

**CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION  
CITY OF WATERTOWN  
March 14, 2022  
7:00 p.m.**

**Mayor Jeffrey M. Smith Presiding**

**Present:** Council Member Patrick J. Hickey  
Council Member Clifford G. Olney III  
Council Member Sarah V.C. Pierce  
Council Member Lisa A. Ruggiero  
Mayor Jeffrey M. Smith

**Also Present:** Kenneth A. Mix, City Manager

**City staff present:** Scott Weller, Michael Delaney, Dana Aikins, Patrick Keenan, Michael Lumbis

**DISCUSSION**

**Zoo New York**

Lawrence Sorel, Executive Director and CEO of Zoo New York, began the presentation by providing Council with a handout (on file at the City Clerk's office). He told Council that the original agreement made pre-Covid between the City and the Conservatory no longer supports the Zoo for success. He stressed that if the Conservancy should fold, the responsibility of the Zoo would fall on the City. He asked Council for immediate assistance in the form of \$50,000 for educational programs and \$50,000 for public relations. He informed Council that the Zoo barely survived Covid, stating that this is a crucial point for the Zoo. He informed Council that the College-educated students from the Jefferson Community College Zoo Tech Program are making 20 cents over minimum wage. He also mentioned that members of management and other educated staff are not making much more than this, adding their pay is below the State mandated amount. He advised Council that the Zoo could use two to three more staff to bring the Zoo up to the recommended amount of staffing. He expressed concern that the Zoo is still struggling with non-staffing cost issues as well. Mr. Sorel drew Council's attention to Phase One of the operational improvement ideas which include additional animal attractions and additional guest activities, noting the estimated cost of approximately \$75,000. He added that he is asking Council to consider funding the cost to initiate the rebirth of the Zoo which belongs to all of us.

Mr. Sorel then discussed at length zoo statistics including the numbers of visitors that attend the Zoo annually (between 40,000-60,000), special events and the 22<sup>nd</sup> survey of Jefferson County Center for Community Studies. He said this survey revealed that nine out of 10 residents believe the Zoo is important to the quality of life in Jefferson County. He reiterated that significant support from the City is needed to continue the growth of the Zoo.

Mayor Smith asked for clarification on the specific request.

Mr. Sorel said the Zoo is asking for \$75,000 for Phase One, \$50,000 for education and \$50,000 for Public Relations to promote the Zoo. He suggested Council find a way to fund the Zoo other than small increments at a time. He added there are options out there for additional funding but stated that tonight's

meeting is not the time to discuss this. He explained that those funding resources should be discussed with not only Council, but also with the Board and staff. He summarized the different ideas for funding that other cities do and noted he would like to use some of their ideas for Zoo New York. In response to Mayor Smith's question of whether the total amount being requested is \$175,000, Mr. Sorel replied that was the correct amount.

Mayor Smith questioned if the City is responsible for the maintenance on the buildings.

Mr. Sorel said the City does landlord-type maintenance on the original buildings. He indicated the visitor center is maintained by the Zoo and the City is responsible for the stone structure, explaining the City did the repairs to the roof and the furnace in the conservation center.

Mayor Smith asked if there are currently any big maintenance jobs that need to be done on the City owned buildings.

Mr. Mix said the current budget has funds to replace the windows in the Director's house. He then drew Council's attention to the fact that Mr. Sorel is asking for a different contractile agreement, and he summarized the concerns that need to be addressed, especially since Covid changed so many things. He said Council will need to wrestle with some of these ideas, particularly the idea of the City taking over the Zoo.

Council Member Olney asked Mr. Mix about sales tax revenue and whether Council should consider using the revenues to help boost the economy by bringing tourists to the City to utilize our Zoo. He added that he and Council Member Hickey met with Mr. Sorel last week and discussed other ways to fund the Zoo. He discussed at length the comprehensive things that need to be looked at first and the most attractive venues to the public that can be marketed. He suggested placing billboards along Route 81 and reiterated the idea of using sales tax revenue to fund these ideas.

Mr. Sorel explained the main ideas for Phase One are reconstructing the entrance to help with congestion during peak times, adding an animal attraction or two depending on cost, and the Adventure Park. He added it is hard to determine the true cost right now.

Council Member Ruggiero asked for a time frame to get Phase One implemented.

Mr. Sorel explained ideally, he would like to get the studies done this year and start the project in the spring of next year.

In response to Council Member Pierce's inquiry of whether the \$75,000 requested would go towards the study, Mr. Sorel said it would, which would also help establish what Phase One really is.

After much discussion, Mayor and Council all agreed to support the \$175,000 request.

Mr. Mix asked Council to readopt the Budget so that \$100,000 can be used now to allow the Zoo to start work on Phase One this year.

The Mayor and all members of Council agreed to this.

### **Parks and Public Land**

Mr. Mix began the presentation by presenting Council with a handout (on file in the City Clerk's Office). He informed Council that Parks and Recreation consists of two parts, which are the parks within the City and the recreation programs. He said that the public lands go beyond just Thompson Park. He stated it is important to keep public spaces in good condition by maintaining them and bringing some of them back to what they originally were. He explained this is the reason the City added some equipment last year to help maintain landscape. He noted the plan had been to hire additional staff, but unfortunately, it had not worked out. He noted the volunteer program was a great success. He advised Council that, in the upcoming year, professional contractors should be hired along with adding more volunteers. He mentioned Council Member Pierce's efforts at revitalizing the islands have been a success and more of that should be done this year. He discussed at length the different machinery that was used to remove buckthorn in Thompson Park, noting that it was a job well done. He recommended hiring this type of work out to professionals rather than hiring seasonal staff.

Mayor Smith asked about money in the budget for trails.

Mr. Mix replied that a brush hog and a clipper had been purchased to maintain the trails.

In response to Mayor Smith's question about the first volunteer day, Council Member Pierce stated it was April 23<sup>rd</sup>.

Mr. Mix and Mayor Smith discussed the different groups and businesses that volunteer and it was noted that this brings the community together.

Mayor Smith asked Council if they would be interested in allocating some money to better clear the overgrown areas so they can be better utilized by the public.

Council Member Olney said he would, noting it needs to be cleared out better to prevent deer/car accidents.

Mayor Smith asked what would be a fair amount of money for this project.

Mr. Mix confirmed there is \$50,000 available but noted it is hard to pinpoint an exact cost until the machinery gets in there. He added that there are cable and telephone lines deep in the wooded area.

In response to Mayor Smith's query on whether some of this work could be hired out, Mr. Mix said it could.

Mayor Smith mentioned that prisoners used to do some of that type of work.

Council Member Pierce asked if it is possible to make use of the prisoners again.

Mayor Smith pointed out that many of the prisoners were from Watertown Correctional Facility, which is now closed.

Council Member Pierce suggested other local prisons, and informed Council that a request would need to be made to the Department of Corrections. She added that she would investigate getting contact information.

Mayor Smith praised the great work that staff has done maintaining the Park and surrounding areas, stressing how nice it all looks, and asked Council if they would be willing to put \$50,000 in ARPA funds for Spring clean-ups this year.

All members of Council agreed.

### **Recreation Programs**

Scott Weller, Superintendent of Parks and Recreation presented a handout to Council (on file in the City Clerk's office) and explained that the handout was a snapshot of the programs available as well as events and facilities that Parks and Recreation are responsible for. He noted the handout also shows what groups use the facilities and the revenue that is brought in along with the fee schedule.

Mayor Smith informed Mr. Weller that he has nothing but the highest praise for staff and the phenomenal job they do in taking care of the fields, facilities and arena. He noted how much pride they put into their work and asked Mr. Weller to let staff know how appreciated they are.

Council Member Ruggiero addressed Council reminding them there will be a Concert in the Park again this year and asked if the Rotary Club has been in contact with anyone at the City. She mentioned that Rotary was going to possibly get in contact with former sponsors and wondered if Council was aware of this.

Mayor Smith replied that after last year's event, he was under the impression that Rotary was going to take a step back and leave most of the responsibility to the City.

Mr. Weller replied that the last he had heard, getting assistance from the Rotary Club looked promising for this year and added that although nothing is a 100%, Rotary is working on it and reaching out to sponsors.

Council Member Ruggiero agreed that was her understanding also and she added she will bring the topic up at this week's Rotary meeting.

Mayor Smith stressed that it would be great if Rotary would reach out to sponsors because the City is not able to do so.

Mayor Smith and Mr. Weller discussed at length the concerns that Rotary has with rising costs.

Mayor Smith discussed the different options that exist for Rotary partnering with the City.

Council Member Ruggiero asked about a special events category using the Eclipse as an example.

Mr. Mix said the City prefers to know at least a year in advance when events will be happening, explaining that last minute events can cause a lot of problems. He then explained to Council that if they wish to increase events, there will need to be additional staff and noted that Mr. Weller no longer has an

Assistant. He summarized the possible positions that could be created to help Mr. Weller, especially with social media and marketing and possibly an Events Coordinator.

In response to Council Member Ruggiero's question on how much staff had been decreased over the last two years, Mr. Weller said it was essentially one position.

Council Member Ruggiero offered her support for hiring someone to fill the position.

Council Member Olney agreed with Council Member Ruggiero.

Council Member Hickey stressed that the Solar Eclipse needs to be a line item in the budget.

Council Member Olney informed Council and Mr. Weller that the American Little League had contacted him about field usage and discussed at length the number of teams and revenue that is generated from using them.

Mr. Weller responded by saying that any concerns or requests can be brought to him or Council directly.

Much discussion ensued on improvements to the fields and facilities such as lighting and getting estimates for cooling pads for ice rinks. Council also discussed having surveys done to ask the residents for their opinions and requests for recreation and also how much residents feel should be spent on the programs and facilities.

### **City Hall Improvements**

Mr. Mix began the presentation by reminding Council that improvements for City Hall have been discussed for years and pointed out that currently the heating system is working properly, and it is comfortable in Council Chambers. He informed Council there were three main topics that were going to be discussed: the Courtroom expansion, second floor renovations and the envelope of the City Hall building.

Dana Aikins, Code Enforcement Supervisor, presented Council with drawings of the designs for the Court Room expansion. He said Codes will be temporarily moved to another location which has yet to be determined during the reconstruction. He explained that with Codes relocated, that area can be utilized while the Court Room expansion is being completed. He informed Council that getting the entryway completed first would allow for better security.

Council Member Ruggiero asked what the time frame is.

Mr. Mix said there is not a time frame, reiterating that Judge Murphy is happy with doing the project in phases. He explained that the process still must be reviewed by the Office of Court Administration (OCA). He stressed that Judge Murphy does not want to make any decisions until he knows Council is committed to moving ahead with the project.

Council Member Ruggiero mentioned that she is often asked when City Hall will be open again to the public. She expressed concern that people should be allowed to come in for things such as dog licenses and birth certificates.

Mr. Mix stated that City Hall is open for such purposes, just by appointment only. He informed Council that it will mostly likely be at least a year. He mentioned that the Court Guards are a big help in monitoring public that access City Hall which helps with security. He then informed Council that Judge Murphy is looking for a resolution from Council so he can send the plans to OCA for review.

Council Member Ruggiero asked for the cost.

Mr. Mix said there are some very rough estimates based on square footage. He said the biggest change would be bumping out the side doors so there is a vestibule where the metal detector will be, noting this is where a big chunk of the cost will be.

Mr. Aikins informed Council that just based on the square footage the price range is \$1.5 to \$2 million.

Mayor Smith added that at his last meeting with Judge Murphy, they toured the building and said Judge Murphy was receptive to the improvements being done in stages.

Michael Delaney, City Engineer, remarked that on the engineering side, a phased approach is the best option so that operations can still be maintained within City Hall. He told Council that Mr. Akins did the design in-house which helped save money.

In response to Council Member Olney's question on whether Codes will end up on the second floor, Mr. Mix said just temporarily.

Council Member Olney asked what the budget was for the entire project.

Mr. Aikins said the \$1.5 to \$2 million is for the Court phase only, reiterating that it can be done in phases.

In response to Council Member Olney asking if new bathrooms in the Court are part of Phase One, Mr. Aikins replied they were.

Much more discussion was had as to the length of the project and the different phases and timeframe for the project while trying to keep City Hall operational.

Mr. Mix drew Council's attention to the fact that there is a lot of empty space on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor. He reminded Council that, for many years, there has been discussion about consolidating departments and putting them in better locations. He drew Council's attention to the design plans and explained where each department currently is and where, ideally, they would move to. He added that the departments that service the public more would be joined together, which are Assessment, Comptroller and bringing the City Clerk's office up there, noting they would be the last department to move. He noted that Superintendent of Public Works Patrick Keenan's office would move to the DPW Barn where his staff is located. He told Council that the cost estimate for this project is \$150,000.

Council Member Olney asked if there could be an office made on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor for Council.

Mr. Mix said not in this configuration.

Council Member Olney said it would be nice to have an office to meet with people.

Mr. Delaney told Council that one of the goals is to consolidate departments that work closely together, explaining that there are many times he must go up and down stairs to meet with Codes and said there are other departments in the same situation.

Mr. Mix addressed Council saying that regardless of the timeline for the other projects, he would like to get the ball rolling with the second-floor project.

Mr. Mix then drew Council's attention to the third topic, which includes the upkeep and renovations to City Hall. He said the building envelope is anything that keeps the weather out and the warmth or cool air in. This will also include lighting, plumbing and electrical work, as well as carpets and floors. He also mentioned the acoustics in Council Chambers pointing out there used to be a material on the ceiling for acoustics which was torn out.

Mayor Smith voiced his concern about some of the changes being suggested and said, as an example, he would rather see roads get taken care of before a ceiling replacement for Council Chambers.

Mr. Aikins broke down the costs for whole project which were: \$1.5 to \$2 million for Court project, \$150,000 for second floor project and, after breaking down each estimate for repairs on the building envelope, a rough estimate of \$8.1 million to \$9 million, noting engineering/architecture fees of around \$1 million.

In response to Council Member Hickey's concerns about asbestos in the building, Mr. Aikins agreed that the tiles are asbestos and therefore cannot be broken. Mr. Aikins stressed that these figures are just preliminary and that an energy audit/study will be conducted.

Council Member Olney asked how much of the \$8 million is from the energy study.

Mr. Aikins and Council discussed at length the energy study and the different costs that will be accumulated. They also discussed different ways to cut costs while keeping the same design of City Hall. Mr. Aikins noted that a large portion of the cost estimate came out of the energy study.

Mr. Delaney added that part of the energy study included the lack of insulation in the exterior walls, which is part of the cost calculation.

Council, Mr. Aikins and Mr. Delaney discussed at length the heating/cooling system and the pros and cons of different heating/cooling options along with different payment options for the new system.

Mayor Smith commented that the decision to make all these repairs is tough because investing in the community is one thing but added there is no payback with this project.

Mr. Mix advised that City Hall is still a City facility and is a building that employs many people. He added that the previous City Hall was torn down at a younger age than this one.

Council agreed that the price tag is steep, but improvements do need to be made, with Mayor Smith suggesting doing it in phases like the Court Room project.

Council Member Hickey expressed concern that if something is not done to maintain City Hall it will eventually end up costing more money and end up like the DPW Barn, park pool or arena and he does not want to see this happen. He said City Hall is an asset to the City.

Mr. Mix asked Council if they are ready to make a resolution for the Court project.

All Council members agreed.

Council Member Ruggiero commented that as far as Phase 3 goes, she thinks starting with the roof and HVAC is a good place to start the project.

All Council agreed.

Work session ended at 9:30 p.m.

Margaret M. Puccia  
Deputy City Clerk