

A work session of the Council of the City of Blue Ash, Ohio, was held on Monday, February 4, 2008. Mayor Robert J. Buckman, Jr. called the meeting to order in the Council Chambers at 7:30PM.

OPENING CEREMONIES

Mayor Buckman led those assembled in the Pledge of Allegiance.

ROLL CALL

MEMBERS PRESENT: Councilman Rick Bryan, Mayor Robert Buckman, Councilman Lee Czerwonka, Councilman Henry Stacey, Councilwoman Stephanie Stoller, Councilman James Sumner, and Vice Mayor Mark Weber

ALSO PRESENT: City Manager David Waltz, Deputy Clerk of Council Sue Bennett, Parks & Recreation Director Chuck Funk, Service Director Dennis Albrinck, Fire Chief Rick Brown, Police Chief Chris Wallace, Economic & Community Development Director Judy Clark, future Service Director Mike Duncan, and Assistant to the City Manager Kelly Osler

WORK SESSION TOPIC: STRATEGIC PLANNING DISCUSSION

City Manager David Waltz explained that the purpose of tonight's meeting is to discuss a variety of long-term "big picture" subjects. The purpose of this discussion is not to solve problems tonight, but rather to be contemplative in nature. The purpose is to review and introduce these long-term items that have been considered by the Administration, and perhaps to frame potential action steps. Some of the concepts to be presented may be new to Council, while others may not.

Mr. Waltz mentioned that Treasurer Jim Pfeffer is recovering well from his surgery that took place last week.

For purposes of this review, Mr. Waltz commented that discussion has been divided among the four broad areas of City governance. These areas may involve direct service to citizens, service via partnership with another entity, or overall policy regulation and influence. Those areas are summarized below:

- Community Services: services the City provides, for the most part, directly, such as fire, police, public works/infrastructure, and administration/finance. The topic of education is also included here, though is not directly provided by Blue Ash.
- Community Development: including economic development, housing, downtown development, and redevelopment or commercial areas development.
- Community Infrastructure: such as streets; lights; water/sewer; overall transportation; and overall "connectivity," such as sidewalks, bikepaths, etc.
- Community Recreation & Leisure: including our Recreation Center, Golf Course, Sports Center, other parks, and recreation programming/special events.

Fire Service Issues:

Blue Ash provides its fire and emergency medical services from two stations: the south station situated behind the Municipal & Safety Center, and the newer North (main) station at 10647 Kenwood Road. Especially given the completion of the newer station in recent years, there is not an abundance of immediate need regarding fire services. Discussion continues, however, with the Fire Administration related to staffing issues, including determination of appropriate staffing levels for the Fire Department.

Current trends and issues affecting the fire service include the determination of appropriate staffing issues already mentioned, and the trend in this geographic area towards the creation of regional fire service areas, such as joint fire districts.

Fire Chief Rick Brown commented on the City's current mutual aid partnership with the City of Montgomery, and the discussion underway with potential of partnership with the City of Sharonville, especially affecting Blue Ash's northwest neighborhoods. Mutual aid agreements include the concept that all communities involved will respond to service calls to schools, hospitals, and nursing homes, and the intent of mutual aid agreements is to improve service response time (while preserving service quality) in a manner which would make sense for the citizens of both communities involved. He cited examples of when mutual aid was either given or received in recent fires, such as a warehouse fire in neighboring Evendale and an office building fire in Blue Ash on Alliance Road.

In addressing questions from Council, Chief Brown commented that though the Department does work on a limited basis with Sycamore Township, due to a difference in management philosophy and style between the departments, there are no immediate changes or formal partnerships anticipated. In regards to the City's south station, Chief Brown commented that though he does not see a need for services out of the south station necessarily growing, there is still a definite need for the station.

City Manager Waltz clarified that there has been no discussion with any other area department relating to the potential creation of a joint district. This potential is brought up because it has been seen as a regional trend, and it is likely that within coming years the question to Blue Ash may arise.

Police Services:

Mr. Waltz commented that the Police Department is fairly stable regarding long-term trends. However, discussions continue regarding the communications system, which is controlled at the County level. As far as the potential of regional police services, this appears to be much less of a trend, as compared to the potential of regional fire services. Another current pending issue with a potential effect on the Blue Ash Police Department is the Mayor's Court legislation currently being considered at the State level.

Police Chief Chris Wallace added that the communications system continues to be an issue, as Blue Ash is part of the Hamilton County Communications network. He explained that this system is utilized because Blue Ash is part of a much larger metropolitan area. A unified system assures the best police service possible for all communities. One of the negative aspects of such a network, however, is that some facets of the police service will be beyond the City's control. For example, the County dictates what communications equipment our Department will utilize, and also how much that equipment will cost. This concept will likely affect future Police budgets, as it has past budgets. Recent discussion regarding the need for improvements to the County-wide communications system (which have been delayed due to defeat of past County tax levies) appears to be heading towards an air card system for the network.

Mr. Waltz added that in recent months, the City has looked at space needs at the existing station within the Municipal & Safety Center, as has been discussed in concept with Council. Chief Wallace commented that this is more of a near future need that he looks forward to addressing.

Chief Wallace commented about the pending legislation and potential changes for the Mayor's Court system. He commented that depending upon what is decided, these changes could affect the Department budgetarily. Councilman Sumner added that the latest report given at a recent Hamilton County Municipal League (HCML) meeting indicated that it is likely that the concept of a magistrate for these Mayor's Courts will be supported; however, it appears that Home Rule will be preserved, a major concept the HCML is strongly supporting. The only three communities in the County which still utilize the Mayor for local courts include Blue Ash, Amberley Village, and Indian Hill.

Chief Wallace commented that Police Department staffing levels will essentially be driven by development. The new 130-acre park could also affect staffing levels dependent upon the activity generated.

Public Works:

Mr. Waltz commented that the administration of public services is essentially evolving in two areas: (1) areas where the City could adopt more business-like practices to deliver services (while still assuring high quality); and (2) environmental related issues, such as those affecting the quality and quantity of storm water runoff, methods for providing ice/snow control, etc. He added that regarding environmental issues, the City has complied with the County-wide Phase II requirements within the past four or five years, and regarding ice and snow control issues (particularly the salt and calcium chloride treatments), the City is considering and staying abreast of more environmental-friendly methods. Another environmental issue, also affecting the City's parks operations, is the use of pesticides and herbicides.

Service Director Dennis Albrinck commented that the Service Department has been experimenting with the use of the sugar beet juice additive to the salt /calcium chloride treatments already utilized. The beet juice is reported to be more environmentally friendly and less corrosive; however, it is also at least three times as expensive. Some discussion was had regarding the potential of using less salt/etc., and Mr. Albrinck commented that this method was attempted perhaps six or seven years ago, and it resulted in a sharp increase in the number of complaints from citizens. Blue Ash has gained a reputation of taking very good care of its streets and keeping them safe during the winter season for the benefit of motorists.

Some discussion was had regarding the method of purchasing bulk rock salt, and it was explained that Blue Ash had participated with the County's bulk purchase programs in past years. However, some problem was experienced when there was a shortage of salt. With that arrangement, Blue Ash was considered just another community amongst the multiple other bulk purchasers. A closer relationship with suppliers/vendors has proven worthwhile for Blue Ash. Mr. Waltz added that the City is also currently looking into the potential of participating in the County's bulk purchase programs related to other products. For example, the purchase of gasoline through this program has recently been investigated; however, its benefit is yet to be determined as it is difficult to analyze. A known disadvantage of this type of bulk purchase involving multiple communities is the loss of personal service and relationship between the City and vendors, as was the case with the previous salt bulk purchase arrangement. That business relationship, and perceived importance of the City as a customer, has proven valuable in cases such as shortages, overall service quality, etc. Additional discussion of this potential of working with the County is planned for the next staff meeting.

Administrative / Finance:

Mr. Waltz commented that the administrative and financial area of City operations has been regularly reviewed with Council, including through the capital improvement program information updated regularly. Mr. Waltz commented that he would characterize the City's finances as stable and the City's future bright. The City's rate of growth continues to grow; however, the rate of operational expenses is increasing even more – something the Administration will stay abreast. Growth is somewhat tempered since, as a mature community, the cost of redevelopment is more than new development and occurs at a slower rate.

Mr. Waltz commented on the maturing union environment within the public sector. He explained that this is a trend that is occurring throughout the nation, not just in Blue Ash. Unions appear to be adopting more state and regional strategies. Nationally, this appears to be a trend as union activity within the private sector has decreased sharply in recent years. Union activity towards the public sector and governments has increased markedly as such entities are considered to be more stable and long-lasting, and are less able to relocate. Union activity is expected only to increase in the near future and will be a continual issue in which the City will have to deal with.

Mr. Waltz commented that another trend and issue which the Administration will stay abreast relates to the manner in which the public receives its news. This issue is also not unique to Blue Ash as it appears that focus continues to be on the public's reaction to the news. This trend can be seen with focus often being on comments obtained from various blog sites.

Regarding education issues, though the City does not play a direct role, it is clear that Blue Ash does affect the Sycamore Community Schools, and vice versa. The City and Schools work together to make each other healthy, and effort to develop and strengthen relationships with the officials of the district and school board will be continued. The Sycamore Schools are facing similar issues to Blue Ash, such as their concern with student numbers declining and competition from newer communities. Another comparable concern is that the Schools also are affected by a growing union environment. Economic & Community Development Director Judy Clark also commented that the public schools are a growing facet of Blue Ash's economic development activity and success as well.

Community and Economic Development:

Mr. Waltz explained that with Blue Ash being a mature community, a primary focus in the economic development arena continues to be redevelopment. In addition to redevelopment desired in Downtown, another prime target area could be the currently underutilized 40 acres north of Osborne Boulevard. That area, coupled with the existing vacant 30 acres south of Osborne currently owned by Duke Realty, does present opportunity for major quality development.

Mrs. Clark commented that effort in recent years has also focused on retention and expansion of existing companies. An example of a recent success is the announcement that French-owned Sogeti on Lake Forest Drive plans to expand its Blue Ash IT consulting business by an additional 100 employees. Work is also progressing on the focus of recruitment in certain business sectors, and Blue Ash is looking specifically at two: IT and Life Sciences. Mrs. Clark thanked Council for their approval of support required when the State of Ohio's Job Creation Tax Credit is utilized by businesses. Most recently, Omya Industries was attained utilizing that economic development tool, and Defender Direct is a potential.

Much discussion was had regarding housing issues. While Blue Ash has a wide range of housing options, that fact brings with it other issues, such as an abundance of rental housing with off-site landlords. Typically, neighborhoods with relatively high percentages of rental housing represent areas that also require more "calls to service" from the City. For example, they typically have higher police runs, property maintenance issues, etc. Mr. Waltz stressed the need for Council to consider this effect long-term and to consider these factors in reassessing the City's existing policies and Code regulations. It will be extremely important to encourage reinvestment; otherwise, a downward slide could occur. Much discussion was had regarding housing issues, and it was the consensus of Council that the City should take a more proactive role to assure Blue Ash's housing stock remains desirable. Examples of concepts discussed include the potential of a reinvestment incentive that would encourage major improvements to homes and also potential measures for reducing the overall number of rental houses (which are often the subject of property maintenance problems). Council encouraged staff to continue aggressive property maintenance enforcement efforts to assure properties remain up to Code. Mr. Waltz also commented that future Council decisions and Code/regulation direction should be considered while keeping in mind current market condition difficulties with many Blue Ash homes. The layout and character of many of Blue Ash's older homes simply do not have features desired by today's market, such as open floor plans, attached garages, etc. This trend is clearly pushing potential desirable home buyers to communities to the north, where newer and less expensive housing is available.

Some discussion was had regarding Downtown, including the issue of perceived parking shortages in some portions (such as near the newer InCahoots restaurant on Kenwood Road to the north). Mr. Waltz commented that there are funds included in the 2008 Budget (about \$1 million) to do something in Downtown – perhaps begin streetscaping efforts, or take on another venture should an opportunity present itself sometime soon. A particular problem with downtown redevelopment will continue to be the cost and land restraint from non-available (or extremely expensive) adjoining land uses.

Regarding future potential for commercial development and improvement, Mr. Waltz commented that target areas for improvements could include the Hunt/Plainfield Road area, Deerfield Road, Reed Hartman Highway north of Cornell, and the Blue Ash Road area. Some of these areas will be more difficult than others to see improvement or redevelopment as

recent discussion with larger developers has indicated that the more visible locations, such as the Reed Hartman corridor, are preferred.

Community Infrastructure:

Regarding the Plainfield/Hunt area, Mr. Waltz commented favorably on the recent street/lane striping completed, which has improved traffic flow greatly in the area. The traffic engineers at CDS have recommended that Council consider major widening in that area in the future. At some point, Council will have to weigh the cost of such improvements, which could affect nearby adjacent residential properties in the Peppermill and Sycamore Trace neighborhoods. The cost-benefit will have to be evaluated since, if improvements are not done, it is likely going to result in limited future development on properties that would feed traffic onto that corridor.

Regarding the I-71/Pfeiffer Road interchange, Mr. Waltz commented that recent discussion has taken place relating to future improvements of this important interchange. Priorities have recently been changed by ODOT, and it appears that improvements may be scheduled sooner than originally anticipated. Officials from the City of Montgomery, which is where this interchange actually sits, have also participated in those discussions with ODOT.

Some discussion was had regarding overall traffic signal technology and future potential opportunity for continued improvements. The Administration will keep abreast of changing and improving technologies which might be considered in the future to assure efficient traffic flow.

Mr. Waltz commented that in recent years, water and sanitary sewer issues have become apparent, including with the issuance of limited available new taps. This situation exists not just in Blue Ash, but throughout Hamilton County as well. Councilman Sumner commented that next week he plans to attend a meeting whose purpose is to discuss potential expansion of regional water efforts. He will provide future updates.

Mr. Waltz commented that given the current economy and substantially increased gas prices in recent years, the issue of transportation must be kept in mind. It is his speculation that regional efforts, such as the potential of light rail that was studied in the Greater Cincinnati area several years ago, may arise again within the next few years to address these concerns. The Blue Ash Airport, offering yet another form of transportation, should also continue to be evaluated as a potential complementary alternative.

Regarding "connectivity" issues, such as sidewalks, bikeways, etc, Mr. Waltz commented that Council has expressed public commitment for continuing such efforts, and funding has been included in the 2008 Budget towards such efforts. With funding likely to be included in future Budgets, the desire is to eventually create a network of sidewalk/bikpaths that will connect all neighborhoods to the City's main public areas, such as Towne Square and the future 130-acre park near the airport. This is clearly a multi-year effort.

Community Recreation / Leisure:

Mr. Waltz commented that passage of Issue 15, and related promises to voters, have already initiated major improvement and enhancement in the recreation and leisure-time arena of City services. Work on Phase II of the Recreation Center improvements will begin in coming months, with recommended bid awards for Phase II expected to be presented to Council at the next regular meeting on February 28th. At some point, future review will be needed relating to aging pool and tennis areas.

Regarding the Golf Course, the staff continues to evaluate potential layouts of a future clubhouse and related Course improvements, including services to serve additional market segments. Mr. Waltz mentioned that he continues to hear comments frequently from citizens who are non-golfers indicating that they take pride in the Course and appreciate its appearance and overall value to the community.

Regarding the determination of amenities to be included within the future 130-acre park near the airport, Mr. Waltz urged Council to consider the City's existing park amenities. He commented that the City probably would not want to replicate what it already has within its current park system, but rather should complement current park services and options. He

suggested too that future decisions with the 130-acre park could also cause re-evaluation of current parks. The overall goal should be to assure an overall park system which is comprehensive, not duplicative.

Parks & Recreation Director Chuck Funk also spoke briefly regarding the likely need for tree replacement over coming years. Given the recent drought, in addition to the problems expected from the Emerald Ash Borer, it is likely that substantial effort and funding will be required to replace trees in coming budgets.

Regarding special event planning, Mr. Waltz commented that overall sponsorship revenues are down, which is not unexpected given the overall downturn in the national economy. Blue Ash's events are popular and of high quality, however, are also expensive. The 130-acre park near the airport will hopefully have a performing arts component, and this too could affect future special event offerings and scheduling. In addition, the park itself could create another, or alternative, venue for the larger events, such as July 4th.

Brief concluding discussion was had, and it was the consensus of Council that future direction and decisions must be guided by overall benefit to residential and corporate citizens. Whatever decisions and direction are decided upon must be done while keeping in mind the importance that the outcome must be of benefit to citizens. By the passage of Issue 15, citizens were promised, and will receive, the completion of the Recreation Center renovation project currently underway, as well as the future golf course improvements and 130-acre park near the airport. Quality community infrastructure must also be sustained.

ADJOURNMENT

All items on the agenda having been acted upon, Councilman Sumner moved, Councilman Czerwonka seconded to adjourn the meeting. A voice vote was taken. All members voted yes. The Council meeting was adjourned at approximately 9:30 PM.

Robert J. Buckman, Jr., Mayor

MINUTES WRITTEN BY:

Susan K. Bennett, Deputy Clerk of Council