



CITY OF NEW BEDFORD, MASSACHUSETTS

MEETING: SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AFFORDABLE HOUSING & HOMELESS AFFAIRS
DATE: OCTOBER 28, 2024
TIME: 7:06 P.M.
PLACE: CITY COUNCIL CHAMBER, ROOM 214

PRESENT: COUNCILLORS SHANE BURGO, CHAIR; IAN ABREU; NAOMI CARNEY; LEO CHOQUETTE; MARIA GIESTA; BRIAN GOMES; JOSEPH LOPES; LINDA MORAD; SHAWN OLIVER; RYAN PEREIRA

ABSENT: COUNCILLOR DEREK BAPTISTE

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Councillor Burgo called the Special Committee on Affordable Housing & Homeless Affairs meeting to order, took attendance and explained that the meeting was being live-streamed and recorded. The Clerk read a letter into the record from Councillor Baptiste explaining his absence. The Communication was received and placed on file by Councillor Oliver and seconded by Councillor Pereira.

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The following items were taken up together, without objection:

WRITTEN MOTION, Councillor Gomes, requesting, that the Committee on Affordable Housing & Homeless Affairs meet to discuss the present housing shortage and cost in the City; and further, that the Administration explain how it's dealing with this present housing crisis in New Bedford. (Referred to the Committee on Appointments and Briefings – November 23, 2021.) (Referred – May 24, 2022.) (November 21, 2022 – tabled) (March 20, 2024 – tabled) (June 12, 2024 – tabled for 120 days)

RELATED MOTION, Councillor Morad, requesting that the Chair of the Special Committee on Affordable Housing & Homeless Affairs establish a meeting with the Mitchell Administration, representative(s) of the Housing Alternatives Committee, the HEART task force, the Director of Housing and Community Development, and the Chief of Police for a discussion regarding the increasing homeless population in the City and the establishment of a plan to address this concern with programs and increased shelter capacity; and further, that an update regarding this meeting be provided back to the Special Committee on Affordable Housing & Homeless Affairs within the next 45 days. (Referred from Committee – June 12, 2024.)

WRITTEN MOTION, Councillor Gomes, requesting, that the City devise a plan to address the homeless issue in New Bedford, and further; that the City call a summit to include the New Bedford Health Department, the Administration, the State Health Department, our State Legislative representation along with every drug and health agency that is available with local offices and officials to assist with a plan of action to address the issue that is becoming a crisis in the City of New Bedford. (Referred – August 13, 2024.) (Matter ID #1361)

On motion by Councillor Oliver and seconded by Councillor Lopes, the Committee VOTED: To receive and place on file and remove from the table.

The Chair reminded his colleagues that on September 19th, Joshua Amaral, Director of Housing and Community Development, emailed the Technical Assistance Collaborative (TAC) Report to the body. This Report addresses the homelessness issue facing New Bedford.

On motion by Councillor Pereira and seconded by Councillor Abreu, the Committee VOTED: To receive and place on file the TAC Report.

Referencing Councillor Morad's Related Motion, Councillor Burgo shared that he met with Carl Alves from Housing Alternative and the Mitchell Administration to discuss the homelessness issue and how to address the concerns. The result of the meeting was that the Administration was going to wait until the TAC Report had been received and once they had a chance to review it, they would issue comments. Councillor Burgo stated the overall essence of the three Motions before the Committee tonight are to seek answers as to what the Administration's plan is regarding housing and homelessness and suggested that the Committee hear from Mr. Amaral.

Mr. Joshua Amaral, Director of Housing and Community Development, was recognized, and explained that the City, through his Department and a multitude of local non-profits, provided information to Technical Assistance Collaborative, resulting in the TAC Report. TAC is a nationally renowned firm with expertise in homelessness and solutions, and they are well respected in their field. Mr. Amaral shared that he had worked with them in the past, although never on a scale as large as this. Mr. Amaral stated that the process was relatively straightforward. TAC evaluated the homeless situation and the continuum of care, which included all of the local service providers, and provided the City with recommendations on what we can do better. The Report gave some credibility to what the City already believed about homelessness, and also provided some interesting data points.

After Mr. Amaral's review of the Report, he placed the information provided into four categories:

The first being how we utilize our existing resources, specifically how the City is dealing with its permanent housing portfolio. To summarize, this is a HUD funded service delivery model where people are given an apartment and charged a low rent. This applies only to individuals who are literally homeless and suffering from some form of disability. The City has a pretty good portfolio of the types of housing/shelters which are run by several different agencies in New Bedford. The review included how the City's' portfolio is currently being utilized.

The second item within the Report addresses a new housing portfolio, which includes the shortage of shelter beds and the need for more permanent housing units. This section of the Report offers models which illustrate how this dilemma would be affected if additional housing units were offered. Within this section of the Report, it is noted that shelters are hard to access in the City, as well as throughout Bristol County. They state additional shelters are clearly needed, and also call for more homeless assistance services, particularly during the day. New Bedford shelters release their occupants early in the morning and there is an identified gap in time during the day when people could be engaging in services.

The third item addresses the need for a regional shelter, which would provide a plethora of services, including emergency shelter assistance, a shelter with meals on site, permanent supportive housing, case management on site, and a built-in health center. There are different models to be looked at throughout the country. The Report discusses the different types of assistance to be offered if the City were to move forward with a regional shelter. Mr. Amaral stated this could be looked at as a next step, but questioned where a large regional shelter might be situated.

The fourth item deals with service provider capacity. New Bedford has only one organization that deals with shelters in the City. Mr. Amaral said shelters in New Bedford are hard to come by and he added that unfortunately, the City is not being approached by agencies looking to provide shelters. It would benefit the City to secure an operation whose primary focus is homelessness. Most of the providers in the area provide additional services, and homelessness is only a part of what they address as a whole. The Report also stated that the leadership of many service providers are retiring and turnover in those organizations is high.

Mr. Amaral stated that there are sub-categories within the four items he has referenced. Those sub-categories would be explored as well. He went on to say that he wished he had the answer to the homeless problem in New Bedford. He hopes that by sitting down with those agencies that provide care and going over the TAC Report, they will be able to come up with a competent plan. A regional summit is planned for November 22, 2024, which he sees as a key step in reviewing the Report and determining how to address many of the findings.

Councillor Pereria asked if the City has a plan in place to deal with homelessness outside of the Building New Bedford Plan. Mr. Amaral replied that a formalized plan is not in place like the Building New Bedford Plan, which deals with housing more broadly. Specific to homelessness, Mr. Amaral said he can envision the City getting to a point where they would have a similar document in place.

Councillor Pereira suggested the possibility of putting a Request for Proposal (RFP) out to hire a consultant to develop a plan, people who are experts and who have dealt with similar issues around the country and would know how to move forward with a formalized plan. Mr. Amaral stated that in some ways, this is what the TAC Report addresses. His thought is that the Report is based on many conversations with those experienced in developing such strategies.

Councillor Pereira stated that he believes a position should be created to deal exclusively with the homeless issue and the information provided in the TAC Report, someone other than Mr. Amaral. He praised Mr. Amaral for his work done to date, but believes that in his current position he has many more things other than the homeless issue under his purview. Councillor Pereira asked whether we need a person who could focus more on this. Mr. Amaral said there are two individuals in his Office that are dedicated to homelessness. His Department is in the process of reaching out to local providers to review the TAC Report and work toward long-term solutions.

Councillor Pereria asked if the Housing Authority was involved in these conversations. He was told they were and are represented on the Committee, but that he has yet to have a conversation with Executive Director Steven Beauregard on the TAC Report. The Report addresses a “moving on” policy within public housing programs which will be reviewed. Mr. Amaral plans to provide all of the regional Housing Authorities with the Report as well. Homelessness, he said, is a regional issue, not just a New Bedford issue. The Councillor agreed.

Councillor Oliver inquired about the current state of the homeless issue since it will be getting cold soon, and the summit is to be held in November. He also asked how much the TAC Report cost the City, as opposed to applying those funds directly to solving the actual problem. Mr. Amaral replied that the summit would cost nothing, and the TAC Report cost approximately \$105,000. He added that it covered a year-long effort with the leading expert in this field and believed it to be a reasonable amount for the information they received. He did acknowledge that it will be getting colder, but stated that every year the City has been able to figure out how they will address the situation.

Councillor Pereira stated that the City has empty buildings that might be used as shelters and asked whether any providers could look into utilizing some of them. Mr. Amaral replied that is often easier said than done, as there is a cost involved in turning an old City building into a shelter and that is not as simple as opening a door and turning on the heat. Mr. Amaral further stated that the problem is not whether we have space, but you also need to find a qualified shelter operator. Currently the City has one provider, and they have not shown an interest in expanding their operations.

Councillor Oliver asked if there has been any discussion with the Administration about issuing a Request For Information to see if there is an interest in outside providers establishing shelters within the City. Mr. Amaral has made such a proposal but more along the lines of a feasibility study, and believes if a Request For Information is needed to lock in a provider, he believes the City should move forward with such a plan.

Councillor Choquette asked if the City had reached out to Bishop Edgar Moreira Da Cunha of the Fall River Archdiocese to see if any of the shuttered churches in New Bedford might be used as shelters. Mr. Amaral acknowledged there have been conversations with the Fall River Archdiocese at various points in time and added that the Catholic Church is a large beneficiary to Catholic Social Services, who are the City's one shelter operator. Mr. Amaral pointed to the Holy Name – Holy Family housing project as a collaboration with the City in addressing homelessness, which include income-restricted units. As far as using closed churches, in the end it would be costly to bring them up to Code and you would need someone to finance the process.

Councillor Lopes asked how many hotel rooms are utilized each year for cold weather incidents. He was told they regularly arrange for 30 individuals to be served using that model; at the peak last year, they ended up using 42 units. Councillor Lopes asked what the total cost was to activate and utilize the hotel rooms; he was told the cost was in the range of \$200,000. Councillor Lopes asked why the Administration has not issued a Request For Information to see if anyone is interested in operating a 50-room shelter, for example, and that hotel funding could be used toward such a project. Mr. Amaral answered that while it is a good idea in theory, one of the potential problems and the reason they have not done it to date, is that the funding resources used on the motel shelter models are not necessarily the same resources you could use to operate an annual entrenched shelter.

Councillor Abreu asked what Mr. Amaral's conversations have been with the City's State and Federal Delegations. Mr. Amaral responded that they have been resoundingly supportive of all that has been discussed. Councillor Abreu asked what other communities were doing in addressing the issue. Mr. Amaral stated they have researched methods used and how they differ between communities and said the more he learns, the more he is convinced that New Bedford is on the right track. He added that other communities have been invited to the summit in November.

Christina Connelly, Chief Operating Officer for the Administration, was recognized.

Councillor Pereira asked Ms. Connelly what the Administration's overall stance was regarding a regional effort to deal with homelessness. Ms. Connelly echoed the information Mr. Amaral provided to the Committee. She stated that the Administration is in full support of regionalization and in fact, the TAC Report was the Mayor's suggestion.

Councillor Pereira asked if the Administration had held actual conversations with the surrounding towns on this issue. Ms. Connelly replied that on this specific issue, a conversation had not yet occurred. However, the summit in November will be an opportunity to open a dialogue between the City and neighboring communities. Councillor Pereira reiterated his desire to have an assigned individual, even just temporarily, to head up this cause on behalf of the City. Ms. Connelly replied that the Administration can look into this, but they may be able to find this person internally.

Councillor Burgo quoted from Page 29 of the TAC Report which stated, "The City weaponizes the Police to terrorize the homeless and their destruction of tents" and he asked Ms. Connelly to address how the unhoused feel in regard to the Police Department. He is concerned about the City of Fall River adopting a certain Ordinance and did not want to see something similar happen in New Bedford. He wants the Administration on record stating they have no plans to draft such an Ordinance. Ms. Connelly stated it is not something the Administration would do.

On motion by Councillor Giesta and seconded by Councillor Abreu, the Committee VOTED: To table the WRITTEN MOTION, Councillor Gomes, requesting, that the Committee on Affordable Housing & Homeless Affairs meet to discuss the present housing shortage and cost in the City; and further, that the Administration explain how it's dealing with this present housing crisis in New Bedford.

On motion by Councillor Giesta and seconded by Councillor Abreu, the Committee VOTED: To table the WRITTEN MOTION, Councillor Gomes, requesting, that the City devise a plan to address the homeless issue in New Bedford, and further; that the City call a summit to include the New Bedford Health Department, the Administration, the State Health Department, our State Legislative representation along with every drug and health agency that is available with local offices and officials to assist with a plan of action to address the issue that is becoming a crisis in the City of New Bedford.

Referencing the Related Motion, Councillor Morad asked if Councillor Burgo had been allowed to have a meeting with the Administration and what the outcome was of that meeting. Councillor Burgo answered that he did have a meeting with the Administration and the decision was to wait for the presentation of the TAC Report. Councillor Burgo stated he was not allowed to bring individuals he thought should be a part of that meeting; however, he did find the meeting to be productive.

Councillor Morad voiced concern that based on what she had heard tonight, the Administration, with the exception of Mr. Amaral, just doesn't seem to care about the homeless issue in the City. She asked the Chair to recount the details of the meeting to the Committee.

Councillor Burgo explained that it was a rather short meeting, primarily because the Administration pointed out that they wanted to have time to review the TAC Report. Councillor Burgo stated that this is the only amount of money spent from the ARPA funds in dealing with the homelessness issue in the City, which he found to be disappointing. Some of the unproductive conversation was obviously around the budget and other issues that were happening around that time but primarily, the Administration wanted time to review the TAC Report.

Councillor Burgo did express disappointment that during this meeting, he was led to believe that the Council would have early access to the TAC Report, which they did not. Councillor Morad asked if members of the homeless collaborative were present at the meeting. She was told that Carl Alves, a member of Housing Alternatives, was acting as a representative for that group. Councillor Morad asked if anyone from the HEART Task Force was present; she was told no. The only people present were Carl Alves, Mr. Amaral, Ms. Connelly and Councillor Burgo. Councillor Morad expressed disappointment that even though the TAC Report was not ready for review, there still could have been a robust discussion on the issue.

Councillor Oliver asked that Police Chief Paul Oliveria be allowed to address the comments on the Police Department weaponizing themselves to terrorize homeless encampments. The Chief was recognized and emphatically stated that this was not true. He went on to say that when the Police receive such calls, they activate the HEART protocol and treat those individuals dealing with homelessness or mental health issues with dignity and respect. The individuals they are responding to are treated no differently than anyone else. When an encampment is identified, they try to place those individuals; however, housing is an issue. It is a process in which there is no one solution. He reiterated that as we all know, it is not just a New Bedford issue and having attended many meetings and discussions with his neighboring Police Chiefs, believes that New Bedford does a better job in dealing with this issue than many other communities.

Councillor Burgo emphasized that there will be a more detailed discussion of the TAC Report at future meetings.

On motion by Councillor Giesta and seconded by Councillor Pereira, the Committee VOTED: To recommend that the City Council take **“NO FURTHER ACTION”** on the RELATED MOTION, Councillor Morad, requesting that the Chair of the Special Committee on Affordable Housing & Homeless Affairs establish a meeting with the Mitchell Administration, representative(s) of the Housing Alternatives Committee, the HEART task force, the Director of Housing and Community Development, and the Chief of Police for a discussion regarding the increasing homeless population in the City and the establishment of a plan to address this concern with programs and increased shelter capacity; and further, that an update regarding this meeting be provided back to the Special Committee on Affordable Housing & Homeless Affairs within the next 45 days.

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Councillor Giesta made a motion to adjourn, which was seconded by Councillor Abreu.

This meeting adjourned at 8:29 p.m.

ATTEST:

Denis Lawrence, Jr.
Clerk of Committees