

Regular Council Meeting

February 5, 2019

Meeting called to order by Mayor Harley at 7:00pm.

Invocation given by Councilman Armijo

Pledge of Allegiance led by Councilman Wright

Welcome extended to all by Mayor Harley; recognized Houston County Commissioner & prior Mayor Ronnie Brand.

Present were Mayor John R. Harley, Councilman Cameron Andrews, Councilman Justin Wright, Councilman J. Micheal Evans, Councilman Edward Armijo and City Attorney Rebecca Tydings.

Rules of Decorum: Mayor Harley went over Rules of Decorum.

Public Comments

Susan Lemme, 219 Mason Drive: Reasonable Use of Travel Funds: No one spends somebody else's money as carefully as he spends his own. Quote from the Seven Principles of Sound Public Policy, Larry Reed. I have several friends who are much better off than I financially, I often hear them argue against providing food stamps or TANF because "There was a lady in front of me at the checkout and she had a buggy full of steaks and shrimp and then paid for it all with food stamps." These friends have assumed the purchase of "luxury meats" to be an unreasonable and wasteful expenditure of taxpayer money. They do not agree that "because the lady had money in her budget to cover the cost of the meats" or even that perhaps after paying her bills and purchasing other foods she had not yet "spent all that she had collected/ earned for the month" and could afford to splurge. When I watch our federal, state and local officials provide themselves with the equivalent of their public salary or more in "lavish" travel, I find it to be unreasonable and wasteful at all levels, our governments have passed laws, policies, and regulations that treat governmental employees differently than they treat elected officials and appointed department heads. As a citizen, I am starting at the level of my city government to request the institution of fair and reasonable travel policies. The current Centerville, expense reimbursement/ travel policy for elected officials allows all approved, necessary and or reasonable travel expenses related to the conduct of business. There is a requirement that reimbursements will be made within budget constraints. The first problem with the policy is that the same people who make the policy, define the ambiguous terms "necessary" and "reasonable". The same people who make the policy and define the policy benefit from the use and approve or override the disapproval of travel and per diem reimbursements. Milton Friedman, a much-revered economist state that "When you use somebody else's money to buys something for yourself, such as lunch on an expense account, you have some incentive to get the right thing but little reason to economize." Centerville's current policy for elected and appointed officials offers no protection against overspending on per diem expenses leading to taxpayers footing the bill for \$ 50.00 and \$ 30.00 a night for room upgrades-maybe for view for a spouse, room service for meals, breakfast expenditures of \$ 20.00, lunch expenditures of \$ 38.00 and dinner expenditures \$ 61.00, valet parking and multiple means of travel to reach a destination to allow for personal vacation along the way. So long as there is money in the budget the policy

allows for the expense. The people who are spending the money are the same ones who can decide that it is, to quote a city official “reasonable to pay \$ 20.00 so a spouse can travel”, even if that cost has risen to \$ 50.00 over the years. Is the way that Centerville officials handle travel beneficial to all? Or is it only beneficial to the few?

The second problem with the policy is that there are no guidelines to define the terms “necessary” or “reasonable”. Guidelines do exist and are used by many cities, including Centerville in the travel policy passed by city council for city employees. The state of Georgia has dollar amount per diem guidelines. The general services administration publishes dollar amount per diem guidelines which are used by many governments and the IRS to limit per diem spending and deductible amounts.

The GSA per diem for lodging / meals in 2019 vary from state to state. The IRS and many travel policies do allow more expensive accommodations if the lodging is the site of the actual conference. Lodging and meal expenditures for our city officials regularly surpass the amounts.

The third problem with this policy is that it is unfair. City employees are covered by a separate policy which provides for both oversight and spending limits. City employees are expected and required to follow GSA guidelines for spending. Subjecting different classes of people to different rules leads to resentment and lack of trust. Is it fair to all concerned? I will let you consider that question.

Many cities, including Macon Bibb County, Dalton and Columbus have one travel policy which covers both elected officials and city employees under the same guidelines. These policies clearly state that public funds will not be used to cover the cost of spouse or family members travel and meals and only cover lodging at single occupancy rates. To this citizen and perhaps to others a policy with clear guidelines which treats all equally seems more reasonable.

Finally, the IRS treats travel reimbursement plans as either accountable or nonaccountable. Centerville’s is considered an accountable plan, travel must be approved and documentation for reimbursement is required. If failure to do so could result in an audit. Would a travel policy which has specific guidelines, treats all employees and officials equally and with the understanding that conference site hotels and meeting, training, and conference provided meals are offered at above per diem rates be more beneficial to all concerned, officials, employees and taxpayers or is it better to continue with a policy that invites abuse, mistrust of officials, and increased cost to taxpayers.

I applaud the city council for coming out of an audit with the showing that it spent less than it took in. I hope that this continues and that further good policy could result in further savings that might even allow for a tax decrease.

I have not included individual names in this report but I have documented. Honestly, anyone who allows abuse and does not push for a better policy is as guilty as those who overspend and defend an ambiguous policy. “He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much: and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much.” Luke 16:10

Adoption of Minutes: Motion made by Councilman Evans; seconded by Councilman Armijo. Councilman Wright abstained stating he was absent from the meeting. Motion carried.

- January 15, 2019 Council Work Session

Old Business

None

New Business

Approval of the Budget Preparation Calendar FY 2020 and Appointment of Budget Sub Committee”: Councilman Andrews made motion to appoint Councilman Wright and Councilman Armijo to the Budget sub-committee; seconded by Councilman Evans. Motion made by Councilman Andrews to approve calendar; seconded by Councilman Evans. Motion carried.

Point of information: Brunch Bill Referendum for November 5, 2019: Councilman Wright recognized Director of Marketing Hogan. Mrs. Hogan reminded everyone that back in December 2018 this was a topic of discussion. Mrs. Hogan reported that she has been working with City Attorney Tydings and City Clerk Bedingfield re: timeline and ordinance requirements and will provide a draft ordinance later. This is only an introduction.

Mrs. Hogan stated this is something that would behoove Centerville. The brunch bill (Senate Bill 12- Amendment to Title 3 Chapter 3, Article 1) passed last year, allowing alcohol sales from 11:00-12:30pm-extending the time 1 1/2. This would be a special election in conjunction with November 5, 2019 General Election. Wanted to bring this forward, would be a great opportunity. Councilman Wright stated this is something that would affect certain restaurants and this would be the best time put it to a vote.

City Attorney Tydings stated there is no vote required at this time, will come back to Mayor and Council at a later date to vote for referendum question to be placed on ballot.

Point of information: 2019 Event Calendar: Director of Marketing Hogan provided a copy of the events for 2019 for review. Motion made by Councilman Wright to adopt calendar of events; seconded by Councilman Andrews. Motion carried.

Conversion to City Wide Email Set Up: Councilman Wright stated he wanted to bring topic up for discussion. There are current issues re: receiving and sending emails. Also, the extension-length of email is long. Concerned that there is a potential for missing an email of importance due to issues of not receiving some emails. The city could miss out on the opportunity of missing important deadlines re: grants. Recommendation to look into upgrading email. Seeking feedback from Mayor and Council on how do we need to move forward. It will cost some money to do upgrade however, feels this is important. Stating this is going to “burn” us eventually. Would like everyone to have the same email extension.

Councilman Evans agrees and stated you get what you pay for, in his business, good things are not cheap and cheap things are not good, get a reasonable price, may cost us more than what we are paying for now-on board with researching, however, looking for the best value.

Councilman Armijo good with change but at the same time better understanding, good value and more effective, would like to know more on how this will be done.

Councilman Wright stated this is a good time to plan due to budget and update all information.

Councilman Andrews agreed but did mention recent malware attack that caused Atlanta to shut down for several days. There is no day that we are not vulnerable.

Comments from Council

Post 1 Councilman Andrews, mentioned the purple wreaths that have been placed on all Centerville Municipality buildings. They are in honor of Houston County Chief Jimmy Williams.

Post 2 Councilman Wright, informed everyone, Centerville Police Department and Fire Department participated in the Centerville Elementary School Celebrity dads-father daughter dance. Great time and appreciate them serving. Also, reminder re: February 13 coffee with a cop event. Invited all to come out and join.

Post 3 Councilman Evans, wanted to say “thank you for the opportunity to serve”. “I will continue to do so at the best of his ability”.

Post 4 Councilman Armijo, informed everyone that the ladder truck is up and operational. We will be doing a debut soon. It is a huge truck and will bring significant improvement and services to our community. Chief Jones is getting all fire-staff trained. Encouraged everyone to come out and see the ladder truck.

Mayor Harley stated he is proud we can support City of Warner Robins Fire Department if necessary, we are here to help each other.

Meeting adjourned at 7:38pm.

Mayor John R. Harley

Attest by City Clerk Krista Bedingfield

Date