



# City of Fitchburg Massachusetts 01420

## CITY COUNCIL

### Councilors at Large

Marcus L. DiNatale  
Sally H. Cragin  
Amy L. Green  
Elizabeth R. Walsh  
Anthony M. Zarrella

**President**  
Anthony M. Zarrella

**Vice President**  
Andrew J. Van Hazinga

### Ward Councilors

Ward 1 – Bernard J. Schultz, III  
Ward 2 – Paul R. Beauchemin  
Ward 3 – Andrew J. Couture  
Ward 4 – Andrew J. Van Hazinga  
Ward 5 – Marisa R. Fleming  
Ward 6 – Derrick J. Cruz

### Finance Committee

A meeting of the Finance Committee was called to order by Councilor DiNatale on Wednesday, May 8, 2024 at 6:30 PM in the Legislative Building, 700 Main Street, Fitchburg, MA.

Committee Members present: Councilors Anthony Zarrella, Paul Beauchemin, Derrick Cruz, and Elizabeth Walsh

Committee Members absent: none

Others Present: Jaquelyn Poirier, Superintendent of Cemeteries; Liz Murphy, Executive Director of Community Development; Fire Chief Dante Suarez; Anne Cervantes, Treasurer/Collector; Chris Paquette, Chief Assessor

101-24 ORDER: the City of Fitchburg hereby transfers the sum of TWO HUNDRED THIRTY-THREE THOUSAND EIGHT HUNDRED DOLLARS (\$233,800) from COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT – CONSTRUCTION to COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT – TWIN CITIES RAIL TRAIL PHASE II for the purpose of acquiring rights of way to complete Phase II of the Twin Cities Rail Trail project.

Discussion: Ms. Murphy informed Councilors that this phase of the Rail Trail project involves the acquisition of both temporary and permanent easements in advance of next year’s Rail Trail construction. Councilor DiNatale asked if the Construction funds were originally for this purpose. Ms. Murphy explained that, no, it is a combination of funds left over from the Main Street two-way conversion project - which would otherwise have been used for way-finding signage - and the Oliver Street parking lot paving funds. The Oliver Street project has not begun and the lot is currently being used as a staging site for Main & Boulder Water Main projects, and in light of budget constraints, the Rail Trail is the higher priority.

Action: (5-0) Be Adopted

102-24 ORDER: there be and hereby is appropriated the sum of SIXTY THOUSAND DOLLARS (\$60,000) from CEMETERY - PERPETUAL CARE to CEMETERY – CAPITAL REPAIRS to mitigate water issues in Section Q and the memorial garden areas, and help with preparation for a new columbaria unit.

Discussion: Ms. Poirier stated that the Cemetery Board of Trustees voted at their meeting on April 18<sup>th</sup> to allocate trust funds to repair these two areas. One is the high water table area at the southwest corner by the rotary, putting grave sites at risk, and the other is the location of the new columbaria expansion. Most of the prep work has been engineered in-house by the Engineering & Streets divisions. She further stated that Perpetual Care Funds have been used in the past for Forest Hill and Laurel Hill improvements. Also, the balance in the expendable Perpetual Care account is approximately \$119,000, and is used for betterment of the cemetery as a whole.

Action: (5-0) Be Adopted

103-24 ORDER: there be and hereby is appropriated the sum of FOUR THOUSAND FOUR HUNDRED EIGHTY-SEVEN DOLLARS (\$4,487) from VETERANS BENEFITS – Cash Benefits to VETERANS EXPENSES – Office Expense.

Discussion: Councilor DiNatale read aloud the letter submitted by Michele Marino, Commissioner of Veterans Services, in support of this Order. In it, Ms. Marino demonstrated the need for the replacement of the current furniture in order to serve Veterans in the dignified manner they deserve, and that the Cash Benefits accounts will have a surplus at end-of-year.

Action: (5-0) Be Adopted

104-24 ORDER: there be and hereby is appropriated the sum of ONE THOUSAND SIX HUNDRED TWELVE DOLLARS (\$1,612) from VETERANS BENEFITS – Cash Benefits to VETERANS PERSONAL SERVICES – Clerical.

Discussion: Councilor DiNatale read aloud the letter submitted by Michele Marino, Commissioner of Veterans Services, in support of this Order. In it, Ms. Marino explained that this appropriation and internal transfer is for a step increase that was due to the employee on July 1, 2023, but was not budgeted for.

Action: (5-0) Be Adopted

105-24 ORDER: there be and hereby is appropriated the sum of TWENTY-FIVE THOUSAND (\$25,000) from FIRE DEPT – PERSONAL SERVICES - MECHANICS to FIRE DEPT – EQUIPMENT & REPAIR – AUTO REPAIR.

Discussion: Chief Suarez explained that the Mechanics position was vacant for several months and during that time basic vehicle maintenance was handled in-house, but anything extensive had to be outsourced.

Action: (5-0) Be Adopted

Orders 106-24, 107-24, and 108-24 were taken together, totaling a \$3,367,292.37 potential transfer to Reserve for Municipal Purposes, with the intent of using the Reserve to balance the FY2025 budget.

Discussion: In response to questions from Councilor DiNatale, City Auditor Jacquie Cronin explained that the Reserve authorized by these three Orders will be combined with \$1,200,000 in certified Free Cash to support the Fiscal 2025 budget. The budget will honor existing obligations to employees, ensure contributions to the Health Trust Fund, and carve out debt service obligations for the Crocker School and Library projects. It also gives the City time to prepare for next years' budget when these one-time funding sources are not available. Revenue declines were also discussed, including marijuana host fees and landfill charges.

Regarding Order 106-24, Ms. Cronin addressed Councilor DiNatale's questions about the ARPA available funds. She explained that the Unappropriated Available Funds are a combination of \$1,002,000 interest income and \$188,000 left unappropriated from the original ARPA tranche. The remaining projects had previously been identified for re-purposing when the city experienced flood damage during the July 16, 2023 rain storm. The state has since awarded the city \$1.1 million from a commonwealth climate resiliency fund.

Chief Suarez addressed Order 108-24, stating that a Ladder Truck failed in 2021 and a replacement was ordered in 2022 through a free cash appropriation. Production and delivery of the truck was initially estimated at 18-24 months, and is now estimated to be delivered sometime between November, 2024 and January, 2025. Ms. Cronin stated that other funds will be forthcoming that could reduce the need to borrow, and the loan order at the end of the agenda will ensure that funds are available to pay for the truck when it is delivered. Councilor DiNatale and Chief Suarez assured constituents that the city will be receiving its new Fire Truck. Councilor DiNatale asked Ms. Cronin to inform the City Council if and when the city does indeed borrow for the truck.

Councilor DiNatale then turned to Order 107-24 and read aloud a letter (attached) submitted by Mr. James McGrath, Parks Commission Chair for the City of Fitchburg, expressing opposition to Order 107-24, in light of the Parks' critically limited budget and ongoing critical needs and essential projects. He also discussed an email communication from James Bunnell, Director of Parks & Recreation, detailing the projects affected by this order. The first being the Fitchburg Youth Soccer Parking Lot and safety improvements at Moran Field, and second, the Mama Fitz and Park Hill landscaping, tables, and benches.

Councilor Zarrella characterized the FY2025 budget crunch, and the lean years to follow, as having been anticipated for several years by the previous Auditor. He acknowledged that the situation has been made worse by sources that could not reasonably be anticipated, the task now being to find the path forward.

Councilor Zarrella then addressed Order 107-24 with the hope that unanticipated revenue or the re-purposing of a Fiscal 2025 line item, when known, could be used instead of these Park funds to address Fiscal 2025 shortfalls.

Councilor DiNatale addressed the cyclical nature of budget years, specifically '08-'09-'10 as being bad for the City of Fitchburg, and the past 7-8 years being good – despite the pandemic – but then leading to cracks in the armor last year. Unprecedented health insurance increases, drops in certain revenues, competitive contracts, and pension obligations have all combined to create a structural weakness requiring \$4.6 million in “free cash” to balance the budget. He expressed reluctance about approving Order 107-24 without first determining if there are other sources within the budget to cover the need, and thereby preserving the Parks funding. He contrasted that with Orders 106-24 and 108-24 where the impact is on unused funds or supported through a loan order, respectively.

Councilor Zarrella then addressed the robust Stabilization Fund available to the city in the event of emergencies, potential revenue measures under consideration, and other creative solutions that will be brought forward to improve the financial situation prior to the next budget cycle.

Discussion then turned back to Order 107-24. Councilor Walsh concurred with Councilors DiNatale and Zarrella that it was preferable to hold off on the transfer from Parks projects, given the risk that it may not be returned, and the comfort level with a budget that may be out of balance by \$164,000. Councilor Beauchemin agreed and expressed confidence that if the Parks money was required for the budget, it would eventually be put back into the Parks where it is really needed. Councilor Cruz concurred with the other councilors in holding off on the Parks transfer for now, and also expressed support for a revenue implementation approach.

106-24 ORDER: there be and hereby is appropriated the sum of ONE MILLION EIGHT HUNDRED THREE THOUSAND TWO HUNDRED NINETY-TWO AND 37/100 DOLLARS (\$1,803,292.37) crediting RESERVE FOR MUNICIPAL PURPOSES, and charging the following ARPA accounts:

Unappropriated Available Funds	\$1,190,534.11
COVID Test/Trace/Vaccinate	\$312,758.26
Rental Repair Program	\$250,000.00
Storefront Activation	\$50,000.00

Action: (5-0) Be Adopted

107-24 ORDER: there be and hereby is appropriated the sum of ONE HUNDRED SIXTY-FOUR THOUSAND (\$164,000) from PARKS DEPARTMENT CAPITAL crediting RESERVE FOR MUNICIPAL PURPOSES.

Action: (4-1) Leave to Withdraw

108-24 ORDER: there be and hereby is appropriated the sum of ONE MILLION FOUR HUNDRED THOUSAND (\$1,400,000) from FIRE DEPT – VEHICLE REPLACEMENT to RESERVE FOR MUNICIPAL PURPOSES.

Action: (5-0) Be Adopted

100-24 LOAN ORDER: that ONE MILLION FOUR HUNDRED THOUSAND DOLLARS (\$1,400,000) is appropriated for purchasing and equipping an aerial ladder truck for the Fitchburg Fire Department, including all costs incidental and related thereto; that to meet this appropriation the Treasurer with the approval of the Mayor is authorized to borrow \$1,400,000 under G.L. c.44, §7(1) or any other enabling authority; that the Mayor is authorized to contract for and expend any federal or state aid available for the project; that the Mayor is authorized to take any other action necessary to carry out this project; and that the Treasurer is authorized to file an application with the Municipal Finance Oversight Board to qualify under Chapter 44A of the General Laws any or all of the bonds authorized by this order and to provide such information and execute such documents as the Municipal Finance Oversight Board may require for these purposes.

Discussion:

Action: (5-0) Be Adopted

The meeting adjourned at 7:58 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jacquelyn Cronin".

Jacquelyn Cronin, Clerk

May 8, 2024

Subject: Opposition to Order 107-24: Parks Department Capital Appropriation

Dear Finance Committee Members,

I am writing to express my strong opposition to Order 107-24, which proposes appropriating \$164,000 from the Parks Department Capital crediting Reserve for Municipal Purposes.

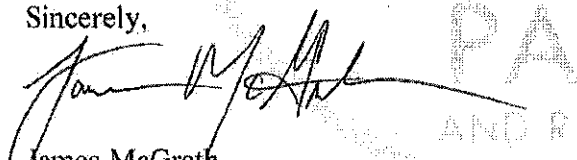
While we understand the city's diverse needs, the Parks and Recreation Department budget is already critically limited. Combined operational budgets make up less than one-half of one percent of the overall city budget. This makes even small appropriations like this one highly impactful on our ability to serve the community.

Our department has made substantial progress in the past year and a half, despite these funding constraints. Re-appropriating funding from two of the smallest departments within the city will only negate the progress that has been made. The parks and roads have always been a concern to the community, and the lack of funding to correct, fix, improve, or maintain them tends to be pointed out often by the public.

- **Limited Transparency:** The order lacks specific details on how the funds would be used. Without a clear understanding, it's difficult to assess the true value of this appropriation for the Parks Department.
- **Competing Priorities:** The Parks Department has several critical ongoing needs within our city parks that require funding. Allocating a significant sum without a defined purpose may come at the expense of these essential projects or programs.

I believe that other ways can be found to address the city's needs while ensuring the Parks and Recreation Department has the resources it needs to continue serving our community. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,



James McGrath  
Parks Commissioner Chair City of Fitchburg

PARKS  
AND RECREATION