



CITY OF NEW BEDFORD, MASSACHUSETTS

MEETING: SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON HOUSING
DATE: FEBRUARY 10, 2025
TIME: 7:00 P.M.
PLACE: CITY COUNCIL CHAMBER, ROOM 214

PRESENT: COUNCILLORS IAN ABREU, CHAIR; DEREK BAPTISTE (7:11); SHANE BURGO (7:12); NAOMI CARNEY (7:40); LEO CHOQUETTE; MARIA GIESTA; BRIAN GOMES; JOSEPH LOPES; LINDA MORAD; SHAWN OLIVER; RYAN PERERIA

ABSENT: NO ONE

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Councillor Abreu called the Committee meeting to order, took attendance, and explained that the meeting was being recorded and live-streamed. The Clerk read Communications into the record from Councillor Burgo and Councillor Carney explaining their tardiness. The Communications were received and placed on file by Councillor Oliver and seconded by Councillor Lopes.

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WRITTEN MOTION, Councillor Burgo, requesting that the Committee on Affordable Housing & Homeless Affairs review the City's current Accessory Buildings and Uses Ordinance. (Matter ID #0483) (Ref'd 03/09/2023) (May 10, 2023 – tabled)

On motion by Councillor Gomes and seconded by Councillor Lopes, the Committee VOTED: To remove the item from the table.

Councillor Shane Burgo was recognized and explained that he had been informed by the Planning Department that the City has received new regulations from the State, therefore, the Planning Department was not prepared to speak on the issue at this meeting. Councillor Burgo also said that this item would be placed on the next Committee on Ordinances agenda where it would be better heard. Councillor Burgo suggested taking No Further Action on the matter.

On motion by Councillor Burgo and seconded by Councillor Oliver, the Committee VOTED: To recommend that the City Council take **"NO FURTHER ACTION"** on the WRITTEN MOTION, Councillor Burgo, requesting that the Committee on Affordable Housing & Homeless Affairs review the City's current Accessory Buildings and Uses Ordinance.

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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. (Matter ID #1361) (Referred – August 13, 2024.) (October 28, 2024 – tabled)

On motion by Councillor Gomes and seconded by Councillor Lopes, the Committee VOTED: To remove the item from the table.

Councillor Gomes was recognized and requested that the Committee be provided with an update on plans to address the homeless situation in New Bedford.

Mr. Joshua Amaral, Director of Housing and Community Development, was recognized. Mr. Amaral explained that due to the weather, the local shelters have accommodated over seventy guests. These shelters are provided in conjunction with Catholic Social Services, PAACA and Steppingstone. The City has been dealing with an overflow of those in need due to the cold weather. Steppingstone has provided thirty beds, Catholic Charities, 30 beds and Sister Rose's House, 20 beds. Overflow accommodations have been provided as a result of philanthropic donations.

Councillor Gomes said he was appreciative of the information provided by Mr. Amaral but was more interested in what was being done to answer the request for a long-term solution. He envisioned a facility that provided not only a night shelter with beds, but a day shelter that offered programs and services.

Mr. Amaral stated that his department is in the process of putting together a plan to create such a facility, but the difficult part is determining who would run it. Who will provide the services? Identifying a location is relatively easy, but the difficult part is finding someone to run it.

Councillor Pereira stated that per the TAC report, sixty percent of renters in New Bedford pay one-third of their income towards rent. Councillor Pereira asked if this was the normal trend nationally. Mr. Amaral replied it was not. Rents in this area are higher than the national average.

Councillor Pereira asked if Mr. Amaral's office provides a leadership role with the newly formed Bristol County Continuum of Care (BCCC), (the former Homeless Service Providers Network). Mr. Amaral replied yes, his office provides the administrative services to support BCCC. Mr. Amaral explained that they are serious about dealing with the problem of long-term homelessness. They hope that as they move forward a solution will be reached to address the problem.

Mr. Amaral gave an overview of some of the programs currently available, such as the Rapid Rent Program, which provides those in need with first, second and last month rent to get individuals into an apartment. Currently, the funding for this type of program is approximately \$250,000. He also stated that this figure is not enough, this amount could possibly help perhaps ten people. They also provide support and help to coordinate those individuals with additional services.

Councillor Pereira asked whether Mr. Amaral would be able to provide the Committee with a summary of the preliminary goals he and the BCCC hope to address. Councillor Pereira said it was his hope that the next time the Committee met to discuss the issue, they could use the summary as reference in determining what has been done to further achieve those goals. Mr. Amaral said he would be able to provide the Committee with such a summary.

Councillor Lopes asked if any out-of-the-box type solutions had been discussed to address the homelessness issue in the City. He referenced an article he read about a community that set aside a bond, a reduced bonding effort, which was made available to non-profits to borrow against, allowing them to create alternative living spaces to address homeless living needs. Additionally, those organizations borrowing funds would be required to repay the funds over a period of time at a reduced rate. Mr. Amaral said his department had not looked into such a program. Mr. Amaral stated that his office is looking to identify parcels which could be developed and possibly sold at a reduced price due to their current condition.

Mr. Amaral said that currently they would like to secure a grant to conduct a feasibility study on what a full-time facility would need to include. He estimated that the study to cost anywhere between \$50,000 to \$100,000. They are currently reaching out to HUD to hopefully receive such a grant.

Councillor Lopes asked Mr. Amaral if the new direction in Washington, D.C. is affecting his department's situation right now. Mr. Amaral replied that nothing drastic had occurred to date. Councillor Lopes asked if Mr. Amaral was working in conjunction with the School Department to address "couch kids" and homelessness. The Director stated that the School Department is a part of the BCCC. He went on to say that the School Department does a good job in addressing homeless concerns as it relates to their student population.

Councillor Oliver asked with the recent increase in the need for shelter beds due to the weather, are organizations turning people away? Mr. Amaral said that they try not to turn anyone away. He went on to say that they have been fortunate to secure funding from philanthropic people and organizations that provide funding which has helped to secure additional beds as needed. Councillor Oliver asked what would happen if the funding became exhausted. Mr. Amaral said this is when organizations turn to fundraising efforts. Councillor Oliver asked if any thought had been given to utilizing a vacant City-owned building to create an all-service shelter. He was told this had already been looked in to, however, the issue is finding an organization/not for profit to run it. Mr. Amaral said there is a relatively small inventory of actual housing units owned by the City.

Councillor Oliver asked whether Mr. Amaral would be able to provide the Committee with a list of City-owned buildings and land that may be used for a full-service shelter. Mr. Amaral said he would provide the Committee with such a list. Councillor Oliver asked if there had been any discussions about what such a building would look like. He was told no by Mr. Amaral, who also said that is why they need to conduct a feasibility study. When the study was completed, they would need to find an operator. Councillor Oliver asked if there was a timeline in place to put an actual building online. He was told that it would be difficult to provide a specific date and time. Mr. Amaral said he was not in a position to make that kind of commitment.

Councillor Burgo said that based on the TAC report's addressing the shelter system, had the City changed its mechanism to address the cold weather which deals with the increased need for beds. Mr. Amaral explained that such mechanisms were at the discretion of the agencies that are offering the beds. The cut-offs are determined by each agency, and they can differ. He went on to state that the City is not the entity that sets that policy. Councillor Burgo asked if the City/Administration has shown interest in a 24/7 shelter. Mr. Amaral replied yes, it is something the City wanted to pursue.

Councillor Choquette asked how the City is addressing possible homelessness when a Senior is unable to pay their property taxes. He asked what steps were in place to prevent a Senior citizen from losing their home. Mr. Amaral stated that currently there are Senior Tax Abatement programs in place, should they qualify. Mr. Amaral said the Department of Housing and Community Development offers financial assistance/grants for home repair. A grant may be obtained to repair a roof, for example. This allows a person who cannot afford a specific home repair to have the work done. Sometimes, if the needed work is not done, it could result in the homeowner having to lose their home.

Mr. Carl Alves, Chief Executive Officer, PAACA was recognized. Mr. Alves stated that now is the time for the City to seriously deal with the issue of homelessness. He noted that ten percent of people in local shelters are seventy years of age. Mr. Alves said that the current hotel solution to address the issue is an expensive one and stressed the need to find an alternative, a structure that is better for addressing the issue. A building dedicated 24/7 with beds and services is

urgently needed. Mr. Alves said he sees such a structure being five years away and emphasized the need to secure additional funding to secure case workers to meet with the homeless and direct them to the services that are available to them. Until this building is operational and functioning, there needs to be more outreach and more of an effort to locate qualified people for outreach.

Reverend David Lima, Executive Director of the Interchurch Council of Greater New Bedford was recognized. Reverend Lima shared the same frustrations as other speakers. He said that as a community, we have barely scratched the surface in addressing homelessness. He expressed concern that these very same issues have been discussed for over twenty years, and no one has found a solution to the problem. He said that he hoped that sooner or later common sense would prevail, and that the City would realize that it needs to do more, and have more, if it is going to fully address homelessness. He explained that it is difficult to convince agencies to step up when the costs involved cover not just the bed, but other incidentals which are financially astronomical. The agencies that provide beds do so not to make money, but because they recognize the need to offer such services.

Councillor Carney asked Reverend Lima if there was anything more the City could do to secure beds during the cold winter months. Reverend Lima said there is an overflow system in place. They meet bi-weekly to address the situation. He projected a \$40,000 short fall for this year but believes there will be individuals and organizations that will step up and donate enough to cover the short fall. Reverend Lima said that they rent hotel rooms, but have to pay a fee to hold them, so the rooms are not rented out to anyone else whether they are used or not. The fee is approximately 1/3 of the full hotel rate. They pay the entire rate when the room is utilized. He asked if it would be better if those funds were given to a structure that could address all concerns and provide all services.

Councillor Choquette asked how various programs address those individuals who do not want to seek shelter? Reverend Lima replied that through outreach, additional clothing and blankets are provided as they are trying to keep these individuals from dying of hypothermia as a result of the elements.

On motion by Councillor Gomes and seconded by Councillor Burgo, the Committee VOTED: To Table the matter for six months.

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On motion by Councillor Burgo and seconded by Councillor Lopes, the Committee VOTED: To follow the Chair's recommendation to waive the reading and take **"NO FURTHER ACTION"** on the following items. The items are as follows:

WRITTEN MOTION, Councillor Burgo, requesting that Dr. Erica Barratt and her team from SSTAR come before the Special Committee on Affordable Housing and Homeless Affairs to discuss health-related issues with the City's homeless population. (Matter ID #1393) (Referred – August 18, 2022.) (December 12, 2022 – tabled) (May 31, 2023 – tabled)

RELATED MOTION, Councillors Burgo, Baptiste, Giesta, Carney, Lima, Gomes, Markey and Council President Morad, requesting that the Special Committee on Affordable Housing and Homeless Affairs hold a public hearing to discuss the possibility of rent stabilization in the City of New Bedford. (Matter ID #0476) (Referred – March 09, 2023.) (September 12, 2023 – Hearing continued to September 20, 2023.) (September 20, 2023 – Lack of Quorum) (October 10, 2023 – Hearing closed; matter tabled)

WRITTEN MOTION, Councillor Gomes, requesting that the Committee on Appointments and Briefings meet with Mitchell Administration for the purpose of discussing what the City is doing to address the increasing rent prices such as 50% to 75%, that is affecting many seniors and families across the City; and further, that at said committee meeting, we discuss the possibilities of establishing a Rent Control Board in the City of New Bedford. (Matter ID #1390) (Referred to the Committee on Appointments and Briefings – August 18, 2022.) (Referred – November 21, 2023.)

WRITTEN MOTION, Councillor Burgo, requesting, that the Special Committee on Affordable Housing and Homeless Affairs review a local report requesting consideration and approval for authorized encampments as a short-term emergency tool, this tool is intended to be implemented with the goal of meeting local, state, and national initiatives/practices aimed at preventing and remedying homelessness. (Matter ID #0852) (Referred – May 23, 2024.) (June 12, 2024 – tabled)

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Councillor Burgo made a motion to adjourn, which was seconded by Councillor Baptiste.

This meeting adjourned at 8:41 p.m.

ATTEST:

Denis Lawrence, Jr.,
Clerk of Committees