



CITY COUNCIL MEETING  
212 MAIN STREET  
Northampton, Massachusetts  
February 26, 2026

**Roll Call**

A special meeting of the City Council was called to order by Council President Rachel Maiore at 4 p.m. Upon a roll call, the following City Councilors were present:

- |                                |                                       |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| At-Large Councilor Meg Robbins | At-Large Councilor Garrick Perry      |
| Ward 1 Councilor Gwen Nabad    | Ward 2 Councilor Deborah Klemer       |
| Ward 3 Councilor Laurie Loisel | Ward 4 Councilor Jeremy Dubs          |
| Ward 5 Councilor Aline Davis   | Ward 6 Councilor Christopher Stratton |
| Ward 7 Councilor Rachel Maiore |                                       |

**Announcement that Meeting Audio/Video Recorded**

Councilor Maiore announced that the meeting is being audio/video recorded.

**Public Comment**

Councilor Maiore explained the procedure she would use in conducting public comment and opened the floor to comments.

**Ezekiel Baskin, (they/them) Belchertown**, said they were born and raised in Northampton and hope to return there in the near future. Regarding the order to amend the rules to allow the city council to have its own attorney, they were really excited when they saw this because it seems like a commonsense measure to allow the council to have an attorney to hold its own as a branch of government and to be able to get a second opinion. In their work in public health and in the medical field generally, it is great to have a 2<sup>nd</sup> opinion and they see this as a way for the council to maintain that option and another perspective. It seems really valuable to them and might add something really useful to the city government landscape. They were excited to see this and just wanted to pop on today to encourage folks to try this out.

**Cathy McNally, Gleason Road**, echoed what Ezekiel Baskin said. It is so exciting to have this discussion about a separate attorney for the city council. This has been such a long thought process and she knows city councilors going way back have worked really hard on this and thought it was a worthwhile idea. She is very interested in what people think. She hopes everyone would vote to pursue it.

**Deb Henson, Ward 1, 118 Franklin Street**, spoke in support of 26.103 to create an attorney to the city council. She emailed lengthy reasons for her support for this necessary position and will now just touch on the highlights. A lawyer's primary ethical duty is to represent and advise their clients. Some cities believe one city solicitor can handle this ethical duty because the solicitor is envisioned as having only one client, the municipality. In reality, the city solicitor is guided and influenced by the Mayor's policies. If those come into conflict with the City Council's priorities, therein lies the rub – a conflict of interest. Recently, the City Council has advocated for, and may continue to advocate for, priorities and issues that are not fully supported by the Mayor. The council, therefore, needs its own independent legal advisor for these situations where a conflict is apparent. A separation of powers between the legislative and executive is necessary for appropriate representation of the residents of Northampton. If elected officials cannot adequately represent the priorities of their constituents, the council is not able to effectuate its legislative and oversight powers. She asks all councilors to vote in favor of an independent attorney specifically for the council. Her only concern is that Northampton have a truly representative, elected legislative body with oversight powers so that the priorities and values of the taxpayers and voters of the city are truly and independently represented.

There being no further comments, **Councilor Maiore brought public comment to a close.**

**26.008 Appointment of Attorney Alan Seewald as City Solicitor**

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The appointment received a neutral recommendation from City Services, Councilor Maiore reported. She recognized Councilor Dubs to speak to the committee's recommendation.

Councilor Dubs said he and Councilor Klemer would have been comfortable with a positive recommendation but the committee settled on a neutral recommendation since the other two councilors were not fully comfortable, mainly because of the conversation they are having tonight about the rule change proposed by Councilor Stratton.

While not prepared to make a positive recommendation, the other two councilors did not want to make a negative recommendation [which might reflect negatively on Attorney Seewald’s performance].

**Councilor Loisel moved to approve the appointment. Councilor Perry seconded.**

Attorney Seewald thanked councilors for their consideration. He has lived in Northampton for 45 years and practiced municipal law for 41. He has been counsel for Amherst and other municipalities of all sizes, from special counsel to the city of Boston to special counsel to the Whately Planning Board. He has dedicated his professional life to representing local communities and enjoyed doing it. 14 years ago when Mayor Narkiewicz asked him to serve his home community, he was thrilled to be asked and jumped at the opportunity. It took him several months to get out of cases he was involved in against the city at that time but he was happy to do so. He has cherished the opportunity to represent his adopted home community.

His philosophy is that he represents the institution. You can’t do this for 41 years and take sides. His role is to give advice that is in the best interests of the city. Often, it is also in the best interests of the person asking, but his job is to give advice in the best interests of the city as a whole.

“The city is my client and I have never lost sight of that for a minute in the 14 years I’ve been doing this,” he assured.

Councilor Loisel said she spoke to half a dozen former city councilors about their experience with Attorney Seewald. She shared some of their comments, including that he is “knowledgeable about municipal and state law,” “has encyclopedic knowledge of the Northampton city charter,” and “is objective and fair.” He was city solicitor for Amherst for 7 years and for Westminster for 8 years, and gave a presentation on the Uniform Commercial Code. One person told her that, at a meeting of other solicitors at the Massachusetts Municipal Association (MMA) annual meeting, other attorneys spoke about him as ‘one of the best in the state.’

She sees no reason not to confirm this appointment and sees it as separate from the other issue. Whatever they do won’t preclude them from doing whatever they decide with the other proposal. She respectfully requested that they keep these conversations separate.

Councilors spoke individually to the appointment, with Councilors Nabad, Klemer and Davis expressing unqualified support. Councilor Klemer cited his professionalism and consistent reliability, while Councilor Nabad referred to his successful service to two administrations and seven previous iterations of the City Council.

Councilor Robbins said there were some questions about the nature of Attorney Seewald’s contract. She would want to be assured it doesn’t preclude the City Council from hiring another attorney.

Attorney Seewald said he could absolutely confirm that he would sign no contract that limited the ability of the city or any other agency to hire [other] counsel.

Councilor Stratton said he thought the City Services Committee meeting was extremely informative and thanked Councilor Robbins for her questions. He previously did some research on the role of the city solicitor. “Essentially, it just says that, with the approval of the mayor, the solicitor may advise any department head,” he asserted. “There is nothing in writing that assigns the city solicitor to the city council.”

He is relieved to hear there is also nothing in the contract that precludes the City Council from hiring another attorney, he added.

He wants the mayor to have her choice of executive branch attorney, just as he wants the council to possibly have the option to pursue its own choice. He would like to approve Attorney Seewald as city solicitor in the way that it is formally defined.

Councilor Perry and Councilor Maiore spoke in strong support, citing their personal experiences with requesting and receiving legal advice from Attorney Seewald.

There being no further comments, **the motion passed unanimously 9:0 by roll call vote.**

**26.013 An Order to Amend the Council rules to Create the**

**26.013 An Order to Amend the Council rules to Create the Position of Attorney to the City Council**

Councilor Maiore clarified that the order requires one reading and needs a two-thirds vote for approval.

She recognized Councilor Stratton, who read the order aloud.

**Position of Attorney to the City Council**

Citing a 2009 ad hoc committee report on Best Practices in Decision-Making that suggested 'considering providing independent legal counsel' as an example, Councilor Stratton noted that the idea that the city council have its own legal representation is not new. That interest has continued. Section 2.8 of the 2012 charter gave the city council a new power to employ staff as it deems necessary. In 2014, this was used by the council to hire its first administrative assistant, Pamela Powers. Under the new charter, the council could simply as a council rules exercise employ staff. He has used the administrative assistant model as a blueprint for how the council president could appoint their own attorney, he related.

To be clear, the administrative code defines only executive branch employees, he said.

It has been argued that the city solicitor serves the whole of government. Even if one were to accept the idea that there could be a neutral party, just as he wishes to allow the Mayor her choice of legal counsel, he considers it equally important that the selection of the best provider of legal advice for the council be their choice.

Councilor Loisel said she is not opposed to this at all. She knows it has been under discussion for many council terms, but she has questions. The order is a little vague in terms of money. She needs to know what the cost would be and whether it would mean they can't consult with Attorney Seewald. She is wondering where the money would come from.

Councilor Stratton said they learned in City Services that the city solicitor bills by the hour at an hourly rate of \$200. He has said the council is a fairly small part of his billed hours. His thinking is that they are not changing mechanisms so much as bringing in an alternative provider. He is open to different versions of this so he really would like to hear other peoples' thoughts.

Councilor Robbins agreed the City Services meeting was super informative. From figures she heard, she calculated that Attorney Seewald basically bills for about 13 hours a week and said not many of those are council hours. Her thinking is that having an independent solicitor they could draw on would give them the same structure the city has. She was surprised to learn that the amount the city pays for legal services is more than double what he earns. The city contracts with a number of people aside from him. She feels like it would be a very good idea to have access to that on the council side when they see the need.

In response to Councilor Loisel's question about funding, she expressed her understanding that they would seek an appropriation from the city. It is a conversation with the mayor and the finance director but they have the right to ask for and pursue that.

The city is already paying for the city council to receive legal advice from solicitor Seewald, so he sees it more as a change of provider rather than a new budget line, Councilor Stratton clarified.

Mayor Sciarra shared that the City Council used 89.5 hours of legal time in FY2024, 102 hours in FY2025 and 50 hours so far in the first two quarters of FY2026.

The city and NPS use the same labor attorney for collective bargaining. Individual departments do not have their own attorneys, she advised.

Discussion continued, with Councilor Davis saying she's not sure it is a good use of their time to explore this this extensively. While acknowledging the importance of exploring new ideas, she questioned the cost of an additional attorney, noting that it's not a small matter to have an additional cost.

Councilor Maiore noted that the city council isn't really a department like other departments in that they legislate and have Open Meeting Law (OML) concerns. There are some ways they compare to other departments and other ways they don't. "We have unique legal service needs," she observed.

Councilor Robbins reiterated that it was proposed as part of a 2009 Best Practices report and was part of something former Councilors Bill Dwight and Ryan O'Donnell proposed.

As an observer, she has seen a number of times over the years they could have used more specialized counsel for certain council decisions. The funding of it is certainly a question. It sounds like they need more information, so she wondered if they could consider revisiting this in the future.

Councilor Dubs said he thinks it is a concept worth exploring but he does not necessarily feel comfortable voting on the order with the language 'as is.'

Councilor Perry raised the question of whether Attorney Seewald would bring in another lawyer to handle things if he felt he could not handle a situation and councilors needed exclusive representation. In other words, why would they hire someone to deal with a potential problem? He wondered.

Are there examples of ways in which they feel the current situation has failed them? He further asked.

Mayor Sciarra said she served with former Councilors Dwight and O'Donnell and she doesn't believe they ever suggested the council have its own attorney She wanted to correct that for the record.

Councilor Maiore shared that, particularly when writing legislation, when there is a gray area and there's a lot at stake, she has found a 2<sup>nd</sup> opinion helpful. Those she has sought have generally been free.

In the model she's most familiar with, it might only be needed once a year or once a term. She knows budgets are tight, but in this landscape it is critical to spend the money on this kind of legislative know-how. Poorly written or not legal legislation is full of potholes, too. She proposed a small amount for legal services in the council budget this year as a conversation point, she shared.

It is an interesting subject. It has nothing to do with the solid, tried and true advice they get from solicitor Seewald but rather with the gray area and impact of legal opinions on their work, she concluded.

Councilor Loisel said she thinks it is a proposal worth looking at. However, she doesn't have the view of Councilor Stratton that there is a 'city side' and a 'council side' but sees them more as being on the same team. Councilor Dwight said he did not think it was a good idea, for what it's worth.

The administrative assistant raised the point of information that she is unsure if it is possible for the city council to appoint a separate city solicitor based on how this position is defined in the Administrative Code. She screen-shared the definition.

Councilor Stratton pointed out that the administrative code refers only to Mayoral employees.

Members continued to discuss, with Councilor Klemer saying she would be interested in exploring the ability to get a second opinion. As far as having their own lawyer, she doesn't see that as being necessary, she said.

Councilor Robbins said she wanted to be clear that, from where she is coming from, she does see the City Council as being part of the city, but they are a separate entity in terms of being a check and balance. "It's not oppositional, it's not divisive, it's simply how we operate" and are mandated to work, she observed. Being a check and balance. it's okay to look for a different opinion. She referred to the opt-in decision as one where the legal opinion had an impact on the council's thinking.

Councilor Stratton thanked everyone for the input. He came to this from a separation of powers perspective but thinks from what he's hearing, it is not actually that, but is being able to have the right advice on a topic.

There has long been an idea that they could get a second opinion, but no one has actually gotten one paid by the city in recent memory, he noted. People have to go out into the community and try to get free advice and often those advisors don't have a municipal law background.

He would be really interested in refocusing on trying to exercise the mechanism of seeking a second opinion. He suggested the possibility of bringing in more providers on an approved list. He doesn't think they're really talking about spending drastically more money but rather spending it on a more targeted person. But, it is clear that his colleagues do not want to move forward with the draft proposal, so he doesn't think it makes sense to vote on it. He would like to continue this discussion and look more at how they could begin making use of other legal voices really targeted to a specific problem.

Councilor Stratton said he came in prepared to indefinitely postpone.

Councilors suggested other possible options, such as forming a select committee to study the issue (Councilor Nabad) and/or earmarking money in the council budget for getting a second opinion with the council president's authorization (Councilor Loisel).

Councilor Perry said he is always supportive of support. He is questioning what it is they want and what problem they are trying to solve. He has not been presented with an example of where this system has failed them. If other folks have tangible evidence they are being failed by the current system, "let's get down to that," he urged.

Councilor Klemer said she and Councilor Maiore are proposing opening the pathway Councilor Loisel suggested, a small stipend for councilors to use for second opinions.

Councilor Stratton said it would be interesting to him in the short term to see if someone who actually needs additional legal advice attempts to exercise this pathway. "Let's exercise it," he encouraged.

**Councilor Stratton moved to indefinitely postpone the order. Councilor Perry seconded. The motion to postpone indefinitely passed unanimously 9:0 by roll call vote.**

**26.014 An Order to Approve the Expenditure of Youth Commission Gift Funds for Travel to Statehouse**

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**Councilor Nabad moved to suspend the rules to waive two readings. Councilor Klemer seconded. The motion passed unanimously 9:0 by roll call vote.**

**Councilor Robbins moved to approve the order. Councilor Perry seconded.**

Councilor Perry, Councilor Klemer and Councilor Stratton spoke in favor.

**The motion passed unanimously 9:0 by roll call vote.**

**The following order passed final reading:**

**City of Northampton**  
MASSACHUSETTS

*In City Council* February 26, 2026

Upon recommendation of the Mayor

**26.014 An Order to Approve the Expenditure of Youth Commission Gift Funds for Travel to Statehouse**

*Ordered that*

In accordance with Massachusetts General Law Chapter 44, Section 53A that the Northampton City Council approve the expenditure of gifted funds from the Youth Commission fund (2514) in an amount not to exceed \$400 to support their travel to Boston to advocate to the state legislature for more school funding.

**Rules suspended, passed final reading and enrolled.**

**Adjourn**

**Adjourn**

**Councilor Perry moved to adjourn. Councilor Loisel seconded. The motion passed unanimously 9:0 by roll call vote. The meeting adjourned at 5:41 p.m.**

Attest: \_\_\_\_\_, Administrative Assistant