

Public Service Committee

Wednesday, January 18, 2023

Video of meeting can be found at https://youtu.be/WHZO_hVMpxY

Members present: Chairman Peter Chairman Tallman, Vice Chairman Will Councilor Puello, David Councilor Bartley

Other councilors present: Joseph Councilor McGiverin, Jose Maldonado Velez

Chairman Tallman called the meeting to order at 6:02 PM

Councilor Bartley made a motion to remove item 1 from the table. Councilor Puello seconded the motion. Motion passed.

Item 1: 12-20-22 From Mayor Joshua A. Garcia, letter appointing Ms. Callie Niezgodá Flanagan, 38 Jefferson St. to serve as a member of the Holyoke Economic and Industrial Corporation (HEDIC): This seat on the Board of Directors represents the Finance Sector. This is a three year term; said term will expire on June 30, 2025.

--->Recommend appointment, 3-0

DISCUSSION:

Chairman Tallman explained that they often have people being appointed to various boards and commission come in to learn about them and why they want to serve.

C. Flanagan stated that she was born and raised in Holyoke, and had lived in the city most of her life other than during college and brief times in other cities, and returned in 2006. She stated that she loved everything about the city and had wished she had gotten more involved in the city already. She then stated that she currently served as Director of Lending for a local Community Development Financial Institution, providing business loans to local businesses and community projects to help stimulate economic growth and opportunity. She added that she would be happy to put her skills to use to benefit the city.

Councilor Bartley stated that this was a good appointment for HEDIC and for the city. He noted that it was an obscure board with a long history. He emphasized the importance of familiarizing herself with past meeting minutes. He suggested that some controversial things had been raised on the board, a few that he disagreed with. He noted that Councilor McGiverin was one of the most veteran members on that board. He also expressed an appreciation that she was coming with a financial background. He then recommended reading past meeting minutes. He then asked Councilor McGiverin if the meetings were taped.

Councilor McGiverin stated that they were being recorded through Zoom.

Councilor Bartley reiterated that reviewing them would help get her up to speed. He then asked Councilor McGiverin what the current balance was for the HEDIC account.

Councilor McGiverin suggested asking the question of Aaron Vega, Director of Planning and Economic Development (OPED).

John Dyjach from OPED stated that the balance was around \$1.7 million, plus other real estate assets and one existing loan.

Councilor Bartley noted that past meeting minutes spoke of funding marijuana. He then suggested that needed to be slowed down in consideration of the city charter and Mass General Laws (MGL). He added that they shouldn't spread too far in order to keep in line with the mission and with MGL.

Chairman Tallman explained that HEDIC helped projects that dealt with the economic development of the city, which had to be signed by the mayor and approved by the City Council. He added that they also helped small businesses with loans.

Councilor McGiverin observed that Ms. Flanagan appeared to bring a lot to the table, particularly from the financial sector. He noted that all HEDIC members were mayoral appointments, adding that his own appointment was as representative of the city government. He also noted that he was the first non-mayor to be the city's appointment to HEDIC. He emphasized the importance of the relationship between HEDIC and the City Council, noting that every economic development plan they put forward get to go before the mayor and City Council. He then stated that they were looking to develop a revolving loan account, and suggested that her expertise would be helpful.

C. Flanagan stated that she was most excited about formalizing a loan program. She added that she enjoyed wrapping her brain around things, reading business plans, noting that she was very thorough.

Motion was made and seconded to suspend the necessary rules to allow a member of the public to speak.

Natalia Muñoz stated that she had worked with Ms. Flanagan many years ago and found her to be professional, kind, and outrageously smart.

Councilor Bartley suggested that she familiarize herself with Mass General Law Chapter 121C. He then stated that as HEDIC was created by Mass General Law, he had concerns when that board attempted to branch beyond the scope of that law. He then asked what her experience was with serving on municipal boards or public charity boards.

C. Flanagan stated that she had not done anything with the city but sat on the board for Leadership Pioneer Valley, serving as their treasurer for the past 3 years. She added that she had been very involved in her children's schools, serving on PTO boards and coaching.

Councilor Bartley stated that was fantastic, emphasizing that she would be coming in with not just lending experience. He suggested that she would be one of the few on this board with lending experience. He also emphasized that the board had some authority, and her background would be vital to their work.

Chairman Tallman stated that he believed she was bringing a wealth of knowledge to the board. He then emphasized that the city needed more people to get involved in the city's boards. He then reiterated the advice that she become familiar with the past meeting minutes and to get to know the other people on the board.

Councilor Puello made a motion to recommend the appointment. Councilor Bartley seconded the motion. Motion passed, 3-0.

(14:55)

Councilor Bartley made a motion to remove item 2 from the table. Councilor Puello seconded the motion. Motion passed.

Item 2: 5-7-19 LISI -- Ordered, that the City Council invite a representative from Soldier On as well as out Veterans Services Director to discuss support services for Veterans who fail to meet the requirements of Soldier On programs.

--->Complied with 3-0.

DISCUSSION:

Chairman Tallman recognized Veterans Services Director, Jesus Pereira, was in attendance. He then welcomed in representatives of Soldier On.

Bruce Buckley introduced himself as the CEO of Soldier On in Pittsfield.

Matt Buckley introduced himself as the Executive Vice President of Soldier On in Pittsfield. He noted that he was Bruce's son. He then explained that he managed day to day direct services.

B. Buckley stated that they did a lot in Western Mass to work with veterans in many capacities for over 25 years. He then stated that they had received recent funding that would allow them to continue to serve veterans in the same way they had been. He noted that some veterans who weren't eligible because of limitations on their service, this funding from the state's Department of Veterans Services would expand beyond that and allow them to work with eligible veterans as well as veterans from the Reserves, from the National Guard, as other groups they had not been able to assist before. He added that their services included case management, drug and alcohol programs, extensive transportation system, a full time well director, peer supports, a financial literacy program, attorneys to help with legal matters, as well as a recently added fuel assistance program. He then emphasized the importance of getting information about their resources out to the community. He added that they had a phone number specific to the services provided through the grant, which was 888-720-5575. He then stated that the number would connect to their call center for referring the case to the field.

J. Pereira stated that there was a program provided as a stop-gap measure for veterans that did not totally qualify for the state's Chapter 115 benefits program. Noting that the order was filed in 2019, he recalled at the time that there was a homeless veteran in Holyoke who had not done well with Soldier On. He suggested that the intent of the order was to

understand how to help other veterans in the community like him who may not do well, and how to help them find the services they need.

Chairman Tallman recalled the situation with that veterans, adding that it continued to be a good time to bring this issue up with a lot of homeless veterans in the area. He emphasized that some people did not know where to go if they needed help.

B. Buckley stated that there were around 130 transitional beds in Western Mass. He further stated that there were around 100 people in their transitional program the night before on their Leeds campus. He added that they also had a building in Pittsfield that did transitional housing. He then explained that people go in and out of the program for a variety of reasons. He noted that some may not be able to stay with it due to the inability to use drugs and alcohol. He also noted that there was a 16 bed transitional unit in Leeds for women, which had been relatively full since the beginning of COVID. He added that they had 191 units of one-bedroom apartments in Western Mass, between Leeds, Agawam, Chicopee, and Pittsfield, with 14 of those units specifically for female veterans. He added that their transportation system included 16 formerly homeless veterans driving for them on a daily basis.

M. Buckley added that they had a Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) grant which was a community-focused mobile outreach model to work with veterans in the community as opposed to those already in their transitional housing program. He noted that the situation described by J. Pereira was not unique, as having 130 beds in the region often led to veterans from outside the area planting roots in the area. He also stated that the grant would allow them to follow veterans even if they were not working well in a transitional housing program. He emphasized that transitional housing had rules, which included specific bed times and restrictions on using drugs or alcohol.

Councilor Puello asked if city councilors could help by referring people, and if someone would go out and talk to people.

J. Pereira stated the background of the homeless vet he spoke about was that they ended up in Holyoke, had multiple arrests for things such as breaking and entering or shoplifting, eventually leading to him being locked up for something more serious. He noted that this person had been ineligible to go to Soldier On, and suggested that this grant may be able to provide services and housing needed for that kind of person.

Councilor McGiverin noted that he worked in Holyoke District Court, which held a weekly Veterans Court session. He then explained that they took advantage of services throughout the area and across the commonwealth. He then emphasized that the state legislature passed the Valor Act which recognized there were veterans who had trouble with the trial court system. He then explained that one of the things they do is try to identify veterans at their initial intake, which sometimes leads to helping them qualify for direct services. He also emphasized that transitional housing was one of the things many of them were looking for. He then noted that one issues was that some Vietnam veterans did not want to identify themselves, adding that he and his colleagues get trained to coach them and help them understand that there are services available to them that they deserve. He suggested that the Council recommend to the state rep and the state senator to push for more federal funding to get additional beds for veterans. He noted that female beds were unbelievably scarce.

Councilor Bartley noted that there was new transitional housing being created at the Holyoke Soldiers Home through a new bond bill. He then asked what the source of the grant was.

M. Buckley stated that it was through the Massachusetts Department of Veterans Services (DVS).

Councilor Bartley asked if it was a federal passthrough or direct from the commonwealth.

B. Buckley stated that he believed it was a federal passthrough but was not totally sure. He then stated that he could find out. He then expressed his understanding that the DVS was hoping that its effectiveness would encourage the addition of the grant as a state budget line item. He noted this was the first year of the grant.

Councilor Bartley asked if it was a multiyear grant.

B. Buckley stated that it was currently one year but they may be looking at two years. He added that there was a question of it becoming self-sustaining beyond that.

Councilor Bartley asked if they had traveled down from Pittsfield that day.

B. Buckley stated that they travel all over the northeast, noting he had recently been in Tewksbury, where they got a building funded to have 21 permanent housing units.

Councilor Bartley stated that several councilors were involved in establishing the local Veterans Court, which had a couple great judges in the local District Court. He noted one had advanced to the Mass Court of Appeals. He suggested communicating with that court.

B. Buckley stated that they were at that court every Wednesday.

M. Buckley stated that one of their staff members who managed their transitional housing also had expertise in working with the criminal justice system. He explained that Soldier On was often used as a diversion option with the Veterans Court, when appropriate.

Councilor Bartley stated that he was interested in seeing an increased number of vouchers for housing. Noting that the state legislature focused a lot of rhetoric on housing, he questioned if all of the funds had to be spent on brick-and-mortar building, and suggested that some could be spent on vouchers similar to Section 8 or the state's voucher program, Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program (MRVP).

M. Buckley stated that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) had a program called HUD-VASH that was a partnership between the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the VA to provide vouchers that came with clinical case managers. He explained that eligibility can sometimes be limited with those vouchers, noting that the definition of a veteran can be different for various federal entities. He added that historically, eligibility for HUD-VASH required being eligible for VA healthcare. He noted that eligibility was beginning to expand.

Councilor Bartley stated that MRVP was meant to help provide support to those who did not qualify for Section 8. He suggested that it had fallen flat, starting out great but eventually fizzling. He then asked if they had a position on people holding signs on the street stating they are veterans and asking for donations.

B. Buckley stated that he didn't have a position, but would often give people a business card and encourage them to call him. He noted that they didn't really ever call him. He stated that he couldn't really know each person's situation or if someone writing it on a card necessarily meant they were a veteran, but they were available as a resource.

Councilor Bartley stated that there was a tendency to want to help when someone says they're a veteran.

B. Buckley stated that he has sometimes given them money but will always give them a business card. He then reiterated that he didn't have a position on it other than that they were there to help anyone that needed assistance.

M. Buckley stated that they had teams of case managers who were in communities. He emphasized the importance of them understanding each individual whatever their situations may be, and working to build a rapport and a relationship in the hopes of making progress. He then explained that there can sometimes be a disconnect in those moments when there was an option for services but not a desire for those services. He then stated that they worked to keep the door open so that when someone is ready for a conversation, they don't have a bad perception from a previous conversation. He further emphasized the importance of a community effort to identify those who may need help.

Chairman Tallman stated that he'll often stop and talk to people he knows are veterans, bringing them food and finding out how they're doing. He added that some of them may be living in the woods or some may have an apartment in another town and come to Holyoke to collect money. He stated that being a veteran himself, he wanted to make sure people realize that there were options and programs to get help. He then expressed concern about just giving money as it encourages people to keep coming back.

B. Buckley stated that it was all about building rapport with people, noting they had developed a lot of one on one relationships with veterans.

Chairman Tallman stated that you could stop by someone 9 times and then the 10th time could be the time they choose to accept help. He then asked what the full grant amount was.

B. Buckley stated that the total amount was \$500,000, which covered salaries and vehicles, adding that a lot could be done with that amount. He then stated that a big part of it was getting the word out.

Chairman Tallman stated that he was familiar with the VA hospital and had gotten some assistance in Leeds. He recalled a retired colleague from the Post Office who was also a veteran who would bring people to appointments at that hospital. He noted the value of having formerly homeless veterans doing work like that.

B. Buckley stated that much of their staff were previously homeless veterans.

Councilor Bartley noted there was a veterans lunch every week.

Chairman Tallman stated that there was a veterans punch at St. Paul's Church every Thursday, which was a great social gathering for veterans. He suggested leaving some of the flyers there.

Councilor Bartley made a motion that item 2 has been complied with.

Councilor Puello asked if a motion could be made to encourage the state delegation to watch the tape of this meeting and pursue passing a bill.

Councilor Bartley stated that there would be an order to invite them to a DGR meeting. He suggested that this topic should be a priority.

Councilor Puello seconded the motion that item 2 has been complied with. Motion passed, 3-0.

(50:40)

Councilor Bartley made a motion to remove item 3 from the table. Councilor Puello seconded the motion. Motion passed.

Item 3: 2-15-22 RIVERA_I -- order that the dpw work on putting up signs welcoming people to Holyoke at every highway entrance in 7 different languages.

--->Complied with and refer to Tourism Advisory Committee 3-0.

DISCUSSION:

Councilor Puello questioned if Councilor Rivera_I was in attendance.

Chairman Tallman stated that he spoke with Councilor Rivera_I to let him know it was being taken up but he was not able to make it. He then stated that in speaking with the City Engineer, he understood that it would be hard to do because signs could not be posted on state roads.

Mayor Garcia stated that they had wayfinding signs around the city as well as the Welcome to Holyoke, Birthplace of Volleyball signs already posted. He noted they were discussing updating them with the tourism component of ARPA funds. He suggested that the advisory committee could explore the suggestion about languages.

Chairman Tallman reiterated that in speaking with the City Engineer, Kris Baker, he understood that it was hard to do on state highways. He noted that Holyoke had Route 5, Route 141, I-391, Route 202, as well as Route 116.

Mayor Garcia suggested that Mr. Baker was likely alluding to a restriction on putting up any sign on a state road but if said Welcome to Holyoke, would we want that in 7 different languages.

Councilor Bartley stated that he respected the sentiment but suggested that it be referred to the mayor's advisory committee.

Mayor Garcia stated that they could talk about it during their planning process.

Councilor Bartley stated that there was nothing wrong with the sentiment but that they should avoid tripping up with state law.

Chairman Tallman read from a communication provided by Mr. Baker:

“The City is prohibited from installing roadway signage on State-owned roadways. This would preclude these signs off of the Interstate 91 ramps, State Route 5 on the southern and northern boundaries of the City, the Williamansett Bridge, Route 116 (Vietnam Vets), and the Purple Heart Bridge (Route 202). Significant roadways that the City Could install such signs would be on Southampton Road, Route 141 from Easthampton, and Route 202 on the western boundary. If the Committee is interested to move this forward, I could prepare a cost estimate for the project.”

Councilor Bartley made a motion that item has been complied with should be referred to the Tourism Advisory Committee. Councilor Puello seconded the motion.

Councilor McGiverin stated that while he respected the sentiment of the order, he had concerns about a sign with 7 different languages becoming a deterrent to drivers. He noted the current Welcome signs, while in need of updating, were visual effects featuring architecture and volleyballs, among other things. He also noted that they were not technically on state property.

Councilor Bartley suggested that volleyballs put around the city should look like volleyballs, while expressing respect that a lot of time and money was put into designing them.

Motion passed, 3-0.

(58:10)

Councilor Bartley made a motion to remove item 4 from the table. Councilor Puello seconded the motion. Motion passed.

Item 4: 12-1-20 BARTLEY, MURPHY -- The Holyoke City Council encourages all city department heads to provide correspondence to Spanish-speaking persons in Spanish to the extent feasible. The Holyoke City Council particularly encourages that technical letters from the Mayor's office, School Dept., Law Dept., Building Commissioner, Planning Board, City Clerk, License Board, and City Council, by translated into Spanish, upon request. (This is a refiled order from 12/3/2019).

--->Complied with 3-0.

DISCUSSION:

Mayor Garcia expressed his intention to transition to this. He noted that the School Department went through that transition and now had everything they put out translated, including flyers, social media posts, technical documents, and emails. He then stated that he would discuss the matter at the next quarterly department head meeting, starting with event flyers and social media posts. He suggested that technical translations will be a longer term and more costly process, likely requiring the hiring of someone to perform that work.

Councilor Bartley stated that he appreciated the response to the order and would be looking for a progress report on the progress in the future. He noted a couple of key points in the

order, specifically noting “to the extent feasible,” and “upon request.” Noting that the City Council doesn’t appropriate funds, he sought to have the discussion and then allow the mayor to determine if it made sense. He note that he had occasionally been concerned that people participating in meetings, particularly those attending as applicants, totally understood what was being communicated. He suggested that it could be an unfair position for people whose first language wasn’t English.

Mayor Garcia expressed appreciation for that level of interest and support. He commended the City Council for getting meetings translated. He noted that Admin Asst Anderson-Burgos reached out to him that day about having the subcommittee meetings translated. He then stated that he would work with Scott from Holyoke Media to discuss costs and available funding from Comcast subscriber fees.

Chairman Tallman emphasized the value of having meetings translated. He recognized that some things will take time but it was good that the discussion was starting.

Mayor Garcia suggested that Holyoke may have been the only community in the area at the time to be translating its City Council meetings. He emphasized with appreciation that someone was translating every word live, sometimes for 3-4 hours.

Councilor Bartley stated that it was about fairness and avoiding anyone being disadvantaged.

Chairman Tallman added that if someone was coming in with a special permit, it was important that they were on a level field.

Councilor Bartley made a motion that item 4 has been complied with. Councilor Puello seconded the motion. Motion passed, 3-0.

Adjourned at 7:07 PM