

CITY OF MILFORD
COUNCIL WORKSHOP MINUTES
January 26, 2022

The City Council of the City of Milford convened in a virtual Workshop Session on Wednesday, January 26, 2022 beginning at 6:08 p.m.

PRESIDING: Mayor Archie Campbell

IN ATTENDANCE: Councilpersons Daniel Marabello, Mike Boyle, Andrew Fulton, Todd Culotta, Brian Baer, Nirmala Samaroo, and Jason James Sr.

STAFF: City Manager Mark Whitfield and City Clerk Terri Hudson

COUNSEL: Solicitor David Rutt, Esquire

ABSENT: Councilmember Katrina Wilson

Councilmember James joined the meeting after it commenced.

Customer Service Update

Staff Members Lou Vitola, Suzannah Frederick, Mike Svaby and James Puddicombe were also in attendance.

Finance Director Lou Vitola recalled that Customer Service Supervisor Frederick provided an update on Customer Service back in November and at that time, they were close to being fully staffed. He shared that the department is doing extremely well under Ms. Frederick's leadership.

Supervisor Frederick then talked about her staff, their longevity, and duties. She is still struggling some when employees are out though she has a great team, each has individual strengths that have really built the department to what it is today.

She reported there has been a lot of growth in the three core utilities over the past year. Our tax parcels are growing, and the department issues 9,000 utility bills every month. On top of that, there are a number of items that are lower volume but require a lot of demand time and immediate action such as settlements. Currently, those immediate action items average about 50 a month.

They also have high utility transfers around the 1st, 15th, and 30th of each month for most of the rental units and leaseholders within the City.

Leak work orders have increased this year to about 400. The AMI service software was upgraded last month and now receives leak event reports daily which allows a much quicker response to potential problems and contacts the customer to alert them and have the meter checks done to troubleshoot anything possible.

Cash, checking, and credit card payments are all taken directly in the office. The online credit cards, and e-checks have really been encouraged over the past two years, especially since Covid. They also manage bank transfers from many of the larger industrial customers or contract service customers.

When they ran the telephone report, she learned that the department last year had about 30,000 incoming and outbound calls pertaining to everything, from trash collection, outages, permit information, and utility billing. The overall staff level at that time was at best 75%. The employees were constantly being juggled to assist with customer service based on the immediate need.

She also talked about the four cycle/schedules and holiday schedule adjustments.

Presently, 99% of the reads are through the AMI software. Cycle two includes solar billing and cycle four large commercial and contract service customers' reads and billing.

Delinquent letters are sent out two days after the due date.

Ms. Frederick also explained that the Customer Service staff lives by the City's municipal code and procedures, the strategic plan, and their commitment to excellence. They work with every department daily and believe the communication throughout the city has improved tremendously over the past two years. She works very closely with the technical service department, solid waste department, public works, administration and management and the city engineer. She emphasized the great teamwork atmosphere that exists and the great relationship they have with the other City departments.

She also recognized the two bilingual employees who have been a tremendous asset to the public and the City.

Ms. Frederick also spoke about the partnership with DEMEC and the advantages with networking and training with their other municipal members.

In addition, the partnership with resource organizations who assist customers who cannot afford to pay their bills and the number of ways for customers to communicate through our website and social media outlets.

She also talked about the involvement in the community and the benefit of adding the drive-thru downtown. Recent changes in citywide processes and procedures have been improved and streamlined. Her staff also has the ability to work remotely since Covid and now allows uninterrupted communication.

The Tyler Technology software conversion has been improved and they continue to move in that direction. They are always looking for ways to be more efficient, provide the best customer service and provide ways that work for the employees. They are evaluating things like a self-service kiosk that will provide 24-hour access for customers to pay their utility bill.

They are considering a staggering or FLEX schedule that would allow one cash operations clerk to work a different schedule so that employee can be available for the customers that come in at the end of the day. The consideration of a remote workforce or form of hybrid workforce where staff occupies other buildings or can work from home continues to evolve as well.

There are still many customers that are not ready to provide an email address or make an online payment and prefer coming into the office with a paper bill. The internal work order process is still paper driven but will change with the new software with more things being accomplished electronically.

It was confirmed that the city absorbs the credit card costs associated with utility bills, though the customer pays those bank fees related to property taxes.

The benefit of the drive-thru was also discussed and Ms. Frederick said that it is used by many customers to the point there is often a line of vehicles around the building. The online software will be much improved with the upgrade and prevent many of the glitches that have occurred in the past.

CIP Budget/Project Update

Finance Director Vitola referenced the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) budget in the packet showing activity through December 31, 2021.

The summary page has three years—fiscal years 2020, 2021, and 2022. Three years is related to Council's approval of projects that carry a three-year life in most cases. Projects in the inner service funds will expire after a year. A large project with a grant agreement or a purchase commitment or construction contract, must be approved by Council and signed by the Mayor. In that situation, it will have the life of the underlying contract.

However, most involve the three-year project window with approval from each year shown along with the total. Then the LTD spent column means life to date through December 31st and not just FY22. The balance remaining is that amount of authorized spending remaining from the original budget.

He commented that the kickoff process for FY23 to 27 CIP is just beginning. Great progress is being made on projects though he recalls the staffing shortages caused them to come in dribs and drabs. At the start of FY21, there was so much uncertainty around Covid and what it could do revenues. So, a lot of projects were purposely pushed off to the second half of FY21. That is the reasons for the large amounts for project authorizations remaining in those years, and the result was a much larger FY 22 budget.

The enterprise projects are really moving along and are boosted by ARPA funding and a more accelerated pace of progress and completion.

Director Vitola then spoke about individual projects which can be seen in the CIP report.

He will provide another update soon which will be necessary as they proceed with FY23.

Public Works Director Svaby then spoke about the current street assessment and the new one that is currently underway and should be ready in the next 90 to 120 days.

It was confirmed that the \$1.7 million under police only includes the usual two-car per year replacement under the old, pooled fleet. Two cars are listed for \$108,000 in FY22 with the balance related to the police building.

Director Svaby and City Engineer James Puddicombe then continued with an explanation of capital improvement projects and plans.

Director Svaby also addressed the general facilities projects and vehicles purchases (see packet).

He confirmed that all positions in the electric department have been filled, except for the Electric Department Superintendent, which involves very specialized and unique qualifications.

City Engineer Puddicombe then commented on each item remaining (see packet) and its status. Included were water and sewer utility projects.

The water quantity issues in the southeast portion of the City were also discussed. He also recalled that the City's responsibility now includes from the meter to the side of the house, as deemed by the EPA. Any internal lead piping falls under the customer though Mr. Puddicombe said there are available programs to assist those property owners.

When questioned about the Washington Street flooding area, the City Engineer explained that the outfall is in the Bicentennial Park area, comes up along Fourth Street, draining all the way up to the area of the cemetery. The biggest issue is finding land that can be used to store the water because it involves digging and maintaining a pond.

Mr. Puddicombe also reviewed and provided updates on the general fund projects.

Streets projects include the Mispillion Group that being completed and are holdovers from the 2019 street group. Also, Third, Fifth, North, NE Second, Mill, Kings, SE Second, Barker and Church are all part of the 2020 street grouping and are in the design for the streets below Fourth Street.

Depending on what comes back from the upcoming street inventory, some streets may have to be reconfigured based on current conditions.

He also talked about the ongoing sidewalk improvement project and anticipates bidding that out with work beginning this spring. Notices have been sent providing the 90-day window for property owners to do the work themselves if they prefer.

Due the next three years are the North Washington and Southwest Front Streets/Park Avenue and Denney Row streetscapes.

The Front Street/North Walnut and City Hall Parking Lot improvements will be bid in the very near future, following the completion of some reconfigurations.

Walnut Street Bridge Concept Plan

City Manager Whitfield then turned to the Walnut Street Bridge and Pedestrian Crossing project. This will link the Riverwalk on both sides of Walnut Street and will act as a speed deterrent, while becoming a focal point in the center of town.

Public Works Director Svaby provided a related slide presentation with renderings of the upgraded area. He added this will be a true representation of the divider line between Kent and Sussex Counties. As they finalize the design, they will work with DeIDOT and DNREC and funding sourced will need to be identified. Once the bid is advertised and awarded, the work will begin. Council was pleased with the general rendering.

Director Svaby also explained the challenge of the weight and original construction of the bridge. Because it is not a complete demolition, they will need to be very careful with the materials that are added. The other concern is the top layers of asphalt possibly falling into the river so the waterway will need to be covered and secured to prevent that.

A year-old cost estimate was in the \$360,000 to \$370,000 range and the associated capital budget line item is \$425,000 which included proper escalators.

When asked if there were reservations about moving the project forward, Councilmembers stressed their support of the project and are excited about the improvement to the downtown.

There being no additional items on the agenda, the Workshop concluded at 7:58 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Terri K. Hudson, MMC
City Clerk/Recorder