

**GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE
MEETING REPORT
TUESDAY, MARCH 26, 2024 @ 7:00 P.M.**

Attendees: Councillor Justin Tseng, Committee Chair; Council President Isaac “Zac” Bears, Committee Vice-Chair; Council Vice President Kit Collins; Councillor Emily Lazzaro; Councillor George Scarpelli; Councillor Matt Leming (non-voting member of the Committee); City Clerk Adam Hurtubise; Chief of Staff Nina Nazarian; Election Commission Chair Henry Milorin, Election Commission Member Erin DiBenedetto; other participants as noted in the body of this report.

Chair Tseng called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m. on March 26, 2024 in the City Council Chambers on the second floor of Medford City Hall, and via Zoom. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss 2023 Municipal Election process errors and accountability (Paper 23-474).

Chair Tseng thanked participants for attending. He gave an update on work to date on the topic. Members of the Election Commission and Chief of Staff Nina Nazarian, who has been helping the Elections Team, were invited to the meeting, and Chair Tseng said that they are all here tonight.

President Bears said that the Council did introduce a number of papers regarding the elections in 2023, including before the recount. He said that the underlying issue is, when we have procedural errors, what is the protocol for the Department, in notifying people, being very transparent about what the errors were and how those errors were communicated. He said he wanted to make sure that there was clear understanding. He said that there has since been a staffing change in the office and since then, there has been very clear reporting. He said we did receive the report they had requested. He said he also appreciated that the Election Commission chair submitted his own report. He said we have more complicated elections than ever before, and we have at least two elections every year. He said that running elections in the city has never been more complicated than it is now, requiring full-time staff and part-time staff. He asked if we have staffing levels sufficient for success of the team. He said he also wants to know if we have staff in place who were doing the job. He said he wants to have a fully-staffed elections office full time. He said he wanted to acknowledge some significant improvements. He said that there is an Elections Department that is separate from the Election Commission.

Councillor Scarpelli said that the Election Commission does the best it can. He said that there were huge deficiencies realized in November and that magnified again for the federal election in March. He said he appreciates the reports, but that the reports mean nothing if the same things happen again and again. He said he thinks the Administration should ask for an outside audit and for more training from the state on how to run an election, and how to count ballots. He said that the mistakes open up an avenue for mistrust and confusion. He said it is not the poll workers’ fault. He said that

they have not been trained or vetted properly. He said that the Council asked years ago for cleanup of the voting lists. He said households receive ballots when they don't even live there any more. He said we see voters who have passed away who are still on voting lists. He said unless we try to get ahead of it, we will never catch up. He said we need to put some funding and support toward this venture right now. He said we saw issues in March that were similar to the issues in November. He said we know that there are issues. He said that we need to give the Elections Commission and staff the tools that they need to run an election. He said that the first step is the review of the voting rolls. He said former City Councillors were told that they were not registered voters. He said it is not often that you see a Chief of Staff running an election. He said that this doesn't look good, having a Chief of Staff running an election. He said he would support any endeavor that would support the commission and the department.

President Bears said he agrees with some of what was said. He said that there are procedural and training issues that need to be addressed. He said he has reviewed the report. He said there was a signage issue that was remedied. He said there were some issues with central tabulation and with entering of votes (77 ballots) for post-election tabulation. He said he has communicated with the Secretary of State's Office. He said that the Secretary's Office has not come in here and declared that there is a broken system. He said that there was an excellent recount. He said we need to address issues like this but that the idea of turning investigatory issues into large-scale problems, the Secretary's Office has been asked to make that determination and has declined to make that determination. He said we need a full-time Elections Department Director. He said the Council has said multiple times that we do not believe that 2.5 full-time employees is a sufficient number. He said that the March election was much smoother than the November election.

Vice President Collins said her concerns also center around what the Council has been talking about for months, which is the under-resourcing and under capacity of our Elections Department. She said that this is a department that needs more than two and a half full time employees. She said that it is not a properly staffed, fully resourced department. She said that issues like lack of signage reflect a resource and staffing issue. She said we need to elevate the Elections Coordinator or Manager position to a Director-level position.

Councillor Leming said that he is not a member of this committee but he said that this is not just about understaffing. He said it's also about software. He said people showed him what their day to day was like. He said that the process was ridiculously slow in terms of loading and processing. He said that a lot of things need to be updated in terms of data.

President Bears said that the VRIS system is maintained by the Secretary of State's Office, not by the City of Medford. He said that people who become inactive did not return their census forms to City Hall or those forms were not delivered to City Hall. He said turnout in municipal elections is 30-35%, up from less than 30% some years. He said turnout in federal elections is 50-60%. He said where there is a desire for this to be

perfect, he supports it; he said that things can be improved but that 42,000 registered voter number has a lot of reasons behind it as to why it exists.

Councillor Lazzaro said that the state sets a lot of rules for elections. She said it's not necessary for us to be purging the voter rolls. She said she worked the polls in 2020. She said it was important to people that they voted in that election. She said it was amazing what our workers and staff were able to do. She said that there are some things that happen at the state level, and that things like voter inactivation are a result of state law. She said that pulling people off the voter lists would not be the highest priority.

Councillor Scarpelli said that this is just a basic, fundamental process that could be done with a consultant that could come in and do this. He said that it is not his number one priority but that it needs to be cleaned up.

Chair Milorin said that to really understand what goes on in an election, you have to work an election. He said he didn't want to take people's knowledge away, but that in order to understand an election, you have to be working on the election. He said it is not a question of whether we trained poll workers. He said he has done it all prior to 2023. He said we used to squeeze at least two election trainings for poll workers for every election every year, for wardens, clerks, and inspectors. He said that there was training in 2023. He said he as a citizen was not happy with that training and that it was not done well. He said that caused an impact on the November election. He said we had poll workers who took action that they weren't supposed to be taking. He said we took corrective action. He said we did what we said we were going to do. He said we resolved them a little bit late, but the equipment that we use for the election is as old as Medford. He said we have to take the training into consideration. He said we do the best we can with that. He said people in his own family received multiple ballots. He said we will send you up to three notifications if your census is not returned, but after the third one, you are inactivated. He said that doesn't stop you from voting. He said you are still a registered voter but you are not on the active list. He said he sent a personal report after that election. He said any election without irregularities is a selection, not an election. Because any time you have human transactions, there can be mistakes and you document that. He detailed all the work he did supervising the 2023 election. He said he does his work to serve the people of Medford.

Councillor Scarpelli said he doesn't know how this process got to the point where anyone doesn't appreciate what Chair Milorin does for this community. He said he has great respect for Chair Milorin. He said we should want this process to be perfect. He said Chair Milorin has legitimized any work he has undertaken. He said the issues with the ballots going out were not Chair Milorin's fault. He said what Chair Milorin does is above and beyond what any election commissioner should be doing. He said he respects Chair Milorin and what he has done.

Chair Milorin said that Councillor Scarpelli may have misunderstood what he said. He said people of Medford are calling him names and disrespecting him. He said our relationship existed long before anybody was in office.

Councillor Leming said he appreciates the work of everyone here. He said these are questions about the system, not about individuals. He said he would be interested in hearing from the Chief of Staff. He said he knows that running the March election was not something she planned to do. He asked if there was anything planned for technology and staffing.

Chief of Staff Nazarian said that task number one is hiring an Elections Manager. She said that this is our best method to expedite and ensure that there is proper planning in place immediately. She said she does not disagree with any of Chair Milorin's points. She said that getting an Elections Manager here is the most critical thing. She said she is happy to learn more. She said we have an A-Team of people who are very well-trained. She said that there are roughly a dozen incredibly talented people who work part-time, in addition to Joan Limone in the Elections Office. She said that the staffing level prescribed in this year's budget is sustainable because of the support of the A-Team members we have available, including the people already mentioned. She said there were no hiccups in terms of staffing the office or completing the work for March. She said we have the right FTE count right now. She said she really enjoyed working with the staff and the A-Team.

Councillor Leming asked how the search for the new Elections Manager is going. Chief of Staff Nazarian said it is going well. She said that it is considered a confidential process in the industry.

President Bears asked about the timeline. He asked if it would be possible to have someone in place in four to six weeks. Chief of Staff Nazarian said that this is her hope. She said we have a formal interview committee.

Vice President Collins thanked the Chief of Staff and Chair Milorin. She said that she agrees that priority number one is filling the Elections Manager role. She said she knows every Councillor appreciates the hard work put in by the Election Commissioners. She said we still need to make sure we have enough people to get the work done.

President Bears said he appreciates that we are going to ask the team what did and didn't go well. He said it may make sense to have the new Elections Manager do an entry audit to identify things that are going well and that can be improved. He said that being a person in charge of elections has a certain highly public amount of responsibility.

Chief of Staff Nazarian said that her role pertains to the March 5 election. She said she takes responsibility for that election and that any errors for that election are on her. She said that in terms of any other involvement, she said she can speak to anything budget-

oriented. She said she will be here to take back ideas for a future Elections Manager but that she also has to respect the roles and experience of the Election Commission.

Chair Milorin said he would share a report with the Council. He said that one of the key things that strikes him the most is the result of transparency. He detailed his hour to hour work on March 5. He said one of his biggest issues is training. He said if someone sees a problem with an election, they bring it to the Commission's attention and we take action.

Chair Tseng asked about the audit process after the election. Chief of Staff Nazarian said she would defer to Chair Milorin. She said she has prioritized her time and resources into hiring. Chair Milorin detailed the post-election audit. He said every poll worker was invited to submit documentation of any irregularities. He said those are compiled into a master document and reviewed. He said that way the Elections Manager will know what didn't go right.

Chair Tseng said that the March election seemed to go better than previous elections. He said we have all made our stances clear on our preference for more FTEs in the department and he has heard that from the A-Team as well. Chief of Staff Nazarian said she can only speak first-hand about one election. She said she doesn't want to speak in haste. She said that there is a lot that goes into elections. She said she feels fortunate to have had that opportunity. She said the biggest reflection she can share is that one election only gives you a snapshot of everything that goes into an election. She said she knew she was flying blind for part of that time. She said we had signs at 18 locations in the City. She said that the November Election is going to be a challenging Election. She said that there will still be problems even though we are preparing and will be prepared. She said she's not sure that support for the Elections Office comes in the form of more FTEs. She said that the first step is getting fully staffed.

Vice President Collins said she appreciates everyone's time tonight and that she thinks that this has been a real exercise in transparency.

Chair Tseng thanked Chief of Staff Nazarian, the Commissioners, and the Elections Department. He said we are all united in wanting to get a better department and process. Chief of Staff Nazarian thanked all the other departments that assisted. She also thanked Joan Limone and Chair Milorin and the Commission.

Melanie Tringali, 116 Forest Street, said that it's good to see that there is work being done. She said she requested a recount in the November election. She said that this election went smoother but there were hiccups. She said you are wasting money by sending papers to people who aren't eligible to vote. She said that Chair Milorin doesn't have any plan on what is to be done. She said that machines were counting ballots incorrectly. She said 60 to 75% of machines had different counts than actual ballots. She said that there is no plan to count the number of ballots that were received and the ballots that were counted.

Vice President Collins moved to adjourn at 8:50 p.m. (Councillor Scarpelli second)—approved.

Chair Tseng adjourned the meeting at 8:50 p.m.