

CITY OF BERLIN
New Hampshire

Minutes of Council Budget Session of 4/13/2026
Council Chambers
6:30 pm

Members:

Mayor Cone
Councilor Valerino
Councilor Morency
Councilor Korzen
Councilor Higbee
Councilor Plourde
Councilor Theberge

Police Commissioners:

Diana Berthiaume
Lisa Arguin
Pierre Morin

City Staff:

City Manager Phillip Warren, Jr
Holly Larsen, Finance Director
James Watkins, Fire Chief
Jeff Lemoine, Police Chief
Nathan Roy, Deputy Chief
Lt. Zach Howry
Hollie Walters, PD Administrative Assistant

Public:

Matthew Chernicki
Paul Guerin
Christian Judson
Lisa Connell, Berlin Daily Sun

Mayor Cone called the meeting to order at 6:37 p.m.

1. FY2027 Budget – Safety Division

a. Fire/EMS

Chief Watkins presented the Fire Department budget for FY2027, breaking it down into three categories. The first section containing items that he has no control over, all contractual, such as salaries, health insurance, NHRS, and other benefits. This section totals \$3,842,431.57, or 93.99% of the budget.

The second section of the budget was items that he has limited control over, such as training, fuel, and electricity, which totals \$242,050.00 or 5.93% of the budget. Chief Watkins advised that when he created the budget, the cost for fuel was less, so this may increase. Chief Watkins advised that he originally

planned to add \$25,000 to the training line to send one firefighter to paramedic school, but he did not include it this year.

The third section of the budget contains items that he has total control over, such as subscriptions, conferences, and miscellaneous expenses, which totals \$3,750.00, or 0.09% of the budget.

Chief Watkins reviewed the Capital Improvement Plan, which includes the ladder truck payment of \$229,000.00, which they are committed to. Chief Watkins advised that they have started production on the ladder truck. New items added to the CIP are rescue jackets and an ambulance lease payment. Rescue jackets are something requested by the firefighters, as they do not have separate jackets to wear on ambulance calls, only their bunker coats. With concerns over cancer from chemicals in gear, even if the gear is washed, it should not be worn for medical calls. The lease payment for an ambulance is an estimate for a 5-year lease. This would include a remounted box on a new cab and chassis, and would also come with a new cardiac monitor, power stretcher, and auto load system. City Manager Warren noted that the lead time on a new ambulance would be three to four years, however a remount is only about four months. Chief Watkins advised that the current ambulances have held up well, but are getting tired. City Manager Warren advised that they plan to hold on to the older ambulance, as they may be able to assist with transfers in the future. Chief Watkins noted that they have discussed the possibility of providing just emergency transfers in the next few years.

Councilor Higbee asked about revenues, and Chief Watkins advised they will not have a surplus; however, revenues will cover the expenses. Chief Watkins noted that revenues were approximately \$580,000 for the year when he checked today. Chief Watkins noted that medical billing went up considerably in the budget, as he assumed the charge for billing was taken as a percentage from the payment, however it is billed separately.

Councilor Theberge asked about the rescue jackets, and what they would do to outfit new personnel. Chief Watkins advised that the jackets would be included in the equipment line as new employees are hired.

Councilor Morency asked about the monitoring report, and if they collaborate with the police department to report drug overdoses. Chief Watkins advised he will be sure the numbers are shared.

Councilor Morency asked what would happen if \$100,000 was cut from the budget, and Chief Watkins advised they would lose positions. Chief Watkins noted that the collective bargaining agreement does have minimum staffing requirements.

Mayor Cone asked about staffing, and Chief Watkins advised there are two shifts with seven personnel, and two shifts with six. There are two part-time employees at school, who they are planning to hire in July to fill the open positions.

When asked if there would be increased revenue with the new hires, Chief Watkins advised that revenue would increase with additional ALS personnel. When asked why the health insurance rates increased, Chief Watkins advised that it is due to rates and demographics.

Councilor Korzen asked about the SAFER grant, and Chief Watkins advised they have not been awarded the grant; however, they can try again. Councilor Korzen commended both the fire department and police department for going after grants. City Manager Warren advised that the Fire Department does have a grant consultant, however there are currently no grants available for gear, and grants will not fund day-to-day items in the operating budget.

Councilor Korzen asked, with the cost of health insurance and retirement, if it would be more cost effective to pay overtime rather than hire new employees. Chief Watkins noted that there is a minimum staffing requirement in the negotiated contract. Councilor Korzen asked if they could hire employees that are just EMT trained, and Chief Watkins advised they could not.

It was noted by the Council that they have not heard a negative word about the EMS services provided by the department, and commended them for the quality care.

b. Police

Chief Lemoine reviewed the Police Department FY2027 budget proposal, noting that the budget was included in the Council packet. Chief Lemoine advised that salary and benefits comprise 91% of the operating budget.

Chief Lemoine reviewed the current staffing as compared to what was budgeted, noting that they are currently down five officers, one detective, and one dispatcher. Chief Lemoine noted that the School Resource Officer position is paid 25% from the police department budget, and the remaining 75% by the school. Chief Lemoine explained the difference between sworn and unsworn personnel, and union and non-union employees.

Chief Lemoine advised that the department provides coverage to both Berlin and Milan, along with landfill coverage for AVR RDD. Milan and AVR RDD pay for these services. Milan currently pays just over \$71,000 for police coverage, and it was noted that this contract should be renegotiated. Dispatch services for Milan are paid as a fee per call.

Chief Lemoine compared the staffing in Berlin to the national average, which is 2.4 officers per 1,000 residents.

Chief Lemoine reviewed the calls for service, noting that they received 3,000 more calls in 2025 than in 2024. Chief Lemoine noted that based on the calls, the department was more proactive than reactive.

Councilor Morency noted that Berlin is the largest agency in the area, and that many do not understand the number of hours that go into the calls received.

Councilor Theberge asked who handles truancy calls. Chief Lemoine advised that although they have an SRO, this position is not designed to be disciplinary. The Juvenile Officer assists the school with truancy complaints.

Chief Lemoine discussed the challenges they are facing, including staffing shortages, increased demand for services, aging cruisers, insurance costs, training costs, and IT costs.

Chief Lemoine noted that they have had only 20 applicants for the five open patrol positions in the last year, with only one applicant being hired who lasted six weeks. Chief Lemoine noted that this has increased overtime hours needed, which leads to burnout.

Councilor Korzen asked about the NBA patrols, and Chief Lemoine advised that these are done on a volunteer basis, and only done if other overtimes do not need to be filled first.

The Council discussed the aging cruisers, and Chief Lemoine noted that two have over 100,000 miles, and two have over 95,000 miles. Chief Lemoine shared mileage for all department vehicles. Chief Lemoine noted that they try to respect taxpayers; however, they also have a responsibility to keep officers

in safe gear. Councilor Korzen asked about fleet management, and City Manager Warren advised maintenance is done by the Public Works Department, who do have fleet management software in which mileage and service is recorded.

Chief Lemoine compared starting pay for Berlin to other local agencies, noting that Gorham's starting pay is higher with less calls for service.

Councilor Valerino noted that he has noticed patrols through the City with their alley lights on, and stated that they are very visible.

Councilor Morency asked what the department would lose if \$100,000 was cut from the budget. Chief Lemoine advised that they are already short-staffed, however there would be reduced manpower for community events, reactive enforcement and prioritizing of calls, a reduction in community involvement, and longer response times. Chief Lemoine noted that their number one function is to answer the phone and send an officer to show up. Everything else would have to go, such as crossing guards, special enforcement, and the school resource officer. Chief Lemoine noted that training could be reduced, however decreased training leads to higher civil liability.

Chief Lemoine noted that the current records management system will soon be obsolete. There are two new systems available, CSI and ProSuite. The migration of data for departments has been smoother with ProSuite. Employees have travelled to other departments to view the systems to help in deciding which to choose.

Chief Lemoine noted that the costs for animal control have risen significantly. The Conway Humane Society has been a great partner for many years, and has recently raised their charges per animal. The department is responsible for strays for the first seven days, and the humane society takes ownership after that. It was noted that the Conway Humane Society also requested \$15,000 from the City as a non-profit, and they should discuss this with someone from the agency.

Councilor Theberge asked if the department did ride-a-longs for recruitment, and Chief Lemoine advised they provide them for both high school and college students.

Councilor Korzen asked if there was surplus in the budget from the open positions, and Chief Lemoine advised that this was part of the money that was taken from their budget earlier this year to help with the tax rate.

2. Non-public Session

Councilor Higbee moved, with a second by Councilor Valerino, to adjourn to non-public session at 7:55 pm under NH RSA 91-A:3 II (a) (c). So moved, the motion carried unanimously by roll call vote.

The Council discussed an employee. No votes were taken.

The Council discussed compensation. No votes were taken.

Councilor Higbee moved, with a second by Councilor Valerino, to leave non-public session at 8:44 pm. So moved, the motion carried unanimously by roll call vote.

Respectfully submitted,
Shelli Fortin, City Clerk

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