

**CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION
CITY OF WATERTOWN
January 12, 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: Scott Weller, Jim Scordo, James Mills, Erica Anderson

DISCUSSION

Golf Course Recap

Scott Weller, Superintendent of Parks and Recreation, addressed Council regarding the 2025 season. He noted that he had presented information in November and tonight he would have some updates and proposals for the way forward.

Jim Scordo noted that the 2025 season had been phenomenal and the course had been in excellent condition despite a wet start.

Mr. Weller presented a season recap which included total numbers for season passes sold, greens fees, cart rentals and tournament numbers as well as a financial report. He noted the course showed improvement by losing less money than in the previous two years.

Mr. Weller reminded Council that the previous course manager left in the middle of July and the course had been had managed by City staff for the rest of the season. He noted this had been effective short-term, but was not sustainable for future seasons. He then presented Council with three options for running the course going forward: the original model with a full-time manager, a hybrid model with a seasonal supervisor and a cap on tournament size and a basic model with no tournaments, events and programming with estimated costs for each. He indicated that he is recommending the hybrid model.

Council Member Garrabrant inquired about the estimated staffing cost numbers.

Mr. Weller indicated that the staff cost is only for the pro shop.

Council Member Kimball asked further questions about the estimated staffing cost of \$190,000 for the original model with a full-time manager.

Mr. Weller indicated that it would cover all full- and part-time employees working at the golf course but not grounds and maintenance.

In response to Council Member Kimball's question regarding the total cost for the original model including the maintenance, Mr. Weller indicated it would be similar to last year's \$270,000 but a bit higher due to the increase in minimum wage.

Discussion turned to season passes, with Council Member Kimball questioning whether there was a way to track how many times a golfer with a season pass played.

Council Member Shoen indicated he had received a total in November about the number of rounds played. He commented that he would like to see more passes sold.

Mr. Weller indicated that the 2026 rates were comparable to other courses and suggested that the course could begin selling season passes for 2027 at the end of the 2026 season if Council passed the rate schedule for both years in the 2026 budget.

There was discussion about potential senior rates, staff rates and golf course staff discounts.

Mr. Scordo mentioned that the Syracuse city golf courses offered free course play to the employees.

Council Member Shoen supported a golf course employee 50% discount. He noted that encouraging the golf course staff to play the course would be helpful to give them first-hand knowledge of the course and allow them to spot potential problems.

Turning to facility costs, Council Member Kimball asked about the lifespan of a golf cart.

Mr. Weller noted his recommendation in the presentation that the City replace 10 carts per year on a 5-year cycle. He noted that most of the carts at the course are significantly older than that.

Referring to the list of facility upgrade expense in the presentation, Council Member Kimball inquired if they were immediate needs.

Mr. Weller said they would be needed soon but not today.

Council Member Kimball expressed his opinion that the best way to optimize the golf course and give it the best chance of success was to go with the original model and have a golf pro.

Mayor Pierce asked if the City went with the basic model with no programming and no classes if the school could be allowed to offer courses there.

Mr. Weller indicated the school had offered golf lessons in the past and that could be continued.

City Manager Wagenaar asked Mr. Weller to give a quick summary of what they had learned in their discussions about hiring a golf pro.

Mr. Weller indicated that a golf pro, on top of their salary, typically receives a cut of the pro shop, a percentage of the driving range plus free golf.

In response to Council Member Osborne's question whether these perks would be offered to the seasonal manager in the hybrid model, Mr. Weller indicated it would depend on who the City hired.

There was a lengthy discussion about the type of pro the City might hire and what they might be offered as incentives.

Council Member Shoen suggested having vendors come to the pro shop for events rather than running a fully stocked shop.

Talk returned to carts and the numbers that were rented for tournaments.

Council Member Shoen proposed keeping the 20-25 best carts and leasing 25-30 more so the City can still offer larger tournaments.

In response to Council Member Garrabrant's question about the potential for Twilight golf (after 6 p.m.), noting other courses offer this option, Mr. Weller indicated he could look into that.

Council Member Garrabrant asked if only hole signs could be sponsored or if the course could sell sponsorships of other things like scorecards or golf carts.

Mr. Weller indicated they had been focused on signs for now.

Discussion continued about offering early golf for seniors, reaching out to Fort Drum in marketing, and the potential of the course making use of GroupGolfer app, and other sponsorship opportunities.

City Manager Wagenaar noted that all the ideas presented by Council are good ideas, but they will cost money and impact the bottom line. He also reminded Council that the course is currently without a manager and making a decision on solid management will be necessary to implement any of the ideas.

Mayor Pierce commented that the list of upcoming expenses is what is scaring her and offered her opinion that the City run the course in the least expensive way possible, which would be the basic model.

Council Member Garrabrant advocated for the hybrid model.

Council Member Kimball again expressed his interest in the original model.

Council Member Shoen suggested using the original model but with a seasonal manager.

Council Member Osborne indicated he liked the hybrid model but also leaned toward the basic model due to costs of future improvements.

City Manager Wagenaar said staff would make adjustments to the hybrid model and present a resolution to Council at the next meeting on January 20.

Zoo Agreement Discussion

Ken Mix, Chair of the ZooNY Board of Directors, introduced Mark Pacilio, Board Vice President.

Erica Anderson, Assistant to the City Manager, began the presentation by providing an overview of the proposed amendments to the Zoo Lease Agreement and the Public Benefit Services Agreement (PBSA).

Ms. Anderson advised Council that the first proposed amendment is to clarify building responsibilities, specifically regarding the Little Trees Visitor Center. Currently, the City only maintains one of the two connected buildings that make up the Center, and the proposed amendment would see the City provide structural, mechanical and exterior maintenance to the second building. She explained that the Center requires a roof replacement. She advised Council the Thompson Park Conservancy would supply the

materials and the City would fund the work and provide a City Engineer to assess the roof and estimate costs.

Council Member Shoen noted he knew from experience that construction costs go up when the City is involved due to State regulations.

Mr. Mix clarified that because the building is public property, the cost is the same since there is no way around prevailing wage. He also added that the Conservancy is not qualified to oversee this work.

Ms. Anderson indicated the second proposed amendment is regarding the PBSA term, which would be extended to a three-year agreement to align with the Zoo Lease agreement. She then proposed a PBSA payment schedule that will drop from the 2025-26 amount of \$100,000 to \$75,000 for fiscal year 2026-27 and then to \$50,000 for fiscal year 2027-28. She advised this is a planning document and that Council would retain fiscal control.

Mr. Mix commented that they were adding a second and third year of the PBSA agreement in the hopes that the City would honor its financial commitments.

Mayor Pierce asked if anything had changed financially at the Zoo, especially in light of the recent New York Times article

Mr. Mix explained that the windfall of donations stemming from that article had allowed the Board to have a fund balance and set aside money for capital improvements. He noted they would take advantage of the money to increase the ability to raise funds with a part-time employee to do fund raising. He indicated they would be sending requests to those who had donated to donate again.

City Comptroller James Mills advised Council that the City pays for the water, sewer and trash at the Zoo and noted they assist with in-kind service.

Mr. Mix offered an example of the Zoo needing a new water line and City staff contributing labor and equipment with the Zoo paying for materials. He clarified that the roof repair on the Little Trees Center is not the whole roof but a roughly 1,000-square-foot area.

Council Member Kimball commented that he had never seen a more enthusiastic group of volunteers than Zoo volunteers and he has been impressed with the level of support. He indicated his support for the proposed amendments.

Mr. Mix noted the Zoo has been in crisis mode for some time with 2024 being an austerity year and 2025 a rebuilding year. He added his hope that 2026 will see more private donations and increased sponsorship.

Council Member Garrabrant inquired about the different ways a private business could sponsor the Zoo.

Mr. Mix noted there were two levels of sponsorship – exhibits and events.

Mayor Pierce wondered if there was any way to use the Little Trees Visitor Center for the golf course.

City Manager Wagenaar noted there had been discussions about using the Visitor Center year-round for other uses such as cross-country skiing or ice skating.

Mr. Mix added that the Board would be more than happy to discuss providing snowshoe or skate and ski rental.

Mayor Pierce asked if the Zoo Board would like to have a Council liaison, similar to the way Council provides a liaison to the Flower Memorial Library board.

Mr. Mix noted it was a possibility but added it was a fine line as the Board discussions were considered confidential.

Council Member Kimball requested a complete financial report.

Mr. Mix indicated that he could provide one soon, once the Zoo was a little farther into its new fiscal year.

There was further discussion about the New York Times article and its benefits. Mr. Mix added his hope that he could convince the reporter to do a follow-up one year later that might be more upbeat.

City Manager's Update

City Manager Wagenaar informed Council that a new engineer had begun work today for the City.

He also expressed his appreciation for all the support he received over the holidays.

Council Member Shoen asked the City Manager to find out more information about the Corporate passes for the golf course and what "four passes" would cover.

Mr. Wagenaar said he would get verification.

Work session ended at 8:48 p.m.

Lisa M. Carr
Deputy City Clerk

