

**CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION
CITY OF WATERTOWN
May 24, 2021
6:43 p.m.**

Mayor Jeffrey M. Smith Presiding

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

Also Present: Kenneth A. Mix, City Manager

DISCUSSION

Zoo New York – Draft Master Plan

Lawrence J. Sorel, Executive Director and CEO of Zoo New York began the presentation by thanking Ed Olley of GYMO for preparing the draft of the Master Plan pro bono. He explained that the Master Plan had been developed from the Strategic Plan and indicated that the Zoo's progress had been delayed a year because of the Covid-19 pandemic. He began his PowerPoint presentation (available in the City Clerk's office) by offering a little background, noting the Zoo was celebrating its 100th year of operation and informing Council that there were 25 acres of zoo property behind the fence. Mr. Sorel explained each of the guidelines that were followed to prepare the Master Plan. He indicated that one of the first changes for the Zoo would be to alter the entrance to better enhance curb appeal, and to create a flow throughout the Zoo that would allow for safety and social distancing should there ever be another situation like the pandemic.

Next, he explained the additional exhibits and animals that could be added, mentioning a new Aquarium, new hoofstock, and a new Aviary, and he suggested the potential return of the original Swan Lake to the design.

He informed Council that they intended to contact a Native American population and offer them the possibility of developing one of the exhibit areas. He noted the same offer would be made to the Department of Environmental Conservation and an area was reserved for their use as well.

Mr. Sorel remarked that Zoo New York was meant to focus on animals that were specific to the region and that the area included Long Island Sound, which meant the Zoo would be able to add some coastal animals such as Harbor Seals to a new exhibit that would be named for that region of New York.

Focusing on being fiscally responsible, Mr. Sorel noted that the Zoo was seeking additional ways to boost revenue. He mentioned several fee-based additions including event rental, food, an expanded gift shop, as well as two new areas of the Zoo which would be activity areas such as a ropes course, a zipline and a playground. He noted these would be accessible to patrons outside the Zoo as well as guests inside the Zoo.

At the conclusion of his presentation, Mr. Sorel asked Council if they had any questions, but noted that he did not, as yet, have any cost estimates adding that the Zoo was still gathering public input and wanted to have a solid idea of what the public wanted before finalizing this Master Plan.

Council Member Ruggiero asked if there was a plan for a Capital campaign and inquired as to the potential timeline for these improvements.

Mr. Sorel stated that yes, they would be doing a Capital campaign as well as seeking private money and indicated the Zoo would also approach the State for funds once they had an overall revenue strategy in place. He informed Council that this was probably a 10-year plan unless a lot of money appeared sooner than that.

Council Member Ruggiero expressed her appreciation for the zipline idea, noting that former Council Member Walczyk had been an advocate for the addition of one in the Park for years.

Mr. Sorel advised that the Zoo improvements would be done in prioritized phases and those phases had also not yet been determined.

Council Member Compo commended the plan for being accessible to guests coming from outside the Zoo as well as inside.

Mayor Smith asked when the Zoo hoped to kick off this Plan.

Mr. Sorel explained they would like to unveil the final Master Plan at the celebration of the Zoo's 100th anniversary to be held in August.

Mayor Smith inquired about some funding being supplied by the LDC (Local Development Corporation) to the Zoo.

Mr. Sorel informed Council that last year, after seeing the money the City had invested in the Park with items like the pool, splash pad and new tennis courts, plus the investment that the Friends of Thompson Park had made in trail improvements, the Zoo got the idea to seek funds for someone to do marketing for both the Park and the Zoo. He noted that the Zoo approached the LDC with a five-year plan, but had settled for a two-year plan for salary and expenses for a part-time marketing position that would promote both the Park and the Zoo.

Council Member Ruggiero expressed that she was pleased to hear about this and asked about potential cross promotions between the pool and the Zoo.

Mr. Sorel noted this had been discussed in the past but, because the pool is free, it had been difficult to offer incentives. He commented that if a fee were put in place at the pool, this type of cross promotion might become possible.

Mayor Smith commented that adding more concessions in the Park was an appealing idea and that expanding the Zoo's concessions would be a good place to start.

Mr. Sorel offered his support of Council Member Compo's previous proposal of having food trucks in the Park.

Mayor Smith inquired about the possibility of having open-air movie nights in the Zoo's pavilion.

City Manager Kenneth Mix stated that staff would investigate the equipment required.

Council thanked Mr. Sorel for his presentation.

Additional Federal and State Funding

Mayor Smith informed Council that the City had been approved for CARES funds totaling \$400,000 to assist for-profit businesses, such as hospitality, tourism, restaurants and entertainment venues, that had suffered financial losses during the pandemic. He indicated the plan was to offer 40 grants at \$10,000 apiece, adding that businesses had until June 25th to submit applications and a board was already in place to review the applications. He thanked Geoffrey Urda and Michael Lumbis for their assistance in moving this plan forward.

Council Member Compo questioned how the grant money would be distributed.

Mayor Smith indicated it would be on a first come-first served basis but added that the 40 businesses/\$10,000 each was a guideline and that if one business only needed \$5,000, the grant money could be adjusted accordingly.

Mr. Mix explained some other grant money that the City was being considered for, mentioning the Army's Defense funds for the amphitheater, and funds for the Waterman Drive extension and police body cams.

Mayor Smith also cited LDC funds for moving the rail spur in the Industrial Park off S. Bellew Ave., explaining that the funds were earmarked, and the City had been in contact with Senator Schumer's office.

Council Member Compo inquired as to whether Senator Gillibrand or Congresswoman Stefanik should be contacted as well.

Mayor Smith explained that earmarks were tricky and that, although the City could let all the various politicians know about the funds, the City could only officially go through one portal at a time, noting the process was tedious and time-consuming.

Regarding other funds the City might soon see, Mr. Mix confirmed that the New York State budget contained an allotment to the City for \$2.3 million in funding for street repair. He noted that this was like the CHIPs program.

Work session ended at 7:27 p.m.

Lisa M. Carr
Deputy City Clerk