



Village of Lawton
VILLAGE COUNCIL
REGULAR MEETING
125 S. MAIN, LAWTON MI 49065 269.624.6407
Tuesday January 28, 2025
MINUTES

- I. **Call to Order:** President Appleby called the January 28, 2025, meeting of the Lawton Village Council to order at 7:00 p.m.
- II. **Roll Call:** *Present:* Appleby, E. Dudek, Peterson, Turner, G. Dudek, Smith Tanis *Absent:* None. *Others Present:* Clerk Rathbun, Village Manager Hackenberg, and fifteen guests.
- III. **Pledge of Allegiance:** The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.
- IV. **Consent Agenda:** The Consent Agenda included the approval of the January 28, 2025 Council Agenda and the January 14, 2025 Council Meeting Minutes. Peterson made a motion to approve the Consent Agenda as presented supported by G. Dudek. A unanimous voice vote approved the motion.
- V. **Communications, Correspondence, and Presentations:**
- VI. **Citizen Comments:**
 - A. Dessirae Sweet, the President of the Lawton Youth Softball and Baseball League spoke. She wanted to represent the board as a whole to go over the council comments from the December 10, 2024 meeting. Sweet stated that she would like to advocate for the fields and kids. She stated the board would like to make sure there are still safe and productive activities for youth in our town. Sweet stated this year there are approximately 200 kids enrolled in the program. The Board has priced out the cost to relocate field, and are currently finding that they are running between \$750,000 and \$1.5 million. She stated she would like to request all decisions to sell property or takeover the property will be discussed with the board. She is also requesting a 12 month notice prior to the Village Council selling the field. Sweet stated at the next meeting many passionate members would like to speak on behalf of the little league fields. She would also like to invite council to the yearly opening day ceremony on April 26. Appleby stated we will have time on the agenda to discuss this at the next meeting so council can layout plans and have discussion with the board at that time. Appleby also stated they have looked into alternatives as well as other opportunities for the Lawton Youth Baseball and Softball Program and are more than happy to help them look into options and grants. Appleby stated the next meeting will be key to explain

further what is going on with the Village on that property. Appleby assured Sweet that no decisions that have been made will impact the 2025 season.

- B. Brian Wadsworth, a non-resident, stated that he has been a member of the community for 40 years, and he doesn't understand why Lawton wants to restructure and take the fields away from the Little League and stated that this cannot keep coming up every few years. Wadsworth stated that he does not believe other communities or villages ever bring this up. He stated the Little League does not own this property, but, he believes they have millions invested in these fields. Wadsworth stated he believes the property should be given to the Little League. Appleby stated that no final decisions have been made at this point, but, they are trying to be as transparent as possible with this. Wadsworth stated that he believes council needs to let the Little League know one way or another, and that he believes a company is currently interested in purchasing it. Trustee Smith stated the comment was made at the last meeting because of the Facebook post that was made in regards to field improvements being done, and the council trying to be transparent that this property is still in the plan for housing development, not because a potential buyer is yet interested.
- C. Joe Magers, the owner of Longship Brewing Company, commented that the fields are sustained by the community. Magers stated he believes that these fields are crucial to the Lawton Identity. He stated the people who come into the games support the businesses in town, and the businesses in turn support the program. Magers stated people don't move to an area just for houses, but for the programs as well. Magers stated he does not believe this property should be sold at all. Appleby stated council is listening, and they will be addressing this next month.

VI: Public Hearings/Appointments/Proclamations: None.

VII. Old Business:

VII: New Business:

- A. Appleby brought discussion of Rental Inspection Ordinance to the floor for discussion. Village Manager Hackenberg introduced Scott Beltz with Medallion Management Company who does property management throughout the state, and can provide professional insight on this without bias as he has no properties located within the village limits. Beltz introduced himself, and stated that he thinks it is great that council is looking into questions and concerns prior to having the ordinance written. Council wanted to know what his side of things looked like as an owner. Beltz stated that depending on the property type, certain properties already get inspected 1-3x per year dependent on the funding. He stated if he were the one looking into doing this, he would tell these types of owners they could provide the government inspection, as this would save both the landlord on cost, as well as the Village time from an administrative standpoint. Appleby stated the reason we are doing this is to protect renters as well as landlords from issues. Appleby also stated that Lawton is one of the only communities around here that does not have an ordinance like this in place already. Appleby also stated that we were hoping to not create additional hoops for someone who was previously inspected if they are up to speed. Beltz shared some inspections that his

company utilizes with a scoring method. Beltz stated something else to consider is to make it less pricey if ownership flips mid-timeline. Appleby stated the village plan is charging cost, as it is about public safety and keeping the property clean. President Pro-Tem E. Dudek stated they are looking to protect both tenant and landlords. Trustee Tanis asked what would be an excessive timeframe without being burdensome. Beltz stated for reoccurring inspections property scores above a 90, inspection timeframe is 3 years, a score of 80-90 is a 2-year timeline, and a score below 80 requires a yearly inspection. Beltz stated he would be happy to come back if there are any future questions as well.

- B.** Appleby brought a discussion about the upcoming special police millage or police special assessment to the floor for discussion. Appleby stated that as a Village in the past year this has become something we need to do in order to keep police on staff, because we were the lowest paid police department in the county, and the county is one of the lowest in the state. It is currently difficult for all communities to maintain officers due to the current environment. Appleby stated we are very fortunate to have a few officers that have lived and worked here long-term and a great police chief who lives in the area. Appleby explained the Headlee Act and how it impacts our municipality, stating that this year alone, inflation is killing us. Appleby stated the Village actually has less money today than we did years ago. President Appleby stated we bring into our general fund for people who live in the Village \$490,000 per year, State revenue sharing brings in approximately \$353,000 per year. Welch's does not pay personal property taxes, and the state reimburses us for that for now, but we are unsure how long that will happen as the state does not always support small communities very well. The police department costs \$545,000 per year for three full time officers, two part time officers, the school crossing guards, which we are required by law to finance, and a chief. That leaves us \$327,000 per year for everything else within the Village. Appleby stated that the Village is currently running a skeleton crew, having already eliminated two Department of Public Works and two full time police officer positions in the past few years, and the Village Manager is currently doing both his job, as well as the Department of Public works superintendent position, so we really can't cut anywhere else. Appleby stated our buildings and parking lots are falling apart, and we do not have the money to fix it or move them. Village equipment is aging out, and just a leaf vacuum that would do the job we need is \$400,000. He also stated Kids Dream is starting to deteriorate, and we are having trouble retaining businesses in the community because we do not have enough people here to support them. Appleby went on to say the village does not have the correct equipment to pump storm sewers. He stated people have asked about the spending on the roads and Reid's corner, and the reality is the village saved for the streetscape for over 15 years, and the remainder for both projects were made possible in majority by grant dollars we sought out. Unfunded state mandates have come down on our community for updating, which we do not have the budget for. Appleby stated the village spent \$70,000 doing not a great job for the leaves, and they spent hours and hours working weekends and overtime to try to keep up on this, but without the correct staffing and equipment this is an uphill battle. Appleby stated that the village brings in another \$275,000 to work on the roads, which does not go far, since mile of pavement costs approximately one million dollars. He also stated the village is \$38,900 into our reserve for the fiscal year, assuming nothing bad happens for the remainder of the year. Appleby stated sewer and water are enterprise funds, which means the funds that come in for this can only

go to sewer and water, they cannot go to help fund the deficit areas in the general fund. The police department is fully funded by the taxpayers who live within the Village Proper through the general fund, and no one else, though both the school and people outside of the village receive services. He also stated if we do not fund the police, we will not have police with all of the staffing shortages everywhere. The village is currently looking at about 3 mills which would raise about \$130,000 per year, for our police department, but doesn't even get us where we need to be with the department, it will get us where we are plus maybe a little bit. Appleby stated this also ties in to ballfield calculation. It isn't that we don't want baseball. The village owns one piece of buildable property, and it is 27 acres on the ball fields. The village need housing and more people living here to help with the tax base desperately, as it is currently not sustainable. Appleby stated as a council they do not want to get rid of baseball, they would love it if something could be found for them, but they must do what they can to keep the village afloat. Appleby stated for the police funding, there are two routes the village can go. The village can pass a special assessment which doesn't require a vote, or place it on the ballot and allow people to vote on it. Appleby stated the reason the council is looking at a special assessment is it may be a lot faster. The council is attempting to be transparent and communicate what is going on. Appleby opened the floor for discussion. Village Manager Hackenberg stated he would recommend doing a special assessment, as this would guarantee we receive the funds we need, and sooner. Trustee Smith stated it depends on when it goes onto the ballot. If people are uninformed then only the people who know about it go and vote on it if the village goes the route of a special election, which could be problematic. Hackenberg stated that the village is at its maximum levy for mills on general fund so we cannot just add mills without a special mill or special assessment. Hackenberg stated that we can do a special assessment until the 2026 vote if we would like. Trustee Smith asked what the timeframe council would like to enact this looks like, because we really need to have a powerful presence of messaging this without a vote. Appleby stated if the police department does not receive this money, the village will have to reduce more as that is the only forward without going into a deficit. Appleby stated the village has looked at contracting several different ways, and having our own police department is the ideal situation. Appleby would like to have things put together for further review at the next meeting, including pricing and a timeline for a stopgap situation.

VIII: Board, Committee, and Staff Reports:

IX: Council Comments:

- X. Adjournment:** Turner moved, with support from E. Dudek to adjourn the Village Council Meeting at 8:26 p.m. Next council meeting to take place on February 11, 2025 at 7:00 PM.

Respectfully Submitted by,

Brittany Rathbun
Village Clerk