

**CITY COUNCIL BUDGET SESSION
CITY OF WATERTOWN
May 31, 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: James Mills, Michael Delaney, Michael Lumbis

DISCUSSION

Recommended Changes to the Proposed Fiscal Year 2022-23 Budget

Mayor Smith explained that Council was given a report this evening with all the updated proposed changes to the budget as well as the cost of the items that are still pending decisions.

Management Salaries Calculation Error – Add \$15,609

City Comptroller James Mills explained there was an error in the management salaries because the formula for calculating this amount needed to be updated due to management now receiving step increases.

Deletion of the “Building Leak Repair” Project – Subtract \$7,500 from both Water and Sewer Funds

Mr. Mills stated that this can be deleted because it is now part of a larger capital project.

SeeClickFix Software – Add \$22,000

Mr. Mills stated this is the software that IT Manager David Wurzburg suggested to receive complaints from the public and works with other City software.

Council all agreed to add this amount to the proposed budget.

Thompson Park Quonset Hut – Subtract \$35,000

Mr. Mills explained it was a last-minute change to move this project from the Capital Budget to the Operational Budget, but the amount was not deleted from the Capital Budget.

Taxable Assessed Value and Omitted Taxes

Mr. Mills explained that these were provided by the City Assessor after his Commission met one more time after the proposed budget was released.

Funding for Pages in Library Fund – Subtract \$35,137

Mr. Mills stated that there was an accounting duplication and the funding for the Pages are no longer needed if the part-time Library Clerk is being converted into full-time.

Correction to Insurance for Snow Removal – Add \$6,300

Mr. Mills noted that this was a data entry error in which a zero was left off a number.

Funding for Refurbishment of Fire Vehicles – Add \$970,000

Mr. Mills stated that during the last meeting there seemed to be a consensus to fund the refurbishment of these vehicles out of current resources in place of issuing debt.

Council all agreed.

Funding for CDL Training – Add \$40,000

Mr. Mills noted there seemed to be consensus at the last meeting to fund CDL training for new employees.

There was further discussion on the agencies that are currently conducting training programs. Mr. Mix clarified that the City would not be setting up its own program and it would use a program that is currently in place.

Council agreed to add this funding.

Reclassification of Vegetation Management (page 307) – Reclass \$100,000

Mayor Smith explained that this will reclass the vegetation management to the operating fund.

Council all agreed with this change.

City Council Tablets – Add \$9,800

Mayor Smith asked if there was support to add this amount into the budget.

Council Member Hickey, Council Member Olney Council Member Ruggiero agreed to add the amount.

Council Member Pierce asked if this is meant to save money, questioning if it would decrease the amount spent on the paper agenda.

Mr. Mix indicated that he is not sure how much is spent on paper to prepare the agenda.

Mentioning that the agenda uses a lot of paper, Mayor Smith advised that if Council receives the agenda electronically then the paper process would be eliminated.

Council Member Hickey mentioned there would be search capability of the documents with the use of the tablets. He said that with the tablets Council will be able to do instant research, instant examination of past meeting minutes and notes could be added to the files.

Mayor Smith advised that the City should have a policy on the use of these tablets, mentioning an issue that happened at the Library in the past.

Council Member Ruggiero requested that the proposed budget still be given to Council in paper format.

In response to Council Member Olney's request to receive reports, such as the recent Hydro report from Skip Trimble, on the tablet, Mr. Mix stated those reports are posted on the website.

City Clerk Ann Saunders clarified that the searching of prior minutes and reports would be through the City's website. In response to Mayor Smith interjecting that the website's search capability has issues, she said this is why she recommended that tablets be the second phase to agenda software.

Council Member Hickey questioned the status of agenda software.

Ms. Saunders explained that agenda software is in the proposed and there was a meeting with the City Manager, the former City Manager's Secretary, the IT Manager and herself to discuss this, and the IT Manager was to research software packages for presentations. She asked Mr. Mix if he knew of any other updates.

Mr. Mix responded that there had not been any further development on this.

Mayor and Council Salary Increases (\$4,000 Increase for Each Elected Official) – Add \$22,503
Mayor Smith called for a vote on this, and Council Member Hickey, Council Member Olney and Council Member Ruggiero voted in favor of it and Council Member Pierce and Mayor Smith voted against it.

Council Member Ruggiero informed Council that County Legislators receive a raise each year and it is tied to what is received by management.

Mayor Smith advised that this could be done, but it would have to be actively requested each year and could not be automatically put in, without amending the City Charter. He added that a resolution could be passed but that it cannot bind a future Council to do future raises this way.

Regarding a possible Charter amendment, Council Member Olney suggested that Council might want to discuss this further in the future so that Council is keeping in place with management.

City Council Chamber Audio and Visual Improvements – Add \$ 3,500
Mayor Smith polled Council for their support of this.

Council Members Hickey, Olney and Ruggiero voted yes and Council Member Pierce voted no, and Mayor Smith called this in favor of the yeses.

Increase Funding for Steve Weed for Non-City Hall Location Work Sessions – Add \$1,400
Mayor Smith polled Council for their support of this.

Council Members Hickey, Olney and Ruggiero voted yes, and Council Member Pierce voted no, and Mayor Smith called this in favor of the yeses.

Employee Recognition Funding – Add \$1,000

In response to Mr. Mills asking for clarification of the intent of this, Mayor Smith provided the example of sending flowers to the family of a deceased employee or former employee. He also suggested buying pizza for a retirement party.

Mr. Mix explained that the City can do employee recognition but cannot expend funds for funeral flowers.

Mr. Mills mentioned that he sought advice from the City Attorney and read from NYCOM's gift and loan constitutional prohibition publication, which states that flowers for a funeral is not a proper municipal purchase and there is no statutory authority for a municipality to purchase flowers for someone in the hospital or a funeral.

Council Member Olney asked if there is another way to do this.

Mr. Mills reminded Council that this is public money and that with most employers, it is just their money and they do it.

Mayor Smith noted that he understands this because it is public money and confirmed that employee recognition can be done with this.

Council agreed to add \$1,000 to the budget for the use of employee recognition and agreed to Council Member Ruggiero's suggestion to use it for volunteer recognition as well.

Holiday Decorations – Add \$25,000

Mr. Mix explained that Planning and Community Development Director Michael Lumbis looked into updating the Christmas decorations, as well as what is done at the tree lighting ceremony.

Council Member Ruggiero suggested using some of the old decorations in Thompson Park.

Council was in agreement.

Trail Use Counter – Add - \$900

Mr. Mix mentioned that Council inquired about how many people use the various trails and staff recommended getting a trail use counter, which could be moved around to the different trails within the City.

Council Member Ruggiero noted that it would be nice to determine usage of a trail prior to reinvesting funds into improvements.

Council agreed to this.

Hydro-electric Engineering Evaluation of Increasing Plant Capacity - \$100,000

Mayor Smith asked how the amount of \$100,000 was determined, noting that he does not think the City had even paid \$100,000 for both of the other two hydro reports.

Mr. Mix advised that the other hydro reports were not engineering studies, noting that Mr. Trimble did a market analysis and the other consultant concentrated on the metering component. He noted that this may not cost the full \$100,000, and it depends on how much engineering is done.

Council Member Olney commented that this is meant to start the City in the direction of increasing overall capacity of the plant.

Indicating that he requested this be added to the budget, Council Member Hickey said it was to see if the City should build another facility next to the current turbines of Faith, Hope and Charity instead of modifying them in effort to increase capacity.

Mayor Smith reminded Council that sometimes there is not enough flow during the summer months to generate anything.

Council Member Olney noted that Kaplan turbines can operate at low water level and this study would look at the possibility of building an addendum building next to the existing Francis turbines. He stressed that this would not shut down the current facility.

The cost of construction for this project was talked about and Council Member Hickey mentioned that there are grants available.

Mayor Smith polled Council for their support of this.

Council Members Hickey, Olney and Ruggiero voted yes, and Council Member Pierce noted that she is undecided about the amount, and Mayor Smith called this in favor of the yeses.

Funding for Repairs to River Parks – Add \$50,000

Mr. Mix mentioned that at the last meeting it was brought up that some decking and railings needed repairs, so he is proposing adding these funds to refurbish some things that have reached the end of their lifespan.

All of Council agreed with this.

Increase Thompson Park Renovation Capital Project (page 308) – Add \$1,250,000

In response to Council Member Ruggiero's inquiry about the Factory Square Park improvements, Mr. Mix explained that page 307 will now only list the Factory Square Park Trail Connection to Factory Street for \$100,000. He further explained that \$1,250,000 would be eliminated from page 307 and added into the Thompson Park Renovation project listed on page 308 for some of the ideas, such as an outdoor ice rink or stage, which were suggested at the last meeting.

All of Council agreed to this.

New Staffing Positions

Council Member Olney commented that with the availability of the ARPA funds, he wants to make sure there is enough staff in place to do the added work, in order to plan and implement all the projects. He expressed further support for keeping all of the 24 new positions that Mr. Mix included in the proposed budget. He mentioned the increase in sales tax revenue, noting that the proposed budget was conservative, and discussed the importance of investing in recreational opportunities that will draw people to Watertown. He also noted that the City has a large fund balance, more than he thinks it should and mentioned the State Comptroller's recommendation of having 15% in reserve, which would equate to about \$8 million.

Mr. Mills advised that the State Comptroller's recommendation is a broad stroke-based percentage, and you need to look at what makes up each municipality's revenue and expenses. He explained that

Watertown's revenue is very volatile, and it which relies on people's spending and Mother Nature, since property tax only makes up 20% of the revenue. He stressed this is why the City needs more in reserve than 15%.

Mayor Smith reminded Council that the fund balance is used as operating funds throughout the year due to the timing of when revenues and funding streams are received. He said this saves the City from having to borrow money to pay employees or make small purchases.

Council Member Olney argued that he does not feel the City has enough staff at this time to do the additional projects and recreational improvements. He said he supports leaving all 24 positions in the proposed budget.

Council Member Ruggiero mentioned that Council recently approved two new positions for the Code Enforcement Office and now they are asking for another one. Noting that both Assessment and Code Enforcement want an additional full-time clerical position, she suggested splitting one position between the two departments. Regarding the other new positions, she stated some positions could be added this year and then Council could consider adding more next year, stressing that 24 is a lot to add at one time.

Mayor Smith agreed, stating that the 24 positions will cost \$1.4 million which will go up each year after that. He talked about the City's revenue being volatile and dependent on people's spending.

Council Member Ruggiero added that the budget could always be readopted if there was a need to add more positions during the year.

Mayor Smith mentioned that a majority of the assessment work can be done online, and the office coverage is mainly needed when the current assessor's staff is not in the office, but not all the time.

In response to Council Member Olney's question of how many positions were cut during COVID, Mr. Mills stated that those positions are not any of the proposed employee additions for this budget because the positions eliminated due to COVID have already been brought back.

Stating he feels a lot of work had been put off throughout the years, Council Member Olney said the City has an opportunity to get projects done now and he feels the revenue to support this will continue to be there.

Mayor Smith remarked that projects were not done in the past because the money was not available to do them at that time, noting that now the City has the ARPA funds available. He stressed that this all involves spending other people's money (the taxpayers') and previous Councils were conservative and did not want to raise taxes.

Council Member Ruggiero noted that she would like to see the addition of the Deputy Comptroller position remain in the proposed budget and questioned whether the Engineering Department needed the Civil Engineer I or the Civil Engineer II more.

Council Member Hickey reminded Council Member Ruggiero that the Engineering Department will have a lot of work due to the ARPA projects and will need them both.

Mayor Smith suggested using third party consultants for some of the work.

Mr. Mix explained most of the work will involve project administration, for which there is a large demand for with the current projects. He said he is not worried about there not being enough work for the new positions in the future because the work is always there.

Mayor Smith said he agreed with eliminating half of the Assessment position and half of the Code Enforcement position and put the remaining halves into a fulltime position for the two departments to share. He recommended eliminating the additional Planner position, two of the proposed five Police positions, the Fleet Manager, one of the proposed five DPW positions, which would bring the total of new positions to 18 instead of 24. He reiterated that he would add a few now instead of all 24 because the City's revenue is volatile.

Council Member Hickey said he would like to decrease the number of positions added from 24 but is undecided as to how many to eliminate.

Discussion occurred in response to Council Member Olney's question of what work would not get done if these positions were eliminated and where the savings would go. Council debated over the number of positions to be eliminated from the proposed budget, as well as which ones. The responsibilities of several of the proposed new positions were reviewed and evaluated as to whether they could be eliminated from the proposed budget or funded through grant funding. Several proposals were offered.

Council Member Hickey pointed out that the new zoning ordinance is almost completed and once adopted, it will require a lot of work from the Planning Department.

Council Member Olney continued to support adding all 24 new positions.

There was a consensus among Council Member Hickey, Council Member Pierce, Council Member Ruggiero and Mayor Smith to eliminate the following: Half of the Assessment position and half of the Code Enforcement position and put the remaining halves into a full-time position for the two departments to share; Two of the proposed five Police positions; One of the proposed five DPW workers. This would cut four positions and bring the total number of new positions to 20 instead of 24.

Further discussion occurred about which particular positions should be eliminated in the Police Department and the DPW Department and Council decided to leave that up to the Police Chief and Superintendent of Public Works to determine.

Sidewalk Program

Council Member Hickey asked if there was an update on the proposed changes to the sidewalk program.

Mr. Hickey pointed out that the sidewalk program is listed on page 323 and further discussion on how it will run will be scheduled for a future work session.

Budget session ended at 8:09 p.m.

Ann M. Saunders
City Clerk