

**BIG LAKE CITY COUNCIL
WORKSHOP MINUTES**

MAY 24, 2023

1. CALL TO ORDER

Mayor Knier called the meeting to order at 5:00 p.m.

2. ROLL CALL

Council Members present: Ken Halverson, Sam Hanson, Paul Knier, Kim Noding, and Paul Seefeld. Also present: City Administrator Hanna Klimmek, City Clerk Gina Wolbeck, Finance Director Deb Wegeleben, Community Development Director Therese Haffner, City Engineer Layne Otteson, Police Chief John Kaczmarek, Liquor Store Manager Greg Zurbey, Streets/Parks/Fleet Superintendent Norm Michels, Water/Wastewater Superintendent Dan Childs, and Big Lake Student Liaison Allie Cross.

3. PROPOSED AGENDA

Council Member Noding motioned to adopt the proposed Agenda as presented. Seconded by Council Member Seefeld, unanimous ayes, Agenda adopted.

4. BUSINESS

4A. Election Precinct Discussion

Gina Wolbeck discussed that following the 2022 General Election, the City Council directed staff to review the City's voting locations due to concerns with parking, pedestrian traffic, and space needs at each site, noting the Council directed staff to meet with Big Lake Schools to discuss the possible use of school facility space for future City elections. Staff met with the Big Lake School Board and Administration and a potential location in the High School was identified. The School Board is still reviewing safety measure, and space needs at this location. Currently the City has three voting locations, (City Council Chambers, Public Works, and Saron Lutheran Church). Wolbeck reviewed specific issues with each site, as well as potential ways to correct the issues. Precinct 1, located in the City Hall Council Chambers has 1,811 registered voters. The voting area is becoming more of a concern because of the number of registered voters at a General Election, noting we have made do with the limited space by utilizing the hallway area of City Hall. Parking availability is adequate at this site, but the number of registered voters is anticipated to increase going forward due to multi-family developments currently in construction and pending in this precinct area. Precinct 2, located at the Public Works Facility has 2,019 registered voters, and the size of the building is more than adequate to accommodate a growing population. Wolbeck noted the Public Works Department has always been very accommodating for the City to use the bay areas for voting; However, voting does take the shop down for 2+ days for each

election. There is a significant safety issue with the amount of available parking at the front of the building, and during the 2022 General Election, election judges were sent out to direct traffic until the BLPD was dispatched to the site for traffic control. Election/Engineering/Public Works staff have met to discuss additional parking availability on the backside of the building which could provide for approximately 50 (+/-) additional parking stalls with the completion of striping in this area. Public Works staff have confirmed that compost grinding could be scheduled to be completed prior to General Election day each year, but there would be an increase to our current grinding costs. A temporary access could be created so vehicles are entering from one point and exiting from another. A cost effective way to do this would be to utilize road construction materials left from the 2022 street project to form a driveway base and then cover with gravel and Wolbeck discussed this access would only be used for election day access. Precinct 3, located at Saron Lutheran Church, has 3,428 registered voters. The Sherburne County Auditor has recommended the number of registered voters at one precinct be less than 2,000 voters, which puts this precinct at almost 1,500 voters past the recommended number. Wolbeck reviewed the church building size/layout is more than adequate to accommodate a growing population, but noted at the 2022 General Election there was a backup of voters inside the entrance of the church for about an hour in the evening due to inclement weather. At the 2020 General Election, we experienced the same type of backup but the weather allowed for voters to line up in an organized line outside the building. Wolbeck also reviewed the safety issue with the accesses (entrance and exit) to the property and discussed that during the 2022 General Election, the BLPD was dispatched to the entrance/exit for traffic control. The City of Big Lake received an election complaint from the State of MN (from a political party) due to the presence of law enforcement being near a polling place, with claims of voter intimidation. To continue to use this site it is recommended we reduce the number of registered voters at this precinct. The only way to accomplish this is to establish a fourth voting precinct, and it is recommended we provide clear signage so voters are not exiting the property from the entrance.

After discussions with Big Lake School officials, a location in the High School building was identified as a potential voting site. The school will be constructing improvements to this area that could accommodate a secure voting location inside the gymnasium area that would not conflict with the student population. If the City wishes to move forward with establishing another voting site, more discussion would need to occur with the school. Wolbeck also discussed that the BLEDA recently purchased the east end of the City Hall building, potentially for redevelopment of the entire site. If this redevelopment occurs, Big Lake City Hall would need to relocate to a location that is not currently known, which would affect our Precinct 1 (current Council Chambers at City Hall) polling site. Council could consider holding off one more election cycle (2024 elections) to wait it out to see if Precinct 1 will need to be relocated. Staff does have concerns with changing voter polling locations this year, and then doing it again within the next couple of years if the City P1 location is purchased by a private company. Changing voter polling locations a number of times can create voter confusion so it is something that should be considered. Wolbeck reviewed options for Council to consider that included Option 1) Establish a fourth voting precinct at Big Lake High School and redefine the City's polling site boundaries. The deadline to do this for next year's elections is December 31, 2023. If Council directs we move forward with this option, staff would prefer to designate our polling locations sooner rather than waiting until year end. This option would also include improvements to the Public Works back parking area and additional voter driveway, as well as ingress/egress signage at Saron Lutheran Church to control the flow of vehicle traffic. Option 2) Keep the same three precinct locations we have had for many years (P1, P2, and P3). This option would also

include improvements to the Public Works back parking area and additional voter driveway, as well as ingress/egress signage at Saron Lutheran Church to control the flow of vehicle traffic, and would include the purchase of a spare ballot tabulator. This option would allow time for the potential redevelopment of the City Hall site, which houses P1 and shifting voter polling locations one time, versus now and then again in a couple of years. Option 3) Make no changes to our voting precinct locations, and do no improvements to P2 and P3. Wolbeck stated staff is not recommending this option due to known issues with the Public Works and Saron Lutheran Church polling locations. Staff asked for Council feedback on the options presented.

Mayor Knier asked why the grinding costs are expected to increase so much if the work is done later in the fall, and asked what the actual impact will be for the shop area to continue to be a voting site. Norm Michels discussed issues with having the Public Works site used as a voting precinct, noting the steps Public Works staff takes to get the building prepped for election usage. Michels also discussed potential lost time or potential for issues that may arise while Public Works is being utilized. Mayor Knier acknowledged that we need to fix the access into and out of Precinct 3, but he isn't necessarily willing to proceed with establishing a fourth precinct at this time and would like to budget for the expense prior to establishing the extra precinct. Knier also stated he doesn't feel getting rid of Precinct 2 is the answer and asked what improvements would be needed to create another drive lane to the backside of the building to accommodate more parking. Michels discussed the compost gate drive lane only allows for one car going in and out at a time so a temporary gravel drive lane would be needed for cars to access the backside of the building for parking on election day. Michels also discussed the asphalt project that will be further discussed at a future workshop relating to improvements by the gate area.

Council Member Halverson discussed the possibility of having two voting tabulators at the school and utilize the entire gymnasium space. Wolbeck mentioned the school is willing to let the City use only the backside of the gym, not necessarily the entire gymnasium area. Wolbeck also discussed potential parking/traffic issues at the school site with two precincts voting in the same area as the student population. Halverson also discussed concerns with the City continuing to use the Public Works building as a voting precinct, citing issues with shutting down Public Works for three days for each election. Knier asked if Public Works would actually be shut down for three days with shop staff not working. Michels clarified that staff would be working in other areas, but where we run into problems is that it takes an entire day to clean the shop for each election, and they maybe aren't as efficient as when they are working in the shop, noting there are other areas they can be assigned to do work. It isn't wasted time, but it isn't as productive as when they are doing their normal tasks. Knier commented the shop needs a good cleaning once in a while, and Michels noted he is always concerned if we have a major equipment breakdown on election day, but noted we've been very fortunate that we haven't had any major issues. Halverson discussed concern with using the back parking lot when there is inclement weather. Wolbeck stressed concern with getting rid of Precinct 2 as there really aren't any other locations for the City to use as a polling site, and Knier responded that removing Precinct 2 isn't on the table right now. Halverson stated that it is on the table noting he votes at this precinct and is concerned that we are now talking about spending money on creating a back parking area and creating another entrance. Council Member Seefeld discussed that if we do create a fourth precinct, it would alleviate some of the voters from the other precincts. Council Member Noding asked if we would take voters from all precincts, or just a couple. Wolbeck responded the plan would be to move voters from P1 and P3 and leave P2 alone.

Wolbeck reviewed that we do need a fourth precinct, but we should be cautious about moving voter locations more than once in a short period of time. With potential changes coming at Precinct 1, waiting one more election cycle to make any changes would most likely be in the best interest of voters. Knier agreed that we obviously need to address access issues at Precinct 3, acknowledged that we do need a fourth precinct, but noted right now might not be the best time as we haven't budgeted for that expense. The State has also just expanded Absentee Voting substantially so that could affect the number of voters voting on election day.

Council Member Hanson indicated he prefers we move forward with Option 2 as recommended by staff.

Council Member Noding reviewed after listening to discussion, she can see the potential problems with establishing a fourth precinct now, and then having to shift voters again if City Hall moves locations in the near future. Noding stated she is in favor of making the changes to our voting precincts closer to the 2026 election cycle so a change is only made one time.

Council Member Seefeld asked if Option 2 could be done without redrawing the boundaries right now, noting creating a fourth precinct would relieve pressure on other precincts. Seefeld also asked if parking improvements at Public Works can be completed this year. Seefeld stated he likes Option 1, but wants to wait until the 2026 election and be able to budget for the expense, suggesting we do the changes at the Public Works facility and Saron Church in the meantime.

Halverson stressed he feels Option 2 will deter voters.

Council directed Staff to move forward with Option 2 which includes improvements to Precinct 2 and 3 as discussed and purchasing a spare voting tabulator. Council also directed staff to continue moving towards creating a fourth Precinct for the 2026 elections.

5. OTHER

Council Member Hanson suggested the City kick-off summer by having the second Council Meeting in June be a tropical dress meeting.

6. ADJOURN

Council Member Seefeld motioned to adjourn at 5:30 p.m. Seconded by Council Member Hanson unanimous ayes, motion carried.

Gina Wolbeck
City Clerk

06.14.23
Date Approved by Council