

LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF TACOMA-PIERCE COUNTY

Observer Corp Report

Meeting observed: Tacoma City Council Study Session

Date: October 27, 2020

Members Present: Beale, Thoms, Hunter, Ushka, Walker, Hines, Blocker, Woodards

Member excused: McCarthy

This report centers on one agenda item during this weekly study session and acts as a supplement to the report of the Council meeting of the same day. The agenda item was a detailed look at how the proposed 2021-22 budget supports the Council's stated interest in addressing deficiencies in access to city services and facilities that many residents experience.

The Council defines its priority interest in access to mean equitable access by residents of all incomes and ethnicities to services, facilities, infrastructure, and employment. In a community survey 26% of residents described poor access. Priority areas for survey respondents included improved transit (26%), internet access (14%) and a desire to redirect police funding to improve access issues (12%).

Within the proposed budget, \$237 million is related to access and most of the revenues to support this come from enterprise and dedicated special revenues. Capital funding related to access includes \$17.8 million, the bulk of which will be devoted to transportation projects (\$14 million) and the remainder to community development projects. The Department of Public Works, the Tacoma Public Library, Tacoma Venues and Events and Metro Parks all reported on their proposed budgets and how they address improving access.

Public Works includes Street Operations, Engineering and Facilities. To maintain essential services for sidewalks, safe routes to schools, ADA, streetlights and Vision Zero, \$3.25 million is requested. (Vision Zero is an initiative to end traffic related serious injury and death within the city by 2025.) The Streets Initiative began in 2016 and since then 2700 residential blocks have been addressed (34% of network). The proposed budget will continue this work on an additional 900 residential blocks. The Transportation Benefit District's funding is now secure due to the Supreme Court's action against I-976. Additional revenues from 2020 and those predicted for 2021-22 are a total of \$8.7 million and will be used for street rehabilitation (\$5.8 million), non-motorized transportation enhancements (\$500 thousand) and traffic signals (\$2 million).

I note that during the Council meeting later in this day, one of the biggest items of public frustration was the current \$2.2 million reduction in Tacoma Public Library's 2021-22 budget. Both the city manager and library director confirmed in this Study Session that a "mutual mistake" had taken place during the budgeting process and that a more optimistic budget will be forthcoming in the next few weeks. The amount of mitigation was not stated. The library director reviewed the marked increases in the use of various library services (card applications 140%, E-books 90%, scholastic teachables 837%, Linked-In and similar services 20-90%). In addition, the library has its Dear Tacoma Project, a living history project collecting community stories of the pandemic and a new YouTube channel. A popular program describes the history of redlining in Tacoma. Other plans include the reconfiguration of the Main Branch to give space for a variety of community service organizations and the addition staff dedicated to Equity and Diversity. At the same time the micro-library planned for Hilltop has been postponed due to the pandemic.

Tacoma Venues and Events includes the Dome, Convention Center, multiple theaters and the Office of Arts and Cultural Vitality, which operates Tacoma Creates. The Dome will open in March 2021 and the

convention center is already open at 30% of capacity. Expansion of signage in 5 languages is underway, as well as equity training for all staff. Tacoma Creates revenue is less than expected before COVID but still anticipated to be \$5.5 million in 2021 and \$5.7 million in 2022. This year \$4.9 million was distributed to 58 organizations.

COVID has had a significant impact on Metro Parks, as 46% of its revenue is “earned” (user fees) and many facilities had to close. The City of Tacoma’s contribution to Metro Parks in 2021-22 is expected to be \$7.6 million, which is \$600 thousand less than it would normally be. This deficit will affect irrigation, flower bed, equipment, and fleet maintenance. The maintained essential services include access to restrooms, trails, and other COVID-safe services, homeless response in parks as well as rangers, park ambassadors and park watch programs. There will be capital improvements including new bike and pedestrian routes, Gas Station Park renovation, Safe Routes to Parks planning, and People’s Park Planning.