

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

Mayor Jeffrey M. Smith Presiding

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

Also Present: Kenneth A. Mix, City Manager

City staff present: Patrick Keenan

DISCUSSION

Zoo New York Master Plan

Lawrence J. Sorel, Executive Director of Zoo New York, presented to Council the Zoo's Master Plan and the proposed Phase One prepared by GYMO (on file in the City Clerk's Office). He explained the proposed plans were prepared after various public input opportunities, which included Council, the Rotary and Advantage Watertown. He added that the plan had been posted on the Zoo's website as well so anyone could access it and comment.

He noted the proposal for the Master Plan was basically the same as when it was first brought to Council, with the exception of some changes made to the Zoo entrance and convenience drop off. He went on to explain all the various changes and additions the Zoo hoped to make in the Master Plan including: the addition of large hoofstock, with a larger multi-use staff handling service area, event space, walk through bird aviary, Long Island Sound exhibit, expanded pollinator exhibit, better directed flow through the Zoo but with paths available for exploration and an Adventure Park with ziplines and/or rope courses.

Mr. Sorel also informed Council of the Zoo's intention to add food service, located in what is now the farm area, where food could be offered that was somewhere between carnival-style and sit-down dining and which would also service the Park.

Mr. Sorel mentioned that the Thousand Islands Region draws 7,000,000 visitors and he would like the Zoo to be able to draw just 10% of those visitors.

Moving from the Site Plan Overview to the Phase One proposal, Mr. Sorel explained these were the three main changes the Zoo would like to accomplish first and added that everything begins with the Welcome Center. He compared this to selling your house and making sure that the front door was inviting. He discussed the splitting of the entrance and the exit to the Zoo and how that would serve to improve flow and would be an absolute necessity in the event of another pandemic.

The second part, he said, would be the addition of the North Country Aquarium and more education space. He informed Council that the Zoo offers a Teen Development training, which teaches leadership skills, and they would like to expand that program.

Mr. Sorel stated that the third component of Phase One was the addition of Bison and the expansion and creation of a combined staff service area that would serve all the large mammals.

He added that he would love for the proposed Adventure Park to be part of Phase One, but at this time, it is slated for future expansion.

Mr. Sorel indicated that Phase One had been priced out but that some items on the list were not cut and dried, noting you cannot just buy a Bison exhibit.

Mayor Smith thanked Mr. Sorel for the presentation.

In response to Council Member Pierce's question about the proposed timeline for Phase One, Mr. Sorel said that the plan was to have a design by 2022 and construction in 2023. He added that what the Zoo is looking for at this moment is endorsement of the concept from Council, which will allow them to go forward in seeking funding.

Council Member Ruggiero stated that she agreed with Mr. Sorel, and she would also like to see the Adventure Park be part of Phase One as it would be an instant source of revenue for the Zoo and would attract many visitors.

Council Member Henry-Wilkinson added that something like the ropes course in the proposed Adventure Park could immediately attract corporations for team-building activities.

Mr. Sorel noted that he would prefer the Adventure Park be an addition to Phase One rather than a substitution.

Council Member Pierce added her support for both the Adventure Park and the expanded event space. She noted that post-Covid, people are looking for places to gather in larger groups and that residents could get excited about a new recreational area.

Mr. Sorel pointed out that he would like to see about 50% of the Master Plan included in Phase One, but the initial focus was on education and conservation.

Council Member Pierce advised that the Governor had a new tourism-related initiative worth several hundred million dollars, and she would investigate if the Zoo would qualify for those funds.

Mr. Sorel expressed his belief that the City's Zoo is a grass-roots zoo and not a tourist mecca, but that he would like the Zoo to complement the great work the City has already done in other areas of the Park.

Mayor Smith suggested working with the consultants on the Master Plan to make sure the Zoo and the Park's work would complement each other.

Mr. Mix stated he would be in contact with Starr Whitehouse. He also informed Council that work would be done on the parking lot at the Zoo to make it more inviting for Park visitors and would include the addition of tree islands. He indicated that the proposed back parking lot to the Adventure Park would make access to the Park's trailheads more accessible.

Mayor Smith commented that one of the positives to come out of Covid was the public's rediscovery of Thompson Park.

Mr. Sorel mentioned he had heard many compliments about the improvements at the Gotham Street entrance due to the clearing of brush there.

Mayor Smith reminded Council that there was another brush cleanup in the Park slated for November 13 at 9 a.m.

Mr. Mix informed Council he would prepare a Resolution to endorse the conceptual design for the Zoo for the next Council meeting.

Work session ended at 7:33 p.m.

Lisa M. Carr
Deputy City Clerk