# somersworth_logo_2color Minutes of City Council Workshop Monday, January 30, 2023

5:30 p.m.

**ROLL CALL OF MEMBERS**

The City Council Workshop was called to order at 5:30 p.m. by Mayor Dana S. Hilliard. The following Council members were present: Pepin, Vincent, Gibson, Austin, Michaud, Witham, Gerding, Cameron and Messier.

**CITY COUNCIL WORKSHOP regarding City-Owned Properties**

Mayor Hilliard began the workshop by explaining to the Council that the purpose of the special meeting is to provide a clear direction on City-owned parcels.

*Former Police Station*

City Manager Belmore stated that he asked Director of Planning and Community Development, Michelle Mears, to develop a Request for Qualifications (RFQ) pertaining to the former police station located on Main Street. He added that there was previous interest from developers but the site required a hazardous materials cleanup that was expensive, therefore no developer would move froward to purchase the property.

There was discussion regarding ways to shorten the process by requesting an RFQ and Request for Proposal (RFP) at the same time from developers or by simply putting it on the market to sell. Councilor Gibson asked what the zoning restrictions are and Director Mears confirmed that currently, per form-based codes, it is commercial on the first floor with residential above.

Councilor Gibson stated that he would be in support of putting the property on the market and having the developer go through the Planning Board if deviating from the current zoning. He does not support more residential development in the downtown area but would agree to mixed use as he feels that the City needs to continue to attract commercial development.

Councilor Pepin arrived to the meeting at 5:40 p.m.

Councilor Vincent agrees with the idea of putting the parcel on the market however he doesn’t want the City to give it away, he wants the Council to vote on the choosing a developer and a selling price.

Manager Belmore added that the Council could approve a sealed bid requiring a minimum bid price or go through a realtor. Councilor Michaud asked which process would be quicker. The Council agreed that they believe the property would sell rather quickly in the current market and that if there wasn’t enough interest from developers, they could remove from the market and seek an alternative.

Councilor Messier stated that he would like to know the worth of the property.

Councilor Witham supports the suggestion of putting the property on the market because when asking for RFP’s from developers, the Council is trying to control what gets developed and there is a reason the City has Zoning Ordinances in place.

Councilor Gerding commented that he has trust in the City’s zoning and processes to deviate from them, he added that the City is in the process of applying for a Grant that would examine our current zoning regulations so he wondered if we should wait for this review to take place.

There was some discussion about getting the property on the market sooner than later with a suggestion of doing so by the end of February as many of the Councilors do not want to continue to sit on the property.

Director Mears stated that the assessed value of the former Police Station is $151,000.

Councilor Gerding questioned that if the Council votes to sell the property, is there a potential for the property to sit without going through the process of an RFP or RFQ.

City Manager Belmore suggested he can confirm with the City Attorney if the Council chooses to add conditions to the sale of the property.

Councilor Vincent commented that the tax card assessment value that Director Mears provided isn’t necessarily what the property is worth and expects that it would have a higher market value.

***Councilor Witham made a motion to sell the former Police Station Property on Main Street by way of requesting sealed bids with a minimum base bid of $200,000. The motion was seconded by Councilor Vincent and passed 9-0 by voice vote.***

*Former Breton Cleaners Property*

City Manager Belmore stated that Z Capital Investments expressed interest in the former Breton Cleaner’s property and has added Chinburg Properties, Inc. to their team. He noted that Z Capital Investments won’t move forward until the City agrees to fund the moving of the sewer line that runs through the middle of the property. Councilor Austin commented that the property needs a lot of prep work in order to get a developer to move forward with the purchase of the property and Councilor Cameron expressed agreement with his statement. Discussion continued pertaining to the barriers of the property including the monitoring wells, retaining walls, sewer line, railroad tracks, etc..

Councilor Witham stated that if the City moving the sewer line is going to be what sells the property, he would like more information and preliminary engineering to obtain the cost and feasibility of the City moving the sewer line . He added that if the property is not buildable, what about the potential for a parking lot and the lot remains City property.

Councilor Gibson commented that, in his opinion, the cost of moving the sewer line along with the other work mentioned during the discussion, it sounds as though the City would lose value and income in order to get it ready to sell but does like the idea of additional parking and the potential of adding parking meters.

Councilor Gerding stated that he too worries about the cost of moving the sewer line and the other work that needs to be done. He expressed leaning towards the City retaining ownership but isn’t sure that a parking lot will provide enough value and suggested something more attractive such as renting to food trucks or a green space with benches.

Councilor Messier stated he is inclined to agree with parking space or green space due to the cost of moving the sewer line and added that he hears complaints regarding there not being enough parking in the downtown area or perhaps the parking be reserved for Market Street Residents. He wondered if there would be an issue with having received the Brownfields Grant for the property. Manager Belmore stated that he will investigate this.

Councilor Pepin also expressed preference of having the additional parking or green space as opposed to investing a large expense into moving the sewer line.

Councilor Witham concluded that the Council is aware that the cost to move the sewer line will be costly and wonders what the cost is for engineering the property for a parking lot or greenspace rather than moving the sewer line.

Mayor Hilliard recommended moving this item to the Economic Development Committee to provide the Council with a maximum of two proposals and a report no later than February 20th. The Council agreed.

*Somersworth Plaza*

Councilor Witham stated that if the City decides to move forward with a developer, we need to be clear on parking spaces for the tenants and residents of the plaza and involve all stakeholders in the decision-making process.

Councilor Gerding mentioned the possibility of not making any decisions pertaining to the plaza at this time while the City works towards the selling of the former Police Station and finalizing plans for the former Breton’s cleaners site as well as other potential development taking place in the general downtown area.

Councilor Witham questioned what the value is for the City in owning the plaza parking lot. City Manager Belmore stated that it is permit parking for City employees; while the City spends money to maintain and plow the lot.

Councilor Michaud was in agreement with Councilor Gerding’s thought on taking a step back from the discussion of the plaza pending the downtown taking off with the new development coming. Councilor Messier agreed that he is in no hurry to get rid of the lot but would like to have it cleaned up with hot top.

Mayor Hilliard moved the plaza discussion to the Economic Development Committee and will schedule a workshop meeting in April. He asked that the Committee review meeting minutes and information from the previously created Plaza Commission and modernize a plan to present back to Council with a minimum of two different directions the City could go with the property.

*National Guard Readiness Property*

Councilor Gibson questioned if the tabled item sits as an RFQ and stated that he feels that if the property is sold to a developer for residential use, the City will be missing out on economic development opportunities considering the property sits in a good location with lots of traffic, commercial development is better to enhance the tax base. He added that increasing residential development, increases the load on City services including the Police Department, Fire Department and Schools.

Mayor Hilliard clarified that the item is currently worded as an RFQ and needs to be corrected to include an RFP that it how it was tabled at a previous City Council meeting.

Councilor Austin reports having many residents address him on the direction of the National Guard Readiness Property and they want more housing, he is supportive of what the residents want.

Councilor Pepin expressed supporting anything that gets it off the table, he would like to see an RFQ issued to get ideas back to the Council allowing them to then vote on a final direction at that time. He is interested in what developers see on that property and respects the National Guard Reuse Commission’s time and effort that went into their recommendation to Council.

Councilor Vincent stated that there is more value in property that you own and wondered of the possibility to do a combination with leaving the ball field, he understands that residential adds strain to services. He does like the idea of recreational use to draw in families and the Community and that once it sells, it is gone.

Councilor Witham commented that the National Guard Reuse Commission recommended residential use after a study was done by a consultant that provided three different directions the City could go in. He stated that the ball field is zoned for recreation and the surrounding area is residential inhibiting commercial development. Councilor Witham reminded the Council of the residential idea being 9-10 subdivided town homes and not an apartment building with multiple family units. He added that he does like the idea of a recreation facility but after careful thought, the Commission agreed that financially it wasn’t feasible for the City.

Councilor Messier stated that he would not vote in favor of residential, he added that the building could be remodeled and isn’t worried about the estimated $4.5 million project cost for a recreation facility and believe that if the money can be found to build the new Fire Station, then money can be found for this project.

Councilor Gibson expressed appreciation of the National Guard Reuse Commission efforts and that he is not totally against residential but wants the Council to consider the impact to City services as other residential units come into the City adding to the burden.

Mayor Hillard concluded the meeting with recommending that the Council take action during the Council meeting to remove the item from the table by either voting to approve or reject issuing an RFQ for the purchase and redevelopment of the National Guard Readiness Property for residential or recreational use.

The meeting adjourned at 6:45 p.m.