

Public Safety Committee

Tuesday, January 10, 2023

Video of meeting can be found at <https://youtu.be/zH-IM8ddtrA>

Members present in person: Chairman Israel Rivera, Vice Chairwoman Kocayne Givner, Todd McGee

Other councilors present: David Bartley, Will Puello, Linda Vacon, Jose Maldonado Velez, Juan Anderson-Burgos

Chairman Rivera_I called the meeting to order at 6:33 PM

Councilor Givner made a motion to remove item 1 from the table. Chairman Rivera_I seconded the motion. Motion passed.

Item 1: 11-1-22 RIVERA_J, MALDONADO-VELEZ -- Ordered, that the mayor and the flex squad be invited in to discuss what it is, as well as its effectiveness and what steps they're taking to make sure that the neighborhoods are cleaned, not just on private property but public property as well.

*Tabled 11-21-22

---> Complied with, 2-0-1 (McGee).

DISCUSSION:

Chairman Rivera_I stated that the order had been taken up previously but was tabled in order to allow the members of the Flex Squad to be available.

Councilor Maldonado Velez thanked the mayor for the [communication](#) provided at the last meeting. He then stated that he was motivated to file the order after an organization he worked with on Main Street received a citation for graffiti while the city owned property across the street was a hot mess that wasn't being handled properly. He added that many property owners felt it didn't matter when they clean their property because the wind will later bring new trash onto their properties again. He noted that in the past, many city trash cans tended to overflow, leading to trash spilling out. He noted that one of the first orders he filed was about holding people accountable for trash not being

picked up, similar to when people did not remove snow in a timely manner. He suggested that there needed to be enforcement and fines, and then later he learned there was already an ordinance in place but had not been enforced. He added that his main goal was to work on these matters together to make the city cleaner. He questioned if the current approach was the right way to do it. He also suggested that there be better communication as far as when and where the Flex Squad would be out.

Chairman Rivera_I stated that he believed it was a great idea, but some businesses and nonprofits may have felt it was a bit of an aggressive approach. He then suggested that perception may have been because things hadn't been getting done for a while. He suggested that one problem with the way things were being done was in regards to addressing graffiti. He noted that many nonprofits such as Nueva Esperanza did not bring in a lot of revenue but had to spend \$2,000-\$3,000 to get rid of graffiti or they would have been fined. He then expressed concern that it could show up again the next week, leading to them either getting fined or needing to continue to spend the money to remove it. He also asked how progress happened with trashed lots that nobody was taking care of.

Councilor Givner stated that it wasn't clear what the Flex Squad was or what its total purpose was. She suggested explaining what they were doing before getting too deep into specific issues.

Mayor Garcia stated that the issues with trash and code compliance were complex. He then stated that the strategy had two parts, one a short term strategy with going into neighborhoods to address immediate quality of life issues, along with a more long term strategy of understanding the root causes of the issues to begin with. He added that there was a menu of issues that Board of Health Director, Sean Gonsalves, and other members of the enforcement team would speak on. He then stated that Alicia Zoeller, Office of Community Development Director, could speak on her involvement and data that she had collected since they started. He then stated that it started with meetings at the Fire Department where owners of specific problem properties, as well as large event organizers, met with them. He stated that it was about helping people mitigate issues and understand certain ordinances or get permits. He then stated that they got the idea of the Flex Squad after talking with Springfield Mayor, Dominic Sarno, about issues in his much larger city. He noted that their issues were very similar to the issues in Holyoke, so they used that template to develop methods of cross communication between departments to tackle many of the quality of life issues. He emphasized that it was about getting people to understand and follow the ordinances around maintenance of properties. He recognized that the graffiti issue was a headache for businesses and nonprofits, adding that they were creating a graffiti removal program to help remove it at no cost to the owners. He concluded by stating that while it might be upsetting when people leave stuff on their properties, it was still their responsibility. He then stated that the response had been overwhelmingly positive, even among some who had received

citations. He also recognized that there were issues with city properties that needed to be addressed, and was a complex problem. He then explained that this was an effort to assure property owners understood that there were ordinances requiring them to maintain their properties. He then stated that they were constantly talking about what they could do better.

Councilor Givner asked what would trigger action by the Flex Squad. She also asked how councilors could know if their neighborhood was being focused on so that they could support what was happening.

S. Gonsalves, in response to questions about consistency, stated that they had only gone out on Thursday evenings and Saturday mornings. He added that they stopped going out on Thursdays when Daylight Savings Time returned to Standard Time due to it getting too dark too early. He then stated that they had rotating areas they went out to. He then explained that the Flex Squad was a multi-departmental inspection team. He added that when fully staffed, they would have members from the Board of Health, DPW, Police Department, and the Fire Department as the core group. He further stated that their parameters for coverage was based on what could reasonably be covered in 2 1/2 to 3 hours. He then stated that they start at a certain point, going out door to door, looking for things that cover quality of life criteria that could be readily resolved, inspected, and reinspected. He emphasized that matters of building code was not something that could be handled with this. He added that they addressed matters like trash, graffiti, old tires, unregistered vehicles, overgrown vegetation and other things that can detract from the visual appeal of a neighborhood and would be defined through ordinances or other laws as blight. He then explained that the Fire Department issues could cover concerns such as tires, wood, brush, and other related code issues. He further explained that the Police Department had their own areas of enforcement that could be overlapping. He then stated that they had cards with checkboxes showing the issues, with times for reinspection, and other spots for non-standard issues. He emphasized that nobody was being issues fines immediately. He then stated that they had at that point covered the neighborhood between Beech, Lyman, High, and Appleton Streets, as well as all of Race Street, Main Street from Lineman Street to Berkshire Avenue, all of Clemente Street, Cabot from Main to Canal, as well as some of the surrounding side streets. He added that they were usually able to work with property owners but fines would be issues if notices weren't addressed or were ignored. He also recognized that the city should not ask people to maintain their properties without maintaining its own properties.

Chairman Rivera_I stated that he thoughts it was a great idea, although possibly too aggressive for some people. He then emphasized that the Flex Squad could lay out the steps that would be taken when problem properties were being identified. He noted that one property at Lyman and North Summer had been brought to his and others' attention for several years as an issue. He suggested creating a plan for the city taking action when

properties like that did not get addressed within a certain amount of time in order to assure that the other residents in the neighborhood feel valued.

S. Gonsalves stated that the property owner was deceased and that it would likely only be resolved through a tax taking which was outside of his purview. He emphasized that he had raised the issue of that lot to the Problem Property Group as well as the Law Department and the Treasurer. He further emphasized that the list of similar lots that needed to be addressed was pretty lengthy. He added that the only way it was going to be resolved was the city taking the lot but because the city had so many of these lots, there wasn't currently an effective way to dispose of them in bulk. He added that because vacant lots like that were not really buildable or as attractive as other properties, holding onto them creates their own problem for the city.

Chairman Rivera_I suggested that it could become a parking lot for DPW, noting that they were already parking all along Lyman Street as well as Baystate Plating's parking lot.

Mayor Garcia stated that the Treasurer and Tax Collector had been very aggressive with tax taking. He noted that there was no process during 2-3 years of the pandemic. He then stated that in this scenario, there was something they could do with it because of where it was located.

Chairman Rivera_I suggested that the Flex Squad could address these kinds of properties, and if they find out the property owner is deceased, they could start the process of tax taking. He further suggested it would show the value of the Flex Squad.

Mayor Garcia noted that with most of the properties with issues such as overgrowth, people were getting noticed but not immediately fined. He then stated that he was in favor of immediate fines, but he was outnumbered. He suggested that what they were doing at that point was working. He then explained that they were about to look up the owners while out at the properties, filling out cards, placing notices on the doors, and then often hearing back from the owners about what steps needed to be taken for corrective action.

Councilor Givner stated that it was a logical step to give people inconsequential no fine notices to let people know their properties were being watched, and then allowing them to follow up. She suggested that in the beginning, it may be harsh to fine people right away, especially without the city having the capacity to follow up anyway. She then asked how the Council could know what areas were being targeted.

Mayor Garcia stated that when they know what neighborhoods they'll be going to, he could send a communication to ward councilors.

Councilor Givner stated that if people are not home when they come through and don't get a notice, they don't know it happened.

Mayor Garcia stated that another idea they were working on was rewarding people to recognize people who were doing the right things.

S. Gonsalves stated that he picked the idea up from Peoria, Illinois. He added that they learned of the idea during a recent Vacant Buildings Conference, which was about addressing blight as well as underserved properties. He added that Syracuse, New York has had success in posting placards. He suggested that it could be rolled out with a public information campaign as part of a #AppreciateHolyoke effort to recognize owners who had been doing the right thing or turned things around as a way of building pride in community. He added that they may also build in a way for people to recognize others.

Councilor Vacon stated that this was a great initiative. She noted that Northampton was very aggressive in the way they ticketed illegally parked cars, leading visitors to be aware of how and where they were parking. She suggested this was a way of drawing a line in the sand that people will have to get used to. She added that one of the best parts was the cooperation between departments. She then asked if there was a way to communicate to the Flex Squad on requests to visit specific neighborhoods.

Mayor Garcia stated that requests were being filtered to various city departments, often to the Board of Health. He added that they often take Mr. Gonsalves's lead on suggestions for focusing on specific areas because there wasn't much happening in the city that he wasn't aware of.

Councilor Vacon stated that all made sense.

Chairman Rivera_I suggested that anytime department heads were collaborating, it resulted in better constituent services.

Councilor Maldonado Velez stated that he would love to see a system highlighting businesses following the rules, using the restaurant rating system in New York City as an example. He then asked that it be better communicated that the Flex Squad is going out on Saturday mornings so that people know they could be in their neighborhoods. He also suggested that ticketing sometimes was the best way to get people to do what they should be doing.

Councilor Bartley asked if the Scope of Services document was online.

S. Gonsalves stated that it had not been posted online.

Councilor Bartley suggested that be done. He also suggested that it appeared that because they were being paid, the locations needed to be in line with qualified census tracts due to being paid through APRA funds. He suggested posting a map online showing which areas were the eligible target areas. He then emphasized the importance of addressing specific lots. He noted that he called the department regularly to address areas that he was familiar with. He then suggested that city property needed to be thought about in terms of not getting taxes paid, as well as the city's liability if anything happened on a lot. He also emphasized that the city had an incredibly effective receivership program that had done a lot for the city in terms of cleaning up lots and getting new taxpayers. He added that the department could also field calls from the public to hold people accountable. He then suggested that the order be reported back to the full City Council, and that there could be a follow up order filed in 6-8 months.

Chairman Rivera_I asked for clarification if that suggestion was different than when he would do the committee report at the full Council meeting.

Councilor Bartley suggested that the committee call this order complied with, report on it for a larger audience at full City Council, and then file another order later.

Chairman Rivera_I asked if making a full committee report would suffice with what the suggestion was.

Councilor Bartley confirmed that was accurate.

Chairman Rivera_I suggested that if there were additional questions from the full Council, those could be addressed with the next update. He then asked what department the receivership program was run under.

Councilor Bartley stated that it was set in ordinance as adoption of a state law allowing a community to go into situations at properties based on certain criteria, where there were outstanding taxes or multiple code violations, where the Law Department would file a complaint with the Western Division of the Housing Court. He added that they would have a hearing before a judge, an owner could be brought in to explain their perspective on the situation, and the judge would have the authority to appoint a receiver that could come in, buy, fix, and either rent it out or sell it. He emphasized that the Law Department handled the legal part of it but would be taking in information from other departments such as the Building Department or the Board of Health.

A. Zoeller clarified that the scope of services contained the contract between the Office of Community Development and other city departments. She added that after 6 months, she could do a summary of their activities showing what properties they had inspected and what the results were. She then emphasized that their work has resulted in significant human connection where inspectors were encountering people who may be in

need of resources and services to help get them off streets and into shelters. She added that they were sometimes running into people who may need information on available grants or residents who did not have heat and needed those resources.

Mayor Garcia stated that they had been learning a lot through being in the neighborhoods, being present, and dealing with property owners. He emphasized that the Flex Squad was there to address immediate issues while helping the city identify gaps in services as well as navigating barriers and obstacles. He added that the information they were gathering could help inform future requests for funding in various departments in order to address these kinds of quality of life issues.

Chairman Rivera_I suggested that it appeared to be the beginning stage of a process that could help the city move in the direction of changing the culture and narrative all over the city.

Councilor Givner made a motion that item 1 has been complied with. Chairman Rivera_I seconded the motion. Motion passed.

(1:02:40)

Councilor Givner made a motion to suspend the necessary rules to remove items 2 through 7 from the table as a package. Chairman Rivera_I seconded the motion. Motion passed.

Item 2: 12-20-22 JOURDAIN, Bartley — That the City Engineer review the opportunity to put a raised sidewalk(s) in front of Blessed Sacrament School on Westfield Rd and report back to the City Council on our ability to do that. These were placed in front of Mayer Field on this street and should also be considered here as well for child safety.

---> Laid on the table 2-0-1 (McGee).

Item 3: 12-6-22 BARTLEY -- The DPW, HPD and City Engineer report to City Council with its efforts to improve traffic safety at the corners of Linden/Hampshire Sts. and Linden/Locust Sts. as residents report speeding, accidents, and many instances of running the stop signs. Please produce any accident reports for the last two years for these intersections and send as a communication.

---> Laid on the table 2-0-1 (McGee).

Item 4: 12-6-22 ANDERSON-BURGOS -- That the City Engineer come to a Public Safety Committee meeting to discuss the possibility of making Corser St one way traffic.

---> Laid on the table 2-0-1 (McGee).

Item 5: 11-15-22 BARTLEY -- City Engineer review options to improve road safety at Queen and Cherry St. Issue: trucks exiting Queen St. are seen driving over the median strip and making an illegal left-hand turn onto Cherry St. (Rt. 202-South)

---> Laid on the table 2-0-1 (McGee).

Item 6: 11-15-22 BARTLEY -- The City Engineer provide an update to a future Public Safety meeting on the status of funding repairs at the crosswalk at the main gate to H.C.C. (This has been pending since at least 2017.)

---> Laid on the table 2-0-1 (McGee).

Item 7: 11-1-22 VACON -- that our city engineer evaluate the intersection of Evergreen and Bray Park Drive for improvements due to safety concern.

---> Laid on the table 2-0-1 (McGee).

DISCUSSION:

Chairman Rivera_I stated that he spoke with City Engineer, Kris Baker, on items 2 through 7 and understood that they were not yet ready to address all of the issues. He then suggested that they could be tabled and be taken up the next time. He then asked if the makers of the orders still wanted to speak on their orders.

Councilor Bartley asked to be added to item 2. He noted that items 2, 5, and 6 were Ward 3 matters. He then stated that item 2 was a request for additional crosswalks, noting that there were already 2 in front of Mayer Field. He emphasized that item 3 was an important order, noting that a friend in the area had seen horrific accidents. He then

stated that on item 4, he had received feedback from Holyoke Medica Center and suggested that the maker speak with them and provide some more detail. He added that on item 5, it was likely that not too many people were aware of the issues that motorists were driving over the median strip heading onto Route 202 South, risking potentially serious accidents. He then stated that on item 6, it had been pending since 2017. He then expressed concern that it had been funded, put out to bid, but then nothing happened. He further stated that it would benefit HCC but that they made no offer to help. He noted that their foundation had around \$20 million. He questioned that with a blinging light at their main gate, Holyoke Community College would not want to help with an engineering study or anything else. He suggested that senior officials at HCC were aware of this. He also emphasized that it was a state road, and that there should be an opportunity for collaboration between the college, the state, and the city.

Councilor Vacon stated that on item 7, it was a misunderstanding in the area in that Bray Park was unusual in that it was a circle. She added that Evergreen ran into it, likely leading someone on Evergreen to believe they were still on that road, while those coming from Bray Park tended to know they were still on Bray Park. She suggested a yield sign may help.

Councilor Anderson-Burgos stated that on item 4, he welcomed tabling it to hear back from the City Engineer.

Councilor Givner made a motion to lay items 2 through 7 on the table. Chairman Rivera_I seconded the motion. Motion passed, 2-0-1.

(1:11:35)

Councilor Givner made a motion to suspend the necessary rules to remove items 8, 9, and 11 from the table as a package. Chairman Rivera_I seconded the motion. Motion passed.

Item 8: 12-20-22 RIVERA_I, GIVNER, TALLMAN — Order that both the Public Health & Legal department come into public safety and elaborate on the process of code enforcement and taking landlords to court that aren't complying with city ordinances.

---> Complied with, 3-0.

DISCUSSION:

Chairman Rivera_I stated that he filed this order to have the Board of Health and Law Department walk the committee through the process for code enforcement. He then

stated that it needed to be clarified for residents, especially with the recent public hearing around rent control which included a lot of questions around code enforcement with property owners. He asked to clarifications on where things tend to get stuck or where things don't move smoothly.

S. Gonsalves stated that the Board of Health tends to address the first part of this process while the Law Department addresses the second part. He then stated that Housing Court cases will often start with a complaint, typically from a resident but can sometimes be from a caretaker, family member, city councilor, or other departments heads. He then stated that Housing Court could involve anything from single family homes to 20-30 unit blocks. He then explained that complaints will be assigned to inspectors in his office, oftentimes in collaboration with a public health nurse or code enforcement officer in the Police Department. He then stated that if there were sanitary code violations, they would issue a citation to the property owner which would be provided to the unit occupant. He added that they also provide a bilingual tenants right form to occupants explaining some of their legal rights and providing resources and information for doing their own follow up and legal investigations. He emphasized that they cannot and do not offer legal advice. He further emphasizes that any occupant who feels their rights are being violated can file complaints with the Housing Court without needing to go through the Board of Health to do so. He added that certain violations have timelines for addressing the issues, sometimes resulting in fines depending on the circumstances, recognizing that supply chain issues and availability of contractors can delay work being done. He added that if fines do not generate change, they can then refer them to the City Solicitor's office along with any of the relevant supporting documents.

Atty Bissonnette stated that departments had a shared drive allowing the documents be shared more easily and efficiently. He then noted that a good run of receivers had been halted due to supply chain issues, influenced by delays related to the pandemic. He noted many receivers lost money due to the inability to recover their expenses as a result of recent issues. He then stated that there had been up to 20 receivership cases that had been reduced down to 6 recently, adding that they continued to have a good relationship with receivers. He also emphasized that courts were transitioning to more in person hearings, which would lead to Holyoke needing to have more viable, in person presence at the Springfield Housing Court. He also noted that there was a handful of repeat violators filing appeals and playing a tax title game. He further noted that the courts had allowed the city to combine many of those cases into single hearings. He then commended City Treasurer, Rory Casey, for his work in addressing a 3-4 year backlog of titles. He added that they had been working to reduce and get closed many of the open cases at the Housing Court.

Chairman Rivera_I reiterated that this was filed as a result of the public hearing. He then noted that one landlord attending that hearing informed him that in Springfield, owners behind on addressing any code violations are taken to court immediately while in Holyoke, they

may sometimes not be brought to court. He then noted that in reviewing a document sent by Sean, there did not appear to be any effort at accountability if landlords did not keep up or maintain their properties beyond a renter being able to withhold rent until an issue, like a non-working toilet, is fixed. He questioned how a renter should feel protected.

S. Gonsalves stated that if a renter reported to the city, a unit can be condemned if issues like that are not fixed, which would require a landlord to put someone up in alternative housing by state law until the unit is fixed or some other alternative settlement is reached. He added that unaddressed sanitary issues can cause a lien to be placed on properties and a landlord can lose their property, leading to it being put into receivership.

Councilor Bartley emphasized that now that more councilors were being made aware of the receivership program, that should result in more residents being made aware of it as well. He emphasized that it was a pretty significant power for the city to be able to take away someone's property under dire circumstances. In reference to points about Springfield, he emphasized that they had many more home and housing inspectors than Holyoke. He then commended the Board of Health, Building Department, and the Law Department for building and managing the receivership program, emphasizing that it could be anywhere in the city.

Councilor Givner stated that it was helpful to hear from tenants and what they were dealing with. She then stated that the city was missing an education component so that tenants knew more about their rights. She suggested that they could do more to help people get the information and make it available in more public spaces.

Mayor Garcia stated that while there was progress for the city to be proud of, much more needed to be done to fill the gaps and strengthen the city's position. He then stated that there were plans in development, with an expectation that more would be coming in March in terms of holding landlords accountable and handling housing cases.

(1:37:35)

Item 9: 11-1-22 MALDONADO-VELEZ -- That an Office of Tenants Protection be created. This will be housed under the Board of Health, or appropriate department, which will work on holding landlords accountable and making sure all residents of Holyoke are living safe conditions.

*Tabled 11-21-22

---> Complied with, 3-0.

DISCUSSION:

Councilor Maldonado Velez stated that there was an issue in Massachusetts where, regardless on if tenants go to Housing Court no matter the cause, it shows up on their records that they had a Housing Court case. He then emphasized that the city was responsible for assuring people were living in safe conditions. He then commended the mayor for planning to announce additional plans by March. He then encouraged that this proactive approach be taken to projects the tenants of the city. He also noted that he had regularly heard in his past year in office that departments were unable to address many issues because they didn't have the capacity. He then explained that the order's intent was to address the reality that tenants needed to be protected and that can't be expected to go through Housing Court when they're worried about paying their bills or paying for rent. He then asked how the city can do as much as it can to support them. He also noted having heard about some cities creating a landlord registry.

S. Gonsalves stated that a rental registry should be a goal. He noted that in places around Boston with a lot of multifamily housing, they have rental registries. He emphasized that Summerville requires inspections every 2 years. He then stated that this usually kept buildings from becoming problem properties. He then explained that getting something like that started required having and retaining staff. He emphasized that the city had not funded one of his inspector positions for 2 years in a row, hamstringing the department. He added that he had also been dealing with turnover, noting that he had inspectors who were trained and then moved on. He also emphasized that the pandemic had led to people not maintaining their properties as often as they would have before, as well as a backlog of issues within the department that had grown. He then stated that the rental registry would be a goal that could keep people out of Housing Court, emphasizing that they would need funding and staffing across multiple departments. He added that additional ordinances would need to be drafted.

Chairman Rivera_I asked Councilor Maldonado Velez if he believed the order had been complied with if another order for an update could be filed later.

Councilor Maldonado Velez stated that he was fine with that, emphasizing that Mr. Gonsalves had laid out many additional steps that would need to be taken up later, as long as there was continued forward movement.

Chairman Rivera_I recognized that many of the issues had been brought up and it was clear the Board of Health was working toward addressing them. He emphasized that capacity was one of the major pieces of the issue.

Councilor Maldonado Velez stated that this was about sending a message to department heads and to the mayor that this was an issue councilors were interested in addressing.

(1:47:10)

Item 11: 12-20-22 ANDERSON-BURGOS, GIVNER — Ordered, that the Board of Health, Law Dept, and any other involved departments come into a Public Safety meeting to discuss how the city will use what it's receiving from opioid lawsuit settlements.

The state AG's office website provided an update on November 4th that Holyoke will receive around \$427,000 over several years and it has been reported that the state also plans to seek a part of another \$10 billion that was just announced from a CVS/Walgreens settlement.

---> Complied with, 3-0.

DISCUSSION:

Councilor Anderson-Burgos stated that there was a settlement between Walgreens and CVS for \$10 billion, with Massachusetts planning to seek nearly \$230 million of that amount. He then asked if there was a set plan for how Holyoke would plan to use these funds, specifically with people who have addiction problems.

S. Gonsalves stated that he discussed this with the mayor, Alicia Zoeller, Rory Casey while he was within the Board of Health, as well as with the Law Department. He then stated that as of November 2nd, 2022, they had so far received 2 payments from the first settlement but had not yet been aware of funds coming from the Walgreens settlement. He noted that Atty Bissonnette was shaking his head on that. He further stated that they had so far received \$144,765.60 over 2 payments.

Atty Bissonnette stated that the original lawsuits from a half dozen defendants had been consolidated, the first involving manufacturers and distributors. He then stated that the state portion from the first set of settlement of that was spread out over 20 years, noting that former Atty General Healey changed the terms so that 40% would go to communities. He added that Holyoke would be eligible for \$2 million due to the impacts the city was experiencing specifically, which otherwise would have been around \$500,000. He further stated that additional cases were in litigation, including the CVS/Walgreens case as pharmacies that were distributors. He suggested that Holyoke may receive up to \$4 million in settlement funds from that case. He then explained on the expenditure side, it would be a continuous revenue stream over 2 decades, possibly totaling up to \$4 million. He then stated that the funds could be used by the city within parameters.

Councilor Anderson-Burgos asked what the parameters were.

Atty Bissonnette stated that they revolved around addiction treatment, education, and other matters related to addiction and homelessness. He added that regulations on expenditure would be coming from the state.

Councilor Anderson-Burgos stated that a pdf file that he found stated that Holyoke would receive 7 payments, beginning in June 2022, each averaging around \$70,000 each and adding up to much more than \$144,000.

S. Gonsalves stated that his figures were from his last communication with Tanya but more may have come in since then.

Atty Bissonnette stated that additional checks had come in.

Councilor Anderson-Burgos suggested that the city may be able to gain the upper hand in the impacts of the opioid crisis on Holyoke. He then asked what the city was planning in order to be mindful and to understand how it would have a positive impact to the city.

S. Gonsalves stated that after speaking with several departments, including public safety officials, he was suggesting that the city start an office of homeless services, as a working title. He emphasized that there was not one office in the city whose sole responsibility was managing the situation of people who were homeless or experiencing housing insecurity, and the breadth of the opioid crisis. He emphasized that departments handling code or law enforcement were not able to capture the nature of the issues or solve the underlying causes. He suggested that the proposed office could have a services coordinator, ideally someone with a social work background. He noted that the Police Department had a grant that helped people get treatment but often those people have nowhere to go afterwards, often leading them to relapse and continue to experience the same issues and environments that initially led to the addiction. He emphasized that there were many organizations in the region providing services, but the city lacked a hub, a single person that could link all of the services together. He suggested that this would work better than individual departments patching together the resources they were familiar with. He added that his department will often interact with the same people repeatedly but there was no method for taking inventory of interactions, a log of the people they were interacting with, or a record of what strategies work or don't work. He then stated that the larger amount expected was welcome because the smaller initial expectation of around \$70,000 a year would not be nearly enough to pay their salary, plus the other staff and resources they would need to get the office up and running.

Councilor Anderson-Burgos asked if he had an outline of his plans.

S. Gonsalves stated that he had not yet written it down but had sent various emails to various department heads explaining what his ideas were. He then stated that the preparation was to try and get it posted for fiscal year 2024.

Councilor Anderson-Burgos suggested that an outline of what it would entail would be good to provide before a job description was put together. He emphasized that there needed to be shown benefits.

Chairman Rivera_I suggested that the benefits be measurable.

Councilor Anderson-Burgos he then asked to clarify if the job would include creating a profile for people they were encountering. He asked how that would look with HIPAA laws.

S. Gonsalves stated that it would be protected information. He then explained that Springfield had a "by name list," which was a regular inventory of people who were displaced, housing insecure, or chronically homeless, and they regularly run down the list to ask their team when someone last had an interaction with each person, asking where they were, did they need treatment or were they in treatment, did they have housing lined up, and they were managed by staying with them. He emphasized that people in those positions are not always able to represent themselves. He also emphasized that people may turn down treatment many times until that next time works, adding that each person's situation is different and they can't all be treated the same.

Councilor Anderson-Burgos suggested that the person chosen for the role should be in recovery.

Chairman Rivera_I stated that he agreed.

Councilor Anderson-Burgos then explained that having been recovery himself, he would feel less threatened by them than by someone who never had an issue with drinking and didn't understand that story and being in those shoes.

S. Gonsalves stated that in communicating with the Police Department, he understood that their work with the Behavioral Health Network (BHN) included several people who were in recovery.

Chairman Rivera_I stated that the city had a group hub that worked with many nonprofit organizations in the area, led by Ed Caisse. He explained that they worked to address substance abuse, homelessness, crime, DCF issues, as examples. He suggested that their work could be grown through funding. He then stated that the idea sounded a lot like a community responder model that he and other councilors had filed orders to pursue. He suggested that in that model, instead of calling the police for minor

situations, a community responder team would come out. He suggested that such responders should have familiarity with the people and the situations and should develop a database of the people they come into contact with. He emphasized that a community responder model broadens the aspects instead of keeping situations in narrow categories such as homelessness, substance abuse, or other varieties of issues. He noted that while Holyoke had a lot of resources, many of them were exhausted, there were not enough shelters, no programs to enter for people with substance abuse. He suggested that the position could be created, but people would be getting referred to places that were already full.

Councilor Vacon expressed a perspective from the opposite side in suggesting that a significant portion of the funding be used for education and prevention. She then suggested that the only way to get in front of the pandemic of drug addiction would be to prevent kids and young adults from trying and dying. She emphasized that this was happening throughout the country with fentanyl. She noted that local statistics appeared to show that 80% of the people approached would not accept entering any programs. She added that another statistic showed that 80% of the overdoses in the community were people who lived elsewhere. She stated that they needed to find ways to stop the flow of it and then work to address the issue of homelessness. She then stated that in talking to the Veterans Services Director, she felt confident that there were not homeless vets on the streets in Holyoke. She then questioned how many homeless people there may be in Holyoke. She suggested her research appeared to show that homelessness was caused by addiction but the causes of the original addiction were less clear since everyone's path was different. She then advocated for measurable outcome management through education and prevention.

Chairman Rivera_I stated that he did agree with the prevention argument, adding that a part of the education side of it was real life experience of watching people get messed up due to drugs. He stated that many in his neighborhood did not use drugs because of what they had witnessed with others. He then emphasized that the people who were unhoused and suffering in the moment needed access to services.

Councilor Vacon asked if it was known how many unhoused people there were in Holyoke who were likely suffering from addiction.

Chairman Rivera_I stated that it was likely hard to pinpoint because some people may be living in Holyoke but didn't have residency in Holyoke.

Councilor Vacon stated that the rule in Massachusetts was that if you slept in a city for one night, you were considered a resident.

Chairman Rivera_I stated that it should be clarified what it means to be a resident of Holyoke.

S. Gonsalves stated that they initially thought the count was in the mid to low 30's prior to recently opening popup shelters. He then stated that after they opened and there being several meetings between Alicia Zoeller and BHN, they understood it to be close to 100, with some fluctuation.

Councilor Vacon stated that the situation was a regional problem with each city wanting to get them out of their community. She added that at the end of the day, the community with the least resistance tends to have the biggest problem. She then advocated for taking a regional approach to the problem so that one city's increase wasn't a result of another city's reduction, instead getting the whole number down.

Mayor Garcia emphasized that this was a complex problem with a lot of ideas to address it. He further emphasized that there was an opportunity to address it through this funding source. He noted that past discussions and communications about finding a housing liaison or housing navigator positions were tied to this. He then explained that this funding source was initially put into the general fund but with the new budget discussions coming soon, he would be proposing a transfer into a new dedicated stabilization account for this kind of public safety use, noting that the funds in the general fund would end up going into free cash without creation of that account. He added that it would likely also include some type of office for tenant protection. He then explained that the role created by these funds would need to focus on education and prevention, in addition to addressing immediate needs of those suffering from addiction and the related issues of homelessness. He suggested that they would like to learn a lot more about the homeless population than they know at that time. Referring to the topic of tenant protection, he stated that they would have to understand more what could be done with local government under what was dictated by Mass General Laws. He suggested that a working group may be in order, perhaps creating a tenants protection committee, established through an executive order.

Councilor Maldonado Velez expressed that he welcomed the idea of a tenants' rights working group. He then noted that he worked as victims' services manager for domestic violence victims. He recognized that while a housing liaison or navigator would be helpful, there was not a lot of housing available. He recalled one weekend when one organization, Alianza, had 40 people who they could not help house even though that was their purpose. He added that he agreed with the educational component, emphasizing that while he agreed with the needle exchange program, there was a problem with needles being left out on the streets. He suggested that with the settlement funds, the discarded needle issue was a direct result of the opioid crisis. He also stated that someone who was going into housing where there was no heat or needing to come up with \$1,500 a month, it opened up an additional struggle.

Chairman Rivera_I recalled that Councilor Anderson-Burgos was looking for a strategic plan to assure the funds were not wasted. He then suggested that there needed to be a layout for how the funds would be spent over 20 years.

Councilor Anderson-Burgos reiterated that the position should be taken by someone in recovery. He added that the broader discussion should include people who have been in recovery, emphasizing that they would be people who had found their way out and would bring good advice to the table. He then stated that while he believed in education, he suggested that the “Just Say No” messages in the 1980’s from the Reagan Administration didn’t work. He emphasized that it didn’t work for him or for a lot of people he knew. He then emphasized that the people who were suffering needed to be helped, who then could help assure that the younger kids don’t get involved.

Councilor Givner suggested that a part of the reason why the discussion was about citywide ideas instead of regional was due to the funds being given to individual cities. She added that a spreadsheet she saw showed around a half million coming into Holyoke over 15 years from just a Johnson & Johnson settlement. She also suggested that Councilor Vacon’s idea was not only about education but that it should be a component. She then added that the Just Say No campaign worked for her. She suggested that education can support everything else that could also be done.

Mayor Garcia noted that Opportunity Academy had a curriculum that included a comparison component in an opioid class, teaching students to understand what causes addictions and to understand how people get into those positions. He added that instead of just a ‘say no, it’s bad’ approach, they were teaching about impacts to families and humanizing it by showing the consequences. He further stated that it allows people to navigate the issue much more easily and understand where the situations come from. He suggested that an educational part of the process would be critical. He also recognized that there would need to be a way to partner with an organization to evaluate progress and track data. He also conceded that while there were limitations of what could be done on the local level with a nationwide problem, there should be attempts to do something.

S. Gonsalves stated that none of the ideas brought up were things that could not be brought up or managed by a city department. He also noted that the state had areas in the city where they were renting units for people needing to be temporarily placed or in need of transitional housing. He also recognized that the housing capacity did need to be built up. He also stated that efforts to find housing needed to be shepherded with care, recognizing that every community often has a level of resistance to low income, low threshold housing in their neighborhoods. He reiterated that there currently was not one place for all of these responsibilities to be handled, and individual departments lacked the reach or capacity to fully address all of the needs that would go into addressing this issue.

Councilor Maldonado Velez clarified that when he thinks about education, he did not believe that an abstinence only approach was effective. He added that he believed an educational component was about addressing things from a holistic perspective: addressing what to do about needles, who do we call or what do we do when we observe people in crisis, education around how drugs affect people differently and the different paths that people can experience from drug use.

Councilor Vacon stated that one of the major issues with the supply in Holyoke was that many drug dealers had found a very comfortable home in the city. She noted that there had been a lot of collaboration between local and state police, but the fact that Holyoke was seen as a destination was a problem. She suggested that some of the funds could be used by finding ways to reduce the number of drug dealers in the city, if that was an allowed use of the funds.

Chairman Rivera_I suggested that it may not change anything. He noted that as a former drug dealer, people would come from miles away, including from other states, to where he was. He stated that he started after being asked where they were at least 10 times.

Councilor Vacon stated that her point was that it was very well known that Holyoke was the place to come to get drugs. She further stated that one of the goals of the Police Department should be finding ways to get rid of the large scale dealers doing it as a business.

Chairman Rivera_I suggested that the reality of it was that it was a form of capitalism. He added that in capitalism, if nobody was there to buy your product, you move somewhere else where someone will buy your product. He emphasized that the city holds raids every year, only to have many other dealers coming out of the same neighborhoods soon after.

Councilor Vacon suggested that if there were no known encampments in Holyoke where people could buy illegal those drugs cheaper than legal drugs, they would not be coming to Holyoke.

Mayor Garcia emphasized that it as it was a complex issue, the whole picture needed to be looked at and it needed to be tackled at all angles. He recognized that while it won't completely eliminate it, it would de-escalate and mitigate it as much as possible to save lives. He also stated that no solution was the sole solution. He also stated that there needed to be federal and state intervention to help local governments deal with this.

Councilor Maldonado Velez emphasized that the opioid crisis started with legal drug dealers in the form of pharmaceutical companies and doctors creating and prescribing drugs that people got hooked on, leading to them seeking out other sources. He recalled receiving an email one morning about a drug raid one morning, and later seeing out of state

vehicles parked in the neighborhood and still getting their drugs. He then agreed that these were state and federal issues, adding that much of it related to the issue of jobs and opportunities. He recalled seeing the impact of the afterschool programs at the YMCA closing, and seeing some of those same kids on the corner selling drugs not long after. He suggested that leaders in the city needed to learn to give other people a chance by recognizing that they are capable of getting involved and participating in the city.

Councilor McGee made a motion that items 8, 9, and 11 had been complied with. Chairman Rivera_I seconded the motion. Motion passed, 3-0.

(2:56:05)

Councilor McGee made a motion to suspend the necessary rules to take up item 12 out of order. Chairman Rivera_I seconded the motion. Motion passed.

Item 12: 11-15-22 ANDERSON-BURGOS -- Order that Chief Pratt come in to discuss a possible gun drop off program.

--->Laid on the table, 3-0.

DISCUSSION:

Chairman Rivera_I stated that Chief Pratt was not present.

Councilor Anderson-Burgos suggested tabling the item so that Chief Pratt could come in at a future meeting.

Mayor Garcia stated that Chief Pratt was on vacation. He then stated that in speaking with the Chief, he understood that there was currently no buyback program but that they were open to hearing ideas.

Councilor Givner made a motion to lay item 12 on the table. Councilor McGee seconded the motion. Motion passed, 5-0.

(2:57:30)

Chairman Rivera_I suggested holding off until item 10 until the next meeting as it was getting late.

Councilor Maldonado Velez suggested adding the petition to the next meeting as a public hearing.

Chairman Rivera_I stated it may not be the next meeting, but possibly the meeting after that.

Councilor Givner made a motion to remove item 10 from the table. Chairman Rivera_I seconded the motion. Motion passed.

Item 10: 12-20-22 Petition from Residents of Holyoke in support of a Tenant Bill of Rights

--->Laid on the table, 3-0.

DISCUSSION:

Councilor McGee made a motion to lay item 10 on the table to set a public hearing. Councilor Givner seconded the motion. Motion passed, 3-0.

Meeting adjourned at 9:32 PM