# Special Common Council Meeting

Meeting Minutes

**October 26, 2026, 6:00 PM**
**Auditorium, 42 N Main St, Fountain City, WI 54629**

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## 1. Call to Order

Mayor B. Adank called the Special Common Council Meeting to order at 6:00 p.m. in the Auditorium at 42 North Main Street. B. Adank said the purpose of the meeting was to hold a public forum on the proposed Administrator-Treasurer position, which is the subject of the November 3 referendum on the charter ordinance. B. Adank noted that the city was still working through new technology following the recent renovation project. The meeting was livestreamed.

## 2. Roll Call

**Present:** Mayor Ben Adank (presiding), Alderperson Peter Schaffner, Alderperson Barb Schmidtknecht, Alderperson Scott Feraro, Alderperson Steve Qualy, Alderperson Christine Williamson, and Alderperson Mike Adank. Clerk-Treasurer Marcia Larson and Deputy Clerk Michele Klein, Librarian Annie Sullivan also attended.

**Absent:** None noted.

## 3. Pledge of Allegiance

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

# 4. Public Forum on the Proposed Administrator-Treasurer Position

## Meeting Format and Mayor's Presentation

The Mayor Ben Adank outlined the format. He would present the timeline and rationale for the position, each council member would then share their views, and public comment would follow.

B. Adank reviewed the history of the proposal. The city began considering the position in November 2025, when Clerk-Treasurer Marcia Larson announced her retirement, scheduled for July. The Police, Personnel, Health and Safety (PPHS) committee discussed separating the treasurer and clerk duties and creating an administrator role. In January the committee voted to bring the proposal to the full council, which discussed it in February with general support and some feedback on the position description and posting.

At the March meeting, the motion to move forward failed 2–3, with P. Schaffner absent. At the April meeting, the motion ended in a 3–3 tie. B. Adank chose not to cast a tie-breaking vote and sent the matter back to committee. The position and charter ordinance were then approved at the April meeting after the election. A petition to put the charter ordinance to referendum was received in late May, and the council accepted it and scheduled the referendum in June. The referendum will be held on November 3.

B. Adank described changes in public works staffing. Public Works Supervisor and water/wastewater Operator-in-Charge (OIC) Gil Adams resigned about March to take another position. The city did not refill the position. It ran a summer trial in which leadership, HR and oversight functions would be combined with the administrator-treasurer role, and the public works full-time-equivalent (FTE) count was reduced from three to two, with mowing subcontracted. B. Adank reported that operations went well. He said the proposed structure would reduce city staffing from five FTEs to four, excluding the library, which is a separate entity under its own board.

B. Adank said the recruitment drew 44 applicants, which S. Feraro screened to seven, with an interview already scheduled. Under the proposed structure, the Administrator-

Treasurer would oversee daily operations and financial management, and a city clerk, the public works foreman, general maintenance staff and contracted services would report to that position. B. Adank and council would retain all policymaking, budget and contract approval authority. He added that the role would provide continuity beyond election cycles, citing the 2024 election, when there was no mayoral candidate and two council seats had only write-in candidates. The role would also address a material weakness identified in the city's audit, which recommended separating the combined clerk-treasurer duties.

B. Adank presented the following cost figures:

- A full-time public works employee costs $133,000 annually, including salary, benefits and payroll taxes.
- Replacement costs of about $64,000 include roughly $30,000 for contracted OIC services, $25,000 for the summer mowing and trimming contract, and a $10,000 placeholder for snow removal.
- Public works savings come to about $68,000 annually.
- About $15,000 currently spent on outside financial help from the audit firm would also be saved.
- Total operating savings would be about $83,000.
- The current clerk-treasurer salary is about $71,000, and the proposed Administrator-Treasurer range is $72,000 to $92,000.
- Estimated net savings would be $62,000 to $82,000 annually.

B. Schmidtknecht clarified that the savings are spread across all three city budgets, including the utility budgets, and are not all in the general fund tax levy budget.

## Council Discussion

S. Qualy stated that he was opposed at this time and that his comments were not a personal attack. He said the presentation was compelling, but raised these concerns:

- The salary and savings figures are "estimated" rather than "projected."
- The breadth of skills required would make the position difficult to fill and retain.
- Taxpayers could be affected by reassessment, and he questioned the recourse for any budget shortfall.
- The city has higher priorities.
- He would prefer a carefully phased approach to a change to the city charter.

During this discussion B. Adank and M. Larson corrected his statements about the levy. They explained that the levy limit is set by the state Department of Revenue based on net new construction, that city levy increases have been about 1 to 1.5 percent, and that the city cannot arbitrarily raise taxes. S. Qualy disagreed that assessed values had no effect on individual tax bills. B. Adank said the administrator would report to the Mayor day to day, with the council retaining oversight and hire/fire responsibility. He added that a future council could amend the charter ordinance if the arrangement did not work. S. Qualy said he had no alternative projections to offer.

P. Schaffner spoke in strong support, saying that committee chairs and the Mayor currently field day-to-day calls and decisions. He said a dedicated person would provide continuity and speed decision-making, and that further delay would be a mistake. He said the workload on volunteer officials was becoming unsustainable.

S. Feraro responded to concerns about finding qualified talent. Of the 44 applicants, seven met most qualifications and three met all of them. He said the interview process covered cultural fit, proficiency, experience and education, and that few trade-offs were required. He hoped the earlier candidates would remain interested if the position is approved.

B. Schmidtknecht spoke in favor. She said savings could be redirected to other priorities and that an on-site staff member would be quicker than tracking down a council member. She noted that elections are a clerk function under state statute and that the city receives only a portion of each tax bill, with the school and county taking the largest shares.

C. Williamson stated that she was opposed. Her reasons were:

- The city's auditor, Bauman and Associates, is not demanding an administrator position, and the $15,000 savings would occur only if the new hire needs no outside assistance.
- The administrator may not live in the city.
- Major infrastructure issues remain.
- Personality and fit are critical in a small office.
- She has not received an answer on the city's total indebtedness.

She urged a no vote until the city provides greater transparency and suggested that two people split the clerk and treasurer duties instead.

B. Adank responded that the city's debt ratio is low. B. Schmidtknecht explained that debt capacity is based on general obligation debt in the general fund, while sewer and water loans are supported by user fees and set by regulators. B. Adank offered to obtain the figure from the clerk-treasurer. B. Schmidtknecht and M. Larson clarified that the proposal is for a paired Administrator-Treasurer role with checks and balances, since many clerk and treasurer duties are already separated.

B. Adank noted that none of the four current city hall and public works employees live in the city and said the council and Mayor, as the city's representatives, would provide oversight. He cited the livestream, social media postings and the monthly newsletter as evidence of the council's transparency.

## 5. Public Comment (Q&A)

B. Adank asked speakers to state their names and to direct questions to the council. The following members of the public spoke.

Gwen Katula (former Mayor) read a prepared statement in support of the position. Summary of Public Comments – Proposed City Administrator-Treasurer Position

The speaker, a former Mayor and Council member, expressed support for creating a City Administrator-Treasurer position, drawing on personal experience with the significant time commitment and demands of managing daily city operations.
Key points included:

1. Time Demands on Elected Officials: Serving as Mayor or Council member requires considerable time, often outside normal business hours. The speaker noted that the workload can lead to burnout and that elected officials should not be responsible for handling the growing demands of daily city operations.

2. Need for Professional Administration: A City Administrator-Treasurer would handle daily operations, resident concerns, finances, grants, projects, and outside resources, allowing the Mayor and Council to focus on policymaking, long-term planning, economic development, and improving city services.

3. Fountain City's Economic and Population Challenges: The speaker highlighted declining population, lower household incomes, lower property values, smaller household sizes, and poverty rates compared with Buffalo County and Wisconsin. Concerns were raised about the ability of a shrinking population to support the increasing costs of infrastructure, utilities, and other mandated services.

4. Qualifications and Responsibilities: The speaker contrasted the basic eligibility requirements for serving on the City Council with the professional knowledge and experience expected of a hired City Administrator, emphasizing the value of having experienced administrative leadership working alongside elected officials.

5. Future Growth and Cooperation: The speaker stressed that Fountain City needs to move beyond reacting to daily problems and focus on sustainability, economic growth, planning, and cooperation. The proposed position was described as an opportunity to help guide the community's future.
Conclusion: The speaker encouraged residents to consider the long-term needs of Fountain City and urged them to vote in favor of hiring a City Administrator-Treasurer in the November 3, 2026, referendum.

An unidentified resident asked S. Feraro what research was done on administrator-treasurer roles. S. Feraro described three sources: published third-party salary survey

data (local, regional and national), conversations with local municipalities such as Trempealeau, La Crosse and Cochrane, and the original published package. He said the position requires municipal experience, financial experience (with grant writing a nice-to-have) and people management experience. Only 7 of about 40 applicants met the minimum requirements.

Cheryl Braatz (1212 Birch Street), a former six-year council member, questioned the three votes on the position (March 11, April 8 and April 21). She questioned how a newly seated alderperson could vote on it. She asked which positions would be eliminated to reach four staff.

B. Adank said the library is a separate entity with its own board. He said the reduction from five to four reflects the unfilled public works supervisor position. Staff members Eric and Jake are pursuing DNR certifications, with Eric taking three wastewater exams in November and Jake taking two water exams. In the meantime, Gil Adams continues as contracted OIC. B. Adank estimated 6 to 9 months to complete the certifications, said the city had shared the plan with the DNR, and said the DNR was supportive.

Cheryl Braatz said she did not support the position and felt an administrator would be "putting out fires" the council had started. This led to a tense exchange between her and P. Schaffner over a prior phone call and zoning questions. B. Adank redirected the discussion and explained that the administrator would be the point person for coordinating zoning matters, attorneys and consultants, which would also preserve institutional knowledge. S. Feraro added that the problem is structural, with too few "hands and voices" to address city issues promptly. B. Schmidtknecht said volunteer council members had done extensive financial and clerical work during a period between clerks, which is not sustainable.

John Schlesselman (Chair, Board of Appeals) offered to help with zoning questions. He said a Mississippi Regional Planning Commission member had asked him what was happening in Fountain City. He said a University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh study had identified two main objections to administrators in Class 4 cities: cost, and that the position is not elected and cannot be removed by voters. He predicted the hire would seek a raise and assistance within 6 to 12 months and noted that the job description references legal expertise nine times, but legal expertise is not listed as a qualification.

He encouraged council members to attend the League of Municipalities annual meeting. He said his position had moved from a "soft no" to a "hard no."

Rosemary Binkley questioned why public works supervision was no longer considered crucial if it had justified Gil's compensation. She asked what would happen if the two workers failed their exams and whether a salary within the offered range would attract an experienced candidate. She asked for a zoning consultant and for monthly financial reports showing all revenues and expenditures, and said the community wants honesty and transparency. She said it is not clear that other options have been fully explored.

Robert Keiper, a former Public Utilities Committee member, stated that he opposed the position and would prefer a separate treasurer position. He raised concerns about concentrating power in the position, the loss of a public works director, the reliance on two young employees still seeking licenses, and the lack of day-to-day direction. B. Adank noted that a professional engineering firm provides oversight and support to the city as needed.

Mary Jo Keiper doubted that one person could hold all the required qualifications and said she supports separating the administrator and treasurer roles and keeping a public works director. S. Feraro said two candidates had met all the listed requirements.

Ryan Ligman called the position unnecessary and said zoning is simple to administer from the ordinance. He questioned the savings, since the contracted OIC is still Gil. He argued the city should remove services, criticize the use of loans, and said the position, which is not elected, is unnecessary given the council. He said he was disappointed it was on the ballot. B. Adank asked him to keep his remarks focused on the administrator position.

Jen Tepevich stated that she supports the position and will vote yes. She noted that public administration degrees exist and that many opponents' remarks had made the case for the position. She asked C. Williamson why residency matters for an administrator when current city office employees also live outside the city. C. Williamson said that the administrator would hold financial and HR control, unlike public works staff. M. Larson noted that the mayor and council hold the power. B. Schmidtknecht reiterated that the administrator would report to the council and handle routine day-to-day matters,

and that the job description requires only legal coordination with the attorney. Robert and B. Schmidtknecht exchanged views on the risk of a council majority being swayed by an administrator.

Written submission from Jeffrey Puterbaugh, read by M. Larson, raised questions that were answered by S. Feraro and B. Schmidtknecht:

- Library staffing: The five-to-four figure excludes the librarian, who reports to the library board. The library is on a planned path to a self-funding entity, and the 2026 budget already includes $65,000 for the library, with an increase in 2027.
- Public works supervisor duties: The Administrator-Treasurer would not be the public works supervisor. The role would handle people management, municipal leadership and HR for all municipal employees, while the public works expertise and certifications would come from existing staff.
- Continuity and recordkeeping: A policy for recording decisions of historical significance is a good idea but is not sufficient on its own. Both the role and a more specific policy would help.
- Wage factoring and lead compensation: The estimated wage does not include public works supervisor responsibilities for the reason above. Wage benchmarking for existing public works staff has been accommodated in established budgets, with no additional adjustments projected.

Robert Keiper later asked about contractor coverage for vacations, absences and emergencies such as a damaged hydrant. He warned that the city might "save dimes" and spend dollars. No specific answer was recorded.

B. Adank thanked attendees and those watching the livestream and said that voters would decide at the November 3 referendum.

## 6. Adjourn

> A motion to adjourn at 8:13 PM was made by B. Schmidtknecht and seconded by S. Qualy. The motion carried by voice vote.

The meeting was adjourned