



Council Worksession

March 8, 2022

5:00 pm

Present: Mayor Kari Niedfeldt-Thomas
Councilmember Abdullahi Abdulle
Councilmember Graeme Allen
Councilmember Emily Dunsworth

Absent: Councilmember Pam Axberg

Staff in Attendance: Devin Massopust, Tony Paetznick

Guests in Attendance: Ramsey County Attorney John Choi, Mark Haas

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic this meeting was held virtually.

Discussion with County Attorney John Choi

Massopust introduced Ramsey County Attorney John Choi and Mark Haas to the City Council. He explained staff has been having conversations with suburban partners regarding the uptick in crime and how to bring this down. He noted Ramsey County Attorney Choi asked to come to a meeting to speak to the Council in order to address this concern.

Ramsey County Attorney Choi thanked the Council for their time. He stated he has enjoyed getting to know the mayor and has appreciated the conversations that have been held regarding the uptick in crime. He commented he was receiving a lot of calls about all of the things that were happening that were unsettling, such as car jackings and shots fired. He reported he appreciated the intent to better understand and hear his perspective. At the same time, he believed the intention was to try and work towards solutions. It was his hope that everyone would work together and pull in the same direction versus laying blame on any one institution.

Ramsey County Attorney Choi reported one of the major contributors was the fact that the country was in the midst of a global pandemic. He indicated many urban areas were facing the same concerns as Ramsey County. He understood most looked to police to solve all of the problems, but noted the police have been under tremendous stress for several years now due to civil unrest and being understaffed. He stated it was frustrating for the police to see what was going on right now as well, because they were arresting individuals who were then put back out on the street. He commented he would be speaking to this more.

Ramsey County Attorney Choi explained all people believed in the constitution and one of the things about the constitution was guaranteeing everyone a right to a jury trial. He discussed how this has been impacted by the pandemic noting there was a tremendous backlog and three times the workload. He then provided the Council with a presentation that reviewed the crime rates for motor vehicle thefts, gun possession, drugs, car jackings and aggravated robbery. He commented further on how the County was working on solutions to address the rise in crime. Historical charging rates for adults and youth were reviewed along with the number of referrals he received in his office each year. The prosecution policy for 5th degree drug charges during the pandemic was further discussed. The "revolving door" concerns with respect to rising crime were then addressed along

with the concerns of the cash bail system. He supported the country moving away from the cash bail system in order to find another pre-trial detention system. He explained after the death of George Floyd, the Minnesota Freedom Fund raised \$35 million and these funds have been used to post bail. He then discussed Rule 20 Gap Cases, commented on the process followed for having some civilly committed and encouraged the Council to look into this topic further.

Ramsey County Attorney Choi reported a Violence Reduction Leadership Group has been formed to address the rise in crime. He noted the issues being discussed by this group and stated there was a focus on deterrence. He explained this group was the first in the nation to request and receive grant funding specifically for the problem of carjacking. He stated he was pleased to see the direction this group was moving in order to address crime in the County, while bringing the community navigators, family members and police together.

Ramsey County Attorney Choi explained Congresswoman McCollum has been approached and was asked for \$900,000 in order to assist with the efforts of the Violence Reduction Leadership Group. He was hopeful that the federal government would be making a direct appropriation for this group sometime in March. He stated monthly meetings with suburban police chiefs and County corrections (both adult and youth) were also being held in order to identify issues and discuss problem solving measures.

Ramsey County Attorney Choi then discussed his RCAO policy for non-public safety traffic stops which addressed brake lights, head lights, tinted windows, excessive muffler noise, dangling items from the rearview mirror, and overdue tabs. He stated this policy was put in place so as not to further perpetuate the racial disparity that exists. He understood this policy was controversial for many, but he believed his job was to be an administrator of justice and to be an advocate for the community. He commented further on the racial disparity that exists with these types of traffic stops and noted they were not yielding a high outcome of drugs or other contraband. He reiterated that public safety exceptions may be made. He stated it was his hope that over time trust would be increased between the community and public safety.

Ramsey County Attorney Choi commented on the Bail Reform Working Group that was formed noting work continues between the Sheriff, other system leaders and the community. He stated this system had to move away from a wealth-based system to a safety-focused system, while also reducing jail admissions and improving support. He further discussed the efforts of the County and reiterated that the County was very focused on prosecuting violent crimes or threatened violent crimes.

Mayor Niedfeldt-Thomas thanked Ramsey County Attorney Choi for his presentation. She stated it would be helpful for the leaders of New Brighton to understand what he was seeing in the City's data. Ramsey County Attorney Choi commented relative to other cities the crime issues were not as high as other places. He understood there were incidents that were happening but it was not as severe as other communities. Paetznick discussed the upward trend in crime (theft and gas drive offs) that occurred in 2021, but stated violent crimes were few and far between in New Brighton. He appreciated the fact that violent crimes were a high priority for the County.

Councilmember Allen explained he served as the Council Liaison to the Public Safety Commission. He reported the City reviews, monitors and discusses its traffic stop data on a yearly basis. He indicated this group discussed what contributes to the numbers and commented the sad reality is the public safety department may be seeing people on their worst day. He reported he appreciated how the Public Safety Department focuses on education and has even pursued grants to provide vouchers to assist with mechanical issues. Ramsey County Attorney Choi reported the County has raised \$150,000 to assist with providing options other than a citation for drivers that need mechanical work or new tabs on their vehicle. He was of the opinion the police were asked to do too much, such as enforcing expired tabs.

Councilmember Allen thanked Ramsey County Attorney Choi for his efforts. He stated so many of the challenges the community was facing was with the policies that were in place and if they produced equitable outcomes for all. He indicated there was a great deal of societal imbalance when it came to wealth, and other areas and trying to find fairness was a challenge. Ramsey County Attorney Choi agreed this was a challenge.

Councilmember Abdulle thanked Ramsey County Attorney Choi for his presentation stating it was very informative. He indicated he appreciated the efforts he was taking to focus his attention on violent crime while still making sure his office was not perpetuating historical harms and racial disparities in the way law enforcement is approached. He understood there were communities of color that have been harmed by policies and he was reassured that Ramsey County Attorney Choi was reconsidering these policies. He requested further information regarding the JDIA including prevention and diversion options. Ramsey County Attorney Choi stated he would follow up with the Council on this topic. He reported there were things the County had to improve on such as the placement of violent youth in secure institutions. He indicated special accommodations or variances were needed such as a MIF program and noted funds were being requested for this type of program. He believed that a one-size fits all correction system was not serving society well. He supported society having better rehabilitation and correctional institutions. He believed more had to be done after a person served their sentence in order to help people heal.

Councilmember Abdulle thanked Ramsey County Attorney Choi for his thorough response. He agreed that the public tended to think once a person serves their time they will be better off and this was not always the case, but rather people may need additional help in order to get out of the vicious circle of crime. He stated he really appreciated all of the efforts from Ramsey County Attorney Choi and thanked him for taking the time to meet with the New Brighton City Council.

Ramsey County Attorney Choi spoke to the need to support local and state police agencies. He reported officers were leaving in masses and there was a real difficulty to recruit at this time. He believed that police were a part of the solution. He needed to remain grounded in the community, along with Police Chief Paetznick. He stated through this better trust and support would be built for the police and a better version of justice would also be built.

Councilmember Dunsworth thanked Ramsey County Attorney Choi for attending this worksession meeting. She stated this was a very heavy topic but it was uplifting to hear about the reform and other efforts that were in place at the County level. She encouraged Ramsey County Attorney Choi to come back to a future meeting in order to provide an update on what impacts his efforts were having on the community.

Mayor Niedfeldt-Thomas thanked Ramsey County Attorney Choi again for attending this meeting and for his presentation. She also thanked Public Safety Director Paetznick for his ongoing efforts on behalf of the community.

Worksession adjourned at 6:27 pm

Respectfully submitted,



Terri Spangrud
City Clerk