

Aiken City Council Minutes

June 9, 2003

WORK SESSION

Present: Mayor Cavanaugh, Councilmembers Clyburn, Cuning, Price, Smith, Sprawls and Vaughters.

Others Present: Roger LeDuc, Gary Smith, Bill Huggins, Larry Morris, Richard Pearce, Sara Ridout, Phillip Lord of the Aiken Standard, Josh Gelinas of the Augusta Chronicle, and about 20 citizens.

Mayor Cavanaugh called the meeting to order at 6:45 P.M. He stated Council had three items that they would like to discuss in the work session.

BRIDGE

Closure

Union Street

Mr. LeDuc stated he received a letter from James Cagney, of the Highway Department, in May regarding the proposal to permanently close the Union Street bridge to vehicular traffic. He pointed out the Highway Department is currently working on replacing the decking and stringers on the Union Street bridge. With the letter from the Highway Department there was a petition from a number of residents in the vicinity of Union Street asking the Highway Department to close the Union Street bridge to vehicular traffic expressing the concern that there was limited sight distance available to the motorists going over the bridge. The letter asked that the city consider the possibility of closing the Union Street bridge and make comments to the Highway Department.

Mr. LeDuc stated one of the recommended items from the original Strategic Plan was the closure of the Union Street bridge to vehicular traffic. The Department of Transportation concurs that the time may now be right for this closure. Several citizens in that area have signed a petition asking that the bridge be permanently closed to vehicular traffic while maintaining it as an access for pedestrians and cyclists. If City Council would like to consider this as an option, we can work with the Highway Department and conduct the necessary public hearings to get input from citizens concerning this closure. We would also need to develop an agreement as to who would maintain this bridge over the long term. He said this was being brought to Council to see if Council wanted to consider the possibility of closing the bridge and to get some feeling or general direction from Council.

Mayor Cavanaugh stated his personal feeling was that he did not see a reason to close the bridge. He said he had heard there were concerns about safety. He said the bridge had been there for years. He said if there was a concern about safety, signs could be erected. He said the bridge was being repaired at this time, and he could not see any good reason why the bridge should be closed. He also pointed out there were citizens who wanted to keep the bridge open.

There was concern that if the bridge is closed it will cause more traffic on the other bridges to get to that side of town and cause undue traffic on the Fairfield Street bridge.

Mr. William Day, 328 Park Avenue SE, spoke against the closing of the Union Street bridge. He said closing of the bridge would affect his business. He said he did not see anything unsafe about the bridge.

Ms. Mary Smoak, 218 Union Street SE, also spoke against closing of the bridge on Union Street. She said she had lived there for 29 years and had never had any complaints with the bridge or the traffic. She said possibly a speed limit sign would help. She said the bridge is a public access and felt it should be left open for residents in the area.

Mr. Lee Boylston stated his business is located at 112 Union Street NE and his trucks use the bridge. If the bridge is closed his trucks would have to use the next bridge and cause more traffic in another area.

Councilwoman Vaughters stated the suggestion of speed bumps at the bottom of the bridge and a sign to warn people of the steep bridge might help.

Mayor Cavanaugh stated the question was whether Council wanted to take any further steps and have a public hearing on the possible closing of the bridge.

The general consensus of Council was that the bridge should not be closed at this time and that the staff look at placing speed bumps at the bottom of the bridge and speed signs or signs warning pedestrians of traffic.

Mr. LeDuc stated, based on the feelings of Council, he would send a letter to James Cagney of the Highway Department stating that the City of Aiken is not interested in closing the bridge, and that the area be reviewed for possible signage and speed bumps on either side of the bridge.

VIETNAM MEMORIAL MONUMENT

Relocation Monument Vietnam Memorial

Mr. LeDuc stated about 1973 a group of veterans established a Vietnam Memorial Monument in the parkway in front of Public Safety. They are now asking permission to move the monument to the Aiken County Veterans Memorial Park on Richland Avenue East. They feel the move to the Veterans Park would allow the memorial to be more accessible and visible. The Veterans Association will move it and do any associated work at no cost to the City or the County. They have had some discussions with the County and the Marine Corps League, and to date no one appears to have any problems with the relocation. He said, although it may not be necessary for them to obtain Council's permission to do this, he felt that some of Council may want to comment on this move, and the public will have the opportunity to state their opinion.

Mayor Cavanaugh stated Mr. J. D. Pickett was present to address the request. Mr. Pickett, Chairman of the Veterans Coalition, stated he had received several calls about the Vietnam Memorial which was erected in 1973 by Mr. Burrell Whitley, being moved to the memorial park on Richland Avenue. He said various organizations will help raise the funds to move the monument. He said permission was needed from the City and the County to move the monument. He pointed out this monument was one of the first Vietnam Memorials in the United States, so it does have history, and he felt it should be protected.

After discussion it was the general feeling of Council that the Veterans Memorial Park on Richland Avenue is a beautiful spot, and that the Vietnam monument would be well served at this location.

EMPLOYEE PHYSICALS

Physicals

Mr. LeDuc stated that at the budget meeting in May Council briefly discussed employee physicals for non-Public Safety and Public Safety employees. Initially in 1985 the physicals were provided as part of a physical fitness and wellness program. Physicals are now required by the State for all Public Safety employees. From 1987 to 1992 a local physician was used to conduct the medical examinations. In January, 1993, the Department took bids for conducting the medical examinations, and, as a result, Dr. Mitchell Hegquist was awarded the bid. At that time his cost was \$93 compared to two local physicians at \$120 and \$125. He also provided on-site examinations for six days during the spring, five on Friday and one on Saturday. Dr. Hegquist and his nursing staff travel to Aiken for these exams, and two additional dates are used to draw blood for

testing so he can discuss the results with the patient at the time of the medical examination. The blood testing was completed at the Public Safety Station, and, because the physicals were done on-site, the employees spent little or no waiting time for the examinations, thus eliminating any overtime. Again, these are required examinations and are part of their job qualifications. Since this time Public Safety has not gone out for bids for this service.

All non-Public Safety employees were offered physicals beginning in 1997. Anita Lilly was instrumental in developing this program, which is a voluntary service offered to our employees. Initially four local doctors stated they would perform the physicals, with the selected doctor being Gary Fischbach. Nine tests were included in the basic physical, along with optional testing for Pap smears, PSA, EKG, and TB testing. In 2000, the City again requested bids from four local providers and also Dr. Mitchell Hegquist. Based on cost received at that time, Dr. Hegquist was awarded the proposal, which was \$36, or 25% lower than the closest price. He also performed the physicals on-site for the employees using Public Safety Station No. 4. Mr. LeDuc stated the city is prepared to go out for proposals again this year for physicals.

After our discussion in May, we held several meetings with our Employee Benefits Committee concerning physicals and other possible testing. Mr. LeDuc stated he discussed our tests and possible other options with Doctor Ray Vaughters. The employees feel the advantages of a stand-alone site allow the employee to not have to wait to receive their physical exam, plus they receive exclusive attention from the doctor for approximately 15 minutes per patient. The disadvantage is that we are not using local doctors. Many of our employees do not have a personal physician in Aiken, so using a local physician might allow them to begin a patient relationship with a local doctor, and some employees expressed concern about not having the physical exam being done in a doctor's office, where they would feel more comfortable. Additionally, we had several employees express concern that they prefer to use their own personal doctor for these exams.

Mr. LeDuc stated the city would like to talk to several of the local physicians to see if they would be willing to have some selected hours so city employees could get physicals and give the city a price for a base line physical. He said the city would also like to be able to give a voucher to city employees to be used for a physical by a doctor of their choice. He said the staff would like to get a proposal for non-Public Safety employee physicals. Then, next year after evaluating the process, the staff would like to get proposals for doing Public Safety physicals by a local doctor.

This has been a good year for the City of Aiken's health program, and to date we have saved several thousand dollars. We would like to set aside approximately \$20,000 to provide some benefits to employees and their families during this next season. Based on these results and our future financial situation this could be continued yearly. We would like to suggest that for non-Public Safety employees we solicit proposals from local doctors to determine whether or not they would set aside exclusive office time for employees to take their physicals over several weeks. In addition, based on the selected price, we would issue vouchers to employees that prefer to use their own doctor and allow them to pay the difference in cost. Our primary goal for all non-Public Safety employees would be to take a physical exam on a regular basis to determine if they have any potential medical problems that could be discovered. Based on our experience from these physical examinations, we could then proceed with a similar process for Public Safety. Public Safety employees pointed out that having a dedicated time and location for their physical exams is a major plus, because of the emergency nature of their business and the 12 hour shifts that they perform. For this reason, we need to look even closer at the convenience factors doctors can provide in performing this service at a dedicated time for employees only. This program has been very good for our employees and has allowed several of them to discover medical conditions that were corrected.

We would also like to extend our wellness program to include several new items. These would include payment of the deductible portion of our insurance for mammograms and colonoscopies, and asking medical staff to educate our employees about the importance of these two examinations. In addition, we would like to start some nutritional and

physical fitness programs with our employees and families. This would include having a nutritionist present both day and evening classes. Our Benefits Committee is also looking at a pedometer program which would supply each employee with a device that could be placed on the employee's belt and count the number of steps taken each day. It has been noted that if an employee takes 10,000 steps a day they would have major health benefits. By supplying the employees with this device we can create competition between different departments, with awards given out to those who take the most steps or increase their amount over a period of time. Again, our major goal is to increase the wellness and health awareness of all our employees. Through education, wellness testing, and physical activity, we would create a healthier work force in the City of Aiken. We would like to move forward with the request for proposals for non-Public Safety employee physicals and to begin the wellness program for all city staff as soon as possible.

Councilwoman Vaughters expressed concern that the city was getting physicals for employees from a doctor who does not have an office in Aiken and does not pay city taxes or have a business license. She said she would rather see the employees pick their own physician. She pointed out that the staff was proposing a voucher system for employees and also asking a physician for a proposal for a physical. She stated if a physician knows that he will get a certain number of physicals, a better price can be given for a physical. She said she was concerned that the city would pay an out-of-town physician, when local physicians are asked to contribute to various causes in the community. She was also concerned that the staff was suggesting that the city wait until next year to decide on getting proposals from a local physician for Public Safety employees. She felt this should be done at the same time rather than waiting for nine months.

Councilman Sprawls pointed out that Public Safety employees are happy with the physicals given to them by Dr. Hegquist. He has their history, and he has not heard of anyone at Public Safety being dissatisfied with Dr. Hegquist's service. He said it is important that the employees be happy with the service received.

Councilman Cuning stated he felt if a local doctor could provide the same level of service and the bids were on a competitive basis, the local doctor should have the opportunity to do the physicals. He said, however, if it costs the city \$30 or so more per employee, then obviously the local doctor could not be used. He said this is the same as other businesses. He said he would like for his bank to have all the business too, but that is not possible. He said the key is what is in the best interest of the taxpayer and the employees. He said there are two issues, one is the cost and the other is that the employee is satisfied.

Mr. LeDuc stated cost is a factor, but another important factor is to get employees to have a physical. He said he was suggesting that the city ask for proposals for non-Public Safety employees first and see how it works out with local doctors. If it works out okay, then proposals for Public Safety physicals could be requested.

Councilwoman Price stated a wellness program and education might encourage more employees to take a physical. She also pointed out if the employee was footing part of the bill, then the employee should have greater choice as to who would do the physical. However, if the City will be offering the physical as a benefit, she felt it was up to Council to decide if business would be better in Aiken. She felt using local physicians would be the best way if possible.

Council continued to discuss the matter. The consensus of Council was for the staff to proceed with asking local physicians to give a proposal for a base line physical for non-Public Safety employees. Then, when it is time for Public Safety physicals, any problems would have been worked out and the staff can ask for proposals for Public Safety physicals also. It was also the consensus of Council that the staff proceed with the wellness and nutrition programs. Some of the Councilmembers questioned the pedometer program and asked that the Benefits Committee look at the program again and see how many people would be interested in the program before proceeding with it.