

VILLAGE OF SPARTA
Kent County, Michigan
Special Village Council Meeting
Thursday, March 30, 2023 at 5:00 PM
156 E. Division St. (Sparta Village Hall)

Present: President Robert Whalen, Council members Brenda Braybrook, Robert Carlstrom, Dave Cumings, Courtney Mais, Tom Peoples, and Bill Taylor.

Also present: Village Manager Jim Lower, DPW Supervisor Dennis Brinks, and Village Clerk Katy Shelton.

1. **Call to Order:** The meeting was called to order at 5:00pm.
2. **Pledge of Allegiance:** The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.
3. **Roll Call:** Formal roll call was taken. Those members in attendance/absent are noted above.
4. **Additions or Corrections to Consent and Business Agenda**
 - a. None.
5. **Approval of Consent and Business Agenda:**
 - a. Not applicable.
6. **Public Comment for Agenda Item**

Please Note: This Public Comment portion of the meeting is reserved for comment on agenda items. Personal or abusive attacks on Council members, staff members, or other participants will not be tolerated and may result in the Village President taking action, up to and including, having the speaker removed from the meeting by law enforcement officers.

 - A. None
7. **Public Hearing**
 - a. None.
8. **Old Business**
 - a. None
9. **New Business**
 - a. **DPW Workshop:** DPW Supervisor Dennis Brinks was present in order to answer various questions that Council members had at the last Council meeting. The primary issue was why so many projects were farmed out

versus having them done in house by the DPW. Council member Carlstrom brought up several charges by outside companies for doing work that involved the Village's public works responsibilities and services.

Supervisor Brinks stated that the main reason was that the Village does not have the proper machinery and equipment for doing these types of projects. He also said that maintenance on this machinery and equipment would be very expensive. In addition, he said that even if the Village purchased the proper machinery and equipment so that his department could complete these tasks, there was really no way to store those things. Basically, he said that it was cheaper for outside companies to perform these activities because they could do so at a cheaper price than if the Village DPW did them. He also said that having outside companies perform these tasks freed up his department to complete other tasks.

In addition, he said that previous Village Managers Shay Gallagher and Julius Suchy approved the use of these outside companies in order to complete these projects.

Council members said that it appeared as if most of the work had been completed by one outside company. They asked if the projects had been bid out and if doing so would save the Village any money.

Sewer and water line repair has not been done in house recently. The cost of using an outside company to work on those lines has gone from approximately \$9000 in 2017 to \$109,000 in 2022. The Village Manager said we have spent \$44,000 year to date in 2023.

Cleaning out catch basins was also discussed. The material that is removed from catch basins is considered hazardous waste, and as such, must be disposed of properly. That drives the costs of those projects up.

The Council discussed whether contracting out work is the most efficient use of the Village's money. The consensus of the Council was that we don't know if we haven't cost those projects out. We need to do a detailed analysis of what it would cost to do these projects in house versus farming them out. Council members also discussed having DPW employees on site while an outside company is performing work. They understand the need to have the DPW there to inspect various things. However, having two employees there for most of the day does not seem like a reasonable thing to have happening.

The “seasonal issue” was also discussed. This involved hiring a part time seasonal employee awhile ago to cut grass in order to free the DPW to do other tasks. This gradually turned into a full time permanent worker. That person is no longer in that position. The Council debated whether the Village should post for that grass cutting position. They decided to table that issue until the next meeting.

- b. Goal Setting Strategic Planning Session:** At the last Council meeting, President Whalen asked each Council Member to come to this meeting with a list of their three top goals for this next year.

This is the complete list (so some are cited multiple times) of the goals of all the Council Members in no particular order: Balyeat Field improvements, marijuana dispensaries – location and numbers, faster growth of existing businesses, Balyeat and Nash fields: evaluate use and non use of these fields, options and alternatives for fire department funding, sidewalks – new ones and repair of existing ones, current DPW building – should we fix it, central business district – improvements and parking, continue to bring down Village debt and informing residents of how their money is being spent, WW treatment plant, downtown development and parking, better communication with residents, WW treatment plant, marijuana issue, exploring the pros and cons of becoming a city, WW treatment plant – collection system, planned growth with an emphasis on housing, evaluation of current employees with the aim of effectively using current employees, Balyeat field utilization, development of the east end of the Village/Township, and the WW treatment plant.

As is evident, the WW treatment plant featured most heavily in the goals of the Council. Some members debated whether it’s an expectation or a goal. Village Manager Lower said that because it’s such a large issue and will occupy so much of his time, that he prefers to categorize it as a goal.

The other goals that were mentioned repeatedly were:

1. Balyeat and Nash fields: what’s the best utilization of them ?
2. Marijuana issue: how to incorporate them into our Master Plan and ordinances.
3. Parking in the Central Business District

Other than those four issues, the Council also talked about downtown development. We have a lot of empty and run down buildings downtown. We also have some empty shipping containers. The Council wants to encourage smart, planned growth with faster growth of existing businesses. The question was asked why we can’t have housing on the

second floor of all business in the central business district. President Whalen said that he believed that that was now required.

Another goal the Council discussed was the annexation of more property into the Village with appropriate water and sewer improvements. The Village Manager said that he had met with the Township Supervisor and Township Planner on this issue. There will be a joint Township and Village meeting on May 1st at 5pm. Speed is of the essence here because the Village Master Plan is currently being revised.

The need for more housing was expressed.

The Council discussed the pros and cons of becoming a city. It was stated that we need to expand Village boundaries before we can entertain becoming a city because we can't annex property once we're a city.

Better communication with residents was discussed. Handing out newcomers' packets to all new residents used to be done

when the resident came into the Village Hall in order to set up their water service. Apparently that's no longer being done. The Village Manager is going to investigate this. The Village Manager will create a quarterly update for all residents that will be published in Sparta Today. It will update the residents as to what is going on in the Village, some of the needs of the Village as well as include some of the items in the Village Manager's weekly update sent to Council members and selected Village employees. The idea of having periodic open houses was also mentioned.

Village Manager Lower then discussed his three main goals for this year. His first goal was the overarching facilities question. This involves the DPW building, the police department building, and the Village Hall. The Council discussed having one main administrative complex. The former Free Methodist church was mentioned as a possible location.

His second goal was with employee time keeping. He'd like to reorganize paid time off, vacation time, personal time, sick time, anniversary dates, and the timing of evaluations and raises. He would like to standardize all hiring anniversary dates to one particular date. This would simplify the issue of all other dates. All employees would have their time prorated for the year in which this time keeping conversion took place so they did not lose any personal or sick time or vacation days. Village Manager Lower would also like to move to digital time keeping rather than written/paper. He's also like to put the cost of living increases into the budget and not have them tied to anniversary dates.

He said that this conversion would be complicated in the short term but much more simple in the long term. He envisions doing this with non bargaining unit employees first and then moving on to the bargaining units. That will allow them to see how much better of a system this is and make for less of an issue when union contract time comes around.

His third goal would be to change employee hours from five eight hour days to four ten hour days with a paid working lunch. This would allow the Village Hall to be closed on Fridays and open a bit later each evening. With the DPW and Water dept, employee schedules would be staggered. Some employees would work Mon-Thur and others would work Tues-Fri. This would provide for full five day coverage for those two departments. The Village Manager's idea would be to implement this in the Village first and see how it goes. If successful, it would then be implemented in the DPW and Water dept. The Council decided to bring this to the next Council meeting on April 10th so that it can be voted on.

10. Public Comment:

- a. None.

11. Council Member Announcements:

Councilman Carlstrom announced that he is reviving the utilities committee. He said they will meet monthly. This is due to the increase in the number of utility projects as well as their complexities.

12. Adjournment: Meeting adjourned by President Whalen at 7:45pm.

Submitted by Village Clerk Katy Shelton.