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NEWBURYPORT, MA

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October 21, 2022

Richard Jones
City Clerk
PO Box 550
Newburyport, MA 01950

Dear Clerk Jones:

It has been more than three weeks since the Mayor withdrew their Parks Reorganization Proposal that was submitted to the City Council. The reasoning of the Mayor's withdrawal was stated in the first sentence of the Mayor's September 27, 2022 press release: "In order to give all stakeholders more time to review details and prepare for next steps".

I am not aware of any request for comments or proposals from the community. As a resident with young children, I would consider myself a stakeholder. I think in order for Mayor to make effective change in the delivery of city services, the Mayor should actively engage stakeholders.

I am providing the following comments for the public record. I believe it is imperative that the Mayor review the concerns with the withdrawn plan and create a plan that addresses the long-term needs of our community.

- 1) The Parks Department still exists as a separate entity in the city government. The Parks Director has been vacant since July. I would expect the Parks Director be accountable to the city for the oversight of the city parks. I have raised concerns about playground maintenance and inspections. I learned that after the elimination of the Parks Director, there was no one on staff that was certified to perform playground inspections. Not having certified people on staff to oversee this safety function during peak park use is concerning. Not having a proactive inspection program brings unnecessary liability to the city.
- 2) If the new reorganization plan will merge the Parks Department into the Department of Public Services (DPS), an assessment of the operational and planning structure needs to be completed. DPS's primary mission is the maintenance of our city's critical infrastructure. The new organization needs to be designed to allow for effective planning and maintenance of our city's assets.
- 3) The previous proposal stated that a Parks Division will be created within the DPS. This would create a 4th division. Currently the Water and Sewer

enterprise funds (which are raised with user rates and fees) fund 2/3 of the administration. Will the added scope of work be considered when allocating funds? The added workload will be a burden because the plan specifically states that DPS personnel will be the primary point of contact. Is it fair to have the water and sewer users fund the additional administrative burden?

- 4) Workflows regarding the city's parks would move from one organization into multiple organizations. In my experience, the infrastructure operator, planner, and maintainer should be one organization. The proposed plan takes various functions of this enterprise and moves it to unrelated entities. DPS would perform maintenance and field customer service requests. The people at DPS would not make decisions pertaining to parks use, but would refer them to the Parks Commission. The Parks Commission would not have oversight on DPS operations. The Mayor's Office will work on planning and interfacing with endowments. Recreation activities will be managed by the Council of Aging and Youth Services. Community groups will have to know their way around to coordinate parks maintenance, use, and scheduling. This sounds like a lot of overlapping tasks, which would be managed by different people. How will there be accountability in the city's government to ensure the continued stewardship of our parks if multiple people are in charge?
- 5) The reason I became active in municipal politics is because there is a need for stewardship of our critical infrastructure. DPS's primary mission should be the management of our critical infrastructure. Adding the additional workload of parks will distract the DPS from its primary mission. There are millions of dollars of upcoming needs (dam repairs, water resiliency, climate resiliency, the backlog of highway projects for pedestrian access, just to name a few). The DPS should be prioritizing these needs. Recent news in Jackson, MS and Cambridge, MA highlights the need to keep this a priority.

It is my hope that the city council holds the Mayor accountable to submitting an inclusive plan that addresses the needs of our parks and the needs for our critical infrastructure. This plan should seek stakeholder input in a public forum, with a public docket so the community has confidence that the proposed reorganization is in the public interest.

Sincerely,



Owen Smith