

City of Keene
New Hampshire

MUNICIPAL SERVICES, FACILITIES AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Wednesday, February 26, 2020

6:00 PM

Council Chambers B

Members Present:

Janis O. Manwaring, Chair
Michael Giacomo, Vice Chair
Randy L. Filiault
Bettina A. Chadbourne
Robert C. Williams

Staff Present:

Elizabeth A. Dragon, City Manager
Thomas P. Mullins, City Attorney
Kürt Blomquist, Public Works Director
Steve Russo, Police Chief
Duncan Watson, Assistant Public Works
Director

Members Not Present:

Chair Manwaring called the meeting to order at 6:00 PM, welcomed the public, and explained the rules of procedure.

1) Continued Discussion: Encouraging the City to Become a “Bee City”

The City Manager, Elizabeth Dragon, recalled this matter being presented at the last meeting, when staff was still unsure as to the best place in the City structure to refer the request. Because the Agricultural Commission is inactive, the Mayor spoke with the Conservation Commission to gauge their interest, and to the City Manager’s understanding, the Commission was interested. She recommended referring this matter to the Conservation Commission.

Chair Manwaring welcomed the petitioner, John Therriault (of 76 Bradford Road), who recalled that Bee City USA is a way for Keene to demonstrate commitment to policies and practices that support pollinators (e.g., bees, bats, hummingbirds, and some lizards) and their habitat. He was at the previous Conservation Commission meeting, where the idea was discussed briefly. He would attend the next Conservation Commission meeting as well.

Councilor Filiault made the following motion, which Vice Chair Giacomo seconded.

With a vote of 5-0, the Municipal Services, Facilities & Infrastructure Committee recommended that the request for the City of Keene to become a “Bee City” be referred to the Conservation Commission.

2) Referred Back: Harris Center for Conservation Education – Temporary Road Closures – Jordan Road

This matter was referred back to the Committee. The City Manager, Elizabeth Dragon, explained that in the past, only North Lincoln Street was closed and this year Jordan Road was an expanded request that did not go through proper Police Department (PD) review before coming to this Committee, which is necessary for expanded requests. She said the recommended motion provided to the Committee was to modify the original request for overnight closure to instead to provide for closure for only two hours while the volunteers are at the location. She said the Police Chief, Steve Russo, looked at the number of homes on Jordan Road that could be impacted and with that, the Chief and City Manager are supportive of this closure for a few hours while volunteers are active. The City Manager thought this meeting was an additional opportunity for residents of Jordan Road to provide feedback on the potential closure and she received a communication in support from one resident of Jordan Road in advance of this meeting. She continued explaining that the modified closure for two hours would allow for local traffic only so residents can access their homes. She said this would be an opportunity to observe deterred traffic, to determine if there is support from effected residents, and to determine whether to modify the closure next year. Staff is not yet comfortable with an overnight closure.

Chair Manwaring asked if the City has access to an across-the-road traffic counter that could help estimate how many vehicles travel that section of road through the night. The City Manager said no, the City's radar signs could be placed in dark mode to count vehicular traffic without flashing speeds. She said that Southwest Regional Planning Commission has across-the-road technology like Chair Manwaring referenced. Chair Manwaring asked if the City could borrow that technology and the City Manager said she could certainly ask and if denied, the City's radar signs are available.

Councilor Filiault noted that the City has electronic signs that can flash messages to the public about upcoming events that could affect vehicle traffic (e.g., marathons). He asked if those could be used in the area of Jordan Road at the necessary time of year displaying a message such as, "caution – salamanders crossing." The City Manager replied in the affirmative.

Chair Manwaring recognized City Councilor Mitch Greenwald, who said he was representing the residents of Jordan Road and the salamanders that want to cross there. He said this issue is not rocket science and it is being over-engineered. He said this closure could be accomplished simply with signs at Concord Road and Peg Shop Road each saying the road is closed to thru traffic. Councilor Greenwald continued that he and his daughter will volunteer to place and remove those signs when needed. He used to live on Jordan Road and thinks the few residents would just need to be prepared, which the closure signs would accomplish. He said this closure is possible if the Council wants it enough and he said it is worth doing so. He urged all members of Council to visit on these nights to see how many families are participating.

Chair Manwaring recognized the petitioner, Brett Amy Thelen from the Harris Center for Conservation Education, who provided two comments on this proposed modification. First, she understood the two-hour decision was based on how long volunteers would likely be on the road. While she understood that reasoning to arrive at a compromise, she said that many volunteers

stay longer if there are still amphibians on the road. She was concerned that two hours was not flexible enough to ensure the ultimate goal of protecting volunteers while on the road. She asked the Committee to consider a motion that would give them that flexibility. Second, Ms. Thelen said that from an ecologically meaningful perspective, the amphibians need more help when volunteers are not present, which is why the request was for overnight. She understood the need for compromise this year and hoped the bigger goal for next year would be an overnight closure. She hoped this meeting's decision would not set the precedent for just an "early evening, few-hour closure" for the future.

Councilor Williams said it would be useful not to just collect data on the quantity of passing cars but also at what hours they are passing. He said that if there proves to be minimal traffic after midnight that should affect the City's future decisions. The City Manager said that data should be captured by the City's radar signs.

Police Chief Steve Russo stated that the Police Department is not against this ecological effort or working toward successful closure of Jordan Road. Normally, he said that relevant Department Directors (e.g., Police Chief, Public Works Director, City Manager, etc.) would have had an opportunity for protocol meetings before an expanded petition comes before this Committee. This did not happen because of the timeline in this instance. The Police Chief looked at data for Jordan Road, which was collected for 13 days in August 2018. The data showed an average 93 cars traveling Jordan Road between 6:00 PM – 7:00 AM daily. A total 4,523 cars traveled Jordan Road in that same period. He noted that Jordan Road is a connector and so detour signs might need to be posted as far down as RT-101. He said this is not a complicated effort, but it requires sufficient planning. Based on his experience, he thinks that 10% of drivers would turn around and obey the no thru traffic closure and the rest would continue driving down Jordan Road regardless. Therefore, he hoped the Police Department could collect fresh data during this proposed "few-hours" closure. He anticipated no issues working with the petitioner to determine where the radar signs would be most effective to produce the most accurate counts. He noted that 27 occupied homes would be impacted on Jordan Road in addition to one home being constructed.

Councilor Chadbourne asked Ms. Thelen how many hours volunteers are typically at Jordan Road. Ms. Thelen said the duration is weather dependent. If conditions are ideal for amphibian migration, then volunteers could be present from sundown until after midnight in some instances. If conditions change throughout the evening, then volunteers could go home earlier. She sought flexibility to account for these complexities. She only requested closure on Jordan Road for two nights this year to determine its efficacy and so she hoped the closures could be approved for more than two hours to accommodate typical volunteer presence during ideal weather conditions. Councilor Chadbourne asked the City Manager whether there was opportunity for flexibility in allowing longer than two hours but less than a full overnight closure. The City Manager said there is flexibility for this year and then there would be more data to determine flexibility next year. The City Manager understood the ultimate goal for this to be an overnight closure.

Vice Chair Giacomo recalled that when this proposal was presented initially to this Committee, the Public Works and Police Departments did not seem to be on the same page. He asked if all relevant departments would support any modification to the proposed motion, as this was the

third time the Committee was hearing this matter. The City Manager replied in the affirmative and apologized that she was absent when this petition was first heard. The City Manager continued that part of the confusion was not on staff's part, but rather this expanded request was not brought to staff in the manner that is typical, and so staff did not have an opportunity to convene and provide a concise recommendation at the first meeting. The lack of preparation led to the presentation of differing staff opinions, of which there is nothing wrong but it led to confusion when presented to the Committee. To maximize the potential of these events, the City Manager suggested changing the proposed motion language to read, "for several hours per night," instead of, "for two hours per night." Councilor Chadbourne asked how this petition was brought to staff differently this year. The City Manager said the difference was that this was an expanded request, which required an additional level of review.

Vice Chair Giacomo made the following motion, which Councilor Filiault seconded.

With a vote of 5-0, the Municipal Services, Facilities & Infrastructure Committee recommended that the City Manager be authorized to do all things necessary to coordinate with the petitioner for the temporary closure of Jordan Road to through traffic for several hours per night on the nights requested by the petitioner to allow for volunteers to assist with salamander crossings, and that the petitioner comply with the recommendations of the City Manager with respect to the safety of the volunteers.

There being no further business, Chair Manwaring adjourned the meeting at 6:24 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Katrinya Kibler, Minute Taker
March 1, 2020