

Committee of the Whole  
December 11, 2024

The Fergus Falls City Council held a Committee of the Whole meeting on December 11, 2024, at 7:00 am in the City Council Chambers. Mayor Schierer called the meeting to order, and the following council members were present: Mortenson, Rachels, Hicks, Fish, Job and Kvamme. Kremeier and Rufer were absent.

**Productive Alternatives Transportation Agreement**

Otter Express Director Kayla Sullivan spoke about their transportation services and the obstacles many people face trying to secure rides within the community. The Otter Express has provided nearly 50,000 rides to date in Fergus Falls including transportation for workers to 45 different business locations. They are seeking a continuation of their 2024 contract for \$50,000. The Otter Express does operate in other communities and plan to expand as they find staff. Prior to Productive Alternatives providing this service, the city provided \$50,000 per year to the senior center to operate transportation services. Sullivan answered questions about their operations, other funding sources and the rising cost of providing these services. A motion and second were made by Fish and Job to recommend the council approve the 2025 Productive Alternatives Transportation Agreement and the motion carried.

**Visit Fergus Falls Update**

Visit Fergus Falls is funded by the city's lodging tax. Rolando Felizola gave an update on the organization's re-branding, new website and video reel that promotes Fergus Falls as a tourism destination since he took over leadership two years ago. They have done 2-3 google campaigns per month which has resulted in a 4.1% increase in hotel occupancy when the region, state and country are trending downward. Social media outreach is up nearly 1000%. Content interaction, link clicks, website visits and follows are also up with the most popular search being hiking, biking and events. They were able to save a considerable amount of money by using Felizola's experience with photography and videography. Their board has budgeted for an investment in an automated events calendar (\$13,000), an itineraries platform (\$12,000), a strategic workshop (\$5,000) and they plan to hire a part-time person to manage their social media at an estimated cost of \$25,000. The organization is expanding their outreach with 14 new tourism campaigns that will promote Fergus Falls, their hotels, amenities, art and culture as a hub for West Central Minnesota.

**Bigwood Event Center Marketing**

The council heard a two phased marketing proposal for the Bigwood Event Center from Leighton Media in August of 2024. Phase I, the exchange of space in the facility for equivalent value in media exposure from Leighton Media is underway. Phase II requires an initial outlay of \$7,500 for display advertising on non-Leighton websites and search engine marketing for six months. If the marketing results prove to be fruitful, an additional \$7,500 would be spent to continue these social media marketing efforts. The Tax Levy Committee has recommended \$15,000 be included in the 2025 budget and funded from liquor store profits. Job talked about the necessity of trying these marketing efforts to increase bookings or the facility will sit idle and continue to cost more. Rachels agreed and felt the decision on the facility's future needs to be made before bookings come in for 2026. Hicks was not opposed to investing in marketing and asked if Visit Fergus Falls could provide some assistance. Rolando Felizola said their organization generates funds through the lodging tax and they felt the marketing proposal would result in many overnight hotel stays. He spoke of the wider radius they are using in their google campaigns and how they can generate leads for less than \$1,000.

Mortenson asked how much money the Bigwood Event Center lost last year. Bill Sonmor said they are estimating a \$124,000 loss in 2024 and there was a loss of \$83,000 in 2023. The city transferred funds from the liquor store to make up the shortfall. Mortenson agreed the city needs to do something and suggested the city consider partnering with Visit Fergus Falls to market the Bigwood Event Center. Mayor Schierer commented the \$15,000 is within the 2025 budget.

### **Pebble Lake Golf Course Management Lease**

The existing management agreement with the Pebble Lake Golf Club Inc. will expire on December 31, 2024. With the proposed sale on hold, an extension to the management lease would be necessary to continue operations while long-term solutions are considered in 2025. The only proposed changes to the lease agreement are extending the dates to December 31, 2026, and insurance requirements would be raised from \$1 million per occurrence/\$2 million aggregate to \$2 million per occurrence/\$2 million aggregate. A motion and a second were made by Fish and Kvamme to recommend the council approve a one-year extension to the golf course management lease and the motion carried.

### **Fir and Friberg Roundabout**

Otter Tail County is the lead agency on Public Improvement 5362, the Fir and Friberg roundabout improvement project. They have scheduled the bid opening for the project on January 16 and the total estimated project cost is \$2,447,598.33. The state awarded \$790,000 for the project through the Local Road Improvement Program (LRIP) which is expected to cover 100% of the city's eligible costs. Utilities and engineering expenses are not eligible for these grant funds. The county's total estimated share is \$1,307,851.35 and the city's share is \$349,746.98. The city's portion would be funded by state aid funding, the water enterprise fund and the sanitary sewer enterprise fund. A motion and second were made Fish and Rachels to recommend the council authorize the submission of the Local Road Improvement Program grant agreement in the amount of \$790,000 and the motion carried.

### **PI 8231 & 7224 Scenic Drive Improvements**

Plans and specifications have been substantially completed for the water main and sanitary sewer improvements on Scenic Drive. The total combined improvement cost is \$259,400 and the final assessment hearing will be held prior to awarding the construction services. A motion and second were made by Hicks and Job to recommend the council accept the project plans and specifications and to authorize the advertising of bids and the motion carried.

Due to time, the aquatic center update was moved to the December 16 agenda.

### **Sidewalk Snow Removal Contract**

City residents are required by code to remove snow and ice from public sidewalks within 24 hours of precipitation has stopped. Walkways that have not been cleared and generate complaint calls are sent a letter detailing the offense and requesting compliance. If the snow and/or ice have not been removed after several days, a contractor is sent to remove the snow and ice, and the property owner is billed for those services plus an administrative fee. A motion and second were made by Rachels and Kvamme to recommend the council award the snow and ice removal services contract to Atlas Outdoor Services for fall of 2024-spring of 2026 and the motion carried.

### **Plow Truck Purchase**

Unit #263, a 2005 plow is ready for replacement and staff recommended the purchase of a 2025 Freightliner 108SD plus a Bonnel Commander dump body and a falls plow from Bert's Truck

Equipment. The cost of the new truck is \$261,748 and is a planned 2025 equipment fund purchase. A motion and second were made by Hicks and Mortenson to recommend the council authorize the purchase of a new gravel/snowplow truck, to declare Unit 263 as surplus equipment and authorize its disposal and the motion carried.

**Other Business**

Mark Leighton requested a true picture of the Bigwood Event Center including how much the city has invested, actual losses, carrying costs, how many events are scheduled for next year and how much it would cost to close the facility.

The meeting adjourned at 8:08 am

*Lynne Olson*