

City Council Minutes
March 4, 2024

The Fergus Falls City Council held a regular meeting on Monday March 4, 2024, at 5:30 pm in the City Council Chambers. Pastor Dave Foss gave the invocation, and the Pledge of Allegiance was recited. Mayor Schierer called the meeting to order at 5:32 pm and the following council members were in attendance: Job, Kvamme, Kremeier, Rachels and Hicks. Fish, Rufer and Thompson were absent.

Approval of the Agenda

A motion and second were made by Hicks and Job to approve tonight's agenda with the addition of a discussion of the open forum policy under new business as requested by Kremeier and the motion carried.

Housing Tax Rebate: 1409 Lenore Way

The property at 1409 Lenore Way qualifies for the housing tax rebate program. The public hearing opened at 5:34 pm. As no one appeared, the hearing was closed. Rachels offered **Resolution #50-2024** approving a property tax rebate for 1409 Lenore Way, which was seconded by Kvamme and was adopted.

Staffing Levels at Prairie Wetlands Learning Center

Molly Stoddard and Rud Wasson explained the lack of staffing at the Prairie Wetlands Learning Center (PWLC) has led to the closing of the visitor center and Bluestem Store. It has also resulted in reduced or discontinued programming, and they are concerned with the future of the center as the current director is expected to retire at the end of the month. They asked the city to adopt a resolution of support to dedicate funding for staffing at PWLC and encourage the USFWS and to require the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to fulfill their legally obligated staffing in accordance with their Memorandums of Understanding with the City of Fergus Falls and the Fergus Falls Public Schools. The community was encouraged to contact congressional leaders urging them to dedicate funding to adequate staff the center. Kvamme offered **Resolution #51-2024** supporting staffing at the Prairie Wetlands Learning Center, which was seconded by Hicks and was adopted.

Open Forum

Al Kremeier stepped down from his council position to address the council as a third ward resident. (NOTE: there was no longer a quorum of city council members). He cited examples of what he considered disrespectful actions from the mayor and council to speakers at the open forum. He felt the open forum policy restricts free speech and the council engages in censorship when nothing is decided or discussed at the open forum. He will continue his campaign pledge to keep open communication with residents and he encouraged citizens to remember this in 8 months when there is an election, and they have an opportunity to voice their values. Mayor Schierer told him it was inappropriate to make political statements at a council meeting, that Mr. Kremeier had exceeded the time allotted per speaker in the open forum policy and reminded him he asked for this topic be added on the agenda as new business and these comments would be more appropriate then. Kremeier told the mayor he was out of order and was committed to the people of Fergus Falls to stay on course. He said he was returning to his seat as a council member.

Bob Noah disagreed with the mayor's management of the meetings and felt the public deserves more of a role in making decisions. He challenged the mayor to an open forum debate.

Mark Leighton did not feel the council was unilaterally following the rules as some people are allowed to speak multiple times during a meeting and he was not allowed to address the council at the open forum more than twice in a year. Mayor Schierer reminded him the council adopted an open forum policy resolution in 2023 limiting a speaker from addressing the same topic more than two times over the course of a year. The public is invited to speak on topics that are on the agenda.

Debbie Smith did not feel the council should be surprised that people are frustrated or angry with leadership throughout the county and encouraged residents to pay attention to what happens in government.

Consent Agenda

The following items were approved under **Resolution #52-2024** by Kvamme: A motion approving the minutes from the February 20, 2024, open and closed City Council meetings and work session and the February 28, 2024, Committee of the Whole Meeting. A motion approving the following licenses: Mechanical Esser Plumbing & Heating, Richard HVAC & Solar; Minnesota Lawful Gambling Permit Vets R Us Inc for BINGO and raffle events on May 4, 2024, at the Eagles Aerie #2339, Fergus Falls Youth Activities dba Otter Golf for a raffle on May 1, 2024, at the Pebble Lake Golf Course; Mobile Food Vendor for Peney Cakes Cupcakery. **Resolution #53-2024** supporting an additional \$40,000 in funding from the State of Minnesota to extend the Lake Alice 3D water quality pilot project for an additional year. **Resolution #54-2024** accepting the Preliminary Engineering Report-Feasibility Report for PI 5373, Shoreview Drive street improvements and setting the preliminary project hearing date for April 15, 2024. **Resolution #55-2024** initiating PI 9774, the landfill demo cell project, ordering the preparation of plans and specifications and accepting the professional services proposal from Houston Engineering Inc. in the amount of \$196,567. **Resolution #56-2024** authorizing the City of Fergus Falls to partner with Otter Tail County on traffic markings. **Resolution #57-2024** approving a variance to split the lot in an R-1 district into non-conforming lots as requested by Habitat for Humanity at the corner of St. Charles and Arlington. The resolution was seconded by Rachels and was adopted.

Ordinance 53, Eighth Series

Ordinance 53, Eighth Series, Tree Management was adopted by a roll call vote.

Ordinance 54, Eighth Series

Ordinance 54, Eighth Series, Amending the definition of hotels was adopted by a roll call vote.

Ordinance 55, Eighth Series

Hicks introduced Ordinance 55, Eighth Series, Rezoning 2008 County Highway 111 from R-1 to R-A as requested by Alex and Megan Blondeau and it was declared to have its first reading.

Ordinance 56, Eighth Series

Hicks introduced Ordinance 56, Eighth Series, Rezoning 801 W Stanton from I-2 to R-4 as requested by the City of Fergus Falls on behalf of Mark and Brenda Christopherson and it was declared to have a first reading. It was clarified this action is being requested by the city to facilitate a housing project, but it is contingent upon the completion of the transaction.

2024 Utility Rates

Rachels offered **Resolution #58-2024** approving the 2024 utility rate adjustments, which was seconded by Hicks and was adopted.

Resolution of Accounts

Job offered a resolution authorizing the payments and claims in the amount of \$590,777.14, which was seconded by Kvamme and was adopted.

Open Forum Policy

A motion and second were made by Kremeier and Rachels to bring the open forum policy back to the council for discussion at the March 18 meeting. Kremeier felt restricting speakers to two times addressing the council at an open forum is censorship and he feels the speaker is owed a response from the council. Hicks agreed a simple question can be answered quickly but there needs to be a balance between answering a simple question and not consuming staff time. Mayor Schierer agreed there needs to be a balance between what is expected of staff and the council. He reminded the council that the purpose of their meetings is to conduct city business. The council has the discretion to invite the public to participate in the meetings and this council has chosen to incorporate the open forum policy to allow public participation, but the public doesn't have the ability to direct staff and their work. Kvamme said the previous open forum policy required people to pre-register and indicate what topic they wished to address with the council. This information was provided to the staff and the council prior to the meeting so they could come prepared to answer the questions. The policy was changed when some felt this was too restricted and he commented no policy would please everyone. The motion was called to a vote and carried.

The meeting adjourned at 6:14 pm

Lynne Olson