

**CITY COUNCIL BUDGET SESSION
CITY OF WATERTOWN
May 6, 2026
5:30 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: James Mills, Erica LeClerc, Erica Anderson, Brian MacCue, Thomas Compo, Dana Aikins, Aaron Harvill, Fire Chief Matthew Timerman, Scott Weller, Jim Scordo, Police Captain Cristin Lyon

DISCUSSION

Budget Recap

City Comptroller James Mills offered Council a recap of where the FY2026-27 proposed budget currently stands. He reminded Council that, since budget discussions started earlier this year than in previous years, some of the numbers for the tax roll had not been finalized. He indicated that the finalized tax roll and total taxable assessed value have decreased since the release of the proposed budget. He explained the changes and stated that the changes resulted in a proposed tax rate of 12.25%. He then listed the changes Council has made to the proposed budget so far and explained the impact of these changes to the tax levy and tax rate. He went on to offer staff recommendations for additional changes and noted the proposed tax levy would be an increase of 8.47% and a proposed tax rate would be an increase of 8.71%.

Hydro Consultant Fee

Council Member Shoen questioned the necessity of \$100,000 for the hydro consultant.

City Manager Wagenaar explained this covered the requirements with respect to FERC and allowed for standard operating procedure and site visits. He noted this is pay-as-you-go funding and the City will need a reserve to cover future costs.

In response to Council Member Shoen's questions about inspecting the hydro plant using staff, City Manager Wagenaar said that it was beyond staff's capabilities.

Parks and Recreation - Playgrounds

Comptroller Mills informed Council that staff had determined they could add two playground programs back to the budget at a cost of \$13,628.

Discussion occurred regarding which playgrounds were being considered and which were the busiest.

Council Member Kimball supported adding two programs.

Council Member Garrabrant supported adding none.

Council Member Osborne, Council Member Shoen and Mayor Pierce agreed with add one playground program at North Hamilton back into the proposed budget.

Parks and Recreation - Pools

Comptroller Mills presented a report on the seasonal statistics for each pool and the savings, or lack thereof, for keeping the pools open only certain days.

Returning briefly to the topic of playgrounds, Council Member Shoen offered his opinion that the City of Watertown School District could cover the costs of all the playground programs in lieu of spending \$130,000 on a digital sign.

Council Member Osborne offered his support to have the Flynn pool open weekends only.

Mayor Pierce agreed this was a reasonable suggestion.

Council Member Shoen noted this makes sense as he did not wish to have the pool closed completely.

Noting that he did not believe it should be open at all, Council Member Garrabrant supported having the Flynn pool open Thursday through Saturday when attendance is higher.

Council Member Kimball noted that the savings for having the Flynn pool open for fewer days was so small that he supported keeping it open every day.

Mayor Pierce asked about pool hours and suggested the possibility of having the pools open fewer hours on more days.

Parks and Recreation – Wolves Hockey

Comptroller Mills informed Council that the Wolves generate \$80,000 gross concession revenues.

Council Member Shoen requested the concession revenues for other open ice time.

Mr. Mills indicated it is around \$60,000.

Council Member Garrabrant asked if the contract with the Wolves extends to the new owners.

Parks and Recreation Superintendent Scott Weller explained that the Wolves are contractually obligated for at least one more year.

Parks and Recreation – Other Concerns

Council Member Garrabrant suggested removing a basketball court resurfacing line item of \$18,000 or at least postponing this project.

Council Members Shoen and Osborne agreed.

Council Member Shoen questioned the expenditure for lighting the baseball stadium and suggested postponing this work and searching for potential grant opportunities.

Mr. Weller indicated that this work has been postponed and staff are currently working to attempt to replace bulbs, but noted the equipment is obsolete.

In response to Council Member Shoen's question regarding how much revenue the baseball stadium generates, Mr. Weller replied about \$15,000.

Council Member Garrabrant asked if there was money for maintaining the greens at the City golf course even though it will not be opened next year and suggested he would like to keep funding in the budget for that to facilitate a future lease agreement.

Council Member Kimball suggested he doubted that any potential buyer or lessee was going to emerge at this late date.

City Manager Wagenaar informed Council that it will be nearly impossible to get the State to agree to allowing the City to sell the course but much more likely that they will agree to allowing a lease. He noted he expected to have an RFP for leasing the facility available by mid-June.

Council Member Shoen advised that the City should properly close the course or it would be a waste of time to try to sell or lease it.

Council Member Osborne and Mayor Pierce requested staff provide a figure on the potential closing costs.

Council Member Osborne requested clarification on an expense labeled "Kostyk" on page 266 of the Capital Budget.

Mr. Weller informed him the item was for replacement playground equipment.

Council Member Shoen requested removing \$120,000 for repaving the Fairgrounds YMCA parking lot.

In response to Mr. Mills asking if this was being removed from this year's budget or from the five-year plan, Council Member Shoen asked to have it removed entirely.

Mr. Mills asked if Council had made a decision about the baseball stadium lights and whether they would like the project kept in the five-year plan.

Mayor Pierce suggested keeping it in the five-year plan and seeking potential grant opportunities.

Regarding the Golf Clubhouse roof, Mr. Mills asked if that was being removed from the budget and Council Members Kimball, Osborne and Shoen agreed to remove it.

DPW - Refuse and Recycling

Comptroller Mills offered Council a brief overview of the City's refuse system and the proposed cessation of that service. He mentioned that, once debt service begins, the fleet's costs would be part of operating expense. He provided an overview of the three components of the system which were revenues, direct expenses and the cost of the fleet. He advised Council that it is important to note that regardless of whether or not the City runs a refuse pickup program, it will look like a budgetary loss. Mr. Mills explained the costs versus revenue and presented a series of graphs showing the yearly use of stickers and totes and number of customers. He also advised that there would be 5% fee increases for stickers and totes.

Council Member Shoen proposed an RFP for a solar farm at the City's closed landfill.

City Manager Wagenaar advised that the City is in the early stages of negotiations with NYSERDA.

In response to Council Member's Shoen question about the potential revenue from such a farm, Mr. Wagenaar said there is an EPA program which provides an income tax credit.

Council Member Shoen suggested using any revenues to offset the cost of the refuse programs since the revenue would have been generated by refuse.

Discussion followed regarding the recent turmoil with the change in refuse procedure and the drop in sticker sales and tote customers.

Council Member Shoen mentioned an issue with businesses hoarding stickers purchased at a lower price and sold for higher prices. He also advised that the dump has raised its minimum dump costs and noted that may drive customers back to using the City's service. Council Member Shoen commented that he would still like a resolution to require containers for garbage but admitted that the changes to the refuse program had resulted in the opposite effect by driving customers away. He stated that refuse had a rough year, but he did not feel it was a "dead animal" and would like to see the City keep trash service. He also commented that in a perfect world, he would like trash service to be provided without charging the customer, a model that has not been used in the City since 1990. He suggested this would save money and cause fewer issues, notably with the Code Enforcement Office.

Council Member Garrabrant said it is clear to him that the City should move forward with the service since the difference in costs is negligible, and he cited the negative effects, including confusion, that cancelling the service would cause. He offered some suggestions on how to reverse the trend including recruiting new customers to the service through a new homebuyer program and advertising. He advised that 90% of the feedback he received from the public was to keep the service.

Council Member Kimball stated that he approved of the 5% increase and wants to see the City continue the service. He commented that, although the changes to refuse program caused a lot of problems, he did not believe it was a fatal wound. He said he would also like to see the City promote the program and asked if a flyer could be sent out.

Mayor Pierce agreed that the trash service seemed like an important service to keep.

There was discussion about the potential of smaller totes and the costs of trash pickup at City buildings.

Council Member Osborne said he was a proponent of the trash service and views it as essential to the sanitary condition of the City.

Mayor Pierce asked about returning to bi-weekly recycling as a cost saving measure.

Department of Public Works Superintendent Brian MacCue spoke regarding the difference in tonnage versus volume. He stated there is a significant increase in cardboard recycling due to online shopping and clarified that cardboard takes up a larger volume of space although it does not weigh much.

Zoo

Council Member Kimball proposed continuing to support the zoo in this year's budget since the City owns the zoo and cited a potential figure of \$50,000. He asked that the City not abandon the zoo and commented on the enthusiasm of the staff and volunteers.

Council Member Osborne asked how much the City provides to the zoo in terms of utilities.

Comptroller Mills answered that utilities for the zoo, which are provided by the City, total between \$60,000 - \$75,000.

Council Member Osborne commented that this is a pretty significant amount that the City is already contributing to the zoo and noted that it is incumbent upon the zoo to be more self-sufficient.

There was some discussion about donations the zoo has received and support from the County.

Council Member Garrabrant noted his support for the zoo but added that extra financial support from the City this year is not possible.

Miscellaneous Budget Items

Mayor Pierce inquired about a line item for speed signs from the Police Department.

Police Captain Cristin Lyon clarified that the cost is for installation and that the City is already in possession of the signs, noting that they require an electrical hookup as they are not solar powered.

Council Member Kimball offered support for installing them rather than letting them linger in storage.

In response to Council Member Osborne's request for clarification about a compressor service, Fire Chief Matthew Timerman advised that the cost could be dropped from \$4,600 to \$3,400.

Council Member Shoen offered his opinion that the Fire Department should not be budgeting for painting vehicle roofs, which is not a necessity.

Council Member Shoen suggested removing half of the budgeted amount for demolition and suggested using the funds received in tax sales to fund demolitions.

Comptroller Mills advised that there will not necessarily be any proceeds from the tax sales, due to many of those funds being redirected toward back taxes.

City Manager Wagenaar informed Council that staff will dust off the list of parcels the City owns so it can be determined what can be sold.

Council agreed to hold off on the decision on demolition costs.

Council Member Garrabrant questioned a budget item of \$13,000 for an intern at the Water Department.

Water Superintendent Aaron Harvill explained that this is for engineering students to introduce them to potential jobs with sewage treatment and that the internship is partially funded by NYWEA.

In response to Council Member Shoen's question of whether any of the interns had ever been hired by the City, Mr. Harvill said they had not.

Budget Timeline

Comptroller Mills detailed the next steps in completing the budget process. He noted the next budget session would be held on Wednesday, May 13 and suggested that Council make a decision on the tax cap Local Law at the next City Council meeting on Monday, May 18. He explained that the budget must be passed by the last meeting in May, but which could also be adjourned to the Council meeting on June 1.

Mayor Pierce mentioned that Council is hosting two more budget office hour events for the public to meet with members of Council. She said they are scheduled for Thursday, May 7 from 12-2 p.m. and Tuesday May 12 from 6-8 p.m. She noted that many people expressed appreciation for these events, so they did not have to voice their concerns during public meetings.

Mayor Pierce reminded Council that the next Council Work Session is scheduled for Monday May 11th.

Budget session ended at 7:26 p.m.

Lisa M. Carr
City Clerk