

**CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION
CITY OF WATERTOWN
March 8, 2021
7:00 p.m.**

Mayor Jeffrey M. Smith Presiding

Present: Council Member Sarah V. Compo
Council Member Ryan J. Henry-Wilkinson
Council Member Lisa A. Ruggiero
Mayor Jeffrey M. Smith

Also Present: Kenneth A. Mix, City Manager

City staff present: Police Chief Charles Donoghue, Michael Delaney, Geoffrey Urda, Scott Weller

DISCUSSION

Business Improvement District

Joseph Wessner, president of the Downtown Business Association (DBA), preceded his presentation with introductions of Carol Locke, DBA treasurer, Mark Holberg, a member of the board, and Lori Gervera, a member of the DBA. He began his presentation by offering some background and history of Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), noting there are over 2,000 in the United States and over 95% that were created are still operational which was a tribute to their popularity and longevity. He stated BIDs were responsible for four things: Marketing and Events, Safety, Business Development and Curb Appeal/Beautification.

Carol Locke, DBA member for 25 years and DBA treasurer for 20 years, mentioned all of the events the DBA presents in a year and noted they have had varying degrees of success. She said that tonight they were here to ask Council to consider establishing a BID.

Mr. Wessner gave a very detailed Power Point presentation (on file in the City Clerk's office) detailing the purpose of the BID, the operational costs, budget, goals and benefits. He stressed the value of the BID was in having one person in charge with a single focus and that person should be compensated as an executive director. He commended the DBA and other organizations that support Downtown but suggested that, since they are volunteer-based, the quality of what those groups can do varies from year to year. Citing last year's visit by the LL Bean pop-up shop, he remarked how much more successful that could have been if there had been one organization in charge that could have coordinated all of the other businesses on Public Square.

Mr. Wessner then revealed a map of the proposed BID which included a much larger portion of Watertown than the typical "Downtown" of the past. He mentioned that with this many businesses in the district, the assessment would be \$2.60 per \$1000 on every piece of property with a cap of \$5,000 per property.

Mr. Wessner remarked he had spent more than a thousand hours working on this BID proposal and he intends to keep working to get one established until someone told him to stop. He offered examples of other BIDs in the State that he and his task force had visited including Geneva, Auburn and Corning. He informed Council that he would be back, hopefully in one year's time, with 75% of the people in

Downtown in favor of the BID. He indicated the BID would partner with the City, the County and the State to get this done.

Council Member Henry-Wilkinson asked how many of the businesses in the proposed district were in favor at this point.

Mr. Wessner explained that he had not yet spoken to anywhere near all of the included businesses, but of the ones he had spoken to, 75% were already in favor.

Council Member Ruggiero noted her concerns with businesses with larger property owners being hit with very large fees and how that will affect their bottom line and willingness to stay in the downtown area.

Mr. Wessner stated that the average cost to a business in the district would be around \$900 with some as low as \$300. He suggested that the ratio of costs to value will help convince someone that this district is beneficial, and it could turn their properties into “premium properties.” He stated that by 2025, the BID would be prime real estate and businesses would be eager to get into those locations.

Mayor Smith expressed his “grave concerns” with government getting involved with businesses and with adding a fourth tax to businesses that were already struggling. He added a further concern with duplication of services.

Mr. Wessner explained that if a service was already being provided, the BID would serve to enhance those services. He further noted that it is an important distinction that the money charged to businesses would not be a tax but a levy or assessment.

Mayor Smith asked if a property could be seized if the business did not pay the assessment.

Mr. Wessner admitted this could be a possibility, but it had never happened. He added it takes 3-5 years to seize a property. He went on to note that his fellow DBA members had visited other cities with BIDs, and it has been suggested that the businesses within the District are very happy. He cited Kingston, Ontario as an example of a group of businesses who feel they should perhaps be paying even more for their BID assessments.

Council Member Compo remarked that the aim of the BID was laudable but her concerns with the proposal was additional costs to already struggling businesses and the duplication of services. She expressed concerns about what the Watertown DBA, Watertown First and the Watertown Trust would do.

Mr. Wessner stated the BID’s function would be to give directions to all groups.

Mayor Smith and Council thanked Mr. Wessner for his comprehensive presentation.

Alteri and Flynn Pool Evaluation Report

City Manager Mix stated this report was to compare the evaluations of the two pools and to put the filling in of the Alteri pool on hold.

City Engineer Michael Delaney explained that the initial task his staff was presented with was to determine options to decommission the Alteri Pool. He advised that after meeting with Parks and Recreation and the Department of Public Works they determined to do a full comprehensive evaluation of both Alteri and Flynn pools. He informed Council that the result of those evaluations revealed that the Flynn pool had a considerable leak and needed significant repairs to the shell, the deck and the plumbing and, as a result, Engineering staff recommends that the City decommission the Flynn pool and repurpose the relatively new equipment to the Alteri pool. He noted that neither pool would be in a condition to be open for the 2021 swim season, no matter what was decided. He added that this decision was based on condition and costs for repairs and had nothing to do with usage.

Council Member Ruggiero stated that the condition of the pool had not been presented to Council when they voted to decommission the Alteri pool during budget deliberations.

Mr. Delaney noted the previous Parks and Recreation staff was only asked for a recommendation on which pool to decommission without being asked for a comprehensive evaluation of the conditions of the pools by his department.

Council Member Ruggiero asked why the resurfacing done to the Flynn pool in 2012 had resulted in such a rough surface and structural failure so soon after.

Mr. Delaney noted he could not make a judgment on anything other than what he could see and evaluate right now.

Parks and Recreation Superintendent Scott Weller indicated that the work on the two pools had been done by different contractors.

Mayor Smith suggested that the shell under the surface at the Flynn pool is probably failing causing the poor conditions.

Council Member Ruggiero asked what the costs would be to completely repair the Flynn pool.

Mr. Delaney indicated that he could not predict the full costs at this point, adding that to fix the drains they would have to dig through the shell and then replace the shell. He suggested it would be upwards of \$100,000.

Mayor Smith remarked that, basically, this would be constructing a new pool, which takes Council back to the previous concerns of how many pools a City of this size needs. He noted that when the pools were built more than 40 years ago, fewer residents had their own pools. He suggested obtaining real data from users at the Thompson Park pool this summer, including how many people used the pools and where they lived. He added that the Thompson Park pool was well attended last year, but the same users were using it in the morning and afternoons and were being counted twice. He expressed an interest in getting more precise data on the users than that. He further noted the City offered bus service to the Pool and, in the weeks the pool operated it, he believed about four people made use of the service.

Council Member Ruggiero noted she had heard from parents that they were not comfortable putting their children on a bus and sending them across the City whereas they were comfortable letting them walk or bicycle to their neighborhood pool.

City Manager Mix stated that the bottom line was only one pool could open this summer and that the bus service was not worthwhile.

Council Member Ruggiero noted the filter and boiler had been replaced at the Flynn pool last year and asked if they could be re-used at the Alteri pool.

Mr. Delaney noted the expenses at the Flynn pool last year would not be wasted as the filter could be repurposed for the Alteri pool. He added that was not the case for the boiler.

Scott Weller stated that the Alteri pool would require the purchase of a chemtroller on top of the repurposed filter.

Council Member Compo requested more info on usage of the pools before she could make any decisions.

Council Member Henry-Wilkinson agreed that more user data was required.

Council Member Ruggiero asked if there were ever any lines outside of the Thompson Park pool last summer.

Mr. Weller said there were lines but those were largely due to Covid-19 restrictions on capacity, adding he was hopeful that capacity would be increased this summer with the Governor's modifications of gatherings.

Council Member Henry-Wilkinson asked Mr. Delaney to provide more definitive numbers on the cost to repair the Flynn pool.

Mr. Delaney said a ballpark figure would be around \$300,000 but that he could not say anything definitively until the pool was dug up and the drains inspected.

Council Member Ruggiero indicated it was a "blessing" that the City was provided this information about the repair costs for both pools before the Alteri pool was demolished.

Mr. Delaney noted that the previous staff was not tasked to do a comprehensive evaluation of the two pools, adding that they did what they needed to do to keep the pools operational. He clarified that he is not saying the previous staff did not do their job and stated that they were doing just what they were told to do.

Covid-19 Aid Package

Prior to the presentation of the Police Reform Plan, Mayor Smith let Council know that the Aid Package signed by the Senate was sending \$22.95 million to the City but the money comes with provisions which may make it difficult to spend.

City Manager Mix noted that one provision covers loss of revenue and there may be room for interpretation there.

Police Reform Plan

City Manager Mix informed Council that it was critical for the Police Reform recommendations to go to the State by April 1. To that end, he suggested that Council give their support to the plan this evening and adjourn the March 15th City Council meeting to March 29th when the proposal will be brought to Council in the form of a Resolution for their approval.

Mayor Smith expressed his concerns about the term “implicit bias” stating he does not believe he has biases, and he does not believe the police department does either and remarked he found the term unfair.

Police Chief Charles P. Donoghue explained that it might not be fair but implicit bias was a large part of the motives behind police reform and that the training for his officers to recognize the bias was already underway. He indicated that the three biggest issues addressed by the City’s Police Reform proposal was body cams, training against the bias and training for de-escalation.

The Mayor commented that the City Manager and Police Chief had done a good job on the plan.

Council Member Ruggiero added that the plan was very thorough.

Mr. Mix advised Council that putting the plan into action would not be cheap.

Council Member Compo asked how long it would be after the plan was sent to the State for the plan to be put in place.

Mr. Mix stated that he had no information about what would happen next after the plan went to the State on April 1. He added that all he knew for sure was that the State would not withhold the City’s aid payments if the plan was turned in on time.

Council Members Compo and Ruggiero also gave their support and approval.

Work session ended at 9:20 p.m.

Lisa M. Carr
Deputy City Clerk