

**CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION
CITY OF WATERTOWN
May 11, 2026
7:00 p.m.**

Mayor Sarah V.C. Pierce Presiding

Present: Council Member Shane A. Garrabrant
Council Member Robert O. Kimball
Council Member Douglas E. Osborne, Jr.
Council Member Benjamin P. Shoen
Mayor Sarah V.C. Pierce

Also Present: Eric F. Wagenaar, City Manager

City staff present: Erica Anderson

DISCUSSION

Jefferson County Homelessness

Jefferson County Administrator Ryan Piche outlined the goals of his presentation and stated the County's philosophy that homelessness is a complicated public policy challenge that cannot be solved but can be managed. He mentioned a recent community survey found 11% of respondents said homelessness is the single largest issue facing the North Country. Referring to graphs supplied to Council, Mr. Piche noted the County is not alone as the number of homeless across the country rise with New York having a rate four times higher than the rest of the country. He offered the combination of housing affordability and state policy decisions as the main causes of the increase. He noted that as Jefferson County's Area Median Income has dropped 11% from 2023 to 2024, the fair market housing rate has increased 11%. He also cited New York State policies of closing mental health institutions and jails as well as criminal justice reforms as reasons for the increase.

Mr. Piche advised that the County's thesis is that, with the loss of compelled changes like court ordered treatment and institutionalization, they must offer instead "influenced change" like supportive housing, safe shelters and street outreach.

To gain better insight into the homelessness situation, Mr. Piche explained that the County needs to collect better data, which they do through hotel and motel placements, user counts at the warming centers, and two street outreach programs provided by Northern Regional Center for Independent Living (NRCIL) and ACR Health. He also discussed the various temporary and permanent housing programs provided by the County, as well as homelessness prevention programs they administer.

Mr. Piche detailed the County's budget of leveraged assistance to vulnerable housing populations and noted that the total local investment in the Department of Social Services, \$39,056,641, which represents 59% of the County's total tax levy.

Jefferson County's Director of Housing and Special Initiatives Jillian Reeder informed Council that the 200 new housing units coming online in the City of Watertown should go a long way to addressing the housing situation. She noted she has received nothing but support from the City of Watertown's Council and staff.

Mr. Piche thanked the City Manager and noted his appreciation for the City's Police Department. He mentioned that it is not all that common to have the Police offer so much assistance in identifying problem areas and unhoused individuals. He further thanked the Code Enforcement staff as well as DPW.

Council Member Kimball inquired whether the homelessness problem is just located in the City of Watertown or if there are other locations in the County.

Ms. Reeder replied that the prevalence is within the City limits, mostly due to the services being located in the City. She noted there are requirements for housing assistance, which include job counseling and health providers that are in the City, and she mentioned that transportation is an issue. She noted there are small homeless populations in Carthage, Adams and Adams Center.

In response to Council Member Garrabrant's question regarding whether outreach waits to be contacted, Ms. Reeder explained that there are outreach teams seeking out individuals wherever they may be, whether in parks or under bridges, with the goal being to get those individuals in a sheltered situation.

In response to Council Member Kimball's inquiry regarding the percentage of homeless people with addiction issues, Ms. Reeder said she could supply that information, but she did not have those numbers available currently.

Council Member Osborne noted that the State has been identified as the cause of the surge in homeless numbers and asked if the State had a plan.

Mr. Piche informed Council that the State has increased funding mostly through housing programs.

Council Member Osborne commented that his concern with the State's dismantling mental health institutions and the closing of jails results in some individuals who will not be helped simply by providing them with a housing situation.

Mr. Piche agreed that the Councilman was right.

Council Member Osborne expressed his belief that the State should not be placing the entire burden on municipalities.

Mayor Pierce asked if there were long waits to place individuals with mental health resources.

Ms. Reeder noted there are services like veterans' peer-to-peer counseling and other organizations that are constantly evolving to replace institutions.

Referring to a graph in the presentation, Council Member Garrabrant noted at least 16% of the homeless population come from outside the City, and he asked if they could be sent back to their own counties.

Mr. Piche informed Council that all the programs the County serves are pretty clear about serving all those in the area.

Council Member Shoen commented that although 16% are identified as coming from outside the area, it is likely that the ones who have not yet been identified also come from outside the City, resulting in a significantly higher total. He indicated that the City is where the services are and the more the City offers, the more homelessness the City attracts. He said he would like to see a figure on how much

money the State has saved by closing jails and mental facilities and suggested that same amount should be provided to the municipalities who have to deal with the fallout of those closures. He indicated that 59% of the County's budget going to the Department of Social Services seemed high but said he appreciated all the work they do.

Council Member Shoen asked where Jefferson County ranks on the list of all counties in New York in terms of the homeless population figures, and he suggested there must be something about this area to incentivize the number of people coming here, noting it was probably not the climate.

Mayor Pierce thanked the County administrators for their time and information.

Thompson Park Zoo

Ken Mix, Board Chairman at Thompson Park Zoo, thanked Council for the opportunity to describe how the Zoo's 2025 went.

Interim Zoo Executive Director Mark Irwin advised Council that the Zoo had a great year with membership numbers soaring from 200 to nearly 800. He explained how the Zoo is attempting to achieve a wide reach through their various social media platforms. He also noted that the Zoo is seeking sponsorships for exhibits like the elk and the snowy owl. Mr. Irwin commented that Council might have heard about a certain New York Times article, which resulted in a large number of donations.

Mr. Mix advised that the Zoo attempted to maximize the one-time windfall by using the money to improve the Zoo's financial situation. He noted they were able to create an operating reserve for the first time as well as a capital reserve budget, and that they also used the funds to pay off some high-interest loans. He commented that for the first time in a long time the Zoo has more money than they have debt.

Looking toward the upcoming year, Mr. Irwin announced several new programs including an Ambassador Garden for animal interaction, Zoo Discovery days for kids, and the replacement of one of the Brew at the Zoo events with a Sweet End of Summer event. He also mentioned added-value events such as author book readings.

Mr. Mix explained a new program called Nature at Home and Garden, a project making use of the Director's house. He noted that the Zoo has a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Cornell Cooperative Extension to move their Master Gardeners program to the Zoo grounds, where they will create a new kitchen garden. He also explained there would be a number of habitats for small animals like rabbits, quail and guinea pigs, with the idea being to show the kinds of interactions one can have right in their own yard.

Mr. Mix requested the support of the City and City Council in maintaining all of the buildings at the Zoo. He reminded Council that the original request was for a decreasing amount over the next three years.

Mr. Irwin added that the Zoo is asking for support to help them become less reliant on public funds of any kind.

Mr. Mix commented that the majority of Council wants to see the Zoo succeed and that positive attitude trickles down to the public. He noted the Zoo relies on volunteers and the contributions of the public. He suggested that Council commit to providing in-kind services to the Zoo, such as equipment or manpower.

Mr. Irwin noted that the County has contributed marketing funds. He commented that when people are looking for things that work well in the City, the Zoo is working well, and they are looking to get to a point where they will continue to do well in perpetuity.

In response to Council Member Osborne's request for an overall operating budget for the Zoo, Mr. Mix answered that the operating budget is \$1,149,000 with a capital budget of \$200,000.

Council Member Osborne asked if the Zoo was still receiving donations from the New York Times article.

Mr. Irwin advised that they receive around \$2,000 per month in subscription donations.

Council Member Osborne commented that he is happy to hear the Zoo is doing well and said he would support the City providing in-kind services.

Mayor Pierce asked if the Zoo had been able to gather an email list of donors so they could request additional donations and she volunteered to assist with that type of marketing.

Mr. Mix informed Council that they would be employing a part-time development person who would work on marketing.

Mr. Irwin noted many of the Zoo donations resulting from the Times article had been via PayPal, so the email addresses were not available.

Council Member Garrabrant advised that he would not be opposed to in-kind services and supported the Zoo as a major institution in the City of Watertown along with the Library. He asked if the Zoo could take any kind of direction from the Rosamund Gifford Zoo in Syracuse.

Mr. Mix pointed out that the Zoo in Syracuse is a County facility. He noted that the best zoos are the ones that get governmental support. He mentioned that ZooNY must spend time and resources on fundraising and must rely on volunteers in many instances.

Mr. Irwin commented that, essentially, the City outsources the management of the Zoo to the Conservancy while the Syracuse Zoo receives support and assistance from the County's dedicated Parks Department.

Council Member Garrabrant suggested soliciting more corporate sponsorships.

Council Member Shoen, noting the County gives \$150,000 and the City \$80,000, asked if the rest of the budget is made up in revenue.

Mr. Mix explained there is also funding from New York State, sponsorships, unrestricted donations and an endowment from the Community Foundation. He advised the rest comes from earned income from memberships, tickets and sales in the gift shop and snack bar.

Mr. Irwin advised that the Zoo tried to keep ticket prices and memberships low but would listen if Council wanted to suggest different rates for City residents or had other suggestions.

Council Member Kimball asked how many employees are on the Zoo's staff.

Mr. Irwin advised that there are 7 full-time and 10 part-time employees.

Mr. Mix clarified that five out of seven of the full-time employees, the curator and four others, are tasked with animal care. The other two full-time employees are the director of operations and the maintenance supervisor.

Mr. Irwin added that even when the Zoo is closed, the bare bones operation was still six employees.

Mr. Irwin asked Council to consider whether they would support renting the director's house to other entities, noting several not-for-profit agencies had made inquiries.

Mr. Mix said this could offer additional revenue.

Mayor Pierce and Council Member Shoen supported leasing the building to non-profit groups.

Mr. Irwin also informed Council that the Zoo's ultimate goal is to get AZA accreditation and one of the criteria is partnerships with other organizations.

Friends of Thompson Park Update

Friends of Thompson Park Board President Brian Ashley and Vice President Philip Sprague appeared before Council to present an update on the organization's accomplishments.

Mr. Ashley offered a presentation on the newly constructed Walker Bandstand, detailing how the idea was formed and displaying pictures of various stages in its creation. He indicated that he has seen it used by members of the public, and said one of the biggest compliments he has received is that it looks like it has always been there. He noted that the organization had lived up to their promise and asked that the City take charge of arranging musical acts to perform in the bandstand.

Mayor Pierce indicated her belief that there could be grants available from various resources, mentioning the St. Lawrence County Arts Council, but noted that they would probably be looking at acquiring grants for next summer. She said she envisioned possibly having monthly events, perhaps with food trucks.

In response to Council Member Shoen's question regarding who funds the Sackets Harbor Waterfront Concert series, Mayor Pierce said that might also be the Arts Council.

Mr. Ashley reminded Council of the Friends of Thompson Park's origins, which began 15 years ago as a way to get the most out of the Park. He mentioned that the original Master Plan for the Park showed many elements that never were built and that served as their inspiration. He noted that the group has a symbiotic relationship with the Rotary. He also mentioned that the group serves as an advisory committee to Council and, although they do not report to Council frequently, he feels that the organization has an excellent relationship with City staff and Council due to the fact that their goals align with City priorities.

Mr. Sprague described Thompson Park as the core essence of the City of Watertown. He advised that the Friends of Thompson Park works because everyone benefits. He listed as the group's accomplishments the splash pad, the Rotary pavilion, the 10th Mountain Division monument and the Rotary exercise trail. He thanked the City for being good partners.

Mr. Ashley advised that the next volunteer work day was this Saturday, May 16, and he directed Council's attention to a brochure listing all the organization's volunteer work days for the year.

Mayor Pierce stated she appreciated all their efforts and noted that this partnership is very important to the City.

eBikes

City Manager Wagenaar informed Council that the City is close to working out a list of requirements for eBikes, noting staff has been working in conjunction with Samaritan Medical Center. He indicated that there would be some ad spots on WWNY TV, signage throughout the City, especially on Public Square, and also some handouts cards distributed through eBike retailers.

Splash Pad and Pools

City Manager Wagenaar announced that the splash pads and pools are ready to go for the season and are just waiting for warmer weather.

Armed Forces Day Parade

City Manager Wagenaar reminded Council that the Armed Forces Day Parade would be held this Saturday at 10 a.m.

Budget Work Session and Library Meetings

City Manager Wagenaar advised that the next budget work session would be Wednesday, May 13 at 5:30 p.m. and the next library budget office hours will be held Tuesday, May 12 from 6 to 8 p.m. Work session ended at 9:00 p.m.

Lisa M. Carr

Deputy City Clerk