

# EAST BETHEL CITY COUNCIL WORK MEETING

April 22, 2024

The East Bethel City Council met on April 22, 2024, at 5:51 p.m. for the regular City Council Work meeting at City Hall.

MEMBERS PRESENT:           Kevin Lewis                   Brian Mundle               Bob DeRoche  
  Tim Miller                    Jim Smith

ALSO PRESENT:               Matt Look, City Administrator  
  Aaron Berg, Community Development Director

## 1.0 – Agenda Format for Spring Town Hall Meeting

Look requested the Council discuss the format for the Spring Town Hall Meeting.

Lewis stated the Town Hall Meeting needed to be reconfigured.

Look explained the difference between an Open Forum and a Town Hall Meeting. He indicated at the last Town Hall Meeting, which was televised, some of the topics that were brought up and the attacks on the Council, the Mayor, and staff with clapping and cheering in the background made the meeting dysfunctional. He stated they wanted to avoid that happening again, if possible.

Look asked if the Council wanted the meeting to be televised and what would the “rules of engagement” be.

Lewis stated he took certain ownership of the last Town Hall Meeting. He noted that was the first time he had chaired a Town Hall Meeting, so he was more accommodating to the dysfunction than he would be now.

DeRoche pointed out the previous City Council had shut down the Public Forum and this Council had said they would not do that. He agreed people should not get up and “degrade the City to make them look bad,” and badmouth the Council, staff, etc. He indicated he was more open to any ideas or suggestions on how they could point out the things that had been done. He stated if people were going to use the meeting for a political platform though, he would have an issue with that.

Look pointed out that he has never personally experienced town hall meetings anywhere largely because there was the internet, texting, phone calls, open forum, etc. where residents had multiple ways of communicating with the elected officials. He agreed with DeRoche that this did breed a political type of feeding ground where people could say things that were not necessarily based on truth. He stated there was also a concern about giving potential new residents of business who were thinking of coming into the City seeing this type of a dysfunctional meeting, which might be a detriment to them.

Mundle stated he had been through 14 Town Hall Meetings and in his experience if things were going well in the City, few people showed up to the meetings, but if things were not going well in people’s opinions, then more people would show up. He noted there was only one meeting where people were turned away because they were over the allowed room capacity and the Fire Chief would not allow any more people into the room. He believed these meetings needed to be informative and

accessible to the residents. He believed they needed to be televised also as there were seniors or residents with mobility difficulties who want to watch it on cable or broadcast.

Mundle noted with all of the talk of Council saying they are trying to inform the residents by having more newsletters, etc. and then not televising the meeting, he believed they would be “shooting” themselves in the foot. He stated it was an excellent communication tool and it allowed residents to get information and ask questions in a format that was not a Council meeting. He indicated this would also allow people who were not comfortable formally speaking at a Council meeting to talk.

Lewis stated he did not understand why it would be any different for residents to talk at a Town Hall Meeting than it would be at a Council meeting as the people were the same. Mundle noted a Town Hall Meeting was not an official meeting and it had a different format.

Miller stated he believed Town Hall Meetings were designed to serve as a platform for open communication between the local government officials and residents. The meetings provided an opportunity for community members to voice their concerns that could provide feedback on City initiatives and engage in discussions about various issues affecting the City.

Miller indicated ideally, Town Hall Meetings were meant to be inclusive, constructive, productive, and allow for a diverse range of topics to be discussed and for residents to have their voices heard. He believed they were an essential part of the democratic governance by promoting accountability and civic engagement.

Miller stated when a Town Hall Meeting was dominated by a small group of angry individuals who monopolize the discussion and intimidate others from speaking, it detracted from the intended purpose of the meetings. He indicated this behavior could create a negative atmosphere, hinder productive dialogue, and prevent meaningful exchange of ideas and solutions.

Miller pointed out that when individuals made costly and frivolous request, such as the data privacy report request that was never picked up, that reflected a lack of fiscal responsibility and respect for the time and resources of the City staff and Councilmembers. He noted it was important for all participants and Town Hall Meetings to approach discussions with respect, civility, and a genuine interest in contributing positively to the community in order to ensure that Town Hall Meetings remain effective and beneficial to all residents.

Miller stated it was essential for both City officials and community members to uphold principles. He stated they needed to be respectful; have respectful communications, collaboration, and responsible use of the City’s resources by fostering a culture of constructive dialogue and mutual respect. He noted Town Hall Meetings could fulfill their intended purpose of promoting the community and the community engagement between the parties. He stated it was also an effective way of governance.

Smith agreed with Miller. He stated his opinion was that Town Hall Meetings were basically set up by individuals that had current or previous issues with the City, staff, Council, etc. and they are not happy with the results, so they figure this is a good opportunity to come out to voice their opinion and try to overtake the Town Hall Meeting. He believed some people at the previous meeting were intimidated and then did not want to come up and talk. He acknowledged Mundle’s points about older residents that might not have modern technology to pull up the meetings, and it was important for them to get the information as well. However, he indicated the last Town Hall Meeting was a “disaster,” and he did not think that would change a lot if it were not televised.

Look stated there was some good points made on both sides, and he believed if this was going to be televised, they needed to have rules in place, such as if someone attacks staff who was not there to defend themselves. He recommended the person be cut off if they attacked staff or members of the Council.

Lewis stated he thought they should have a Sheriff's Deputy at the meeting. Look agreed and stated the Mayor had to impress upon everyone that this would be a respectful group in their questioning. He also recommended the Council not respond to any questioning, but just receive the information.

Lewis asked if this would be similar as to how the Public Forums were run. Look recommended the Council receive the information, not respond to it, and the concern could be responded to after the fact via email, or after staff has had the time to do some research. He stated this had to be controlled with no personal attacks.

Berg pointed out they had to be careful with First Amendment rights, but the Council could impose a three-minute limit, so everyone had the same time opportunity to speak. He noted that way they were not imposing on someone's First Amendment rights in terms of freedom of speech as everyone would have the same time opportunity to talk.

DeRoche agreed time limits were okay. He also wanted ground rules if someone was getting derogatory or swearing, etc.

Mundle agreed ground rules were fine, but he wanted the meeting televised. He stated the Councilmembers did this job for the residents and the meeting was for the residents, so why would they not show the residents the meeting if the technology was available.

DeRoche stated he had no problem with it being televised.

Lewis noted if the meeting got out of hand, they could also call a recess, clear the room, and let people cool off. He indicated that way they could control it. He stated again that he believed it was important to have a Sheriff Deputy at the meeting also.

Smith stated he was okay if they televised the meeting, if they had ground rules, limiting the time of people talking, and if there was a Sheriff Deputy there at the meeting.

Berg asked if the Council would still limit public comments if there were only a couple of people there. Look responded that would be up to the Mayor if he wanted to extend the time or not.

Both Look and Berg stated at the County and at the City of Cambridge, the Mayor would set his timer on his watch when a person started speaking and when their time was up, the person was thanked for their time.

Smith asked if a person was only allowed to speak once for three minutes.

Berg noted multiple speakers for the same topic could be instructed to use a representative to speak as well.

Lewis stated it would be up to him to be more assertive at this meeting, which he intended to do as he would not put up with what happened at the November meeting.

Look stated the Mayor could also politely say, if somebody had already covered the topic, to please respect everyone's time.

Lewis asked Berg to send him what the City of Cambridge used and asked Look to send him what the County used. He indicated he would look at those and make revisions.

Look asked Lewis what other items he wanted to bring up at this meeting.

Lewis asked if Look had heard from the County Election Integrity Task Force. Look responded he had sent some emails with some dates. He understood their presentation was 45 minutes. Lewis encouraged them to be concise in their presentation.

Look stated he was not sure if he had not received a response because they didn't like time frames or if they were mulling it over to figure out what worked for them. He noted this was in "their court now," and he would wait to hear from them.

Lewis inquired about the Ice Arena and Gibson Management. He understood Gibson Management didn't want to manage the Ice Arena any longer. Look responded Gibson Management had problems associated with being off-site and he did not think they had responded to the RFP and nobody else had either.

Lewis noted Mr. Davis had given the Council a detailed description of the history behind this and he did not have an opinion on it, but questions had come up as to why the City was operating a business and what was the point in doing it. He asked if there was some agreement that the City would do this in perpetuity. He asked if they should consider selling it to someone who would manage it. He stated he did not believe in government's running businesses. He noted it was not a business when they can just tax for losses and make them up.

Mundle noted this year they were currently in the black and it was self-supporting. Lewis stated he had never seen it in the black and it did not make sense the City was operating the Ice Arena.

Look stated these were policy questions as to whether the City wanted to engage in operating the Ice Arena. He indicated he would get the Council up to date financials. He noted there had been some large costly capital improvements. He indicated the argument would be how many local kids were utilizing the facility for hockey versus the benefit for neighboring communities. He stated part of the discussion could be if they were going to continue to operate this and if so he recommended they might want a Joint Powers Agreement with other communities guaranteeing covering the costs of those overages so it was not falling only on East Bethel. He indicated the school district also derived a lot of benefit from the facility for their hockey teams too.

Look agreed anytime they could bring people together in the community it was a great thing and this built camaraderie, so it really boiled down to financials. He indicated staff could reach out to the surrounding communities to see if they would be interested in a Joint Powers Agreement.

Lewis noted this was only spreading it out to more governmental entities and it would still be a government run business, which did not make any sense to him.

Mundle noted up until 2012/2013 when the funds were redirected, the Ice Arena was a self-operating facility.

Lewis stated the previous City Administrator had told him that the reason the business had not been sold was because nobody was willing to buy it. In other words, it had no market value. He indicated he did not understand how a facility would not have a market value.

Look stated the current ice time rates had not been increased in a while, so it was very affordable for families.

Lewis noted he had gone over to look at the Ice Arena when they had open skate, but there was nobody there. He indicated he was not advocating it should be sold because they needed the money, but he believed it should be owned and run as a private business.

Berg stated from an overall community development perspective, there were results that could not be measured, and sometimes they want to keep the quality of life in the community which would lead to residents staying and speaking good things about the community. He indicated if residents were not happy, then they would not say good things, and quality of life was one thing people took to heart when looking to move somewhere.

Lewis noted the City had good parks, but they did not run the leagues. He indicated there needed to be a balance.

Lewis asked if they had received the completed business climate surveys from the Chamber of Commerce meeting. Berg responded the Chamber was in the process of electronically distributing the code and a link to their distribution list and he would check with them about this.

Meeting adjourned at 6:25 p.m.

Submitted by:

Kathy Altman

*TimeSaver Off Site Secretarial, Inc.*