

FINANCE COMMITTEE MINUTES
OF MARCH 8, 2021
VIA ZOOM

In Attendance: **Vermilion City Council:**
Steve Herron, President of Council; Emily Skahen, Ward One; Frank Loucka, Ward Two; Steve Holovacs, Ward Three; Barb Brady, Ward Four; Brian Holmes, Ward Five. Absent: Monica Stark, Council at Large

Administration:
Jim Forthofer, Mayor; Chris Howard, City Engineer; Amy Hendricks, Finance Director; Tony Valerius, Service Director; Attorney Ben Chojnacki; Chris Hartung, Police Chief; Chris Stempowski, Fire Chief

Call to Order: Barb Brady, Chairperson, RESOLVED THAT this Finance Committee comprised of the committee of the whole does now come to order.

TOPIC ONE: Lorain County Resident Assessments

Mayor Forthofer explained he received a letter from the Lorain County Stormwater Management District which details charges that will be assessed to Vermilion residents that are related to the Mapleview Ditch Project in the amount of \$10,000.

Don Romancak, Assistant Director of the Lorain County Stormwater Management District said the Mapleview Ditch primarily serving the residents of Brownhelm Township does have some of their drainage area within the City of Vermilion. The township and its residents brought this as a project to the stormwater district and over a couple years of design and changes, the project was ultimately approved by the Lorain County Board of Commissioners. During this time, they had several conversations with the township, city administration, and city council, and at one meeting it was brought up that Brownhelm Township was attributing dollars to the project to reduce the costs and ensure their residents would not have any assessment. The stormwater district has paid for most of it and the letter that was sent to the Mayor details the costs that residents of Vermilion would incur should the city decide not to contribute towards the cost of the project. Originally, they had talked about \$10,000 before the project was bid out and he felt confident it would be more than enough to cover the costs of the construction and probably some maintenance. As it turned out, the construction cost came out to be \$8,122.71, which is broken down with the highest being for one property owner that has 1.14 acres being benefited and they would pay \$2, 533.56. Most of the residents that live along the ditch would have a construction assessment of \$244.57. A portion of their yard drains into the ditch. The balance of the \$10,000 mentioned in the letter would cover the annual maintenance. Within the Lorain County Stormwater Management District, none of their residents pay for ongoing maintenance because

they are charged a stormwater fee and the district uses a portion of that fee to maintain the ditches that are under maintenance. They are not able to extend this courtesy to the City of Vermilion as they are not a member of the district. The balance of the money - \$1,877.29 would go toward annual maintenance of the Mapleview ditch and it would equate to basically 22 years where no resident would be assessed money. He said one property owner will be assessed \$25.00 a year towards it and most of the residents would be charged \$2.48. He wanted to see if the city would be willing to contribute towards the project financially, and if so, they would credit the resident's potential charges. Because of the change in the year, all the residents along Mapleview have been charged one year of annual maintenance, so this is on their property tax bill.

B. Brady asked if any of these residents gained anything from this ditch or are the people of Vermilion just a pass-through entity for the township. D. Romancak said they received an improved ditch and they have not been suffering much in the way of flooding, but with the improved ditch, water is flowing much better and risks to the residents along Rolling Meadows do not need to worry about their back yards flooding. They also stabilized the slopes so there is less risk of erosion. There were some areas where erosion had taken place on some of the properties because of steep slopes. They also improved areas using riprap rock around some buildings that were placed within the drainage easement to protect them. He believed there were some garages that were allowed be built on the drainage easement. He said they also cooperated with residents to relocate sheds and fences, so everyone is benefitting in this project. The costs that are affiliated are based upon the acres benefitted, so most of the people in the City of Vermilion have about a tenth of an acre or a little larger that has benefitted by the project.

B. Holmes asked if the folks on Mapleview and Rolling Meadows will be assessed this fee. D. Romancak said it also includes Linda Drive and Candy Lane Drive in Brownhelm Township, but in Vermilion it is Mapleview and Rolling Meadows. They have not been assessed for the construction for the year, but just the maintenance. B. Holmes asked if the assessed maintenance fee to the Vermilion residents had been previously discussed. D. Romancak said it was but they did not know the exact amounts. Again, for most of the Vermilion residents, the annual maintenance fee is \$2.48 a year.

B. Brady said she was disappointed this item was not on the stormwater agenda because they should have looked at this, since this is the fund where they would allocate the monies for. S. Holoavacs said the water is flowing nice, but as for the funding of the \$8,000, what portion was the city itself. D. Romancak explained this was the whole assessment for Vermilion and the city itself for its right of ways would be \$1,689. S. Holoavacs said he would need to look at the administration as to what fund they would recommend allocating this money from – stormwater or another fund? S. Holoavacs thought they should have brought this up under the stormwater committee. G. Fisher explained the stormwater committee

recommends projects to council, and this project was a county project, so she believes council would need to direct the administration on whether they are willing to proceed with this payment. B. Brady said it might be nice to get stormwater's input on whether they should because it will come out of their budget. She feels stormwater should look at this and advise council. S. Herron said he is not excited about taking this money out of the stormwater fund because the city did not approve this project and like Gwen said, this was a county project, and he would look to the administration on whether they want to help the citizens and thought they should come back with some thoughts as to where the money should come out of. He said if stormwater did not approve the project, then he did not think they should grab \$1,600 out of their fund. B. Brady said they are looking at \$8,000 not \$1,600. F. Loucka said the stormwater committee has had zero involvement since it was a Lorain County project, so he was not sure throwing it back on them is fair since they were not involved. He felt this should be a decision by the administration and city council. Mayor Forthofer said the administration can make a recommendation as to where they think the money should come out of and then Council can vote on it. B. Brady said they will leave this up to the mayor to come back to Council with a recommendation.

TOPIC TWO: Tree Commission Funding (2021 Budget Review)

Emily Skahen, Council Representative to the Vermilion Tree Commission provided council with a brief review on the Tree Commission's report. She said with regards to their tree and stump removal during 2020, they used all the funds provided by council. The tree stumps were cleaned up, topsoil applied and reseeded. The trees selected for removal were chosen from the list compiled during their last inventory by a certified arborist. It was recommended to continue with the removal of the trees, and they have requested funding for 2021 for this purpose. They also had 34 trees planted in 2020 and all trees planted were paid for by donations and grants. The commission members and volunteers watered all newly planted trees regularly and commission members volunteered 507 hours in 2020 and three memorial trees were planted in 2020. They were also recommended by Tree City USA the last nine consecutive years for exceeding requirements by the Arbor Day Association for caring for our trees. In 2012, it was estimated that 150 trees needed to be removed and their 2020 report states there are 94 trees left that need removed at a cost of \$56,480. She said in 2016 the city approved funds in the amount of \$20,000 and in 2017 Council approved funds for \$20,000, and no funds were approved in 2018 and 2019. However, Council approved funds for \$5,000 in 2020. She said the city benefits from the Tree Commission's time, and she would like to see more funds allocated to the Tree Commission so they can speed up the process of the remaining removals.

B. Brady asked if the trees are on private or public property. E. Skahen thought whatever the city requires is what they remove. T. Valerius explained the trees are in the city right of way or the public parks and beach areas. B. Brady asked the

finance director if there is money in the budget for this. A. Hendricks said currently it is not in the budget this year as she would like those recommendations to come from the council representatives for everyone to discuss, as this would not be up to her to assign those projects. She said this would be at council's discretion. B. Brady asked her if the city is still expecting a deficit and A. Hendricks said yes. B. Brady said it makes it difficult to add more to the budget.

S. Herron said he understands they are looking at a deficit and he does not envy the administration's job, but the Tree Commission does critical work, and these are safety issues, and they do save money with the trees and healthy trees. They save more than \$5,000 a year as trees soak up a lot of storm water and they do an enormous number of advantages to the infrastructure.

B. Brady said the Tree Commission is looking for \$25,000. E. Skahen said \$20,000 is in their budget for tree removals and Council funded \$5,000 last year. S. Herron said there is a limit when they are in a deficit but \$5,000 or \$10,000 seems like a reasonable amount given the benefit they get back from them. He said if the Tree Commission had \$20,000, they would spend it wisely and beneficially for the city, but they need to balance this out. He thought Council may need to do a tree walk this summer like they did a few years ago because they can look at the realistic amount of money that is saved and the benefits of urban forestry they have in the community, particularly when they have stormwater issues like they do.

S. Hlovacs said he would like to see them get the entire \$56,000, but he must trust what the finance director is telling them when they are in a deficit. He said this is the first time in a long time of seeing a deficit going into a new year. Other years has not been a problem because they had extra money to work with. He thought the recommendation would need to come from the administration as to where they should take the funds from and how much they would recommend.

B. Brady said in the minutes from the Tree Commission it looks like they have an opportunity to apply for money from the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative. She said Sandusky received \$100,000 and they were only responsible for 20 percent of that. E. Skahen said whatever grants they receive they use them for plantings. The city's fund is allocated strictly for removal and based on what trees are the most important to remove. B. Brady said if they can get this grant then they can multiply their funds dramatically. E. Skahen thought the Tree Commission could answer the grant questions better than her. G. Fisher said the Tree Commission meets on Wednesday, so E. Skahen could relay these questions to them.

Skip Griffith of Timberview Drive asked if the ordinance that created the Tree Commission has been revised or is it still the same ordinance when first created. G. Fisher believed it was the original ordinance without revisions. S. Griffith said their sole job is to advise the Service Director to contract the tree removal. He asked if the Tree Commission is contracting with companies to cut down the trees because

this is not their function. T. Valerius said the Tree Commission does not contract. They have a certain amount of money they can spend on tree removal and then they contact him, and he gets three different quotes from tree cutting contractors and sets up the process for them.

Amy Hendricks said in previous years the work started in the fall, so if council wanted to wait to see how their tax settlements come in over the early months of the summer, by then she should have a better idea of where the city will fall on a deficit situation. B. Brady said she was comfortable with this. Mayor Forthofer said it is council's job to manage the purse strings and he did not feel they knew all the projects that would be coming before them for consideration – Fulper lot for instance. A. Hendricks suggested council putting this decision off until June until they see some of the tax filings. Members of council did not have any objection to putting this decision off until June.

B. Holmes asked E. Skahen to ask the Tree Commission on the specifics of the grants. B. Brady asked her to tell the members they appreciate the job they are doing for the city. E. Skahen emphasized the commission does put in for grants but the city money is for tree removals. S. Herron agreed because grants are for education and planting.

After no further discussion came before the committee, B. Brady adjourned the meeting.

Next Meeting: April 12, 2021 at 7pm @ Vermilion Municipal Complex, 687 Decatur Street, Vermilion, Ohio.

Gwen Fisher Certified Municipal Clerk