

Committee of the Whole Meeting
February 24, 2021

The Fergus Falls City Council met as a Committee of the Whole on Wednesday February 24, 2021 at 7:00 am in the City Council Chambers. Acting Mayor Tom Rufer called the meeting to order at 7:00am. Council members in attendance were Hicks, Hagberg, Kvamme, Rufer, Thompson, Arneson, and Gustafson. Fish and Mayor Schierer were absent.

Fire Department Annual Report

Fire Chief Ryan Muchow provided a comprehensive overview of the Fire Department, their statistics, activities, response times and calls over the past year. 2020 was their second busiest year on record with 291 calls for service. They had 54 fire related calls, logged 2,500 training hours, and 1,500 hours of equipment maintenance. Their department consists of 3 full-time staff members and 36 paid on call fire fighters. There were five fire fighter injuries last year, but no civilian fire injuries or fatalities. Cooking is the cause of most home fires while smoking is the top reason for fire fatalities. The department is working vigilantly to provide safety not only for the residents of Fergus Falls, but also to the surrounding towns and townships through mutual aid agreements.

Greater Fergus Falls Annual Report

Greater Fergus Falls CEO Annie Deckert provided a recap of their organization's activities over the past year. Their organization's mission is to grow the area business community and they have focused their activities on economic development, business development and attraction, marketing and promotion, partnerships and organizational sustainability. She highlighted their community efforts during the pandemic and their focus on providing services to existing businesses, start-up businesses and entrepreneur activities. They have been keeping a database of all existing land and buildings and it was noted nearly 121,000 sq. ft. of buildings sold last year. Kvamme requested the entirety of the RTC campus be added to their information.

Otter Tail Power Hoot Lake Solar Project

City Engineer Brian Yavarow spoke about Otter Tail Power's proposed 49.9 megawatt solar farm planned for just outside the current city limits. If this project moves forward, it would be their intention to annex this area into the city limits. Minnesota Rules 4410 require Otter Tail Power to prepare an Environmental Assessment Worksheet (EAW) for this solar project. The City of Fergus Falls has been designed as the Responsible Government Unit, which is required to review and approve the EAW document. This document has been completed and submitted for a final decision. The city has determined it is complete and agrees it addresses the reasonably foreseeable environmental impacts of the project.

A 30 day public comment period concluded on December 30, 2020 and the city received 3 agency letters along with 37 public comment letters. A public hearing was held on December 8 to address project details and concerns. Comments made during this hearing were also recorded into the official record. The majority of the comments were substantive to the EAW scope and all remarks were responded to in the public comment section of the EAW. The city hired Braun Intertec to provide professional services for an independent review of the EAW comments and they provided a table of the comments, responses and recommendations. They concur that the EAW was prepared appropriately to meet the rules of the Minnesota Environmental Policy Act Rules 4410.

The city has two options:

1. Determine the EAW is complete, but their remains foreseeable significant environmental impacts for the project that require further analysis to satisfactorily address. This conclusion requires the completion of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) before the project can move forward.
2. Determine the EAW is complete, that is satisfactorily addresses all reasonably envisioned environmental impacts of the project and does not require further project analysis. This conclusion would lead to a “Negative Declaration” allowing the project plan to move forward to the next step.

City staff are recommending the second option. A motion and second were made by Thompson and Arneson to recommend the council accept the Hoot Lake Solar Environmental Assessment Worksheet findings of fact and record decision for a negative declaration not requiring an Environmental Impact Statement and the motion carried.

Data Request Policy

A motion and second were made by Arneson and Gustafson to recommend the council adopt an amended Data Request Policy and request form and the motion carried.

Organics Recycling Pilot Program

Cedar Walters from the Otter Tail County Solid Waste Department requested the city provide a resolution of support for their application for a Minnesota Pollution Control Agency Composting and Recycling Grant. The grant would be used to start an organics recycling pilot program that would collect compostable waste from large waste generators such as schools, health care facilities and commercial/industrial sites throughout the county.

It has been estimated up to 31% of municipal solid waste is organic “compostable” waste that could be diverted from the landfill through organics recycling. The pilot program would also give residents an opportunity to use backyard compost bins or kitchen compost pails in exchange for data on their recycled materials. The program has many benefits including saving landfill space, conserving resources, reducing greenhouse emissions, turning food and other compostable waste into a valuable soil amendment and reducing waste hauling and disposal costs. The grant funds would cover the cost of the bins, signage, and initial program costs. Public Works Director Len Taylor said the city would provide a truck to pick up this waste within the city, but if the program grows, another refuse carrier would need to be hired by the county to assist. The city ordinance would need to be amended to allow the collection of materials outside of city trucks if the grant is awarded. After answering a number of questions about the program and the materials to be collected, a motion and second were made by Arneson and Hagberg to recommend the council provide a resolution of support for Otter Tail County to submit a grant request for the Organics Pilot Program and the motion carried.

The meeting adjourned at 8:09 am

Lynne Olson