



Committee on City Services and the Northampton City Council

Committee Members:

Chair: Councilor Karen Foster

Vice-Chair: Councilor Jamila Gore

Councilor Marianne LaBarge

Councilor Garrick Perry

Meeting Minutes

Date: August 29, 2023

Time: 4 p.m.

Via Teleconference

1. MEETING CALLED TO ORDER AND ROLL CALL

At 4:01 p.m., Councilor Karen Foster called the meeting to order. On a roll call, Councilors Karen Foster, Chair; Jamila Gore, Vice Chair, Marianne L. LaBarge and Garrick Perry were present. Also present was Administrative Assistant Laura Krutzler.

2. Announcement of Audio/Video Recording

Councilor Foster announced that the meeting was being audio/video recorded.

3. PUBLIC COMMENT

Councilor Foster opened the floor to public comment.

Quaverly Rothenberg, former president of the Ward 3 neighborhood association and candidate running unopposed for the Ward 3 council position, said she was there to do a little bit of diplomacy and share possible solutions around some concerns she has heard from residents of the Salvo House and other public housing units about the reappointment being considered. Based on her research, she expressed her understanding that the City Council has 90 days or until November 1st to act on the reappointment of the public housing commissioner (Marilyn Richards) before it.

Regardless of their position on the reappointment, she is hearing from everyone that there is a lot of tension and conflict at public housing meetings as of late. She would suggest that, in the context that it would be unprecedented to go against an appointment and not refer it back to the City Council with a positive recommendation, they should be very cautious and careful in how they frame the deliberation of whether to go against that precedent. She thinks there is a way to do it that is not scandalous and doesn't focus on picking apart the character of anyone. Given the history that they as a city, including the mayor, made a recommendation to increase the number of residents on the Northampton Housing Authority (NHA) board from one to six - making it a majority resident board - it is clear that Northampton has a desire to center resident voices. Of course, it would be important to do this as residents have a tremendous amount at stake. She doesn't know if councilors have ever seen their lengthy leases, but there are many infractions and small things residents could do to lose their housing or Section 8 vouchers. And, they probably wouldn't be in public housing if they weren't facing some sort of adversity

at this moment in their lives. Therefore, they really want to be careful and sensitive and understanding of anyone who is marginalized or vulnerable in their community, and public housing residents are certainly of the utmost concern to all of them.

When they introduced resident board members, some expressed feelings that there were micro-aggressions and racism and that they were accused of not bringing the right matters to the board in the right way at the right time. This has created a lot of discomfort for everyone on all sides of the issue. She doesn't think the matter before them today is to corroborate this or to judge whether or not it is true but rather to simply acknowledge that the conflict and discomfort is there and that the housing authority, HUD, and state and federal government do not provide a lot of resources for public housing residents or non-resident commissioners. For residents, it might be how they are understanding Robert's Rules and for non-residents, how are they understanding DEI (Diversity, Equity and inclusion).

Of course, councilors could make recommendations to the executive director that she require DEI training and require in-house counsel to advise residents and help them parse their grievances to decide which ones are actionable.

If the City Council only has the power to make appointments and that is its only avenue for influencing the housing authority, appointments are where they should focus their attention, she suggested. When looking at 2020 council resolutions on equity and centering the voices of marginalized people and caring for them, this appointment can easily fall into that category, she asserted. As a possible option, she presented the idea of using their collective political will to do something unprecedented and follow a different process for this appointment; namely, deliberating carefully and thoughtfully on the kind of background and skill sets they want for the non-resident commissioners on this board.

She urged the committee to use its 90 days to think about how they might want to do that and take no action today on a positive recommendation.

Gwen Nabad echoed Quaverly's remarks. So much has happened throughout COVID and they faced so many situations as residents during the period of time when there was no general maintenance. Given that and give the inequities that were laid bare during that time, she would love if the City Council could consider that and also everything Quaverly just said.

4. **MINUTES OF JULY 11, 2023**

Councilor Perry moved to approve the minutes of July 11, 2023. Councilor LaBarge seconded. The motion passed unanimously 4:0 by roll call vote.

5. **ITEMS REFERRED TO COMMITTEE**

A. **23.368 Appointment of Assistant Fire/Rescue Chief Andrew Pelis as Chief of Northampton Fire/Rescue, referred by City Council - 8/17/2023**

She is absolutely delighted to present the appointment of Andrew Pelis as chief of the Northampton Fire Rescue department, Mayor Sciarra enthused. Andrew started his career in 1988, moving through all the ranks from training officer, Fire Prevention Officer, Hazmat Technician and shift captain to Deputy Chief and Assistant Chief. As Assistant Chief, he received thorough leadership training as part of sound succession planning. He will bring the ingenuity, creativity and exceptional service that is the hallmark of

Northampton Fire Rescue. He will also bring homegrown talent as a native of Northampton, graduate of Northampton High School and current resident. She is happy to be here to support his appointment.

Councilor Gore moved a positive recommendation for Andrew Pelis for chief. Councilor LaBarge seconded.

This is exciting for him, Chief Pelis shared. He grew up in Northampton, has family here and is vested in the city. He couldn't be prouder and wouldn't want to work for another department. Throughout his years in the department he has seen great progress and his goal is to keep the department progressing in the right direction.

In response to a question from Councilor LaBarge, he pledged to continue sending monthly updates on fire/EMS activities.

Councilor LaBarge expressed strong support for his appointment.

It has not been that long since he became assistant chief since she remembers that event very vividly from March of 2020, Councilor Foster noted. She asked what he intends as far as continuity; what he would like to see stay the same and what he may be looking at for different avenues to explore.

One of the challenges they have right now is hiring; never in his career has it been this difficult to hire firefighters, Chief Pelis reported. They are six short right now and their overtime is pretty high because they are in the summer months and are short-staffed. Unfortunately, COVID hit and people started working from home. Once they realized they could make the same amount of money working from home, a lot of people weren't interested in coming to work. They are allowing candidates to start as EMT-basics and willing to support them in getting their paramedic certification. He is hoping this will bring some new individuals that will hopefully get them to full staffing.

Another challenge is the mental health crisis. He thinks the Division of Community Care (DCC) will be a gigantic help and is so looking forward to working with this service to get people the help they need so they are not just bringing them to the hospital and having them released a few hours later.

As far as things staying the same, they have their capital built out. The new ladder should be there in October which will be good since they have been without a ladder for half a year. Their training program in his opinion is the best in the area. They have a great training officer and some of the best medics. He feels fortunate to live in this city because of their personnel and the work they do.

Minimum shift strength is 13 and he believes overtime is at 20% of their budget so far, Chief Pelis reported.

Councilors have heard from the police department about the [negative] impact on morale of holdovers, Councilor Foster shared. She asked if Chief Pelis had any comments regarding that.

It's certainly an issue, Chief Pelis acknowledged. People get overworked and they get tired. That's why they're trying to hire as soon as possible, so they can lighten the load in terms of people being forced to stay. The department has been doing a better job of other members picking up the slack so other people don't have to take it. He hopes to get them to full staffing ASAP/

She has had a couple of occasions to interact with EMS and is grateful to live in Northampton herself, Councilor Foster said.

The motion to forward the appointment of Andrew Pelis as Chief of Northampton Fire Rescue passed unanimously 4:0 by roll call vote.

B. 23.358 Appointment to Urban Forestry Commission, referred by City Council - 7/13/2023
Urban Forestry Commission

Jordan Friede, 49 Beacon St., Florence

Term: July 2023 – June 2026

New Appointment

Jordan Friede moved to Northampton just under a year ago, Councilor Foster related. He has often traveled between New York City and Vermont and has always loved Northampton for its social and cultural offerings. He is a professional arborist and has been involved both as a professional and a volunteer with urban forestry boards for years in Hartford and other places. He described Northampton as being a 'breath of fresh air' for tending to remain current with policies about its tree canopy. He is most interested in engaging with the public and in educating the community about tree health, including times when trees do need to come down. He is committed to working with the public to better understand tree health and what that means for decisions the city makes about managing the urban forest. People don't often associate arborists and the assessment of tree health with academia and don't always realize the level of academic knowledge that goes into decisions being made. He would like to play the role of being a liaison with the public on the board. He has worked in the field for decades.

Councilor Foster moved to forward the appointment of Jordan Friede to the Urban Forestry Commission with a positive recommendation. Councilor LaBarge seconded. The motion passed unanimously 4:0.

C. 23.367 Appointments to Various Committees, referred by City Council - 8/17/2023
Human Rights Commission

Donnell Turner, 73 Barrett St., Northampton

Term: August 2023 – August 2026

New Appointment

Northampton Housing Authority

Marilyn Richards, 20 Bridge Road Unit#8, Florence

Term: August 2023 – August 2026

Reappointment

Donnell Turner recently moved to the area, Councilor Perry related. He immediately started looking for ways to be involved in the community and was excited to see a vacancy on the Human Rights Commission. He came to the area to fill a brand new position at Amherst College which happens to be his Alma Mater so they had a lovely conversation about how Amherst was at that time. He has 20 years' experience in higher education and is currently the Director of Inclusive Development. He is hoping to bring his ability to lead projects, groups and teams to the commission. One of the things he is most excited about working on is finding ways to look at police training in de-escalation and to bring a human rights-based approach to that. They talked about ways he can make this community more accepting for

his children and other people of color. He talked about being hesitant to come here after having worked for 11 years at LaSalle and becoming a fixture of the community there but he described the community here as being very welcoming and inviting.

Councilor Perry highly recommended a positive recommendation. Councilor Gore seconded. The motion passed unanimously 4:0.

Reappointment of Marilyn Richards to the Northampton Housing Authority

Councilor LaBarge said she was concerned about what was heard in public comment about this appointment. She asked the mayor to talk about what she's heard at today's meeting.

Councilor Foster prefaced the discussion by saying that one of the trickiest things about the City Services Committee is that they are discussing appointments of people who are willing to volunteer their time to serve the city. She is very sensitive to the fact that these conversations are happening in the public sphere.

She listened to those comments, Mayor Sciarra confirmed. They receive a lot of comments about the Northampton Housing Authority in the mayor's office and it is one of the more challenging situations they deal with since, as was mentioned in public comment, the city has little ability to make changes there. The only mechanism they have [to effect change] are appointments so she certainly understands the concern. She has been looking for people to serve on this board since she's been mayor and has been actively trying to fill this position for about a year. It has been incredibly challenging to find people to step up to serve. This reappointment is someone who has served since 2018. She understands there is concern about leadership at the housing authority and people being able to be heard and she hears and understands that and has experienced that as well.

She is very happy to have the council take a closer look at the housing authority. It is something they spend a lot of time talking about in her office trying to figure out how best to help folks find a way to voice their concerns and be heard by the leadership there.

Councilor Gore said she has heard from constituents about the housing authority and this reappointment in particular and is wondering what if anything they can do about the leadership at the housing authority. She asked if they could bring the chair in to a meeting.

They did bring in the chair, Marilyn Richards, a couple of years ago, Councilor Foster reminded. They are in a somewhat strange position as city services because the city appoints the majority of the board but the housing authority is a state agency. It is not fully under the purview of city services although the appointments are under its purview.

They certainly could extend an invitation and ask, Mayor Sciarra suggested. They could say that, as elected representatives of the city, they have heard certain things and would like them to come talk about them. She certainly has had conversations with housing authority leadership.

"It is certainly within your right to contact the executive director and say that you would like her to come and talk to you about what you have heard. I don't think you can compel her to come but you certainly can say that you'd like her to appear before you," she clarified.

In response to a question from Councilor LaBarge, Mayor Sciarra explained that the housing authority has five members per state statute, four of whom are appointed by the mayor and one appointed by the governor. The city filed a home rule petition to change the number of mayoral appointments and asked the legislature to expand the board to include two additional tenant members, so it is now a seven-member board.

She has been thinking about this a lot today, Councilor Foster said. She first heard concerns about 10 o'clock this morning. This has not given her enough time to do the level of research on the appointment that she would like to do and that she thinks these kinds of questions deserve. One possible course of action is to continue the discussion to a future meeting and invite the housing director in, she suggested.

She wants to be really mindful that the discussion in the public sphere stays in the respectful tone that it is but also that they as councilors are able to make the best decision they can for the city.

Councilor LaBarge suggested inviting the chair of the housing authority board as well as the executive director.

As a point of information, Administrative Assistant Laura Krutzler drew attention to Charter Section 2-10, which states that the standing committee charged with making recommendations on appointments "shall make a recommendation to the full city council not less than 7 nor more than 45 days after the referral."

Marilyn's appointment was referred to City Services at the 8/17/2023 City Council meeting, she noted. Further, she cited the final sentence of that section, which reads, "Appointments made by the mayor shall become effective on the forty-fifth day after the date on which notice of the proposed appointment was filed with the city clerk unless approved or rejected by the city council."

In this case, "notice of the proposed appointment" was delivered to the City Clerk and City Council office simultaneously by email from Rachel Messier on August 14th, she advised. The 45 days thus expires roughly September 30th, she pointed out.

Councilor Foster expressed willingness to take responsibility for requesting an extension of the City Services Committee's time to report to the full council if necessary and inviting the chair and executive director in.

Councilor Perry agreed the appointment needs a step back and look at the NHA. In order for him to appropriately vote, he would like to talk to the chair and executive director.

Councilor LaBarge moved to continue the discussion. Councilor Gore seconded.

She will confer with the administrative assistant to determine a date for the meeting with NHA representatives, Councilor Foster said.

The motion passed unanimously 4:0.

6. **NEW BUSINESS**
None

7. ADJOURN

There being no further business, Councilor Perry moved to adjourn. Councilor LaBarge seconded. The motion carried 4:0 by roll call vote. The meeting was adjourned at 4:48 p.m.

Prepared By:

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