MEMORANDUM

To:      DPW Commission  
From:    Chapin Spencer, Director  
Date:    May 19, 2021  
Re:      Review of City Engineer Performance  

As the Commission prepares to conduct the annual evaluation of the Director and City Engineer, I would like to offer my perspective on the City Engineer’s performance. The position is one of the most demanding in the City with broad responsibilities to protect the health and safety of the public. Norm Baldwin, the City Engineer, is a dedicated and skilled staffer who successfully manages a high performing team and resolves multiple challenging issues every week.

**Project Management and Project Support:** The City Engineer and his team often get tapped to manage Burlington’s most complex projects. Sometimes his team leads projects for other departments such as was done with the $5M renovation of City Hall Park that was completed on budget. Sometimes his team supports other departments with negotiations, property rights and engineering as is currently happening with the passenger rail and bike path relocation project on the waterfront. Every day there are seemingly small but real issues that must be resolved quickly to keep projects moving and the City Engineer engages the right people and makes solid decisions over and over again that protect the public interest.

**Navigating Public / Private Projects:** As stewards of the public rights of way, adjacent public and private development projects almost always require extensive coordination with DPW. Time and time again I have seen the City Engineer conduct the necessary detailed review of projects, identify key issues that had not been caught by others, and work tirelessly with the developer or partner to get a resolution on the project. The City Engineer’s review of these projects, and willingness to have hard conversations to get to a fair resolution, has benefited the public interest again and again. Most recently he and the Senior Engineer worked late hours on evenings and weekends with CityPlace Burlington design team to arrive at mutually acceptable designs for the new blocks of Pine Street and St Paul Street adjacent to the project.

**System Development:** During my tenure with this Administration’s focus on addressing aging infrastructure, the City has increased the General Fund capital budgets from approximately $12M annually to over $30M a year. Coordinating this work is a complex and challenging undertaking. To this end, the City Engineer has demonstrated a sophisticated understanding and effectiveness in...
protecting the public interest. Specifically, the City Engineer has set up administrative and financial systems to ensure budgets are well tracked, procurement follows policy and audit documentation is properly kept. Despite the large growth in work, the systems have kept projects well administered.

**Personnel Development:** When the City Engineer started, the engineers in Technical Services were at the same level which did not provide for career growth for the employees or differentiation in work for the City. The City Engineer restructured the team to develop a three-tiered structure that allows for better mobility and advancement in the workgroup. With this structure, he has supported the growth of his team and they are high performers.

**Public Safety:** The City Engineer is responsive to issues at all hours. One recent example was two weeks ago when a truck crashed into a residential home in Burlington. The Fire Department responded and needed a structural review of the home’s integrity. When the building inspector could not be reached, the City Engineer was called and promptly showed up at the site that night after a long day to ensure the safety of the public.

**Designing for the Future:** We understand members of our community are asking us to go further with design in better accommodating pedestrians and cyclists. The City Engineer and I, at times, have differing opinions on how far we are comfortable with taking street design, but the City Engineer is appropriately focused on standards, data, and level of risk. We continue to stretch with numerous projects from the tight curb radii on St Paul Street in 2020 to the proposed two-way protected bike lane we are proposing to install in 2021 on North Champlain Street.

**The Public Works Challenge:** This City is struggling with aging infrastructure and the current Administration and City Council are focused on not only renewing the City’s old assets but transforming them to meet modern needs. I am very appreciative of the funds and support City leadership and the public have provided our department. That said, one of our major challenges is that the desired production is not always matched with the resources provided and we are constantly forced to triage. This is especially true when we have a major event or asset failure that must be responded to in the moment and some existing projects must slow down. Additionally, many projects in our vibrant mixed-use community have divided constituencies and we need to spend the time to work through those conflicts – even within our own City staff. Whether it is balancing the needs of bike/pedestrian safety with access for emergency services, or mediating the interests of developers with adjacent neighbors over new uses of the right-of-way, the City Engineer takes the time to find the workable path forward and it inevitably takes more time.

**Continual Improvement:** None of us are perfect and this of course is true of City Engineer as well. He takes feedback well and strives to learn from each project so that we as a department get better with future opportunities.

Any concern about the direction of the department or perceived lack of performance of the department should land at large part at my feet as I am the Director of the Department. The City Engineer confers with me regularly on difficult issues and together we work to make the best decisions we can for the City. The City Engineer’s performance over this past year has been excellent and I urge the Commission to recommend his reappointment.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.