

BUDGET AND FINANCE/PERSONNEL COMMITTEE
December 11, 2001
4:30 P.M.

The Budget and Finance/Personnel Committee was called to order by Councilman Taylor, Chairman, with Councilpersons Robinson, Benson, Pierce, Littlefield, Page, and Hakeem present. Attorney Randall Nelson, Management Analyst Randy Burns, and Shirley Crowover, Assistant Clerk to the Council, were also present.

Others present include Donna Kelley and Chief Coppinger. Daisy Madison joined the meeting later.

FIRE DEPT. ASSESSMENT CENTER PROGRAM

Chairman Taylor turned the meeting over to Ms. Kelley, who stated that she had with her Chief Coppinger who could guide her if she misworded anything. She stated that they planned to have a Resolution on the Agenda to cover an Assessment Center Program to be executed by the Fire Dept. This will be a Professional Services Agreement with a Resource Group and will cover the actual consultant fee and the exercises. She explained that they had to have a location to do the exercises and that they had chosen the Choo Choo; that in the past they had used the Read House, but it was not available.

Councilman Hakeem asked if there was a year's history using this concept. Ms. Kelley explained that they rotate every other year with the Fire Department and the Police Department.

Chief Coppinger explained that this was a very objective way of testing and that they were pleased with the results; that there are a very diverse group of individuals involved and this takes out the subjectivity of Administration.

Councilman Hakeem asked if this concept withstood legal scrutiny. Ms. Kelley responded that in terms of fairness, it was of the highest standard.

Councilman Littlefield asked what exactly happens. Ms. Kelley explained that applicants come in and are involved in simulated exercises; they are rated by a group of their peers in a group setting. Councilman Littlefield verified that it was a performance test rather than a written test.

Chief Coppinger explained that this helped minimize the perception that tests are geared only to those who do well on written tests and are actually able to perform well but are not rated on how well they know their job. He explained that this tested what they already knew.

Councilman Littlefield asked if they staged emergency situations. Chief Coppinger stated that they go into different rooms for the exercises, and the exercises are not performed with fire equipment. Ms. Kelley added that the promotions are for supervisory positions, and the exercises are role model playing. Chief Coppinger added that this is just for applicants, and they do realize that this is fair; that they did this in 2000; that in 1998 it was a different group.

Councilman Benson asked if there was any written evaluation for those participating. Ms. Kelley explained that we have gone through a transition period to a full-blown assessment center concept. Chief Coppinger added that the people in the department wholeheartedly support this. Councilman Benson asked what was the total cost in their Budget. Ms. Kelley responded that the Professional Service Agreement would cost \$40,000.00, and the cost for the Choo Choo is \$19,000.00; there will be additional costs for airline tickets, etc.

Councilman Page verified that these were people who were firemen now, and they went through this assessment center for promotions. Chief Coppinger explained that it was for the rank of lieutenant and captain and is for existing employees. Councilman Page asked if they screened the applicants, and it was a good evaluation. Chief Coppinger explained that this assessment was the screening process, prompting Councilman Page to verify that anyone could go through this assessment center. Chief Coppinger explained that this was just for those wanting to be promoted to lieutenant.

Ms. Kelley explained that this was a development tool; that the applicants would get an assessment of their strengths and weaknesses and could take it as instruction to improve on their weaknesses.

Councilman Page asked if this was done all over the country. Chief Coppinger noted that it was real common throughout the country. Councilman Page verified that it was in the Budget.

Councilman Pierce asked if there had been any problems with this assessment in terms of costs and fees. Ms. Kelley stated not that she was aware of. She reiterated that it was costing \$40,000.00 and the only other thing was a place to do this, and we had to house the assessors that were coming from out of town. She stated that what Councilman Pierce might be referring to was when we did the Police exercises last year that they were almost stopped because of a funeral, and there were additional costs. Councilman Pierce asked how many would they be bringing in and the number of rooms needed.

Ms. Kelley responded that they needed seven breakout rooms for the exercises; that they would house 13 people for one night and 25 people for six nights. Councilman Pierce asked if the breakout rooms were included in the cost, and the answer was yes.

Councilwoman Robinson stated that it sounded like subjective testing rather than objective testing in that there would be no score so to speak. She questioned how fair this was opposed to a written test. She asked if the promotions were based only on role playing. Chief Coppinger stated that they had been doing this since 2000 and are in a state of transition, and it is based partly on the assessment and partly on a written test; that the rank and file prefer the assessment rating over the written test; that whether it is subjective or objective, they knew it was consistent with what is going on; that there is no pass or fail but the applicants are ranked in order. He went on to say that firefighters would be coming here from other places and would not know the individual applicants, and the way they delivered comments would be taken into consideration.

Councilman Benson asked if a firm contacted these firemen. Ms. Kelley explained that the Professional Services Contract was the firm. Councilman Benson stated that he thought we had a real professional fire department; that he had had no complaints in his district, and he did not feel we could bring anyone in whom he would have more confidence in than our fire department; that our administrators are paid money to handle such things as promotions and should not be in a position to have a crutch; that this might be a nice thing to do, but he thought it raised a real serious question when we had just raised taxes, and he was told that the firemen and policemen would be a step behind next year—that if we were not spending \$60,000 here and \$60,000 there, we might be able to implement the step increase, and the firemen might prefer this to an assessment center. He asked if we were in too deep to stop this.

Ms. Kelley stated that they were just asking to spend money that the Council had already authorized, prompting Councilman Benson to ask if they were bringing a moot question to the committee. Chief Coppinger explained that they had to have the Council's authorization to spend the money.

Councilman Hakeem expressed a perception of fairness when administrators promoted whom they wanted to promote; that two representatives had assessed this and concur with it and questioned if we did not want something that would be perceived to be more fair; that within the ranks there is a clamor that it is not fair if administrators do it. He stated that the numbers had been presented to the Council. He questioned if the total raise that employees received was not just below a step and whether people would actually be behind a step next year.

Councilman Page stated that in his mind, the step increase was under the bridge now. He asked if this assessment center had any norms of evaluation. Ms. Kelley stated that there would be norms when the tests are finished; that it is not a standardized test. Councilman Page stated that any test has validation. Ms. Kelley responded that this had been validated by an Industrial Psychologist, and we did not have to repeat the validation process this time—that it is expensive. Councilman Page asked how this assessment is used in promotions and if there are other tools. Chief Coppinger responded that a small percentage is based on seniority and job performance is also taken into consideration. Councilman Page questioned if this was a tool that was needed to say who will be promoted. Chief Coppinger explained that the ranking order is one of other things that is considered. Councilman Page verified that the assessment center was not the total basis for promotion and questioned its use. Chief Coppinger responded that overall, it was the most important basis.

Councilwoman Robinson stated that it gave her great solace to know that there are written instructions that our officers are equipped to deal with; that she hoped this would not fall through the cracks. Chief Coppinger explained that there is continuous training going on constantly; that this just tests what you skills already are.

On motion of Councilman Page, seconded by Councilwoman Robinson, the committee will recommend to the full Council that the assessment center be approved, with Councilman Benson “abstaining”.

Chairman Taylor indicated that he would like some clarification on the step plan issue.

Councilman Hakeem stated that some people got above 4% and some less; that he thought it averaged out with the \$500.00 as the normal step is 3%; that some got only 2.8%, and the raise was not called a “step” but was close to the dollar value. He asked Mrs. Madison if that was accurate.

Ms. Madison responded “sort of”; that the City provided an across-the-board \$500.00 increase and 2% across the board for all employees, and the amount of raise would vary according to how much money you made; that the \$500.00 added to 2% was a larger amount for those on the lower end of the pay scale; that in some cases we raised it from 2.5% up to 20+% to provide a livable wage for people who had a very low income; that it was 3 ½% average across the board and was not in the form of a step; that people who were maxed out would have gotten no increase—that the raise was in the 3 ½% to 5% range and this way everyone got a raise, but the make-up varied; that people did not lose money but lost the process called a step.

Councilman Pierce asked the reasoning for the process of step increases in the first place. He asked if it was to keep us up with surrounding areas; that 2% is the cost-of-living raise.

Ms. Madison explained that the step increases was a means of providing compensation under a systematic basis; that people were supposed to perform to receive the increase—that it was not supposed to be an automatic thing; that the Plan might need to be adjusted periodically; that the across-the-board increase brought the Plan up to market rate; that the Plan was not designed for across-the-board.

Councilman Benson asked if the \$500.00 was not supposed to balance out the medical loss that employees incurred and then another 2%; that some people felt they would have been better off getting the step increase. Ms. Madison stated that if people had gotten the \$500.00 plus the step increase that some would have been better off. Councilman Benson stated that now employees were a step behind rather than having two compilations of steps; that we raised taxes and management should be able to make judgments. He stated that he felt local people could handle these promotions and that the exercises could be held in the empty stormwater building.

Councilman Page asked about Step 3 next year and was told by Ms. Kelley that the whole Plan was raised this year and the integrity of the plan is still in place.

Ms. Madison stated that it was expensive to give a step increase and an across-the-board adjustment.

Councilman Hakeem asked how often this Plan was reassessed or evaluated. Ms. Madison stated that she thought Ms. Kelley assessed it every year. Ms. Kelley stated that it was monitored every year.

Councilman Pierce asked how we fit in the Police Department market, particularly in relation to Nashville.

Councilman Page asked when the Capital Budget would be ready and was told December.

The meeting adjourned at 5:00 P.M.