

The Common Council met at City Hall in the City of Black River Falls on November 6, 2024 at 6:00 P.M. Alderpersons Gearing-Lancaster, Ammann, Peloquin, M. Rave, E. Rave, and Busse were present. Alderperson Dougherty attended remotely via Zoom meetings. Alderperson Wussow was excused. Mayor J. Eddy presided.

Mayor Eddy opened the public hearing on the shared ride taxi service.

The City Administrator provided a summary of the shared ride taxi service; started the service in 1989; currently operating under contract with Abby Vans; the City provides the two vehicles; vendors charge an hourly rate and they provide the staffing, drivers, logistics, vehicle maintenance, fuel, and all operating expenses; currently the system operates 6am-10pm every day of the week; 11 years ago the local share, the amount the City has to pay, was \$0 and was completely subsidized through fares collected and federal and state grant dollars; through the years the cost to operate the system has increased significantly – paying under \$20 per hour in 2013 to now paying \$49.10 per hour; hourly rates took huge jump in the last 4 years from being in the \$26 range pre-2020 then mid-\$30 range in 2023 - that company went bankrupt and the service was shut down for 3 months while we did an RFP and secured another vendor; at that time hourly rate went to \$49.10 per hour; the City contracts for nearly 11,000 hours annually; the contract for 2023 was \$477,448; of that, the City receives about \$193,000 in federal aid and \$64,000 in state funding to subsidize the service; that leaves \$129,000 for the City to pick up and capital expenses are a little over \$15,000 per year; leaving the total local share for this year at \$145,000; last year the Council approved a significant increase in the levy to pay for the taxi service going from \$50,000 to \$85,000; leaves about a \$60,000 shortfall with no way to make up that difference with levy limits and expenditure restraints set by the State without taking from other areas and services; these conversations have been happening for 1-2 years letting the Council know it is getting worse and worse and it has come to the point where if nothing changes it is unsustainable to be running that kind of deficit every year; the Council asked for a 3rd party to do a feasibility study; the City secured a state grant to cover 80% of the cost for that study; the City utilized the Mississippi River Regional Planning Commission to complete that study which is included in the meeting packet; the City reached out to the County to explore the possibility of a countywide taxi service that could potentially address the transportation needs outlined in the Community Health Needs Assessment that was completed a year or two ago; at the last meeting the Common Council approved a resolution to set this public hearing to consider increasing the agency fares from \$7 per ride to \$10 per ride, decrease the operating hours from 6:00am-10:00pm every day to 6:00am-8:00pm Monday-Friday and 7:00am-8:00pm on Saturday & Sunday, or to terminate the service; Abby Vans provided the proposal to increase agency fares and reduce hours and has indicated they would accept a 1% hourly rate increase instead of the allowed 2.5% increase for 2025 which would bring the contracted cost to \$389,380 less projected \$130,00 in fare revenues less projected \$129,690 from federal aid less projected \$80,575.20 from state aid plus \$15,600 for capital expenses for total projected local share of \$64,714.80 which is \$20,285.20 less than the current levy for the service; used to get an ADA accessible mini-van for \$36,000 and the City is responsible for 20% of that purchase and 2024 price list has them at \$78,000; not only is the operating cost increasing so is the capital costs.

A.J. Sims asked what is being subsidized if Abby Vans is responsible for all operating expenses? The City Administrator explained the City is under contract with Abby Vans at \$49.10/hour to operate the service. Mr. Sims then asked why is Abby Vans being subsidized if they are responsible for operating expenses? Mr. Sims asked why the system is so far in the red, is there just not enough riders? The City Administrator explained there are a lot of factors including the increased hourly cost is a huge part of it, ridership is down – peaked in 2018-19 at 40,000 rides and 2024 is projected at 17,000 rides. Things that have affected ridership include the City doubled the fare rates to increase fare revenue so less tax dollars were needed, and the service was shut down for three months so people found alternate means. Mr. Sims shared other private companies in other transportation services he felt work without being subsidized unless it is open to the public like a city bus that is operating on a scheduled route not an on-call service it is a stop service. Mayor Eddy explained the whole purpose behind the federal subsidy was to keep the fare rate down so that people could afford to ride the taxi; there was a time we were charging \$1.50 to \$3.00 for a ride; like other federal programs, it has not kept up with the actual market cost to provide the service so the City has been subsidizing it the last 8-10 years; the service goes out to RFP every 5 years and many years we only have one company respond to that RFP and one year we brought a company in and they went bankrupt; the situation is not because of something anyone has done, it is the nature of what it costs to operate versus federal and state reimbursements; the City has made up that difference for a number of years but we cannot do that anymore. Mr. Sims asked if we do not have enough ridership to maintain 2 cabs, has anyone considered going down to 1 cab so that it stays busier? The City Administrator explained that we had looked at everything; the City used to have 3 taxis on the road but that was cut down to 2 vehicles in August of 2023 along with cutting a few hours off the schedule; in order to provide the service efficiently and not have 1-2 hour wait times we have determined we need 1 taxi at these times and 2 taxis at other times as outlined in the schedule in the packet. Mayor Eddy added the option of eliminating the

service is out there because no private company is going to come in here if they have to compete with our shared ride with cheaper rates. Mr. Sims asked if you decide to shut this down, is the City opposed to a private entity attempting to operate something here? The City would have no problem with that at all. Mr. Sims asked what requirements would be placed on them. The City Administrator explained the City does not have any licensing or permitting requirements. Mr. Sims went on to explain that state statute does not require a cab company to provide handicap vehicles but they cannot discriminate on the basis of disability; it makes sense to have handicap vehicles, but if you can't afford to start out with a \$76,000 handicap van it makes a lot of sense to start out with a more affordable 4-door sedan get your business established and then move up and begin offering more services as you have the revenue to provide them. The City Administrator provided further clarification that this is not a private company; Abby Vans is not operating here as a private company and the City is not subsidizing them as a private company; the City has elected to provide a public transit system for the elderly and the disabled so in order to fulfill that objective of servicing that population we need ADA accessible vans; this is a government public transit system that the City puts out to private companies to say if you want to operate this system what do you need per hour and we contract to have that done; if anyone wants to have a taxi service in the City they can start one today and they don't need any approvals from the City and they don't have to tell us they cannot provide ADA; they provide what they want, advertise it and get the rides they can; there is nothing preventing anyone from coming in here and operating a private taxi service. Mr. Sims clarified his question is if you did it completely private and didn't ask the government for anything would you guys be opposed to someone running a taxi service that is not handicap accessible? There was no opposition.

Sarah Lindow spoke in favor of keeping the service pointing out she utilizes the taxi service on a daily basis at work; it is a very important service that needs to be here for patients to get to their doctor's appointments; to get to and from the hospital; it is not something we can do without in this town; trying to find rides when the service was shut down was very difficult which added to the stress they see on a daily basis already; there was also inappropriate use of the ambulance and emergency room during that time; there is an isolation issue if people are stuck at home; hope the Council can somehow figure a way to keep this taxi service running because it would be a huge disaster in many aspects in this community if we didn't have some sort of taxi service.

Lyn Gates with Jackson County ADRC explained the County's WisDOT grant they use for transportation services; their program is not an on-demand program; they have a fixed route shopping bus, they do out of town trips, they do volunteer rides for medical appointments outside of Jackson County, partner with Interfaith they do a lot of the in county transportations for medical appointments, The county does not do on demands or pick-ups to the clinic, the hospital or the pharmacy; working with aging and disabilities services Lyn stated she understands how important the taxi service is to Jackson County; the solution for 2025 looks really good; raising agency fares; that is a state aid service and most are contracting for Medicaid services and they can do the higher rate because it would cost them a lot more to independently contract with local vendors so it would still be a cost savings even if the City raises those rates; reducing hours is a better option than no hours at all.

There were no other attendees that wished to speak.

It was moved by Alderperson Peloquin, seconded by Alderperson E. Rave to close the public hearing on the shared ride taxi service. Motion carried at 6:36 pm

Mark Jones from Abby Vans addressed the Council appreciative of operating the shared ride service in the City; gave a history of his company and the services they provide; they believe strongly in public transit and being able to help people access the goods and services they need to live healthier more productive lifestyles; in this community senior, disabled and agency rides represent 85% of the monthly rides and one of the largest growing segments is non-driver population that don't have another option for transportation; taking away a public transit system would cause seniors that would like to continue to live in their homes in this community they wouldn't be able to do that anymore – they would need to move to larger cities that provide a public transit system; also understand the need for sustainability; over the last 5 years the average CPI isn't even close to the CPI for the transportation segment alone; understands we need to make changes to the program; believes these adjustments will be sustainable for the City and will not negatively impact ridership and allow people to live in their homes and have access to goods and services in this community.

It was moved by Alderperson Ammann, seconded by Alderperson Busse to increase the shared ride taxi service agency fare from \$7.00 per ride to \$10.00 per ride and decrease the operating hours for the shared ride taxi service from 6:00AM to 10:00PM every day of the week to 6:00AM to 8:00PM Monday-Friday and 7:00AM to 8:00PM on Saturday & Sunday. Motion carried.

It was moved by Alderperson Ammann, seconded by Alderperson Peloquin to approve the Exercise of Options for the Shared Ride Taxi Service with Abby Vans, Inc at an hourly rate of \$49.59. Motion carried.

Parks & Recreation Director Jarod Meyer and two representatives from the Jackson County Little League Board presented a proposal to update the concessions and rest rooms at Mark Fields and to add a playground area. Total cost is estimated at \$500,000-\$800,000 and they have support from a donor for a significant portion of this project. Little League will cover the cost of the initial design that they can use to further promote and fundraise for the project. Work would begin at the end of the Little League season in July 2025 and be done by the end of the year. Shelter area would be available as a shelter rental option for the city and playground would be available for neighborhood kids. There was discussion on the need for better parking and security cameras.

It was moved by Alderperson M. Rave, seconded by Alderperson Gearing-Lancaster to authorize the continuation of planning for the Marks Field Project to include a return of costing and additional project details as soon as available and for the City Administrator to prepare a resolution to support the project. Motion carried.

The City Administrator results from the November 5, 2024 election. There were 1,741 ballots cast in the City which is nearly 95% of registered voters. Mayor Eddy expressed his appreciation for the poll works and city staff that did a fantastic job with the set up and flow during the election.

It was moved by Alderperson M. Rave, seconded by Alderperson Dougherty to dispense with the reading of the minutes of the October 16, 2024 Special Common Council meeting and approve as presented. Motion carried.

CITIZENS IN ATTENDANCE

There were 7 citizens in attendance for agenda items – 6 in person and 1 via Zoom meetings.

COMMITTEE REPORTS

It was moved by Alderperson M. Rave, seconded by Alderperson E. Rave to place on file the minutes of the October 14, 2024 Plan Commission meeting. Motion carried.

It was moved by Alderperson Busse, seconded by Alderperson Peloquin to place on file the minutes of the October 28, 2024 Utility Commission meeting. Motion carried.

It was moved by Alderperson M. Rave, seconded by Alderperson Dougherty to place on file the minutes of the October 30, 2024 BID Board meeting. Motion carried.

It was moved by Alderperson Busse, seconded by Alderperson M. Rave to approve the agreement between the City and the Municipal Street Department Teamsters General Union Local 662. Motion carried.

It was moved by Alderperson Ammann, seconded by Alderperson E. Rave to approve the 2025 BID Operating Plan and Budget of \$35,592.47. Motion carried.

It was moved by Alderperson Peloquin, seconded by Alderperson Gearing-Lancaster to adjourn. Motion carried at 7:35pm.

A. Brad Chown
City Administrator