

Athens City Council
Committee Meeting
Thursday, April 9, 2020
Zoom Meeting ID 825-300-3670/No password needed

Mayor Bob Dowell opened the meeting and thanked everyone for attending during these trying times. The Meeting was held via Zoom technology due to the COVID-19 Executive Order issued by Governor JB Pritzger. The City attorney has approved this. Clerk Cindy McFarland called roll. Those in attendance were Mayor Bob Dowell, Clerk Cindy McFarland, and Aldermen: Larry Buhr, Amy Chernowsky, Rachel Lantz, Butch Nichols, Chris Reichert, and Angella Thompson. Persons in the audience included Treasurer Ryan Seifert, Gary Richardson, Office Manager Nicole McCormick, and Police Chief Tim Becker.

Mayor Dowell presented the Police Report and noted that the 2016 Chevrolet Tahoe had been sold on consignment at D's Auto World for \$19,000. This was \$4000 more than we had been offered on trade-in. The money will be put back into the LESO account. Police personnel have been working 24 hours per day since the governor enacted the shelter at home order, and have been trained on Covid-19 procedures and provided with PPE including N95 masks. Tim and Nicole have been tracking officer hours to recoup this cost from state or federal Covid-19 funds. The Mayor also presented the Treasurer's Report and noted that the deposits to the new streets account that came from the gaming fund will cease since gaming has been halted. Mayor Dowell presented Streets Report stating that a lot of patch work had been completed. Also, we will probably take a bad hit next year in the motor fuel fund due to lower fuel costs and less travel. Mayor Dowell continued on with the Water Report and said that he will get the Wastewater Report to the council by Monday. Alderman Lantz presented the West Cemetery information. She said that Ed McNeal asked for \$100 more per month for the mowing since we are adding more area to mow. Alderman Buhr clarified that this was an extension of the current mowing contract. Alderman Lantz explained the plan to donate the area of the old park that had been the ballpark to the cemetery. Mayor Dowell said he will be explaining more about that plan. He also said that he had received a few notes from people in town checking in with him to see how that city staff were doing and asking if they could do anything to help. Mayor Dowell said he really appreciates all this support. The Mayor presented the Office Manager Report explaining that there has been no water shut-offs this month due to the Covid-19 emergency. Office staff will be calling those with past due accounts to remind them of their overdue balance. Also, all liquor licenses and gambling permits have been paid for and distributed. The Mayor also suggested to the council that, when this emergency is over, maybe we should consider giving back a pro-rated amount of the fee for these permits to the city businesses since they have not been able to make any sales. Mayor Dowell presented the Fleet report and related needed repairs and service measures. He went on to say that we will be suspending the presentations from individual city businesses until the Covid-19 emergency has passed.

First on the agenda was a Covid-19 update. Mayor Dowell said that when the governor issued the shelter at home order and the executive order shutting down bars and restaurants except for curbside service, that all went pretty well. The city then stopped all late fees and disconnects on water service. The city has maintained regular contact with the police, county, emergency services, the school superintendent, fire chief, American Legion, and volunteer food services for our senior citizens. Also, all parks in the county have been closed. Please see the city web page for updates. The Mayor shared that there had been some anonymous monetary donations to be applied to water accounts that are in arrears. Norm Flowers from the Legion is working to stay in touch with seniors. School Superintendent Scott Laird is in contact with students needing internet. Alderman Chernowsky said that she thinks that Cass Comm is offering free internet during the emergency. Mayor Dowell has been in contact with AT&T concerning internet access. Alderman Reichert suggested that people may contact an internet provider for individual hot spot access.

Next, the Mayor explained that Glory Days, which had been scheduled for the first weekend in May, has been cancelled due to the COVID-19 emergency. Also, the American Legion's Salute to America, which had been scheduled for June 27th, has been cancelled. The Mayor asked the council if they want to also cancel the fireworks scheduled for that date. After discussion, the council decided not to plan anything that would cause people to gather at this time. It is unknown if anything will be rescheduled for later in the year.

Information on the donation of some of the old park to the West Cemetery was next on the agenda. The Mayor said that both are city property so the city attorney said that we can make the donation. The property would have to be sub-divided; the playground and sled hill would be one side and the cemetery would be the other. Only the old ball park would be donated to the cemetery. Alderman Buhr suggested a fence to divide the properties. Alderman Reichert said that he would expect the cemetery to pick up any fees such as property transfer fees or the new fence. Alderman Lantz said that the cemetery doesn't have a lot of funds. The Mayor said that the cemetery could sell plots in the new donated area to pay for the fence or other projects and the council agreed. The vote to move forward on this transfer will be on Monday's agenda.

The new budget was next on the agenda and each council member was provided a copy. Mayor Dowell said that Sgt. Fritz, Nicole, and all the department heads worked very hard on this. Alderman Thompson asked if we have taken the effects of the COVID-19 emergency into account. The Mayor said yes, using the motor fuel account as an example. Mayor Dowell asked the council to reference the back page and pointed out that our budget is looking much better this year than last. Also, the auditor has asked for a copy of the library's income report. Mayor Dowell will make sure the auditor receives it.

Next on the agenda was the authority for the Mayor to pay bills during the COVID-19 shut-down. Mayor Dowell said that he would ask for the council's permission for him to pay the monthly bills. Or he could also leave the bills inside a file in City Hall and the council members could stop by over the weekend and review them. Of course, if there was any unusually large bill, the Mayor would make sure to notify the council.

The next discussion topic concerned holiday decorations and how long they should be left displayed. Mayor Dowell said that he had received a complaint about someone putting up decorations too early and leaving them up too long. The council agreed that they would leave this up to the homeowner's discretion. Mayor Dowell said he would let the complainant know.

The last topic was the creek clean-up on Main Street. Mayor Dowell explained that he had received bids for \$8000, \$5000, and Steve DiGiovanna submitted a bid for \$1,800. He would use his shredder machine to clean up the entire area. Alderman Nichols said that is cheaper than what it would cost for the city to do it themselves. Mayor Dowell asked the council which fund they would like to use. Alderman Reichert suggested the new Streets fund and the council agreed. This vote will be on the agenda for Monday.

Under old business was an update on problem properties. Mayor Dowell said that one property was sold and all fines were paid. The North end property looks better but the fines have not been paid. The properties at Jefferson and Adams are for sale for \$20,000 for both with the house. Mayor Dowell said that he really wants those properties cleaned up and the house torn down. Alderman Buhr asked how much it would cost to level the house. Chief Becker answered that it would cost \$12,000. Alderman Nichols said that would just be bailing the owners out. Alderman Lantz agreed. Alderman Nichols said that if the owner removed the house, he may be interested but not if we have to pay to take down the house plus forgive all their fines. Mayor Dowell said that forgiving the fines was just an idea but the offer had not been made. Alderman Nichols said this is the city's money and the city should not be bailing these owners out. Mayor Dowell explained that the city attorney had said that since this had been a problem property, in the courts, and with fines levied against it, the LESO funds

could be used to purchase and clean up the property if the council wanted to. The Police Tahoe had sold for \$19,000 and there is LESO equipment that the demolisher would be interested in making there be no cost for the demolition. Mayor Dowell went on to say that he does also agree with Alderman Nichols that this is LESO money that could be used for something else. However, this property has been a problem for 15 years or so. Alderman Nichols asked if the city still has a lien on the properties. Mayor Dowell said we do still have a lien but the lien does not cover demolition. It only says that the property needs to be cleaned up and compliant and the fines must be paid. Mayor Dowell asked if anyone else has any other ideas. Alderman Nichols said to keep fining them and see if the property sells. Mayor Dowell said that we promised the citizens that we would clean up the city and it's important that we follow through.

Mayor Dowell asked if there was anything else. Alderman Lantz asked about the spring yard sales and possibly a city-wide clean-up. Mayor Dowell said we had budgeted \$4000 for our last city-wide clean-up and it had actually cost \$14,500. Also, this is probably not a good time for city employees to be out picking up other people's stuff. Alderman Lantz suggested maybe we could have fall yard sales and then a city wide clean up the following weekend. Mayor Dowell said we could check our budget in August and see if this is feasible.

Last was the drawing for the weather radio giveaway in conjunction with Athens being a Storm Ready Community. Ryan Knox was the winner. Congratulations!

That ended the agenda for the evening. The Mayor thanked everyone and the meeting adjourned at 8:22pm.