

INFORMAL MEETING OF MAY 15, 2018

Informal Meeting of the City Council was held in the City Council Chamber, Room 219, City Hall, on Tuesday evening, May 15, 2018.

CALL TO ORDER

Council President Scott J. Graves called the meeting to order at 6:00 o'clock p.m.

ATTENDANCE

Eleven (11) Councillors were present including President Scott Graves and Councillors Nathan Boudreau, James Boone, Craig Cormier, Ronald Cormier, Edward Gravel, Karen Hardern, Christine Johnson, James Johnson, Elizabeth Kazinskas, and James Walsh.

Others participating were Mayor Mark Hawke, Superintendent of Schools Mark Pellegrino, and School Committee Vice Chairman Robert Swartz.

#9921, An Order Authorizing the City to Borrow a Sum of Money for Watkins Field Improvements *(In City Council and Referred to Committee of the Whole 5/7/2018).*

Mayor Hawke – Wayne Anderson made some changes to Bob O'Brien's original plans:

- Eliminated the building.
- Lowered the stands – cheaper.
- Press Box elevator will have a chair lift – the cost reduced from \$150k to \$100k.
- Deduct the team rooms – an “alternate deduct.”
- 8-lane straightaway; 6 “around lanes;” synthetic field in the middle.
- ½ of the building encompasses the restrooms – interior concrete and block walls.
- \$500k for grass (cannot use the field for a full season).
- \$560k budgeted for synthetic turf – could cost \$700k to \$750k – the field can be used immediately and field rental would command a higher price.
- Council appropriated \$13,500 on October 10, 2017 for the Feasibility Study.
- The track is past its useful life – was repainted last year.

Councillor James Boone – Questioned whether the project could be completed in phases.

Mayor Hawke – Project could be completed in phases, but the project would cost more since the contractor would have to mobilize twice. It makes sense to do the entire project at once.

Councillor James Johnson – Cited the materials cost of urinals and water bottle-filling stations.

Mayor Hawke – Estimates include materials, installation, etc. New bleachers – adding solar would increase the cost of the project.

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Councillor James Johnson – Questioned resurfacing the high school parking lot.

Mayor Hawke – The high school parking lot resurfacing project is on the Capital Improvement Project list and the funds were included in the recent Loan Order for various capital projects. The City has a window of opportunity to borrow for the Watkins Field project and the DPW buildings. The GMS loan will be done next year.

Councillor James Walsh – Cited Tighe & Bond’s Preliminary Conceptual Services proposal, June 2017, cost \$13,500. Proposal listed range of project cost estimates from \$800,000 to \$2 Million. It would appear that the scope of the project from the June Report – a project that costs twice as much as the high end of the Report.

Mayor Hawke – T&B Report was only a proposal.

President Graves – Noted that the Capital Improvement Committee did not solicit project bids.

Mayor Hawke – Asked the Consultant to “give us a \$13,500 Report” (feasibility study) or a “proposal for services.”

Councillor Walsh – Questioned whether items were contained in T&B Report that were not included in the initial proposal.

Mayor Hawke – Tighe & Bond was requesting more money.

President Graves – “Vast experience in turf and excavation?”

Mayor Hawke – We should be looking at the product of the proposal.

Councillor Christine Johnson – Were options given for elevator/change? Cited discussion of track replacement when she was a member of the School Committee and questioned the reason that we have to re-do the field itself.

Mayor Hawke – The field was built for football, not for soccer.

Informal meeting recessed at 6:30 p.m. in order to call to order the Special Meeting.

Informal meeting reconvened at 6:31 p.m.

Councillor Christine Johnson – Questioned whether the project involved the installation of viewing stands on the visitors’ side of the field.

Mayor Hawke – “No.”

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Councillor Walsh - Questioned whether the Loan Order included funding for the team rooms and contingency.

Mayor Hawke - The Order included both elements.

Councillor James Boone - Questioned the reason that the Council first received notice of the proposal at its last meeting.

Mayor Hawke - Has been working on the project right along.

Councillor Boone - Asked the Mayor to explain the reason that the initial estimate for the turf field was pegged at \$560,000, but now the project budget estimates the cost at \$750,000.

Mayor Hawke - Estimate provides for 80,000 square feet at a cost of \$7.00 per square foot.

Councillor Boone - Is supportive of having the best of everything for Gardner's schools; however, questioned the reason that no efforts were made to conduct fundraising for the field project – for the stands and press box first; then pursue fundraising for the track and the field. He cited fundraising efforts for the restoration of Oakmont's field. He added that through fundraising about \$2.2M could be cut from the Loan.

Mayor Hawke - Plan is to take a holistic approach by completing the field all at once – do it once and do it right, instead of piecemeal like the High School Auditorium (ceiling tiles, seats, etc.).

Councillor Boone - Repairs to the inside of the school had to be made and questioned whether repairs to the track and field are absolutely mandatory.

Mayor Hawke - Funds could be raised to help pay off the debt or that perhaps a benefactor would come forth with a donation.

Mr. Pellegrino - Parents raise funds for the school all the time and noted the difficulty in asking the same people to donate \$2M for the project at the same time that the City is seeking a Proposition 2½ override. He added that the City needs people with connections to raise funds for a project of this scope.

Councillor James Boone - \$2M is a lot of money and that it all cannot come from Gardner residents. He attributed the project's fiscal dilemma to a lack of proper planning.

Councillor James Walsh – Understands the difficulty asking the same people for money while asking for an override; however, the same people will be paying for the Loan Order through their property taxes.



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Councillor Edward Gravel – He is part of a volunteer group that offers concerts in Monument Park and that the group spends three months to raise funds. He noted the difficulty in asking people for money, but that he finds it difficult to believe that Booster Clubs and others cannot raise funds for this project.

Councillor Christine Johnson – The reason that we're here is because the bleachers are unusable, so let's go with the bleachers and the press box for \$300,000.

Councillor Elizabeth Kazinskas - Suggested that a committee be established in order to raise funds for the project and to pay for it after it has been constructed.

Council President Scott Graves – When the project was broached with the Council, he never imagined that the cost would approach \$4M.

Councillor Nathan Boudreau - Asked if the School Department has investigated something similar to the donation that Boston Scientific made to the schools.

Mayor Hawke – A student applied with Boston Scientific. He suggested that perhaps the Williams-Rockwell Gift Fund could be used to renovate the GHS Auditorium since it is used for theater.

President Scott Graves - The Capital Improvement Planning Committee assigned a top rating for the project on the CIP. Expressed concern that people will shoulder the debt [from the proposed loan] and said that passage might leave a bad taste in the voters' mouths, particularly with the potential that they will be asked to approve a Proposition 2½ Override.

Councillor Ronald Cormier - Suggested that many of the same arguments were used during discussions of the School Budget while considering the override question. Citing Superintendent Pellegrino's remarks, Councillor Cormier reiterated that the City needs to change the culture in the community and "not in a piecemeal manner." He added that the City should not be fiscally irresponsible and approach the entire project as being more cost effective.

Councillor Elizabeth Kazinskas - Referencing correspondence from the Greater Gardner Chamber of Commerce, said that a new field would be an attraction to the community; that the field could be rented at a greater fee, citing football, soccer and field hockey tournaments. She noted that there would be residual effects to the local economy, such as visitors frequenting local hotels, stores, and other establishments which, she said, could be a return on the City's investment in the field. She added that the new athletic facility could also serve to encourage students to stay in Gardner schools and to improve the atmosphere.

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Councillor Christine Johnson - She became aware of grants funding for the field and noted that the deadline to apply was March 20. She asked whether the City could qualify after the project has already been funded.

Mayor Hawke – He would look into it.

Councillor Christine Johnson – “Culture is more than a building or a field,” that “culture starts from the top and works its way down.” She noted the Superintendent’s attitude and efforts to get everyone to buy into attitude and pride. A new field would add a little to the attitude and the pride. The field is filled at the annual Thanksgiving football game.

Mayor Hawke - The tax rates cannot be compared. Gardner is in the bottom 20% in the State for the tax burden.

Councillor Christine Johnson - The City of Leominster has a higher tax burden than Gardner, but other communities in the area have lower rates but that small towns do not have commercial and industrial bases.

Councillor Nathan Boudreau – “Has a hard time why this wouldn’t be part of the culture.” Added that infrastructure does add to the culture.

Councillor Karen Hardern - The Council was “fighting to the death for \$700,000” and “is now ready to borrow \$4 million. “At this time,” she said, “this is a lot of money, which doesn’t sit right with me.”

Mayor Hawke - If the loan order isn’t passed, “the money isn’t going to the schools. We have a need and it is the cost of doing business.”

Councillor Hardern - “\$4 million is a lot of money – taxpayer money, but that it would be great for student morale.”

Mayor Hawke - The City spent \$15k to \$20k “on rinky-dink stands,” so “let’s do it once and do it right.” He said that the Booster Clubs could raise more money with the concession stand, but that the override issues “is outside this conversation.”

Councillor James Walsh - Would make a motion to reduce the Loan Order by the cost of the Team Rooms (\$250k) and the Contingency (\$187,370).

Superintendent Pellegrino - Is embarrassed by the poor condition of the field, which is unlike the fields at many other schools, also the condition of the concession stand, and the storage sheds. He said that turf fields do not provide cushioning and that players experience a lot of concussions on them.” He added that “students feel that they’re not cared about.”

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President Scott Graves - Following up on Councillor Walsh's point, said that hopefully the Contingency will not be needed.

Mayor Hawke - Cautioned against cutting the Contingency which, he said, represents only 5% of the entire project cost. He said that the price of steel "is going through the roof," so the actual cost is unknown. He is "on-board" with the \$250k cut for the Team Rooms and suggested that if there is a Change Order in July, then there would have to be a Special Council meeting to address any shortfall.

President Graves - Suggested that support for the Loan "might come down to one vote."

Mayor Hawke - "I am advocating the logical approach."

Councillor Edward Gravel - Commented on the City's outstanding Debt - as of June 30, 2017, \$21M was on the books.

Mayor Hawke - There is only one debt payment [from the General Fund], that being for the Police Station. He noted that the vast majority of the Debt is for projects paid from the various Enterprise Funds.

Councillor Christine Johnson - Questioned whether the School Department would be willing to provide a "donation button" on its website for contributions and host "a wall" with the names of donors.

Councillor Nathan Boudreau - Concurred with Councillor Christine Johnson's suggestion. A Donation Steering Committee is needed to begin "high-tier fundraising."

Councillor Christine Johnson - Expressed appreciation to Mr. Pellegrino for his remarks relating to concussions suffered on the field, saying that the "extra cushioning" that an artificial turf field would provide "is a sell for me."

Councillor Elizabeth Kazinskas - Agreed with pursuing fundraising and said that a goal is to "keep students in Gardner" and to attract other students through School Choice. Suggested that receipts from the use of the facility would help to pay for the cost.

Mayor Hawke - Noted that the proposed field project is not only used for football, but also soccer, band, and by other youth organizations. It would be well used, he said.

On a motion by Councillor Ronald Cormier and seconded by Councillor Christine Johnson, it was voted to adjourn at 7:29 p.m.

Accepted by the City Council: *August 6, 2018*