

BUDGET, FINANCE AND PERSONNEL COMMITTEE
February 9, 2010
5:00 P.M.

Councilwoman Berz, Chairwoman, called the meeting of the Budget, Finance and Personnel Committee to order with Councilpersons Ladd, Murphy, Benson, Rico, Scott, Robinson, McGary and Gilbert present. City Attorney Michael McMahan and Shirley Crownover, Assistant Clerk to the Council, were also present.

Others present included Dan Johnson, Richard Beeland, Susan Dubose, Donna Kelley, and Daisy Madison. Mayor Littlefield joined the meeting later.

Chairwoman Berz stated that she needed some input; that a number of comments had been made by everyone; that we are taking a look at how we deal with personnel appeals; that there are thoughts about moving to Civil Service, which would take a Charter amendment; also there is talk about changing the time of the hearings; that she needed some sense as to how we want to go forward.

Councilwoman Robinson stated that we need to explain the pros and cons of a Charter change; that we need to adjust schedules so that all nine Councilmembers are available; that many have jobs and run small businesses, and it is hard to be out of the office the whole day; that we need to fix it so nine people are in the pool.

Councilman Murphy stated that he did not disagree—that these are due process hearings; that maybe we do not need something as formal as what we have that looks like a trial; that he had talked to other attorneys who could advise the Council; that he believes they should be less stilted and less of a formal process so that people will feel like they are getting a fair hearing; that we need to look at our rules as regards the procedures; that he had used pre-hearings and the actual hearing had been substantially shorter; that there had been a history of all-day hearings. He suggested moving them to 3:30 p.m. or 4:00 p.m. and try to be done by 7:00 p.m. or adjourn to another day. He felt that this would make the hearings more efficient.

Councilman Rico stated that we had done a lot; that very few hearings are short; that this is just the nature of the beast.

Councilman Murphy stated that we had set them up like a trial with witness after witness; that if a pre-hearing occurs, the parties might come to an agreement and the whole process gets shorter.

Councilman Rico noted that attorneys work by the hour, and they will go as long as they can because it is for their benefit.

Councilman Murphy stated that often the attorneys are paid by the union, and they are not getting paid a normal rate.

Councilman McGary thanked Councilman Murphy for doing pre-hearings, stating that he thought it should be made part of the process so that councilmembers could get abreast of the issues; that we can get up to speed with the help of pre-trial hearings. He asked if there was some way we could formalize material prior to hearings; that the three or four hearings he had served on, he only got information prior to one; that he would like to have it to take home over the weekend.; that it was not a silver bullet to have pre-trial hearings and information prior to hearings.

Chairwoman Berz stated that she was hearing pre-trials and starting later in the day and getting material ahead of time.

Councilman Benson stated that we needed to make it where everyone can serve; that the School Board had their hearings at 6:00 p.m. and ate before they came in; that the other issue is to take this and request to change it by Charter, which he hoped we would—that we could get rid of this albatross; that he did not want to see it happen again where we can't even get four people to serve.

Councilwoman Berz questioned if we wanted to start at 6:00 p.m.?

Councilman Murphy stated that he would just have to leave early if we started the hearings at 4:00 p.m.; that right now he had to mark off the whole day because it could take from two hours to twelve.

Councilman Rico reminded him that this is the Council's job.

Councilman Murphy stated that if they started at 4:00, it might go five hours; that if we started at 6:00 p.m., we might have the situation of adjourning until another day.

Councilwoman Ladd stated that she adjusted her time around city business.

Councilman Benson asked Councilman Gilbert if he was free at 4:00 p.m. Councilman McGary stated that 4:00 p.m. would be better for him. Councilman Rico stated that he liked it the way it is. Councilman McGary asked what day we were talking about—that right now it is Monday. Councilman Rico stated that if it were later on Monday, he would have neighborhood association meetings that night. Chairwoman Berz stated that she taught at the “Y” on Mondays and Wednesdays.

It was noted that the time was being changed to accommodate Councilmen McGary and Gilbert, prompting Councilman Murphy to say that later in the day was better for him, too, and he thought also for Councilwoman Robinson.

Chairwoman Berz asked if we could be flexible as to the panel and the time and day.

Attorney McMahan preferred a “set” day because lawyers agree on the time ahead of time. He asked to pick Monday, Wednesday or Thursday.

Councilman Benson suggested just having one lawyer to represent this Council. Councilman Rico jokingly said “Get one from Georgia”.

Chairwoman Berz moved to the topic of the Budget, explaining that in the past years in regards to the budget packets, there had been two hearings and when received back from the departments, a long series of hearing; that this year the City Finance Officer is asking for three scenarios—keep it the same, add more money, or less money and the justification for the action. She stated that she and Ms. Madison needed to know after all get their packets, with the three scenarios—that the process is that Administration presents, and we approve it; that the presentations are educations, but the Mayor presents the final Budget. She questioned if the Council wanted discussions and the departments coming before them.

Councilman Benson noted that last year was the first time that we proceeded in this manner; that he felt it was a waste of time.

Councilman Gilbert stated that the timing was messed up.

Chairwoman Berz stated that the Budget packets would be ready the middle of May; that once they are back in from the departments, Administration has to come up with a Best Practices Budget; that the Mayor looks at the Budget and then presents the Council with a Budget, which is a meaningful time.

Councilman Murphy stated that the Council needed the Budget earlier from the Mayor’s Office.

Councilwoman Ladd felt that the best thing would be for each Councilmember to give their input to the Mayor and not wait until after the Mayor presents his Budget; that the Council should share with him things in their districts and let him have time to consider this; that she would like to go straight to the Mayor’s office; that issues could be submitted by category so that he has the Council’s wishes during his planning.

Mayor Littlefield was present and stated that a priority list would be helpful to him.

Chairwoman Berz stated that when the Council gets the budget, they will communicate directly with the Mayor.

Councilwoman Ladd stated that the Mayor can disseminate the information to the departments to have input; that it is hard to get input when this is done on the front end.

Chairwoman Berz asked if the Council wanted hearings? Councilwoman Ladd stated that she did not think we needed them.

Councilman Benson stated that if each councilperson was going to submit to the Mayor, that he would have a delegation.

Mayor Littlefield stated that he just wanted a written indication of the Council's priorities.

Councilman Gilbert noted that the Mayor could change the Department's Budgets—that it was his decision.

Chairwoman Berz stated that she would try to come back with a memo as to what she had heard.

On motion of Councilman McGary, seconded by Councilman Murphy, the minutes of the previous meeting were approved.

The meeting adjourned at 5:30 p.m.