

Committee of the Whole Meeting  
November 29, 2023

The Fergus Falls City Council met as a Committee of the Whole on November 29, 2023, at 7:00 am in the City Council Chambers. Mayor Schierer called the meeting to order, and the following council members were in attendance: Job, Kvamme, Rufer, Kremeier, Thompson, Rachels, Hicks and Fish.

**Bigwood Event Center**

The Bigwood Event Center opened in 2001 after its construction was funded by the state, private donations, and transfers from the liquor store revenues. The management of the adjoining hotel, restaurant and bar ran the facility for 20 years and discontinued the arrangement in 2021 after experiencing financial declines and the impact of COVID-19 on the hospitality industry. When the city reopened the facility in early 2022, they projected three years of losses before seeing a profit. There have been struggles with continuity in managing and staffing the facility and changes in corporate meetings, weddings, and social events. In 2023 a new Event Center Coordinator was hired and is working on the direction of Brandon Currie, the city's liquor store manager. They have been focusing on establishing sound business practices and providing exceptional customer service. Widespread efforts are being made to market the facility as open for business and promote the new technology installed in the facility earlier this year. Event counts are still down from the pre-pandemic levels, but the number of events booked for 2023 exceeds the prior year and 50 events have already been booked for 2024. The city budgeted a transfer of \$110,500 of liquor store revenues in 2023 to operate the facility and is forecasting the necessary transfer will be nearly \$21,000 less than projected. A transfer of \$124,000 is budgeted for 2024. Currie was asked what is needed to bring events back to the facility. He explained not every event that is held at the facility is profitable but expressed optimism to turn the operations around by focusing on corporate events and weddings. He said the trend of outdoor wedding venues is turning back to indoor facilities for their receptions and they are marketing the Bigwood Event Center as the most affordable large indoor venue in the region. Kremeier asked if the city has considered other management companies. Bill Sonmor and Andrew Bremseth spoke about the challenges of operating an event center and how our operations model was adapted from the city-run event center in Sleepy Eye. This is a newer facility experiencing success in hosting weddings. Despite the setbacks, the city is beginning to see success in booking events, and they will continue to keep minimal staffing to control costs. Hicks spoke about the enhancements to the technology and the necessity to ensure it works properly. Mayor Schierer left at 7:25 and Acting Mayor Scott Kvamme took over the meeting. He thanked staff for the update and clarified no council action is necessary.

**DeLagoon Park Lighting**

In November of 2022 voters approved a sales tax project for improvements in DeLagoon Park. The campground and utility improvements will be bid on in the spring. Another aspect of the \$5.2 million project was replacing the lighting at the baseball and softball fields and these improvements can be completed separately from the other projects. Staff received a quote for the removal and the replacement of the lights at the four softball fields from Musco Sports in the amount of \$743,459. If the city accepts this lighting quote, Musco will hold their quotes for the Legion and Farmer's Field baseball fields until the spring. They would also order the necessary materials to install at the softball fields until later this winter. A motion and second were made by Fish and Rufer to recommend the council accept the quote from Musco Sports Lighting to replace the lighting at the four softball fields at DeLagoon Park in the amount of \$743,459 and the motion carried.

**Other Business**

Rachels suggested the city consider gating and closing Washington Avenue behind the city garage for public use. He also recommended closing the last block of South Union as it is gravel, in poor condition and there are no homes along the roadway. Staff were asked to take these suggestions under advisement for future improvements.

The meeting adjourned at 7:42 am

*Lynne Olson*