

CITY OF CRANSTON
CRANSTON CITY COUNCIL
Regular Meeting of December 20, 2021 – MINUTES

The Cranston City Council met on December 20, 2021, in a meeting advertised in accordance with the Rhode Island Open Meetings Act on December 15, 2021. The meeting was called to order by Council President Christopher Paplauskas at 7:06 p.m. It was held in Council Chambers at Cranston City Hall.

MEMBERS PRESENT: Council President Christopher Paplauskas, Council Vice President Robert Ferri, Councilmember Richard Campopiano, Councilmember John Donegan, Councilmember Aniece Germain, Councilmember Lammis Vargas, Councilmember Nicole Renzulli, Councilmember Jessica Marino

MEMBERS ABSENT: Councilmember Matthew Reilly

NON-MEMBERS PRESENT: Nicholas Lima (Registrar / Director of Elections – Acting Recorder), John Verdecchia (Assistant City Solicitor), Stephen Angell (Council Legal Counsel), Thomas Lima (Council Communications Aide), Robert Strom (Finance Director), Ron Ronzio (Stenotypist), David DiMaio (Council Budget Analyst), Anthony Moretti (Chief of Staff), Steven Paiva (Communications Coordinator), Joseph Balducci (Chief Financial Officer – Cranston Public Schools), Erica Olobri (Partner, Marcum LLP), James Wilkinson (Partner, Marcum LLP), Members of the Public In-Person and Online via Zoom

The Council President declared a quorum present.

Council President Paplauskas said the COVID-19 pandemic has been very difficult on a lot of Cranstonians and Rhode Islanders. In particular, the Council President acknowledged Michael A. Zanni and the Zanni family, and expressed condolences on behalf of the entire City Council to Acting City Clerk Rosalba Zanni and her family for the loss of Mr. Zanni. Council President Paplauskas also acknowledged the passing of Daniel O. Parrillo, Sr., and expressed sympathy on behalf of the entire City Council to Personnel Director Daniel Parrillo and his family for their loss. The Council President further expressed condolences of the City Council to the Cranston Public Schools community and the McGonagle family, for the passing of Cranston High School East teacher and coach Meaghan McGonagle.

The Council President asked those present to observe an extended moment of silence in memory of those lives lost, and encouraged all present to keep each of the families in their thoughts and prayers.

Council President Paplauskas led the body in the Pledge of Allegiance. He noted that Councilmember Reilly has an excused absence from the meeting because he is caring for a loved one with COVID-19.

APPROVAL OF PRIOR MEETING MINUTES

Council President Paplauskas asked for a motion to continue the minutes to the next meeting.

MOTION: By Council Vice President Ferri and seconded by Councilmember Renzulli to continue the minutes of the Nov. 22, 2021 City Council meeting to the next meeting.
PASSED ROLL CALL VOTE – 8-0 – Councilmember Marino, Councilmember Renzulli, Councilmember Vargas, Councilmember Germain, Councilmember Donegan, Councilmember Campopiano, Council Vice President Ferri, and Council President Paplauskas voting aye.

I. PUBLIC ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND COMMENDATIONS

There were no public acknowledgements or commendations.

II. PUBLIC HEARINGS AND PUBLIC COMMENT

Audit Report from Marcum LLP for Fiscal Year ending June 30, 2021

Council President Paplauskas invited Finance Director Strom to present the audit report.

Mr. Strom said the audit is in a draft format and has nearly been completed. He said the hard copies of the presentation before the Council were essentially final, and review the City and School Department's 2021 financial statement audit. He said the auditors from Marcum LLC, Erica Olobri and James Wilkinson, will present the report and display it on the screen for those watching the meeting virtually.

Ms. Olobri said we are in the final review stages of the FY 2021 report. She said the City has increased its operational General Fund balance to \$674,000, with approximately \$9 million in unassigned fund balance. The School Department General Fund has increased by \$2.3 million, with any leftover fund balance restricted for education. She said the total fund balance is about \$7.8 million. Ms. Olobri presented a more detailed balance sheet for the City as a whole and explained the figures displayed.

She added that the entry for PILOT funding has been changed compared to previous years' accounting, for reduces the apparent fund balance as compared to previous fiscal years. Ms. Olobri said the General Fund surpluses on the City and School Department side show that the City has done well this year. She said total revenues were above budget by \$1.8 million.

Ms. Olobri reported that expenditures were \$1 million above appropriated amounts in total, with the biggest amounts being from the Fire Department and Law Department. She said much of this was due to overtime including that related to COVID-19, which in many cases is being reimbursed via FEMA. She compared major city funds, such as the Sewer Fund, which has a positive net position of \$70 million, to smaller funds, such as school lunches, the charter school, and the ice rink. She said all reported positive increases from FY20 to FY21 operationally. Ms. Olobri said the City Police and Fire Pension plans have showed continued improvement over the last five years from 21.19% funded in FY17 to 27.25% funded in FY21, with a net pension liability of \$217 million. She also reviewed net liabilities for the OPEB plans for Police, Fire, and the School Department, and noted the Police and Fire plan decreased its funding ratio while the School plan increased.

Ms. Olobri said they are still assessing financial management comments from the audit before finalizing, and said the process has involved extensive communication between the auditors and government leaders.

Councilmember Marino asked why the OPEB was funded with a decreased amount in the past fiscal year. Mr. Strom said OPEB was reduced this year but pension was contributed at 100% of the Annual Required Contribution. He said that while it was reduced in FY21, in FY22, the OPEB is back to 100% contribution.

Councilmember Renzulli asked whether the City surplus goes into the Rainy Day Fund, and Mr. Strom said it did. He said on the School Department side, their surplus goes into a similar fund.

Councilmember Germain asked for clarification about the below budget items listed on Page 8 of the presentation. Director Strom said that even though some line items were below budget, others were significantly above budget and offset them. Mr. Strom said that due to COVID, certain revenues such as investment income and Municipal Court were down, along with departments that were operationally affected by the pandemic. Councilmember Germain asked whether the line items that were below or above budget will be broken down individually. Ms. Olobri said the details will all be shown in the full audit report. Mr. Strom clarified that they are shown in periodic financial reports.

Mr. Strom also noted that it had been longstanding practice to account for PILOT funds in the previous fiscal year, which has been changed going forward. Ms. Olobri said the change was due to the state Auditor General informing the municipalities to account for the funds differently than they requested in the past. Mr. Strom said he was not happy about this change in practices but the City had to comply. He added that the FY22 revenues were adjusted in the budget process, as compared to FY21 revenues which were done at the very beginning of the pandemic and were not adjusted, which is why some departmental budgets and funds show an individual deficit. Mr. Strom said revenues are progressing very well in the current fiscal year.

Councilmember Renzulli asked for clarification on the origins of the City's surplus. She said it appears the City's surplus is due to increases in revenues, while the School Department's surplus is due to reduced spending of the total funds appropriated. Ms. Olobri agreed that was the case.

Council President Paplauskas asked when the final audit will be released. Ms. Olobri said drafts are with management, and that the audit should be complete before Dec. 31.

Public Hearings and Public Comment on Docketed Items

Before taking public comment, Council President Paplauskas wanted the public watching the meeting or prepared to testify to be aware that Ordinances 9-21-01 and 9-21-02 may not be voted on this evening due to further changes. He asked Council Legal Counsel Angell to explain further.

Mr. Angell said that two items reported out of the Ordinance Committee relative to the Trolley Barn need to be edited for clarity and Municode should they be passed. He said he conferred with the Assistant Solicitor and that they would like to check the references to the Comprehensive Plan to ensure that what is listed in the ordinances as presented is appropriate and congruent to the Plan. He said the changes that need to be made are not substantive, but need to be corrected before they're put on the floor for final passage. His recommendation is to table these items until the next meeting. He said the applicant's attorney and the Solicitor's Office are in agreement, particularly given the current circumstances with the Clerk's Office short staffed.

Councilmember Renzulli said the Planning Commission recommendation could also be updated on the docket for the next meeting.

There was no one from the public present or attending via Zoom who appeared to speak for public comment. The Council President closed public comment on docketed matters. As several members of the public present were waiting to hear discussion on the Trolley Barn ordinances, Council President Paplauskas asked for a motion to take the docket out of order to discuss those two items now.

MOTION: By Council Vice President Ferri and seconded by Councilmember Marino to take the docket out of order to discuss the Item III. Report of Committees – Ordinance Committee now.

PASSED ROLL CALL VOTE – 8-0 – Councilmember Marino, Councilmember Renzulli, Councilmember Vargas, Councilmember Germain, Councilmember Donegan, Councilmember Campopiano, Council Vice President Ferri, and Council President Paplauskas voting aye.

IV. REPORT OF COMMITTEES

Ordinance Committee

Ordinance 9-21-01

Council President Paplauskas asked for a motion to continue Ordinance 9-21-01.

MOTION: By Councilmember Renzulli and seconded by Councilmember Germain to continue Ordinance 9-21-01 to the next meeting.

PASSED ROLL CALL VOTE – 8-0 – Councilmember Marino, Councilmember Renzulli, Councilmember Vargas, Councilmember Germain, Councilmember Donegan, Councilmember Campopiano, Council Vice President Ferri, and Council President Paplauskas voting aye.

Ordinance 9-21-02

Council President Paplauskas entertained a motion to continue Ordinance 9-21-01.

MOTION: By Councilmember Marino and seconded by Councilmember Germain to continue Ordinance 9-21-02 to the next meeting.

PASSED ROLL CALL VOTE – 8-0 – Councilmember Marino, Councilmember Renzulli, Councilmember Vargas, Councilmember Germain, Councilmember Donegan, Councilmember Campopiano, Council Vice President Ferri, and Council President Paplauskas voting aye.

Council President Paplauskas informed those present that the matter would be heard at the next City Council on Jan. 24, 2022.

III. RESOLUTIONS

There were no resolutions before the Council for consideration.

IV. REPORT OF COMMITTEES

Finance Committee

Resolution authorizing Real Estate Tax Abatements

Chairperson Ferri said the resolution is to authorize Real Estate Tax Abatements.

MOTION: By Councilmember Marino and seconded by Councilmember Renzulli to approve the resolution authorizing Real Estate Tax Abatements.

PASSED ROLL CALL VOTE – 8-0 – Councilmember Marino, Councilmember Renzulli, Councilmember Vargas, Councilmember Germain, Councilmember Donegan, Councilmember Campopiano, Council Vice President Ferri, and Council President Paplauskas voting aye.

Resolution authorizing Motor Vehicle Tax Abatements

Chairperson Ferri asked for a motion to approve Motor Vehicle Tax Abatements.

MOTION: By Councilmember Renzulli and seconded by Councilmember Germain to approve the resolution authorizing Motor Vehicle Tax Abatements.

PASSED ROLL CALL VOTE – 8-0 – Councilmember Marino, Councilmember Renzulli, Councilmember Vargas, Councilmember Germain, Councilmember Donegan, Councilmember Campopiano, Council Vice President Ferri, and Council President Paplauskas voting aye.

Resolution authorizing Tangible Tax Abatements

Chairperson Ferri asked for approval of Tangible Tax Abatements.

MOTION: By Councilmember Marino and seconded by Councilmember Vargas to approve the resolution authorizing Tangible Tax Abatements.

PASSED ROLL CALL VOTE – 8-0 – Councilmember Marino, Councilmember Renzulli, Councilmember Vargas, Councilmember Germain, Councilmember Donegan, Councilmember Campopiano, Council Vice President Ferri, and Council President Paplauskas voting aye.

Tax Interest Waiver Approvals

Chairperson Ferri said the next item was Tax Interest Waiver Approvals.

MOTION: By Councilmember Germain and seconded by Councilmember Marino to approve the Tax Interest Waiver Approvals.
PASSED ROLL CALL VOTE – 8-0 – Councilmember Marino, Councilmember Renzulli, Councilmember Vargas, Councilmember Germain, Councilmember Donegan, Councilmember Campopiano, Council Vice President Ferri, and Council President Paplauskas voting aye.

Tax Interest Waiver Denials

Chairperson Ferri asked for a motion to approve the Tax Interest Waiver Denials.

MOTION: By Councilmember Vargas and seconded by Councilmember Donegan to approve the Tax Interest Waiver Denials.
PASSED ROLL CALL VOTE – 8-0 – Councilmember Marino, Councilmember Renzulli, Councilmember Vargas, Councilmember Germain, Councilmember Donegan, Councilmember Campopiano, Council Vice President Ferri, and Council President Paplauskas voting aye.

V. PUBLIC COMMENT FOR UNDOCKETED ITEMS

Danielle and George Mason, 8 Eden Park Dr., appeared to speak regarding traffic issues on Eden Park Drive related to Eden Park Elementary School. Ms. Mason said she had photos and videos from the residents in the neighborhood. She said she has a map that was given to her on Aug. 21, 2020 by Jason Andoscia. The information was given to Mr. Paiva from the Administration.

Councilmember Germain said she has presented an ordinance about this issue. Council President Paplauskas said we can't discuss it in depth because it's not on the docket, but the residents can present and bring the issues to the Council's attention during this Public Comment session and communicate with the Administration regarding a remedy.

Council President Paplauskas said if this is an upcoming ordinance, it will be heard for the first time in a public hearing next month. Ms. Mason said they have been there for 18 years, and there's a consistent, every-day problem with parking in front of and on their driveways. Council President Paplauskas said the ordinance is being introduced as new business this evening and will be heard on Jan. 18. He invited the residents to come back to that meeting or attend via Zoom to allow a full discussion so Councilmembers have all of the information in front of them and can respond. There was no one else who appeared for public comment in-person or via Zoom. The Council President closed public comment on un-docketed matters.

VI. ELECTION AND/OR APPOINTMENT OF CITY OFFICIALS

City Planning Commission

Appointment of Steven Frias to fill the un-expired term of Robert DiStefano for a term to expire on Dec. 17, 2022

Council President Paplauskas said the appointment is made directly by the Council President so this item is on the docket for informational purposes with no vote to be taken.

VII. REPORT OF CITY OFFICERS

There were no reports of city officers scheduled so this item was not docketed.

VIII. EXECUTIVE COMMUNICATIONS

Request to be placed on pension Deputy Chief Lawrence Caron, Jr., Cranston Fire Department

Chief of Staff Moretti said the Administration is requesting that Deputy Chief Caron be placed on pension. Mr. Moretti said the Deputy Chief has served the City honorably for many years.

Council President Paplauskas wished Deputy Chief Caron a wonderful retirement and thanked him on behalf of the entire Council for his service to the City.

MOTION: By Councilmember Marino and seconded by Councilmember Renzulli to place Deputy Chief Lawrence Caron, Jr. on pension.
PASSED ROLL CALL VOTE – 8-0 – Councilmember Marino, Councilmember Renzulli, Councilmember Vargas, Councilmember Germain, Councilmember Donegan, Councilmember Campopiano, Council Vice President Ferri, and Council President Paplauskas voting aye.

Advice and Consent re-appointment of Carl A. Santucci as a member of the Conservation Commission for a term to expire Dec. 20, 2024

Mr. Moretti said that Carl Santucci is active on the Conservation Commission and is familiar to everyone.

Council President Paplauskas asked for a motion to approve. He said that Mr. Santucci has served on the Conservation Commission and the Pawtuxet River Authority and that he has held many environmental clean-ups over the years and works hard to improve the City and the watershed.

MOTION: By Council Vice President Ferri and seconded by Councilmember Donegan to re-appoint Carl A. Santucci as a member of the Conservation Commission for a term to expire Dec. 20, 2024.
PASSED ROLL CALL VOTE – 8-0 – Councilmember Marino, Councilmember Renzulli, Councilmember Vargas, Councilmember Germain, Councilmember Donegan, Councilmember Campopiano, Council Vice President Ferri, and Council President Paplauskas voting aye.

IX. COUNCIL PRESIDENT COMMUNICATIONS

Council President Paplauskas said he is hoping the first ARPA workshop will be held by the City Council on Jan. 27. Pending whether the Governor signs a new executive order due to the worsening pandemic to again allow for virtual member attendance at meetings, the workshop may be held in-person or via Zoom. He is exploring further dates such as Feb. 10 and Feb. 17. He will get notice out to the members soon and get the meetings on the City's calendar.

The Council President wished everyone a Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays, Happy New Year, and said to please stay safe.

X. COUNCILMEMBER COMMUNICATIONS

Council Vice President Ferri

Plastic Bag Ordinance Discussion

Council Vice President Ferri said he's noticed that several stores in the City are still using plastic bags despite the ordinance prohibiting them. In some cases he said he tried to speak to a store manager and was told they didn't know, which he found suspect. He said he saw four stores within a two-week period, which means there are likely many others. Council Vice President Ferri said the ordinance as passed was a good ordinance and that we need to work with the administration to figure out how we are going to better enforce this. He said one idea would be to send them a notice or copy of the ordinance, and he would like to discuss now how enforcement can be improved.

Councilmember Renzulli agreed and said that some stores have told her that they've run out of paper bags. She said fines should be issued if businesses repeatedly violate the ordinance. Council President Paplauskas said more advertising and information needs to be put out there using a multi-prong approach to let businesses know that they need to follow the law.

Councilmember Donegan said when the ordinance first passed, almost three years ago, the Office of Sustainability in Providence informed him that they spent thousands of dollars on marketing in print, radio, and Mayor Elorza letting businesses know. He said that right before the pandemic hit, there were plans to work with local school students or libraries to help get the information out, but the pandemic delayed that effort.

Chief of Staff Moretti said that Director of Economic Development Franklin Paulino can when time permits go out to inform businesses and follow-up to see if they are complying. Mr. Moretti said they have not received any enforcement complaints so far at the Mayor's Office. Discussion ensued.

Councilmember Renzulli asked who is in charge of enforcement, whether it's Inspections or Director Paulino. Mr. Moretti said he doesn't think the ordinance lists an enforcement authority, which is why thus far it's been mostly Director Paulino. Councilmember Renzulli said it's been three years now and it's beyond an education issue, and that there needs to be clear enforcement or warnings, which should be documented.

Assistant Solicitor Verdecchia said any ordinance dealing with public health and safety would come from an inspector in the code enforcement office. Mr. Moretti said from a practical matter, there is a choice that needs to be made on resources in that office and that prioritizing enforcement of the plastic bag ordinance could take away from other priorities like minimum housing. He said there is a need for further inspectors and that could help solve the problem. Mr. Moretti said that the more resources, the more enforcement can take place in the City. He said the Administration can consider making it a priority balanced against other needs.

Councilmember Renzulli said she understands there are many priorities. Council President Paplauskas said there is a definite need for another code compliance inspector who could be tasked with enforcing things such as this ordinance and business licenses. He said it is one of the biggest complaints he hears from an operational standpoint both from the Clerk's Office and as a former chair of the Safety and Services Committee. Mr. Moretti said that Fire Alarm could also use more inspectors, and that there's a need across the board in the City for more inspectors.

Councilmember Germain asked who inspects businesses to ensure compliance with state COVID regulations. Chief of Staff Moretti said that the City does not have any COVID inspectors. Councilmember Renzulli added that the inspections for COVID compliance were done by state agencies such as DBR and RIDOH.

Councilmember Vargas asked if perhaps a notice could be provided to businesses when they transact with the Clerk's Office, and suggested more language on the City website. She asked if there's a more comprehensive list of businesses the Administration can reach out to, since Cranston does not have a Chamber of Commerce. She said councilmembers can also remind residents on their own and on social media as part of a wider information effort.

Mr. Moretti said many of the ideas suggested like including a notice with tax bills or in the Clerk's Office are all feasible. He said Mr. Paiva could add it to the licensing page and give notice about the ordinance a higher profile on the City website. Mr. Moretti said it won't be an overnight fix and it will take work and involvement to accomplish more consistent compliance. Councilmember Donegan said a notice can be used on the tax mailing as existing code provides for notice about recycling to be included.

Councilmember Campopiano said it could be a supply issue, and that the City could reach out to the major suppliers to alert them to the fact that the bags are not permitted for use by their Cranston customers.

Councilmember Germain

Update information on Diversity Commission

Councilmember Germain said Director Parrillo is the chairperson of the Diversity Commission, and due to the recent death in his family it is best discussed at the next meeting. Council President Paplauskas asked the Acting Recorder to forward this item to the next month's docket. Mr. N. Lima said he will make a note on the record so the Clerk's Office is aware for the next meeting posting.

XI. COUNCIL BUSINESS MATTERS CARRIED OVER

There were no council business matters carried over to be considered.

XII. INTRODUCTION OF NEW MATTERS BEFORE THE COUNCIL

The following items were presented for introduction as new business for referral to the appropriate committees:

Ordinance 12-21-01 in amendment of Chapter 10.12.270 of the Code of the City of Cranston, 2005, entitled "Motor Vehicles and Traffic – One-way Traffic on Certain Streets Between Certain Hours" (Eden Park Dr. northerly from Aqueduct Rd.), sponsored by Councilmember Germain, referred to the Ordinance Committee meeting of Jan. 13, 2022.

Ordinance 12-21-02 in amendment of Title 10 of the Code of the City of Cranston, 2005, entitled "Motor Vehicles and Traffic" (Tabor St.), sponsored by Council President Paplauskas, referred to the Ordinance Committee meeting of Jan. 13, 2022.

Request from National Grid for a pole location at East View Ave. referred to the Public Works Committee meeting of Jan. 13, 2022.

Property Damage Claims referred to the Claims Committee meeting of Jan. 13, 2022, to include: Monica Barros from an alleged incident on Dec. 1, 2020; Daniel Ivanov from an alleged incident on June 30, 2021; the Town of Barrington from an alleged incident on Sept. 8, 2021; Thomas and Karen Carey from an alleged incident on Oct. 1, 2021; and Chester Salisbury from an alleged incident on Oct. 26-27, 2021.

MOTION: By Council Vice President Ferri and seconded by Councilmember Renzulli to refer all new business to the appropriate committees.
PASSED ROLL CALL VOTE – 8-0 – Councilmember Marino, Councilmember Renzulli, Councilmember Vargas, Councilmember Germain, Councilmember Donegan, Councilmember Campopiano, Council Vice President Ferri, and Council President Paplauskas voting aye.

XIII. MISCELLANEOUS BUSINESS ON CLERK'S DESK

There was no miscellaneous business to be reported from the Clerk's Desk.

ADJOURNMENT

Council President Paplauskas said the next regular monthly meeting of the City Council will be held on Jan. 24, 2022.

MOTION: By Council Vice President Ferri and seconded by Councilmember Renzulli to adjourn.
PASSED ROLL CALL VOTE – 8-0 – Councilmember Marino, Councilmember Renzulli, Councilmember Vargas, Councilmember Germain, Councilmember Donegan, Councilmember Campopiano, Council Vice President Ferri, and Council President Paplauskas voting aye.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:15 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,

/s/ Nicholas J. Lima
Registrar / Director of Elections
Acting Recorder

The preceding Unofficial Minutes are a draft copy of the record of proceedings on the date specified, subject to amendment and final approval by the Cranston City Council, and are presented for informational purposes only.

*****MINUTES APPROVED BY CITY COUNCIL AT THE JANUARY 24, 2022 MEETING.***