

City Council Work Session
March 2, 2026

Present were: Mayor Cone, Councilors Korzen, Qualls, Morency, Valerino, Higbee, Plourde, Lavertu and Theberge.

Others present: City Manager Phillip L. Warren Jr., Dir. Of Strat. Initiatives and Asst. City Mgr. Pamela Laflamme, City Clerk Shelli Fortin, Finance Director Holly Larsen, Library Director Ann Brungot, Chief of Police Jeff Lemoine, Police Commission Lisa Arguin, SAU3 District Educational Services Administrator Tammy Fauteux, School Board Vice-Chair Eamon Kelley, Lisa Connell, Berlin Sun and Members of the Public.

Mayor Cone opened the meeting at 6:29 p.m.

Proposed Amendment to the City of Berlin Charter

Mr. Warren advised he received information from the City's legal counsel as to whether there are other ways to change the Charter. He stated there is no other option than the three options discussed at the last meeting. There is no difference between amending and changing the Charter. Councilor Korzen commented he is ready to step away from any changes to the Charter as the majority of the Council is not in favor. He did state that taxpayers can still form a Charter Commission and amend it if they choose. He suggested reviewing the Charter in the future and see if changes are needed.

City Manager presents FY27 Budget to Council

Mr. Warren advised the proposed FY27 budget is in the amount of \$48,578,099. This is a 9.25% increase from the FY26 budget. This increase includes \$500,000 for paving per the Mayor's request, capital improvements increased as we've delayed and deferred some from different depts. that they have to fund at this point. There are also capital items that are already committed to, such as the leases for the ladder truck and loaders. The increase also includes an additional position in Finance as requested by Council. The health insurance increase is 6%. The majority of employees are getting a 3% increase through collective bargaining. He stated that this proposed budget, with the exception of the capital improvement additions, is retaining the same services as the FY26 budget did. The proposed budget would bring the tax rate to approximately \$33.82 per thousand. This is without 100% of the utility amount, we were down about a million dollars because of the equalization rate. The revaluation planned will bring our ratio back to 100% which will allow us to collect 100% of the utility values. He informed Council that each department would be presenting their individual budgets over the next few weeks. This is the time that Council can ask questions of the depts., analyze the dept.'s presentations and decide if they feel that cuts or reductions are necessary. The first meeting is next Monday with the Board of Education.

Councilor Lavertu questioned if there is another way to do the budget process as to where they would set a specific amount for each dept. and it would be each department's responsibility to remain within that set amount. Mr. Warren responded he's never processed a budget this way and this would just be cutting funds and not addressing the services that would be cut. Councilor Lavertu commented each department should be able to decide what services can be cut. Mr. Warren stated it is the duty of the Council to provide policy directions to the City Manager who would then discuss them with the depts. Councilor Lavertu stated this is what he wants to do. Mr. Warren responded that policy is not a number, it's an item, it's a service. He commented that it could be done this way if a goal setting exercise was done before the budget process started. Mr. Warren stated that Chief Watkins color coded his budget in a spreadsheet that he created which red included everything he has today at the current service level he can't touch, yellow were items he could touch but would impact services and green were items that could be cut at the present service level. Councilor Qualls asked if all departments could present their budget like the fire dept. did with the color coordination. Mr. Warren advised he could put together spreadsheets for all departments except he will defer the PD and School to do their own.

Other

Councilor Korzen stated he would like to have a conversation about the 2-way traffic proposal on Main and Pleasant Street as he's received a lot of complaints. He was asked if this is something the Council could reconsider. Mr. Warren stated that a motion could be made to reconsider. It would have to be someone who voted in favor that would make the motion to reconsider and then it would require a 2/3 majority vote. Councilor Korzen moved, seconded by Councilor Lavertu to reconsider the 2-way traffic proposal. The motion failed by roll call vote. Qualls – no, Higbee – no, Plourde – no, Morency – no, Valerino – no, Lavertu – yes, Korzen – yes, Theberge – yes, Cone – yes.

At 7:31 p.m., there being no further business in Work Session, Mayor Cone recessed before moving on to the Regular Meeting.

Respectfully Submitted,
Danielle Rioux
Executive Assistant

*Minutes are unofficial until they have been accepted by the City Council by motion.

CITY COUNCIL MEETING – Monday, March 2, 2026

Public Hearing

Mayor Cone opened the Public Hearing on Resolution 2026-02 Humanities-to-go Grant Dr. Josh Duclos Library at 7:39 pm. There were no public comments. The hearing was closed at 7:40 pm.

Mayor Cone opened the Public Hearing on Resolution 2026-03 Humanities-to-go Grant Mary Adams Library at 7:40 pm. There were no public comments. The hearing was closed at 7:40 pm.

Regular Meeting

Mayor Cone called the Regular City Council Meeting to order at approximately 7:41 pm.

a. Pledge of Allegiance

b. Roll Call

Present: Mayor Cone, Councilors Qualls, Higbee, Plourde, Morency, Valerino, Lavertu, Korzen, and Theberge

Absent: None

Also present: City Manager Phillip L. Warren Jr., City Clerk Shelli Fortin, Finance Director Holly Larsen, Chief of Police Jeff Lemoine, Police Commissioner Lisa Arguin, Library Director Ann Brungot, District Educational Services Administrator Tammy Fauteux, Paul Grenier, Richard King, Russell Otis, Maureen Patry, Eamon Kelley, Jeanne Gauthier, Lisa Connell, Berlin Daily Sun and other members of the public.

c. Councilor Theberge moved, with a second by Councilor Korzen, to accept the minutes of the February 17, 2026, Regular Meeting and Work Session. So moved, the motion passed.

Disbursements:

Disbursement Summary Draft #2004 with a start date of 02/18/2026 and an end date of 03/02/2026 for a total cash disbursement of \$582,698.63. Councilor Theberge moved, with a second by Councilor Qualls, to accept the disbursement summary and pay all bills as recommended by the Committee on Accounts/Claims. So moved, the motion passed.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

Paul Grenier, of 492 Champlain Street, stated that he was going to ask the Council to reconsider the vote on the downtown traffic pattern to gather more public input. Mr. Grenier stated that he feels any disruption in business for the downtown merchants could put them over the edge. Mr. Grenier shared concerns about snow removal for Main Street with two-way traffic, and also noted that there will not be room for cars to open doors and it will make deliveries impossible. Mr. Grenier asked the Council to be sure that the engineers design and build with the ability to go back to one-way traffic on Main Street if they realize it was a mistake.

Richard King, of 107 Jericho Road, agreed with Mr. Grenier, stating that he believes Main Street should stay as a one-way street. Mr. King shared concerns about customers having to park by Irving or by the bridges to access downtown businesses. Mr. King stated that people on retirement are only getting a 2% COLA. Mr. King also stated that they should try a different approach to the budget, stating that the City needs to cut taxes as you can only take so much from the people here. Mr. King also stated that he believes the school budget should be cut more, as Berlin has one of the highest costs per pupil in the state even though our education standards are not at the top.

Russell Otis, of 18 Cascade Street, spoke about reinstating the snowmelt portion of the downtown project. Mr. Otis stated that they spent a lot of time and energy on developing this plan, and received national praise from Washington D.C. Mr. Otis noted that the snowmelt system would provide for cost savings, promote outdoor activity, increase safety, and prolong the life of the project. Mr. Otis suggested they install the infrastructure for the snowmelt system. Mr. Otis noted that this is probably the biggest grant that Berlin will ever receive and they should do it right.

Maureen Patry, a Main Street business owner, noted that she believes two-way traffic is a ridiculous idea. Ms. Patry shared concerns about parking, noting that there were about 30 cars on Main Street this evening, and the proposed

Woolworth lot would only create 22 spaces which will be full of workers. Ms. Patry stated that the downtown consultant never spoke with her, but she did attend the presentation. Ms. Patry stated that customers will not walk to get to the businesses if there is no parking available on Main Street.

Eamon Kelley, of 396 Grafton Street, stated that when he first heard about the proposed two-way traffic he had a similar reaction. However, this proposal is a universal design, flat with streetscaping, and can be changed if needed. Mr. Kelley stated that they must meet engineering deadlines and noted that six months of meetings were held to discuss the plans. Mr. Kelley noted that although he wishes that there was more advertising, there were three public hearings held, along with Planning Board meetings, and the information could be found. Mr. Kelley stated that two-way traffic was the first recommendation of the consultant hired by BIDPA. Mr. Kelley noted that they can continue the conversation about one-way or two-way traffic even after the infrastructure is in place.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

1. Council Committee Reports

There were no Council Committee Reports.

2. Resolution 2026-02 Humanities to go Grant Dr. Josh Duclos Library (tabled 2/17/2026)

In the Year of Our Lord Two Thousand Twenty-Six

A **RESOLUTION** authorizing an application to New Hampshire Humanities, Humanities-to-Go grant, in the amount of \$300, for the purpose of a hybrid presentation of *Why Democracy?* with Dr. Josh Duclos on March 4, 2026

Resolved by the City Council of the City of Berlin as Follows:

WHEREAS, free access to programming that inspire curiosity, foster civil dialogue, and explore big questions are hard to come by in the North Country, despite the region's strong need for educational, cultural, and civic enrichment opportunities; and

WHEREAS, Berlin Public Library in collaboration with Fortier Library at White Mountain Community College, Randolph Public Library, and Gorham Public Library hosts a Winter/Spring Book and Lecture Series; and

WHEREAS, The Winter/Spring 2026 Book and Lecture series entitled *Notable New Hampshire: 250 Years in the Making* will focus on the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the American Revolution, and some of the New Hampshire personalities that played important roles.

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED by the City Council of the City of Berlin as Follows:

That the City Manager is authorized to receive a grant funds in the amount of \$300 from New Hampshire Humanities, Humanities to Go Grant, and the grant proceeds are hereby appropriated for the purpose of the grant, and all grant proceeds shall be deposited with the City Treasurer, and the City Manager is authorized to do all things necessary to effectuate this grant.

This Resolution shall be in full force and effect from and after passage.

Councilor Higbee moved, with a second from Councilor Morency, to remove Resolution 2026-02 from the table. So moved, the motion carried.

Councilor Higbee moved, with a second from Councilor Morency, to read Resolution 2026-02 for a second time. So moved, the motion carried.

Councilor Higbee moved, with a second from Councilor Morency, to read Resolution 2026-02 for a third time. So moved the motion carried.

Councilor Higbee moved, with a second from Councilor Morency, to pass Resolution 2026-02. So moved, the motion carried.

3. Resolution 2026-03 Humanities to go Grant Mary Adams Library (tabled 2/17/2026)

In the Year of Our Lord Two Thousand Twenty-Six

A **RESOLUTION** authorizing an application to New Hampshire Humanities, Humanities-to-Go grant, in the amount of \$300, for the purpose of a hybrid presentation of *Redcoats and Rebels: New Hampshire and the American Revolution* with Mary Adams on April 1, 2026.

Resolved by the City Council of the City of Berlin as Follows:

WHEREAS, free access to programming that inspire curiosity, foster civil dialogue, and explore big questions are hard to come by in the North Country, despite the region's strong need for educational, cultural, and civic enrichment opportunities; and

WHEREAS, Berlin Public Library in collaboration with Fortier Library at White Mountain Community College, Randolph Public Library, and Gorham Public Library hosts a Winter/Spring Book and Lecture Series; and

WHEREAS, The Winter/Spring 2026 Book and Lecture series entitled *Notable New Hampshire: 250 Years in the Making* will focus on the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the American Revolution, and some of the New Hampshire personalities that played important roles.

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED by the City Council of the City of Berlin as Follows:

That the City Manager is authorized to receive a grant funds in the amount of \$300 from New Hampshire Humanities, Humanities to Go Grant, and the grant proceeds are hereby appropriated for the purpose of the grant, and all grant proceeds shall be deposited with the City Treasurer, and the City Manager is authorized to do all things necessary to effectuate this grant.

This Resolution shall be in full force and effect from and after passage.

Councilor Higbee moved, with a second from Councilor Morency, to remove Resolution 2026-03 from the table. So moved, the motion carried.

Councilor Higbee moved, with a second from Councilor Morency, to read Resolution 2026-03 for a second time. So moved, the motion carried.

Councilor Higbee moved, with a second from Councilor Morency, to read Resolution 2026-03 for a third time. So moved the motion carried.

Councilor Higbee moved, with a second from Councilor Morency, to pass Resolution 2026-03. So moved, the motion carried.

NEW BUSINESS

1. City Manager's Report

1. Attached is the January 2026 Activity Report for the Police Department.
2. Attached is the February 2026 Fire Department Activity Report.
3. Salt deliveries have returned to normal, we have received what was ordered.
4. We are catching up on breakdowns. At present one sidewalk tractor is still awaiting parts, the other tractor is in service as is the spare tractor. All other equipment is in service, at present.

Councilor Valerino moved, with a second by Councilor Korzen, to accept the City Manager's Report and place it on file. So moved, the motion passed.

2. Mayor's Report

- a. Letter from Jeanne Gauthier re: Elderly Exemptions

Dear Council Member,

I am writing to you today on behalf of my mom. Her name is Jeannette Valliere, 63 Charron Ave.

My mom is 88 yrs old, lives alone in her home. She was born in Berlin, and has lived here approximately 85 years. She has no vehicle. Her income is just barely ineligible for the Elderly Tax Exemption.

(Personal financial information redacted.)

I am writing to ask you to raise the income eligibility amount to keep up with the rising cost of taxes and cost of living. This would be a small step to help the elderly in our area.

Gorham's rate is \$28,760 for a single person. The asset limit is \$50,000. Littleton's rate is \$30,000 for single person. The asset limit is \$75,000. Littleton is also going to be voting on an increase to \$40,000 single with a \$100,000 asset limit in March. Both towns understand the elderly need our help.

The elderly rate for fuel assistance is \$47,604 for a single person.

There are a lot of elderly people in this whole area who are in the same situation as my mom. Living day to day on her fixed income that does not keep up with all the rising costs of living.

Please consider moving the amount up so the elderly, like her, don't have to stress about whether to buy medicine or pay taxes.

Thank you for your time,

Jeanne Gauthier

Mayor Cone noted that the Council did adjust the income guidelines last year. City Manager Warren noted that Berlin's amount is lower than other communities, and the Council could consider adjusting this again based on their financial situation after the budget is completed. Mr. Warren reminded the Council that any amount reduced for the elderly is made up by the rest of the taxpayers. Mayor Cone agreed that they should hold off to see where they are after the budget process.

b. Re-appointment to Berlin Water Commission – J. Dupuis

Dear Honorable Mayor:

My current term as Water Commissioner is set to expire on May 1, 2026.

I am writing to respectfully express my interest in continuing to serve in this role. It has been an honor to serve the community in this capacity, and I remain committed to supporting the ongoing work and responsibilities of the Water Commission.

I would sincerely appreciate your consideration for reappointment to a new term as Water Commissioner, with the term to expire on May 1, 2030.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,

Joseph Dupuis

Councilor Morency moved, with a second by Councilor Higbee, to approve the nomination of Joseph Dupuis as a member of the Berlin Water Commission with a term to expire on May 1, 2030. So moved, the motion passed.

c. Appointment to Planning Board – C. Sawyer

Mayor Cone & City Council:

After moving to Berlin last fall, the beauty of the surroundings and the kindness of its people, among other things, have been deeply appealing to me. In fact, on my first week here, my neighbors (one of them the newly elected state rep for Coos County, Marc Tremblay) insisted on introducing themselves and helping me move. They've been invaluable to me since then; helping plow my driveway without me having even asked, looking out for my packages, and offering me insight into the community and the best ways to get things done. Despite the rough winter, Berlin has very much stolen my heart, and I intend on being here for a very long time, probably until the end of my life.

A brief background on me: I'm a remote worker who's attended several council and planning board sessions, recognizing the value in community members engaging in their local democratic processes. I don't have a formal education in the sense that I am a high school dropout, so education is one of my priorities as I feel intimately aware of how that system can fail our young people.

There're a couple of catalysts that got me interested in these meetings; one of them is the political headlines that seem relentless and unavoidable no matter how much we try to ignore them for how negative and polarizing they can be.

Another is my love of reading; reading nonfiction and, more recently, political philosophy has been really enlightening for me. One of the books I've read recently, called "The Social Contract", opened my eyes to what the point of all of this is. A lot of people my age don't get involved in these processes, believing government to be an autonomous machine that "just works" and that they have no power over, something to complain about repeatedly. I don't want to live that way; whether we realize it or not, this entire system doesn't have to exist. It was built on the backs of people much greater and wiser than us, and we have a duty to fully commit to these processes, in mind and soul, for them and for posterity.

I digress. I'm interested in a three-year alternate seat on the Planning Board. Please feel free to reach out with any questions you may have, I'm happy to engage however I can. I am told the term would run through April 30, 2029.

Sincerely,

Clarence Sawyer

Mayor Cone stated that he was going to table this item for now. Councilor Korzen asked if there is an open alternate position on the Planning Board, and was advised there is.

Councilor Valerino moved, with a second by Councilor Morency, to accept the Mayor's Report and place it on file. So moved, the motion passed.

3. Public Comments

Jeanne Gauthier, of 10 Corbin Avenue in Gorham, stated that she understood that her request was tabled for now and thanked the Council for considering it. Ms. Gauthier requested that her letter be removed from the website as it contains her mother's personal information, and City Manager Warren advised that it would be removed. Ms. Gauthier requested to be notified when the Council discusses the elderly exemptions, and Mr. Warren advised her to look for the item on the agendas.

Richard King, of 107 Jericho Road, again voiced his opposition to two-way traffic on Main Street. Mr. King noted that people trying to own a business will lose out. Mr. King noted that the street is not big enough with the cars we have today.

4. Council Comments

Councilor Theberge brought up some food for thought. Councilor Theberge noted that if you have a landlord and don't pay your rent, you will be evicted, and if you own a home and don't pay your taxes, the City will take your home. Councilor Theberge posed the question as to whether you truly own your home, and stated he believes you do not if you do not pay your taxes.

Councilor Morency reminded the public, after reading comments on social media, that grant money can only be used for its intended purpose. Money received for the downtown project cannot be used for anything else.

Councilor Morency noted that he has negotiated union contracts for 20 years, and that union employees are not receiving a cost-of-living increase in addition to any negotiated increases in the contract. Councilor Morency noted that most union contracts have either a 1% or 2% increase per year.

Councilor Lavertu stated that he has received many calls and comments from citizens opposed to the proposed Dummer Yard project. Councilor Lavertu noted that the company has promised to be here for 10 years providing revenue to the City, however they may leave sooner, and the dirt will always be here. Councilor Lavertu noted that they will need to take a hard look at the proposal and be sure to get all the information, as most residents are against it.

Councilor Korzen noted that he believes some of the data presented in the notification for the Dummer Yard proposal is skewed. Councilor Korzen advised that the project will be presented to the Planning Board, and the decision will be made by them. Councilor Korzen stated that he believes the State and the City dropped the ball on Dummer Yard, and problems there should have been addressed a long time ago.

Councilor Korzen stated that he has heard Council comments about the State not providing enough funding for education, and noted the demographic challenges pointed out by Councilor Plourde at the last meeting. Councilor Korzen stated that teachers do a good job navigating our challenges and that he believes the state does support our education efforts. Councilor Korzen noted that Berlin receives \$14,500 per student, compared to \$4,600 in towns like Hanover or Rye. Councilor Korzen stated that his wife, Representative Lori Korzen, has made a video on how the State representatives have been working to increase adequacy aid in the areas that need it. Councilor Korzen suggested that we not push the blame, but work together on problems.

5. Adjournment

On a motion by Councilor Higbee, seconded by Councilor Qualls, the Council voted to adjourn the meeting at 8:29 pm. So moved, the motion carried.

A True Record, Attest:

Shelli Fortin
City Clerk

Note: Minutes are unofficial until they have been accepted by the Council by motion.