

CITY OF MENDOTA HEIGHTS  
DAKOTA COUNTY  
STATE OF MINNESOTA

Minutes of the City Council Work Session  
Tuesday, June 20, 2023

CALL TO ORDER

Mayor Levine called the work session to order at 5:00 p.m. Councilmembers Lorberbaum, Mazzitello and Paper were present. Councilmember Miller was absent.

Staff in attendance included City Administrator Cheryl Jacobson, Police Chief Kelly McCarthy, Public Works Director Ryan Ruzek, Assistant City Administrator Kelly Torkelson, Park and Recreation Manager Meredith Lawrence, and City Clerk Christine Lusian.

POLICE STATION / CITY HALL RENOVATION PROJECT

City Administrator Jacobson introduced the discussion asking that the city council confirm their support for the police department/city hall renovation project. She noted that staff submitted a 2024 state bonding request for \$11 million dollars, which represents approximately half of the estimated project cost. She informed the council that bonding requests were due to the state on June 16, and if the council is interested in moving forward with the project, the request would need a resolution of support from the city council. Staff can rescind the request in the case that the council is not interested in moving forward with the project.

Councilor Lorberbaum asked if the \$22 million reflected the small, medium, or large option for the building renovation. Jacobson clarified that the requested amount reflected the anticipated costs for a medium sized project.

Chief McCarthy articulated that there are life safety issues that currently exist within the police department. These issues pertain both to how employees come and go from work as well as safety concerns that staff have to navigate while working. McCarthy stated that the orientation of the existing building is not ideal, however it is the most affordable workable option compared with other publicly owned sites around the city. She stated that staff are also reviewing potential options for building and property donations. It is not recommended to create a separate facility just for the police department or to separate the department into two separate floors. Because of this, it would be the most fiscally responsible option to include the second story city hall remodel at the same time that the expansion of the police department occurred.

Councilor Paper stated that if it would be more affordable to build an entirely new building on the site of the ball field that he would be interested in that option and that he was generally

interested in finding opportunities to do the project completely but in the most affordable way possible. He asked Chief McCarthy if the proposed expansion of the existing building to the south and to the west would meet the needs of the department. McCarthy confirmed that it would. She described the existing challenge of limited space with the department's current configuration which requires staff to interview victims in the police lobby. That set up is not workable for either victims or for the officers and changes are necessary.

Administrator Jacobson shared that the proposed solution is not an extravagant proposal, it reflects a practical solution to the operational needs of the police department and the city. The project proposal responsibly incorporates building needs in the present and sets the city up for the future. The proposal is not a band aid solution, but it is also not extravagant.

Mayor Levine asked for a reminder about the different options that the city council could move forward with. Jacobson shared that option 1 was an expansion to the north with 3-4 additional stalls in a garage. That would not be enough to fulfill the city's needs, but it would be an improvement from the current situation. In addition, the proposal also includes some additional square footage upstairs for city administration. This proposal does not include solutions for the existing storage capacity issues throughout city hall. It did not include an alternative space for a city council chambers. Option 2 expands the police department to the south and to the west and includes an expansion for the upstairs office space on top of the police department expansion. There is an option to add a separate space for a city council chambers included in option 2. Chief McCarthy stated that the city council would need to make updates to the existing council chambers even if they did not move them and that it might be less costly to build new chambers that were ADA compliant rather than try to update the existing space.

Mayor Levine confirmed that the council did not need to decide on which option they wanted to do at this point, but that all options were currently on the table.

Councilor Paper asked for clarification about what would happen if the city's bonding request was funded by the State.

Jacobson shared that it would be a funding distribution from the state to the city for the proposed project. The process is very competitive and proposals are often not funded the first year they are submitted. The 2024 state legislative session is typically a bonding year, but there is no guarantee that a bonding bill will be passed.

Chief McCarthy added that the proposal would better allow the city to be a back up Emergency Operations Center which gives the project a regional significance and may improve the chances of the project getting funded. Additionally, the proposal incorporates architecture that would specifically serve neurodivergent visitors.

Mayor Levine said that the city needs these upgrades whether we get state bond funding or not. We should build options that we can pursue if we get funding as well as what we will do if we

don't have state funding. If we don't get funding we still need the upgrades downstairs and the modifications upstairs. The council needs to decide how to move forward on this project. She would like to get a community work group together to get feedback on the project. The community has limited capacity for this type of project, it is a big ask when we just did the fire station.

Chief McCarthy noted that she often reminds the council that if they are looking for a more affordable option, that the city could always contract with Dakota County to provide police services. This would reduce service levels in the community, you would not be able to guarantee coverage but it would be a less expensive option. Chief McCarthy also articulated that police officers are targeted outside of police departments and that there is a security risk for staff coming and going from the police station because of the current configuration of the department.

Mayor Levine stated that she was opposed to contracting police services with Dakota County.

Councilor Mazzitello also was opposed to contracting with the County, but he was interested in limiting the scope of the project. He noted that the current building was worth less than the proposed project costs and that it would cost more to renovate the building than to build an entirely new facility, however the community was attached to the city hall building and would not want to see it torn down.

Council Lorberbaum also stated that she was not interested in contracting police services with Dakota County and that she wanted a safe and effective police department. She seconded the mayor's ask for a community work group.

Councilor Paper agreed that he was not interested in contracting police services with Dakota County. He said that people in Mendota Heights know their police officers and that is a part of what makes people feel safe.

Mayor Levine said that she was glad the council was on the same page about investing in Mendota Heights Police Department and not solving this problem by contracting with Dakota County. She said that the council needed to consider the scope and tax implications, to explore other options for the storage issue, and to distinguish between the wants and the needs.

Assistant City Administrator Torkelson said that the most expensive option for the project is not the proposed \$ 22 million option. The most expensive option would be to wait to do the project or to only do minimal upgrades now and then have the same issues and the same conversations again in a few years. Doing the project all at once is going to save significant costs even if it is a large cost up front.

Councilor Paper said that any expansion that the city does should include a second story on it.

Mayor Levine said that she loves the city hall building, she likes the round council chambers, the wood, that it is built like a house, and it feels homey. She thinks that large government buildings like the Northern Service Center feel like government extravagance and waste and she doesn't want to see that in Mendota Heights. She said that we do not need to be fancy, we are a small town and we should have a small town feel city hall.

Assistant City Administrator Torkelson said that more than architecture, a small-town feel is something that comes out of the relationships that the staff have with the community and if the council does not make investments in the staff facilities then staff will leave. With the existing labor market, attracting and retaining quality staff is increasingly challenging, and having outdated or dangerous facilities will undercut the city's ability to recruit and retain staff. She echoed Chief McCarthy's statement that there are life and safety concerns for officers coming and going from work. That is not something that staff think about after an incident happens, that is something that staff think about every day and if the council decides to not make investments staff will consider that as a message that the city does not care about them or their safety.

Councilor Lorberbaum said that there has to be proper messaging and marketing about a project like this. Administrator Jacobson shared that the city hall campus represents the pride that a community has in itself.

Mayor Levine said that there is a trust factor that the Mendota Heights community has in the police department and in this council and that this is the time to do this project. Administrator Jacobson reiterated that this project represented a fiscally responsible proposal to meet the needs of the city and to serve the residents now and into the future.

Councilor Mazzitello said that the city has cut corners and deferred maintenance on city hall and that is why we are in the position that we are in. There are needed improvements to the entire building, from the HVAC to the roof in addition to the storage and the police department. Mayor Levine said that the public does not see the problems, the city needs to be upfront about the costs of the project and what residents are going to get for it.

Councilor Mazzitello said that option 2 was a bit too far. Administrator Jacobson said that staff are trying to right size the building, they are not asking for extravagance, they are asking for basics. Staff are asking to right size the facilities and to give staff and the public a functional space to do city work.

Councilor Paper asked what the timeline would be for the project. Administrator Jacobson said that in the bonding request timelines that staff included public bidding in 2024, construction in 2025 and a completion date of 2026. We are not sure if that is accurate at this time, it depends on the scope.

Councilor Mazzitello asked for additional details about the bonding proposal staff submitted. Administrator Jacobson clarified that the plan included a city match as the legislature wants to

know that the city is sharing the investment. Mayor Levine said that the city has a good relationship with our elected representatives in the Legislature.

Mazzitello asked if the city could contract with a third party to run the project. Mayor Levine said that she would support that as it would help to avoid scope creep on the project. Administrator Jacobson said that we would need to because staff do not have capacity to manage the project.

Chief McCarthy said that she would provide an update to the city council on the proposed work group. She was going to pull together a group of 3-5 people and use that group to outline the goals for a citizen led group to advise on the project.

Mayor Levine said that she did not want the citizen group to evaluate if the city should contract with Dakota County for police services, she said that issue has been settled by the council. She said that next year is going to be an election year and that there will be people on both sides of the issue. She said that the city needs to do this right the first time and that transparency and good communication are critical. Councilor Mazzitello said there are things that are outside the scope of the citizen group to review and advise on.

Chief McCarthy said that staff have experience doing building projects in other cities and have a good understanding about how to manage project scope of a project, what to include and what not to include.

Mayor Levine said that the city has a significant fund balance and that we have an opportunity to utilize some of those resources. She asked if the city could use any of the park fund.


Park and Recreation Manager Lawrence said that if the city council wanted to include a community room for programming that it probably would qualify for parks funding. Chief McCarthy offered that the council could also look at issuing a hotel lodging tax and use the revenues from that for the project.

#### ADJOURNMENT

Mayor Levine adjourned the meeting at 6:25 p.m.

ATTEST:

  
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Christine Lusian, City Clerk

  
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Stephanie B. Levine, Mayor