



CITY OF NEW BEDFORD, MASSACHUSETTS

**MEETING: COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC SAFETY &
NEIGHBORHOODS**
DATE: JUNE 27, 2023
TIME: 7:00 P.M.
PLACE: CITY COUNCIL CHAMBER, ROOM 214

**PRESENT: COUNCILLORS BRIAN GOMES, CHAIR; NAOMI
CARNEY; MARIA GIESTA; SCOTT LIMA; WILLIAM
BRAD MARKEY; LINDA MORAD; RYAN PEREIRA**

**ABSENT: COUNCILLORS IAN ABREU; DEREK BAPTISTE;
SHANE BURGO; SHAWN OLIVER**

* * *

Councillor Gomes called the Public Safety and Neighborhoods Committee Meeting to order and took attendance. The Clerk read Communications from Councillors Abreu, Baptiste, Burgo and Oliver into the record explaining their absence. The Communications were received and placed on file by Councillor Giesta and seconded by Councillor Carney. This motion passed on a voice vote.

* * *

Notice, City Clerk of reference of a WRITTEN MOTION, Councillor Gomes, requesting that the Committee on Public Safety and Neighborhoods, meet with the Museum Director and Security Personnel of the New Bedford Whaling Museum to review the policies and procedures for hiring personnel at the Museum; and further, to discuss who was responsible for reviewing CORI checks and who hired the male suspect that stole thousands of dollars in historical Whaling Artifacts (Ref'd 03/23/2023) (Matter ID #0569) was received and placed on file by Councillor Morad and seconded by Councillor Carney. This motion passed by voice vote. (1)

The Clerk read into the record a letter from Amanda McMullen, President and CEO of the New Bedford Whaling Museum.

On a motion by Councillor Giesta, and seconded by Councillor Carney, the Committee VOTED: To receive and place on file the Communication from Amanda McMullen. This motion passed on a voice vote.

The Chair expressed his disappointment in the letter from Ms. McMullen which stated that the Whaling Museum had taken the position that the thefts were a private matter and no one from the Museum would be attending any meeting to discuss what is an ongoing criminal investigation. The Chair also questioned that the letter was dated June 20, 2023, yet was hand delivered to the Council Office on the afternoon of June 27, 2023. The Chair questioned whether CORI checks were properly done, expressing his concern for the safety of the contents of the Whaling Museum. The Chair also stated that many items on display at the Museum had been donated by New Bedford residents, and had it not been for a pawnbroker who grew suspicious and contacted Police, the Whaling Museum would still be unaware the artifacts were missing. The Chair felt this issue should be addressed by the Committee.

Councillor Morad shared the Chair's concerns and was also concerned about the comments in the Museum President's letter.

On motion by Councillor Morad and seconded by Councillor Lima, the Committee VOTED: To recommend that the City Council take “NO FURTHER ACTION” on the WRITTEN MOTION, Councillor Gomes, requesting that the Committee on Public Safety and Neighborhoods, meet with the Museum Director and Security Personnel of the New Bedford Whaling Museum to review the policies and procedures for hiring personnel at the Museum; and further, to discuss who was responsible for reviewing CORI checks and who hired the male suspect that stole thousands of dollars in historical Whaling Artifacts. This motion passed by voice vote.

* * *

Notice, City Clerk of reference of a WRITTEN MOTION, Councillor Pereira, requesting that Thomas Anderson, Superintendent of New Bedford Public Schools, come before the Committee on Public Safety and Neighborhoods to discuss the InForce 911 program (Ref’d 06/23/2022) (09/28/2022 – tabled 60 days; send letters to Supt. Anderson and Chief Oliveira to attend another Public Safety meeting to further discuss this matter.) (10/04/2022 – letters sent to Supt. Anderson and Chief Oliveira) was removed from the table by Councillor Pereira and seconded by Councillor Morad. This motion passed by voice vote. (2)

The Chair recognized Andrew O’Leary, Interim Superintendent of Schools.

Councillor Pereira reminded the Committee of his earlier request to look into the emergency school response app called InForce 911 and asked Mr. O’Leary for a summary of what the School Department had decided. Mr. O’Leary responded that they were familiar with the app, but the School Department was skeptical of the program. He continued to explain that the School Department had adopted a program called PASS K12 in an effort to protect staff and students.

Councillor Lima said that it is important that the School Department create a Public Safety position that would oversee the program and stated that position should be at an executive level. Mr. O’Leary once again said the School Department believes that the PASS K12 is the appropriate program.

Councillor Morad asked if the schools participate in ALICE training and was told that they do. This is the Alert-Inform program that advises people of a threat. ALICE means Alert, Lockdown, Inform, Counter, Evaluate. Mr. O’Leary explained that there were security measures in place at each school, computers in each classroom, VOIP communications equipment, individual radio communication systems, and an intercom system. He said that the main office in each school is able to communicate with all classrooms in the event of an emergency situation. All of these systems are part of the school safety program.

On motion by Councillor Pereira and seconded by Councillor Giesta, the Committee VOTED: To recommend that the City Council take “NO FURTHER ACTION” on the WRITTEN MOTION, Councillor Pereira, requesting that Thomas Anderson, Superintendent of New Bedford Public Schools, come before the Committee on Public Safety and Neighborhoods to discuss the InForce 911 program. This motion passed on a voice vote.

* * *

Notice, City Clerk of reference of a WRITTEN MOTION, Councillor Gomes, requesting that an amendment to Section 1 of the Home Rule Petition with the State, regarding the Appointment of Special Police Officers in the City of New Bedford, the change of the wording is Chapter 32 of the general law it should read: “No retired Police Officer shall be eligible for an appointment of a Special Police Officer if the applicant has attained the age of 70 and any Officer so appointed shall be terminated upon attaining the age of 70”; this is a home rule petition amendment to enable New Bedford Police Officers over the age of 65 the ability to be assigned to detail work in the City in New Bedford (To be Referred to the Mayor, the Police Chief, our local State Delegation and the Committee on Public Safety and Neighborhoods.) (Ref’d 08/18/2022) (09/06/2022 – Returned Unsigned by the Mayor) (09/28/2022 – tabled 60 days) (02/21/2023 – tabled) was removed from the table by Councillor Giesta and seconded by Councillor Pereira. This motion passed by voice vote. (3)

The Chair recognized Police Chief Paul Oliveira.

The Chief stated that he did look into the Committee’s request to change the Special Police Officer wording of M.G.L., Chapter 32, from its present language and to also allow a Special Police Officer to serve beyond the age of seventy. Chief Oliveira informed the Committee that he had spoken to the Police Union President, and it was decided that this would not be the best option for the Police Department at this time. He said an alternative option might be for the Police Department to create a Traffic Patrol Unit which would allow retired Officers to work detail and possibly for civilians with proper training to work detail. To change the current law would be short-sighted in his opinion.

The Chair responded that he was aware of other cities and towns that have changed the language in M.G.L., but that he is willing to see what a Traffic Patrol Unit proposal would look like.

On motion by Councillor Carney and seconded by Councillor Giesta, the Committee VOTED: To table the matter for 90 days. This motion passed by voice vote.

* * *

Notice, City Clerk of reference of a WRITTEN MOTION, Councillors Abreu and Pereira, requesting that New Bedford Police Chief Paul Oliveira come before the Committee on Public Safety and Neighborhoods to discuss on-going public issues relating to the south end of the City, where residents and business owners alike are growing increasingly concerned for their safety and overall well-being (To be Referred to the Committee on Public Safety and Neighborhoods and New Bedford Police Chief Paul Oliveira.) (Ref’d 05/11/2023) (Matter ID #0840) was received and placed on file by Councillor Giesta and seconded by Councillor Pereira. This motion passed by a voice vote. (4)

The Chair recognized Police Chief Paul Oliveira.

Councillor Pereira explained that he had placed this motion before the Committee due to issues with the bar/liquor establishments along lower County Street. Councillor Pereira said that he understands the balance between a residential neighborhood and a business area, but safety concerns have gotten out of hand. The Councillor said he himself was walking to a neighborhood bakery and felt unsafe passing through people congregating outside liquor establishments. He is concerned that one business can affect another.

Chief Oliveira acknowledged that the County Street corridor has always been a hot spot. His department has an all-out presence in the area and added that business owners need to take responsibility for the clientele they serve. Chief Oliveira shared that one of the establishments is currently going before the Licensing Board for a number of issues. The Chief said that when a bar goes before the Licensing Board, they are initially very cooperative, but it does not stay that way. In addition to the Police Department, the Department of Inspectional Services and the Licensing Board are stepping up enforcement.

Councillor Pereira asked the Chief if crime was up in the area. The Chief said that his department does track the number of calls made and received in that area, but he did not have the exact number. The Chief said the County Street area has been a problem for many years and now Ruth Street and Roosevelt Street are becoming hot spots that the Department is addressing as well.

Councillor Lima agreed the area has been a problem for a long time, but stated that the problem is not only alcohol related, but drug related. Councillor Lima asked Chief Oliveira if there had been any drug arrests in the County Street bars. The Chief responded that he could not comment on any drug arrests, but that a recent arrest took place outside of one of the establishments. He added that unfortunately, these bars attract a certain type of clientele and that the main problem was drugs and prostitution. The Chief said it was difficult to make drug arrests inside of bars without the cooperation of the owners.

Councillor Gomes agreed that this area has been a problem for decades, and mentioned that years ago neighborhood groups led by Loretta Bourque would visit these areas and protest the activities along the County Street corridor. Councillor Gomes said the Police Department used to work with the Licensing Board Commissioners in conducting surprise visits to the bars. This helped curtail some of the activity at the time. Councillor Gomes asked Chief Oliveira if he would consider reinstating surprise visits. The Chief said he was unfamiliar with this happening in past years, but that it was worth looking into.

The Chief was asked about outreach programs in the area to assist those who are struggling with addiction and/or prostitution. The Chief responded that the Narcotics Division has spent a great deal of time in the area and that they do have outreach teams, including mental health clinicians. He also informed the Committee that Police Officers are trained in outreach as well.

On motion by Councillor Pereira and seconded by Councillor Giesta, the Committee VOTED: To recommend that the City Council request that the Chief of Police look into reinstating periodic checks, along with the Licensing Board, of local bars and establishments to ensure they are operating correctly without issues or violations. This motion passed by a voice vote.

* * *

Notice, City Clerk of reference of a WRITTEN MOTION, Councillors Giesta, Abreu, Carney, Burgo, Council President Morad, Councillors Lima and Baptiste, requesting, that Fire Chief Scott Kruger and Building Commissioner Danny Romanowicz appear before the Committee on Public Safety and Neighborhoods to discuss the policies and procedures currently in place for conducting fire safety inspections and evaluations on residential structures consisting of three or more dwelling units (To be Referred to the Committee on Public Safety and Neighborhoods, Fire Chief Scott Kruger, Building Commissioner Danny Romanowicz and the Administration.) (Ref'd 04/27/2023) (Matter ID #0817) (05/19/2023 – Returned Unsigned) was received and placed on file by Councillor Giesta and seconded by Councillor Pereira. This motion passed by voice vote. (5)

The Chair recognized Fire Chief Scott Kruger.

Councillor Giesta asked Chief Kruger to provide a review of what steps are in place to ensure fire safety in City homes and buildings.

The Chief explained that the City follows guidelines under M.G.L. Chapter 148 and 7ACM under the Massachusetts Building Code. The New Bedford Fire Department enforces all codes and maintains standards through its Fire Prevention Department. Chief Kruger said that half of home inspections occur during sales and transfers of properties. After the State Street fire, when five lives were lost, the Fire Department restructured their fire prevention steps. The Chief said the current enforcement is determined by manpower and available time to deal with safety issues.

Councillor Lima questioned whether the Fire Department receives pushback from property owners when checking on alarms and sprinkler systems. Chief Kruger replied that building owners cooperate with the Fire Department for the most part. If they do not cooperate, the Fire Department will take the necessary steps to ensure compliance.

Councillor Morad asked if properties in New Bedford are required to have hardwired alarms and sprinkler systems. The Chief explained that in older homes, they are not required. However, they are required in three-family buildings, especially new construction. The Chief explained that with new construction of buildings with three or more units, the building code requires hardwired smoke detectors, carbon detectors and sprinkler systems. Councillor Morad asked if he felt the Fire Department had the inspections under control, to which he responded yes.

Councillor Morad also asked whether the program to provide homeowners with smoke detectors was still in place. Chief Kruger said it was, and was funded and run through the Red Cross. He said his department would go into homes to ensure they were properly installed.

Councillor Markey asked Chief Kruger if the Fire Department conducted outreach to homeowners on fire safety. The Chief replied that fire safety training begins in the school system, where children are taught what is safe and what is unsafe. The Fire Department also deals with enforcement, code enforcement, investigation and education, which is funded through the State and senior grant programs to educate seniors as well.

The Chair recognized Danny Romanowicz, Commissioner, Department of Inspectional Services.

Councillor Morad if there were compliance issues with multi-family units. Commissioner Romanowicz said there are continuous inspections in multi-family homes in the City every day. He said his department currently has fifty people in court for violations.

Commissioner Romanowicz was asked by Councillor Giesta whether the Acushnet Avenue property, where a fire recently occurred, was up to code. Commissioner Romanowicz explained that he is unable to comment as the matter is under review by the City Solicitor's Office. Commissioner Romanowicz explained that inspections on three-family or more homes are required by law every two years and that homeowners/landlords follow the rules, for the most part. The Commissioner stated that when his department receives a complaint or are in the process of doing an annual visit and find a violation, the Fire Department will be notified. Plumbing Inspectors, and all other Inspectors relative to the particular violation, will be notified.

Commissioner Romanowicz was asked about the size of his staff. Commissioner Romanowicz said he presently has ten inspectors on staff in various areas and has an open posting for a total of four new inspectors, but no one has applied for these positions.

Councillor Giesta asked if this was because of the salary. The Commissioner stated it was. He added that someone can make more as a contractor in the private sector than as an inspector working for the City.

On a motion by Councillor Giesta and seconded by Councillor Pereira, the Committee VOTED: To recommend that the City Council take “NO FURTHER ACTION” on the WRITTEN MOTION, Councillors Giesta, Abreu, Carney, Burgo, Council President Morad, Councillors Lima and Baptiste, requesting, that Fire Chief Scott Kruger and Building Commissioner Danny Romanowicz appear before the Committee on Public Safety and Neighborhoods to discuss the policies and procedures currently in place for conducting fire safety inspections and evaluations on residential structures consisting of three or more dwelling units. This motion passed by voice vote.

* * *

Councillor Giesta made a motion to adjourn, which was seconded by Councillor Pereira. This motion passed on a voice vote.

This meeting adjourned @ 8:25 p.m.

ATTEST:

Denis Lawrence, Jr.
Clerk of Committees