

REGULAR MONTHLY COUNCIL
CITY OF INDEPENDENCE, WISCONSIN

The Independence City Council met in in Regular Session Board on Monday, February 03, 2025 at 5:30 p.m. in the Council Room of City Hall.

Meeting Minutes

I. Call to Order

- Council President Jason Ekern presided.

Roll Call of Members

- A.** Jason Ekern, Cleo Skroch, Linda Longmore, Tim Hanson and Deb Marsolek present. Randy Symicek attended via TEAMS online app.
- B.** Also present were Attorney Laverne Michalek, Deputy Clerk Dawn Abrahamson, Clerk Tiffany Bautch, Elaine Conrad, Bradley Skroch, Kari Pedersen, Independence Public School Administrator Paul Franzwa, Joe Galewski, Police Chief Jim Wanoriek, Sharon Wagner, Todd Wagner and Sue Glenzinski (Trempealeau County Times).

Proof of Giving Public Notice - Done

Approval of Agenda:

- Motion by Hanson and seconded by Longmore to approve the agenda. 6 ayes, 0 nays; motion carried.

Approval of Minutes - February 03, 2025

- Motion by Marsolek and seconded by Skroch to approve the agenda. 6 ayes, 0 nays; motion carried.

II. Public Comments

- Hanson asked who determines when the library is closed. The longstanding policy is whenever the public school closes due to weather, the library is closed. Staff reports to work and does in-house projects.
- Hanson asked if there were plans for the vacated library space at City Hall when the new library is built. Short answer: Not at this time.

III. Licenses and Permits

- Building Permit - Bradley Skroch, detached garage; 36181 Osseo Road. Motion by Cleo Skroch, seconded by Hanson. 6 ayes, 0 nays; motion carried.
- Class B Liquor License - Ss. Peter and Paul School Education Celebration. Motion by Skroch, seconded by Hanson. 6 ayes, 0 nays; motion carried.

- Alcohol Beverage Server's License – Britney Cruz- Larios, Cantina Cruz. Motion by Hanson, seconded by Marsolek. 6 ayes, 0 nays; motion carried.

IV. Old Business:

A. Lake Dredge Update

- a. City Clerk Tiffany Bautch updated the Council on the Lake Dredge project.
- b. Russ Kivenemi from Cedar Corp called her and said they are working on the bidding out of the project.
- c. The requests for bids have to be advertised twice. These will be published in the March 20th and March 27th editions of the Trempealeau County Times.

B. Discussion with Possible Action- Block 1 Alley

- Symicek asked if the engineering firm Short- Elliott-Hendrickson will obtain the grade for the street. This is necessary for putting out bids. He will follow up on this when he returns next week.

C. Discussion with Possible Action- City of Independence Sesquicentennial (150th Anniversary) in 2026.

- Longmore said former mayor Baecker reminded her to discuss this issue with the Council. Symicek suggested that even though this is a City function, we should work with community clubs (Legion, Lions' Club, etc.) to assist with this.
- Marsolek said some things we will need to talk about include completion of the Veterans' Memorial Park and City Welcome signs.
- No one offered to Chair this project, so President Ekern suggested we discuss this more in depth in April.

D. Update- Lift Station Land

- Michalak said an attorney from Eau Claire has been hired. He should have more information at the April Council meeting, as there is a deadline coming up April 30th.

V. New Business:

A. Independence High School Referendum

- Superintendent Paul Franzwa and Bookkeeper Kari Pedersen addressed the Council on the school referendum requesting to levy \$900,000 each year for the next three school years for operating expenses. This is on the April 01st ballot.
- Independence Public School District has approximately 420 students enrolled. They have about 20 Junior and Senior class students who participate in youth apprenticeships.
- There are 69 staff members, including 54 instructional staff and 15 support staff. Marsolek asked how many staff members reside within the district. Franzwa said it is about 50%.
- They currently have a stable Fund 10, which is reserve funding that allows cash flow at times of the year when it is needed.
- The Fund 10 is projected to be at only 20% of the recommended amount by the end of this school year.

- Franzwa explained State revenue limits and State aid. He said the more a district spends, the more money in State aid the district will receive and as aid goes up, taxes go down.
- This year there are 200 Wisconsin school districts with an operating referendum on the ballot. 171 are non-recurring (including Independence) and 29 are recurring. There has been a referendum covering funding every year except 2021. That year resulted in high levels of turnover by staff. Every school district in our conference has a referendum in effect or is currently seeking a new one.
- Covid relief funds given to districts during the pandemic are no longer available.
- If passed, the referendum will include an increase in taxes of approximately \$9.⁰⁰ per \$1,000 of assessed value. Cochrane-Fountain City is the only district in the area that has a lower mill rate. It is “in the mid \$7.⁰⁰’s”. IHS also has a Fund 16, but dollars from that account cannot be used until 2027. The supply budget for the District remains the same as last year.
- If referendum passes, the money would go towards trying to avoid staff turnover (by offering competitive wages), increasing the Capital Improvement Fund and paying operating expenses. The district receives no State funding between August and December and if the referendum does not pass, the district will have to use short term borrowing and will likely draw down Fund 10 even further.

B. Discussion with Possible Action- Property Line/Ordinance Concerns

- Zoning Issue- Sharon and Todd Wagner previously sent a letter to the City regarding a zoning matter. The Wagners, who live at 24016 Burrows Street (sic), appeared before the Council regarding a building permit that was issued approximately six years ago to a resident residing at 24042 Burrows Road. They expressed their displeasure that the garage is considerably less than 10 feet from the lot line and that the neighbors’ fence is two feet inside their property line.
- Attorney Michalak said the ordinance allows no less than 16 feet on the total of two sides of a structure. This means a person can build six feet from the property line, as long as there is 10 feet on the opposite side of the structure or any combination of footage that is six feet or greater and totals at least 16 feet. He said the eaves may extend beyond the building itself.
- Sharon Wagner said they previously came to City Hall to request a copy of ordinances related to zoning, but were told Title 9 has not yet been completed.
- She said the eaves of the neighbors’ structure have created runoff resulting in a drainage issue on their property. This is because the Wagners’ property is lower than their neighbor’s. Hanson said he would look into this.

C. Discussion with Possible Action- Approval of Fulltime Police Officer

- Tim Hanson told the Council the Law Enforcement and Personnel Committee recommends hiring Josiah Vogt for the vacant fulltime police officer position.
- Starting pay rate will be \$31.⁰⁰ pr hour with a \$1.⁰⁰/hour raise after successful completion of a six-month probationary period. His starting date will be in early to mid-April.
- The offer to hire signed by Hanson and Vogt also includes two weeks’ vacation and 400 hours of sick leave. Marsolek questioned the excessive amount of leave included, saying

that Vogt could conceivably miss three months of work (based on 12-hour shifts/160 hours a month) without working a single day.

- Marsolek and Skroch said they have never received sick leave before having earning it. Skroch also expressed her disapproval of the LE and P Committee Chair signing an offer to hire for Vogt without consulting the rest of the Committee.
- Marsolek asked Deputy Clerk Dawn Abrahamson what she was allotted for vacation and sick leave when hired. Abrahamson said she received two weeks' vacation and 40 hours of sick leave. Oddly, the City handbook says City employees start out with no sick days when hired.
- Chief Wanoriek said that Vogt has nine years law enforcement experience and is well regarded in the law enforcement community. Wanoriek said he lost 800 accrued hours of sick leave when he left his previous employer to take the Chief position here.
- Marsolek asked why employees get to dictate the compensation terms of their employment. City Attorney Michalak replied that this is a common practice. Longmore then said, "You can only negotiate so much." Marsolek also asked the pay rate for Bautch and Abrahamson. Tiffany receives \$36/hour (1 yr. and 5 months employed) and Dawn \$24/hour (4 ½ months employed.)
- The Council discussed presenting a counter offer to Vogt. Motion by Skroch, seconded by Hanson to amend offer to hire to 40 hours sick leave while retaining the other items included. Roll vote: 6 ayes, 0 nays; motion carried.

D. Discussion with Possible Action Filling and Creating Positions within the Clerk's Office

- City Clerk Tiffany Bautch made a presentation to the Council.
 - a. Bautch described how her office was shorthanded. They are in the middle of an audit and the auditors have a lot of questions. She lamented the layout of the office, saying she has been asked by the auditors to present a number of documents she cannot find.
 - b. She has resigned her position and her last day of work will be following the reorganization meeting on Tuesday, April 15th. She said she is staying until that time to assist with the Spring election and in training Deputy Clerk Abrahamson.
 - c. There was considerable discussion regarding her resignation by email in December, yet she is still working. Attorney Michalak said this was the first he's heard of her resignation. He said that if she resigned, she can't un-resign by setting a new date. He said Bautch was no longer a City employee, but could reapply for the vacant position.
 - d. The discussion progressed to the point where it was learned Bautch was approached by former Mayor Robert Baecker and LEP Chair Tim Hanson who convinced Bautch to stay.
 - e. Skroch, who is a member of the LEP Committee, was angered that this done without Hanson discussing it with the Committee or telling the Council. She said that as far as she was concerned, Tiffany had resigned and that if she changed her mind, she could reapply for the open position.
 - f. Marsolek added that she did not like "these backdoor deals" that were going on.
 - g. Abrahamson said she felt she wasn't getting adequate training. She expressed that the job she was doing is not the one she signed up for.

- h. Since Abrahamson is fairly new and still needs training in some areas, Ekern asked her to create a list of things “she needs to be brought up to speed on”.
 - A discussion was had regarding posting for the City Clerk’s position.
 - a. Marsolek suggested that the posting include wording to establish an eligibility list so we would not have to repeat this, should other positions within the Clerk’s office become vacant.
 - b. Motion by Hanson, seconded by Marsolek to post the vacant job and eligibility list.
 - c. **Roll Vote:** Hanson, Ekern, Skroch, Longmore and Marsolek- aye. 0 nays. Symicek abstained; motion carried.
 - d. Marsolek offered to write up the ad for the newspaper.
 - Currently job Dawn Abrahamson has the title of City Clerk Assistant.
 - a. Motion by Longmore seconded by Skroch to promote Abrahamson to Deputy Clerk.
 - b. **Roll Vote:** Hanson, Ekern, Skroch, Longmore and Marsolek- aye. 0 nays. Symicek abstained; motion carried.
- E. Update on Title 9 Zoning Ordinances**
- City Attorney Michalak updated the Council in the progress regarding completion of new Title 9. He said this is done and being typed up.
 - It was noted that this was promised for December, 2024 and again March, 2025.
 - Michalak said he had several personal obligations that came up and will be ready by the April 07th Regular Council meeting.
- F. Discussion with Possible Action – DNR Recycling Ordinance and Compliance**
- Attorney Michalak advised the Council that a Compliance Reassurance Plan is required to submit to the D.N.R. by April 28, 2025. This is a requirement that communities promote recycling and the City is making sure residents understand and comply with State recycling laws.
 - The City previously adopted a recycling ordinance in the 1990s, but it has not been updated since that time.
 - He will have this completed by the April 07th Council meeting. Discussion tabled until the April Council meeting.
- G. Discussion with Possible Action- 2024 Library Report Ordinances**
- City Librarian Kayla Mathson gave the Council an update on the library.
 - a. In 2024, the library had 25,000 users based on WIFI statistics.
 - b. 12,000 people visited the library in person and 10,300+ items were borrowed, including physical and digital products.
 - c. There were more than 2,400 attendees at 68 library events.
 - d. The library has 1,108 registered library card holders.
 - e. 600+ items have been added to the library, including books, puzzles, games, movie and exploratory kits.
 - f. The library has 1.51 fulltime positions including Liam Herrick who is paid \$16/hour.

- g. Mathson said federal law requires that when contracts are over a certain dollar amount, local contractors need to be hired.
- h. She said they are trying to determine the correct set back from the right of way for the library.

H. Status Update- Grant Applications

- City Clerk Tiffany Bautch updated the Council on the progress of the City grants she's applied for.
 - a. The \$85,000 Dam grant has been approved. This only pays for the study, not any actual work that may be needed.
- In addition, she said the Water and Sewer Grant has been submitted.
 - a. We have not heard back as to whether this grant was awarded.
 - b. Hanson asked Bautch, "In light of the fact that feel there is not enough time to do assigned office work, who asked you to work on grants?" Bautch replied that she often does these applications on her own time.

VI. Committee Reports

- Law Enforcement and Personnel (Hanson) - is assisting in seeking a new City Clerk
- Ambulance (Skroch)- Arcadia Ambulance Service obtained a 3rd ambulance. She's also working on the Annual Budget.
- Library – Everything is still moving ahead. They are still within \$30,000 of their budget. They are working on bidding packets that will go out April 18th or 20th.
- Water and Sewer – Have been following up on high levels of ammonia at Independence High School. They are hoping to pinpoint it by the end of April.

VII. Correspondence-

- A discussion was held regarding electrical upgrades that need to be made. .

VIII. Approval of Invoices and Payroll

- Motion by Hanson, seconded by Skroch to approve paying the bills. Marsolek lamented again that she was uncomfortable approving bills when the Council as a whole was not seeing them. Skroch passed the report to Marsolek to review. **Roll Vote:** Skroch, Longmore, Marsolek, Hanson and Ekern- aye. Symicek left meeting early due to technology issues; motion carried.
- Motion for reconsideration of New Business Item "C" by Hanson, seconded by Longmore. **Roll vote:** Hanson, Longmore and Marsolek- aye. Skroch – nay. Symicek absent for vote. Motion carried.
 - Chief Wanoriek reported that he spoke with Josiah Vogt and Vogt agreed to having sick leave hours reduced from 400 to 80. Marsolek said she was aware police officers are hard to find these days and said she would support 80 hours to "meet Vogt in the middle."
 - Motion by Longmore, seconded by Marsolek to amend offer to hire from 400 hours to 80 hours sick leave for Josiah Vogt. Roll vote: 5 ayes, Symicek absent; Motion carried.

IX. Future Meeting Topics

- Personnel matters - resignation of City Clerk
- Clerk and Mayor position openings

X. Future Meeting Dates

- March 11th, Special Council, 5:15 p.m.
- Next Regular Monthly Council- Monday, April 7th @ 5:30 p.m.
- Reorganization following Spring Election (04/01/25)- Tuesday, April 15th @ 5:30 p.m.

XI. Adjournment-

- Having completed all the business before the Council, the meeting was adjourned by Council President Jason Ekern at 8:09 p.m.

Dawn Abrahamson, Deputy Clerk