis Wertz, 415 N Central Ave, Richland Center - Several years ago, the city council faced tough decisions on projects and sought community input. Served as a council member, initially upset by past utility projects joined to understand the utilities better. Appointed City Council members to the Utility Commission with relevant knowledge. Utility Commission seen as crucial asset for the city, especially with council turnover every two years. Assumed community outreach for constituent feedback to be lacking.

Close Public Hearing on the Future of the Utility Commission: Motion by Alderperson Chambers to approve closing the public hearing. Seconded by Melby. Motion carried 8-0.

Time Closed: 7:35 p.m.

- 6. Presentation by Southwestern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission – Troy Maggied:** The Southwest Regional Planning Commission has been providing planning and economic development services to five counties since 1970. In 2020-2021, they collaborated with the city on a comprehensive plan. Following its adoption, it became evident that numerous projects and tasks lacked staffing resources for implementation. In April 2021, the commission recommended to the City Council the establishment of a City Administrator position to address this gap and outlined specific responsibilities. The commission, having witnessed similar challenges in other communities, underscored the vital role of maintaining continuity in leadership. Embracing change and perseverance through adversities, coupled with diligent progress tracking, are fundamental in fostering sustainable development.
- 7. Review Findings of Personnel Investigation Report:** City Attorney Windel reported Administrator Oliphant requested an investigation by the Personnel Committee regarding a report of hostile work environment. A third party was chosen to conduct the inquiry instead of the City Attorney due to concerns about reliability following feedback on the recent Pine Valley report.

The investigation yielded four recommendations: first, that all individuals receive training in human resources and management communication. Second, it is advised that Oliphant, when feasible, takes extra steps to distribute minutes of department head meetings and gather acknowledgements of the employee handbook. Third, Oliphant should adopt an open-door policy, allot specific office hours for both staff and the public, display a sign on her door to signal availability, and endeavor to engage in more direct communication with employees. Fourthly, irrespective of the presence or framework of the Utilities Commission, Oliphant and the City Utilities' leadership team should persist in convening regular meetings to address and resolve any issues. If routine meetings prove ineffective and persistent trust issues persist, the consideration of EAP mediation at a later stage could aid in restoring the relationship.

[The comprehensive investigation can be accessed on the city's website.](#)

8. Discussion and Possible Action on the Future of the Utility Commission: Motion by Alderperson Cairns to take no action at this time. Seconded by Downs. Motion carried 8-0.

APPOINTMENTS TO COMMITTEES, COMMISSIONS, BOARDS, AND CONFIRM APPOINTMENTS: None at this time

PUBLIC COMMENT:

Scott Sawle, Utility Commission President stated Mr. Windel had participated in a Utility Commission meeting where he requested a list of ten specific pieces of information. In response, the commission suggested that the appropriate reply should potentially originate from their legal counsel. Additionally, Mr. Windel assured the Commission that there were no intentions of assuming control over the City Utilities.

Brett Schuppner, Reedsburg Utility General Manager, If the council is delving into the dynamics of working relationships between commissions and the City Administrator, he expressed readiness to engage in further discussions. Drawing from past experiences with a comparable issue, they have successfully fostered positive working relationships between the city and the utility. Examining the growth underway in the City of Reedsburg offers valuable insights and exemplary instances.

ADJOURN: Motion by Alderperson Tepley to adjourn. Seconded by Downs. Motion carried 8-0 at 8:25 PM.

Minutes respectfully submitted by Misty Molzof, Deputy Clerk