

Top of the Hill 2012 Community Forum
Meeting Notes
05/03/2012

Forty two people attended the Top of the Hill 2012 Community Forum on Monday, April 16th at the Newport Public Library. Attendees heard our new City Manager, Jane Howington, and 2nd Ward Councilor Justin McLaughlin review an agenda of items currently impacting Newport. For many it was a first time opportunity to meet Jane, who was just approaching 100 days on the job. She comes to Newport with 25 years of experience, as well as Masters Degrees in Public Administration and Urban and Regional Planning. The following are the agenda items covered and the comments made:

Budget Issues

The budget has just been submitted and calls for level funding of all departments. The submitted budget, subject to possible adjustment, calls for a 2.43% increase in revenue, well under the statutory cap of 4%.

While there are issues such as a million dollar shortfall in the schools and low funding levels of the pension plans, in particular the fire fund, we are not in a state of emergency and the city's bond rating will remain high.

For those who are interested, the city council will be holding a series of sessions on the FY 2012/2013 Municipal Budget. All sessions are held in the Council Chamber. Sessions include:

Wednesday, May 2 at 6:30 p.m. -- Overview, Library, Capital Improvement Program (CIP)

Thursday, May 3 at 6:30 p.m. -- General Fund Budgets, Civic Support

Monday, May 7 at 6:30 pm. -- Enterprise Fund Budgets

Thursday, May 24 at 7 p.m. -- Council Workshop with School Committee-- School Department Budget

Infrastructure

Roads – A five year plan is being presented to the council and Jane mentioned employing a Geographic Information System (GIS) to enhance planning and organization. Such a system would compile in one place the locations of various infrastructure features. Washington Square/Broadway Project is the #1 priority for next year. Jane talked about the need for better informing the public with respect to plans as well as to progress, perhaps with the help of outside expertise. Justin mentioned improving the ease of use on the city web site.

Water & Sewer

Questions were asked about the substantial increases in water bills. Much of the increase is the result of catching up due to years of deferring maintenances on old systems as well as complying with the consent decree from the Clean Water Act law suit, i.e. unavoidable.

Queen Anne Square

This is currently on track for the fall. The Department of Environmental Management has taken information on soil testing and will come back with additional work to be done.

Communications and City Involvement

Jane is planning two separate opportunities for contact and communication with various community groups of Newport. First will be a visit with each community in the fall to discuss specific issues or problems within the neighborhood. The second will be a community “walk-a-round” which will take place in the spring of 2012. She and members of her staff will conduct tours through the various neighborhoods to hear about and to observe first hand infrastructure problems. Top of the Hill Association will participate in both of these and will advise members in advance of these events, so that all who want to participate can do so.

America’s Cup and Tall Ships

Jane was asked about plans for the America’s Cup races scheduled for June 23rd - July 1st. She expects the races to be an economic positive for the city. They will take place in Narragansett Bay off Fort Adams and can be viewed from facilities being set up at Fort Adams. She talked about traffic and parking plans and emphasized using a special water taxi service between Perrotti Park and Fort Adams.

The races will be followed by the visit of the Tall Ships, July 6th – 9th. Jane anticipates that these events will attract a lot of visitors.

The speakers stayed for an informal visit with the attendees after the formal session concluded. The general response has been very positive on the experience, skills and ideas that Jane brings to her job.