

Efficiency review at the forefront

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Body

PETERSBURG -- Passions became heated during a public meeting on the city's efficiency review Monday night at Vernon Johns Junior High School.

The meeting was supposed to be a public input session on issues raised in the efficiency review.

However after an introduction by Mayor Annie Mickens, the meeting, which drew more than 120 residents, quickly turned into a time to raise accusations against the city, council and city administration.

"What a fantastic opportunity for residents to have their voice heard on important issues," Mickens said before the meeting began.

Mickens said residents could talk amongst themselves in small groups and either individually or as a group fill out sheets designed to collect information from residents. Each sheet had space for an issue, whether or not it was addressed in the study, a recommended solution, whether or not it might have an impact on the city's budget and which department should address the issue.

After extolling some of the city's recent accomplishments including a population increase for the first time in nearly 30 years and new single family subdivisions, Mickens took a comment from the audience.

That comment led to statements from more than a dozen residents and extended the meeting from 90 minutes to two hours.

"This meeting is just a further delay of addressing the merits of what's in the report," said Greg Werkheiser, the first of many to speak. "The city paid a significant amount of money to a third party company to come in and do what you're asking us to do here tonight. The result was a 500-page report."

Werkheiser suggested council members hear thoughts on the recommendations contained in the report from individuals.

Ben Greenbaum said he thought that, as detailed as the review of the city is, the proposed format of the meeting would be non-productive.

"You've had this report for many months," Greenbaum said. He along with many others questioned why City Council had not invited representatives from Berkshire Advisors, Inc., the firm that completed the review of the city.

Sarah Curtis

Efficiency review at the forefront

Another popular question during the meeting dealt with how long will it take before the city implements anything recommended in the efficiency review.

Mickens said that in early January the city administration will present recommendations to Council based on the findings of the efficiency review. By the end of January she said Council will have a meeting to present those recommendations to the public.

She also asked Council for a motion to invite Berkshire Advisors to the city for a meeting with the public about the review. Councilwoman Dama Rice made the motion and Vice Mayor Horace Webb provided a second before the motion was unanimously approved, to applause from the audience.

Several members of the audience raised the legality of the motion since there was no City Attorney or Clerk of Council present. Mickens assured residents that the meeting was legal and that she was keeping minutes of the meeting. She added that the firm will be contacted today and that when a meeting has been arranged with representatives from Berkshire Advisors, it will be announced on the city's Web site, possibly through the school systems, sent out via e-mail and advertised in The Progress-Index.

Treska Wilson-Smith asked whether or not Council would consider a change of charter to a strong mayor system.

"I've asked multiple times," Wilson-Smith said.

"The citizens should have a say," said Wilson-Smith, who recently began circulating a citizens' petition to that effect.

Alain Joyeaux said one of the real problems with the city as a whole is a lack of accountability. He asked why only two of seven councilmembers turned in questionnaires distributed by the consulting firm that compiled the efficiency review.

Mickens said that residents could ask individual councilmembers why they did or did not turn in their surveys. Councilman Kenneth Pritchett said that only he and Rice turned in the survey.

Later in the meeting, Mickens said she had issues with the survey that Berkshire Advisors did not adequately answer when asked.

Webb said he sent his in to Berkshire Advisors but that Monday was the first he heard that his was not received.

"I believe that when we pay a firm \$150,000, I shouldn't have to send it twice," Webb said.

Rice said she mailed the survey in -- twice -- and had to hand deliver it to the firm before they received it. Councilman Mike Ross said he didn't complete the survey because he didn't feel as though he had adequate information to answer the survey. Councilman Ray Coleman answered similarly. Councilman Brian Moore said that the survey was received by council during the crucial budget development time and he felt that took priority over the survey.

Mickens said there are many extremely difficult decisions that must be made including whether or not to continue funding youth services, leisure services or to make cuts at the police department as recommended in the efficiency review.

She added that the city will likely face even more difficult decisions as the state looks to make budget cuts which could affect the school system. Currently the school system receives \$2,100 per student in local funding. The State currently pays the other 80 percent of a student's education.

Richard Stewart said that with as many great ideas and people who were in the meeting, the city could be great. But he also noted some dissimilarities between those in the meeting and the makeup of the city.

Efficiency review at the forefront

"The report says that 90 percent of the city is black and that the majority of people are poverty stricken," Stewart said. "Look at this room, the majority of people here are white and you all know your income, look at all that money."

Stewart said that most of those in the room hadn't been in the city very long and that the city has improved tremendously in the last 15 years.

"This is just a witch hunt," Stewart said.

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