

CITY OF FALCON HEIGHTS
Regular Meeting of the City Council
City Hall
2077 West Larpentour Avenue
MINUTES
January 13, 2021 at 7:00 P.M.

NOTE: THIS MEETING WAS HELD BY WEB CONFERENCE

- A. CALL TO ORDER: 7:06 pm
- B. ROLL CALL: ANDREWS X GUSTAFSON X LEEHY X

MIAZGA WEHYEE X

STAFF PRESENT: THONGVANH X

- C. PRESENTATION
- D. APPROVAL OF MINUTES:
1. December 16, 2020 City Council Workshop Minutes

Council Member Leehy mentioned one edit to the December 16, 2020 minutes.

Motion by Council Member Leehy to approve the December 16, 2020 minutes;
Approved 4-0.

2. December 23, 2020 City Council Regular Minutes

Motion by Council Member Andrews to approve the December 23, 2020 minutes;
Approved 4-0.

- E. PUBLIC HEARINGS:
1. Ordinance Amending Chapter 8, 22, 26, 105 and 113 of the City Code Concerning Fire Departments

Administrator Thongvanh

The ordinances included in the packet amend the City Code to allow the City to contract for those services and dissolve the Falcon Heights Fire Department.

Dan Johnson-Powers: 1974 Tatum Street

I live on Tatum Street and I am a member of the Fire Department and also work with the Emergency Management department. I am honored to have served the City and am disappointed to read in a letter that my position with the department has been terminated.

Rebecca Olson

I want to focus on transparency with regard to the elimination of the department. I have requested data from a few council members and was displeased with the response. I think this is a concerning and rushed decision. In the long term, the entity that the City contracts can raise

their rate to whatever they want. I don't support the rush and I don't feel there has been enough time given to this topic.

Joseph Olson

I spent a decade or more on the Fire Department. I live on Roselawn. I am concerned about what happens with the language in the contract that St. Paul can abandon an emergency situation, and there is no language to require calling for mutual aid.

Nick Olson

I am vice chair of the Environment Commission. I would like to express my dismay that we are getting rid of this institution that has been part of the City for many years. I am concerned that this may go the way of what happened with our police services, where we ended up going with Ramsey County and seeing a significant increase in our taxes. I'm also concerned that we will lose our identity as a City that will provide services to citizens not under contract.

Fire Chief Butch Inks

In reference to the contract related to abandoning emergency situations, this language is in all our contracts with other entities. It simply means that if a catastrophic situation arose in St. Paul, that the department could pull resources to address it. This is a highly unlikely event, and the department would never leave Falcon Heights without services, especially given that we also have mutual aid agreements with surrounding entities.

To respond to concerns about St. Paul increasing the rate after the contract expires, we are not in it to make a profit. We build in a 2% increase to cover the increasing cost of business but we are simply covering costs.

Tom Lageson

I live on Pascal and have been a resident since 1989. I recommend postponing the decision for a year to ensure that we have all the capabilities to meet the needs for apartments in Falcon Heights. If we get rid of the fire department, we need to start asking why the City exists at all.

Nick Olson

I am more so worried about the politics of St. Paul influencing the terms of the future contract.

Sue Majerus: 1381 Iowa Ave West

I do oppose the ordinance. I think the process should have started out with publishing the ordinance and requesting public input. The City needs to think about better communication. I want to see more information about who would be providing mutual aid under the contract. Lastly, I would like to thank the Falcon Heights Fire Department.

Dan Johnson-Powers: 1974 Tatum Street

I want to thank the Council and the City for the opportunity to serve. I do not support this. It has been our honor to have served the City.

Sue Majerus: 1381 Iowa Ave West

I just want to make sure that you know this ordinance is not the last step. Eventually you need to determine what to do with the equipment and the garage.

Council Member Andrews

I want to officially acknowledge that this is not an easy decision for any of us. I personally want to thank the firefighters that have provided service to the City for 70 years. I am also sorry if community people are not aware that this has been talked about. We as a council are struggling with how best to communicate information to citizens. I want to emphasize that our concern is to provide a safe environment for all of us to live. It is wonderful that we will be able to decrease our levy, but for me that was not the primary factor. We needed to have adequate staff and resources, good response times, quality service, and department leadership and for me that was the most important factor. I hope that we are reaching out and making sure that mental health needs are being addressed and that support is being offered.

Council Member Leehy

This is a very difficult decision that we have had to come to. It's been over a year and a half in time invested. Safety and liability is the number one issue that we are looking at. We have done everything possible to keep our fire department as long as possible, but we are put in this decision. I am grateful to each and every fire fighter.

Council Member Wehyee

I want to echo what my fellow council members have said. I deeply appreciate our volunteer firefighters and the work they have done for the community. I have more substantive comments that I will make under policy item 2.

Mayor Gustafson

Council and staff have worked for many months to maintain viability of the department. It was not easy but needed to be done for the long term public safety of the City.

Motion to adopt Ordinance 21-01 and Summary Ordinance 21-01 by Mayor Gustafson;
Approved, 4-0.

F. CONSENT AGENDA:

1. General Disbursements through: 1/07/21 \$182,817.40
Payroll through: 12/31/20 \$16,768.31
2. Approval of City License(s)
3. Designation of Official Depositories for 2021
4. Review Elected Official Out-of-State Travel Policy
5. Review and Adopt Council Standing Rules
6. Council Appointment as Liaison for City Commissions
7. Appoint Acting Mayor
8. Mile Reimbursement Rate for 2021
9. Appointment of Vandara Thammavongsa to Assistant to the City Administrator
10. Resignation of Katie Kohns from the Community Engagement Commission
11. Resignation of Georgiana May from the Community Engagement Commission
12. Purchase of 2021 Ford F250 and Attachments for the Public Works Department
13. 2020 Additional Year End Budget Amendment
14. Accept Donation from Falcon Heights/Lauderdale Lions

Motion by Council Member Wehyee;
Approved, 4-0.

G: POLICY ITEMS:

1. Fire Protection Services with the City of Saint Paul

Administrator Thongvanh

This is a joint powers agreement with the City of St. Paul. It's a 2-year contract with an annual cost of \$165,000. Once it's approved we will work on the transition to the City of St. Paul. On Thursday, January 14 at 1:00pm, the transition will be made with Ramsey County Dispatch to formally transfer fire services in Falcon Heights to the City of St. Paul.

Mayor Gustafson

The joint powers agreement has been approved by the City of St. Paul at their City Council meeting earlier today. Services will begin on Thursday at 1:00pm when St. Paul Fire will become the entity dispatched to emergencies in Falcon Heights.

Motion by Mayor Gustafson to accept the joint powers agreement regarding fire protection services;
Approved, 4-0.

2. Dissolution of the Falcon Heights Fire Department and Termination of Employees

Administrator Thongvanh

This is the final step for contracting with St. Paul for fire services. We will need a motion from Council to terminate all fire department employees.

Council Member Wehyee

I have a prepared statement I would like to make. Last January I was entrusted with the responsibility to serve on Council and I have been forced to make difficult decisions. My assessment of the situation was that the odds were stacked against the fire department from the beginning. I stand firm in my belief that the Falcon Heights Fire Department that the department would have resolved the issues identified in the fire department audit if allowed sufficient time. My preferred outcome would have been an arrangement in which we maintain our department but contract administrative services to allow the department to build capacity to take on these items later. But because this arrangement with Roseville was no longer possible, we have been forced to contract for fire services. I am hopeful about our future with the St. Paul Fire Department and I am sincerely grateful to all past and present members of the Falcon Heights Fire Department.

Mayor Gustafson

Thank you all for your work on the department. We've tried our best to make it go, we'll be moving on with a positive future and safety for our community.

Motion by Mayor Gustafson;
Approved, 4-0.

H. INFORMATION/ANNOUNCEMENTS:

Council Member Leehy

Thank you to the Parks and Rec Commission for letting me serve as Council Liaison. I look forward to serving as the Liaison on the Planning Commission. There is a survey available in regards to the honorary naming of a portion of Larpenteur Avenue to Philando Castile Memorial Avenue.

Council Member Wehyee

Last week was the third community conversation focusing on public safety. Thank you to everyone that was involved. A topic we need to focus on is improving communication with the community, there seems to be a disconnect.

Administrator Thongvanh

We have our ice rinks flooded and people are using them. As of right now, we have received 1,600 responses to the survey on the Larpenteur Avenue renaming. We got great news that the Amber Union project did receive state bonding funds. There are still many steps that the City will have to take, specifically our discussion on TIF funding to fill a gap in funding.

I. COMMUNITY FORUM:

Please limit comments to 3 minutes per person. Items brought before the Council will be referred for consideration. Council may ask questions for clarification, but no council action or discussion will be held on these items.

Dan Johnson-Powers: 1974 Tatum Street

First, thank you Council for extending the date of our termination to allow for the Fire Department members to allow us to earn a small additional amount towards our pension. Thank you to Council Members Wehyee and Andrews for their support of extending the benefit of Employee Assistance, which primarily covers 6 mental health sessions.


H. Kazemi

I would prefer that we keep our fire department for reasons of independence. At the very minimum, don't hastily get rid of the equipment that the City already has.

J. ADJOURNMENT: 8:49 pm


Randall C. Gustafson, Mayor

Dated this 13th day of January, 2021


Sack Thongvanh, City Administrator