

**CITY COUNCIL BUDGET SESSION
CITY OF WATERTOWN
May 4, 2022
6:00 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: Brian Phelps, Dale Morrow

DISCUSSION

Assessment – page 35

City Assessor Brian Phelps noted that the major change to his budget is the addition of a Real Property Tax Services Aide. He explained his department had this position in the past, but it was eliminated in 2018 after the retirement the Real Property Appraiser, noting the Real Property Tax Services Aide at the time moved into the Real Property Appraiser position. He advised that it has been difficult to cover the office with just two people and they are falling behind in inspections. He pointed out that there has been an increase in workload due to the recent increase in property sales in the last 24 months. He indicated that the other big change is the purchase of a folder/sealer machine, which is detailed on page 38. He mentioned this equipment is shared with the Comptroller's Office and used for tax bills as well as payroll checks and accounts payable checks.

Council Member Hickey asked if outside inspections are done using an iPad.

Mr. Phelps replied that he does use an iPad and explained the process that he does for inspections and how parts of it are automated through technology. In response to Council Member Olney's question, he said that the sealer/folder machine is specialized to heat seal the paper into an envelope, but the machine can be used to simply fold letters for bulk mailing and can be used by other departments.

Mayor Smith expressed concerns with adding positions and noted that this budget contains 24 new positions equaling a cost of \$1.4 million, which will continue to increase. He said he wondered how the City would continue to pay for this recurring cost, especially after the loss of the ARPA funds and hydro revenue at the end of the contract.

There was a discussion of sales tax revenue and Mr. Mills noted that, in the proposed budget, he projected sales tax revenue conservatively at a 2% growth of where this current fiscal year is projected to finish.

Mayor Smith suggested sharing personnel and asked Mr. Phelps if he could share with the Comptroller's Office.

Mr. Phelps said he certainly agreed that staff could be shared and that it has been discussed in the past, but his position would also need a special skill set because he needs more than just somebody to answer the phone. He mentioned that he tried getting part-time help a couple of years ago but it is difficult to find someone good that only wants part-time work. He explained that he could run his office with two people, but Council needs to be aware that there will be times that the office is not staffed or phones not answered, so there will be a loss of customer service.

Council Member Olney said that he has heard from the public that they want a certain level of service and noted that people would not mind if their taxes went up, if the level of service from the City improved. He also mentioned that there are complaints that it takes too long to get something done with the City, so increasing staffing levels would help.

Mayor Smith remarked that he is fiscally conservative and would rather start small in adding employees versus adding \$1.4 million for 24 new positions. He suggested adding a few now to see how it goes then adding a few at a time in future years.

Council Member Olney said he supports adding the Real Property Tax Service Aide position now.

Council Member Hickey agreed.

Mentioning that she thought 24 new positions was a lot, Council Member Pierce said she is not ready to make a decision on this particular position because she would like to hear from each department first regarding their staffing needs and then decide where to cut back.

Council Member Ruggiero agreed, stating she would like more information from the departments that want to add staff.

The conversation turned to assessment values and the effect that the market is having on them. Mr. Phelps explained in detail the process his office goes through once they are notified of a property sale and how it ultimately affects the property assessment. He responded to Council's questions on how it affects property taxes for the City, stressing that it keeps equity in place. He reminded Council that the total amount of property taxes does not change unless the levy is changed. He also was asked about different assessment programs that are done by other municipalities.

Mayor Smith pointed out that the Judgments and Claims account listed on page 39 increased from last year.

Mr. Phelps explained that there are some long, ongoing cases that are coming close to being settled, but they will cost the City more.

Purchasing - page 32

Purchasing Manager Dale Morrow stated there were no major changes in her budget from previous years. In response to Council Member Hickey's question about central purchasing, she said that each

department does their own. She noted that it would be easier to centralize it, but it would take a while to get there.

Mayor Smith asked if every department follows the purchasing policy.

Mr. Mix explained that, in the beginning process, not every department does, but they are working with those departments to get them into compliance. He stressed that there are many checks and balances in place to ensure this is caught and addressed prior to it becoming an issue.

Department of Public Works

Superintendent of Public Works Patrick Keenan began by reviewing the Administration account on page 59. He noted the main change is an increase in the salaries line because a larger portion of the Assistant Superintendent's salary was allocated to this account instead of the Central Garage account due to the addition of a Fleet Manager in Central Garage. He explained how the Assistant Superintendent had done more fleet management through the years so most of his salary was put into that account. He pointed out that he is eliminating the Senior Engineer Technician position to accommodate the new Fleet Manager position. Lastly, he explained that this will help with succession planning, since he and Assistant Superintendent Peter Monaco will be retiring in the near future.

Council Member Hickey asked about the elevator maintenance and the Cartegraph software maintenance expenses.

Mr. Keenan explained it is for repairs to the original elevator and how the software is used throughout the department. In response to Council Member Olney's inquiry of replacing the elevator, he remarked that a study was done 10 years ago to do this, and it would have cost \$600,000 - \$700,000 at that time. He also explained what has been looked at in regard to adding a bathroom shower facility.

In the Central Garage account on page 68, Mr. Monaco indicated that everything was pretty much the same as previous years, except for the pressure washer for \$10,000, the concrete floor repair for \$12,000 and the interior wall cleaning for \$37,500. He explained the need for each of these items.

In Buildings and Grounds Maintenance account on page 106, Mr. Keenan explained there is one new Motor Equipment Operator (Light) position added and noted the reasons why it is needed. He also reviewed the other equipment purchases.

In the Maintenance of Roads account on page 111, Mr. Keenan noted there were two new Motor Equipment Operator (Light) positions. He added that he proposed adding a total five new Motor Equipment Operator (Light) throughout the department to help meet the all the department's obligations plus complete smaller jobs that have needed to be contracted out. He commented that this will also provide for more people to pull from during the winter months. Lastly, he pointed out the trailer purchase that is detailed on page 115.

In response to Council Member Hickey's question, Mr. Keenan explained what the bridge sealing and maintenance item pertains to and advised that it is better to rent a milling machine versus purchase one, since a small milling machine is approximately \$365,000.

In the Snow Removal account on page 116, Council Member Hickey noted that there was a significant decrease in insurance.

Mr. Mills said he will look into this in case it is an error.

Overtime was discussed and Mr. Keenan said that it is hard to predict, and it depends on the number of snow events during the season.

Council Member Hickey mentioned the GPS tracking line item and asked if this tracking is available to the public.

Mr. Keenan stated that it is not, but they have looked at that option.

Lastly, the two-stage moldboard replacements on pages 120 and 121 were reviewed.

Turning to the Parking Facility account on page 141, Mr. Keenan pointed out the parking lots that the City is responsible for and discussed the proposed work to be done at the Arsenal Street parking deck and covered parking area. In regard to Council Member Hickey's question about the Stone Street Lease payments, he explained that the City rents part of the Stone Street parking lot from the Jefferson County Historical Society.

For the Storm Sewers account on page 181, Mr. Keenan indicated that there were not many changes, and the biggest expense was the stormwater utility fee study for \$75,000.

Regarding the Refuse and Recycling account on page 185, Mr. Monaco noted that everything is about the same as previous years. He mentioned that they recently were informed that the tipping fee may increase by \$3.

The conversation turned to staffing and the difficulty in filling staff openings and maintaining staff levels. The requirement and expense of a CDL license was discussed and Mr. Mix advised that BOCES is developing a CDL training program, which cost between \$3,500 to \$4,000 per person. He recommended Council consider having the City pay for this as an incentive to new employees and this should be something that is added to the budget and continue to budget for each year. He said the City could do this through an intermunicipal agreement with the County.

Council agreed to have the City Manager move towards obtaining an intermunicipal agreement. It was also noted that if the City pays for the CDL, there should be a commitment from the employee to stay for a period of time or the City could seek reimbursement.

In the Sanitary Sewer account on page 231, Mr. Keenan reviewed the proposed staffing changes, which will allow them to catch up on projects. He responded to Council Member Hickey's questions about the pipeline assessment certification training and the cost of materials going up.

Budget session ended at 8:15 p.m.

Ann M. Saunders
City Clerk