

**CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION  
CITY OF WATERTOWN  
June 13, 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:** Michael DeMarco, Michael Lumbis

**DISCUSSION**

**2022 Jefferson County Prevention Needs Assessment Summary Report Warming Facility for the Homeless**

Anita Seefried-Brown from the Alliance for Better Communities presented Council with an updated 2022 Prevention Needs Assessment Summary Report (on file in the City Clerk's office). She informed Council that the goal is to reduce underage drinking and have a healthy and safe environment for the community as a whole. She discussed at length the survey which was distributed to over 4,000 students (grades 7 through 12) at ten different school districts in Jefferson County. The topics ranged from alcohol use in the last 30 days, tobacco and e-cigarette use, marijuana and prescription drug use. The students were asked how they obtain these items and how easy it is to access them. They were also asked how often they have ridden with a person under the influence, and whether it was friend or family member. The survey also asked the students what their perception is for heavy drinking or drug use. The answers fluctuated between just one drink a day to over five drinks a day. She added that binge drinking is a serious issue with teens since they tend to over-drink when the opportunity arises, such as on the weekends or if a parent works when the teen is alone. She pointed out marijuana use while binge drinking is particularly dangerous since it can inhibit the gag reflex to remove the alcohol from the system and can lead to alcohol poisoning.

Ms. Seefried-Brown then drew Council's attention to the slide show and discussed at length the statistics and percentage increase and decrease in the findings between 2017-2022. She informed Council that another serious topic is emotional health and suicide. She explained that this part of the survey asked the students questions such as if they think that life is not worth living, whether they feel they are a failure or disappointment and if they ever feel depressed. The survey also asked if, over the past 12 months, students had ever considered or attempted suicide. She reviewed and discussed the outcome at great length. She then summarized with Council other parts of the survey such as social norming, perception and social health. She told Council that drug overdoses have declined since last year. She noted that this is a step in the right direction, but there is still a crisis. She said that a lot of the decline in deaths could be the introduction of Harm Reduction kits. She informed Council that, by working with other agencies

in Jefferson County and law enforcement, they have been able to hand out Harm Reduction kits which allow an individual to test the drug they are about to take for harmful things like Fentanyl. The kits are provided to police to carry in their cruisers and are handed out at many of the outreach and educational programs throughout the year.

Council Member Olney expressed concern over the suicide data and inquired whether there is a plan in place to deal with the topic.

Ms. Seefried-Brown answered that they are currently trying to prepare a suicide task force and provide schools with better education on topics such as suicide and the warning signs.

Council Member Ruggiero added that the Bridge Program also works with schools.

In response to Mayor Smith's question on whether there is any data available on the impact Covid has had on the students, Ms. Seefried-Brown said there is some and she would look more into it and report back on the topic.

### **Warming Facility for the Homeless**

Wendy Hinkley O'Donnell and Ruth Lago, Watertown Area Rescue Mission., Inc. (WARM) presented Council with information on their ideas and goals for the City. Ms. Lago began the presentation by explaining to Council that WARM is an organization that exists to address the homeless situation in the City by creating a warming center. She said the mission is to provide an immediate, safe, clean, non-judgmental, barrier-free alternative to sleeping on the streets. She noted that the shelter would be open Monday through Friday as a place for people to come in from the cold. Ms. Lago pointed out there is nothing available like this in the City. She informed Council that WARM was incorporated in August of 2021 and founded by a group of community members that have had personal experiences which greatly impacted their lives or the lives of someone close to them. She noted this is a non-faith-based organization but is not opposed to receiving assistance from anybody that is willing to lend a helping hand.

Ms. Lago said the key principles for operation are to be an open door for the community and a safe place to fall when all else fails. She added that it is a not-for-profit agency and will supplement operational cost with donations in addition to any grants that are available. Ms. Lago indicated she was here to ask Council for help with the operational cost. She discussed at length the effects that homelessness has on the City and the community. As an example, she mentioned homelessness can be a drain on hospital staff, pointing out that many homeless use the Emergency Room as a place to seek shelter. She also mentioned that it can be a big problem for police explaining that many of the homeless are combative because they are desperate for help. She stressed that it is a drain on taxpayers, noting that it can cost up to \$36,000 a year per homeless person. She explained to Council that the individuals who will be served are mentally ill, drug addicts, homeless, chronically institutionalized and destitute. The goal is to elevate problems like "tent cities" and help those that have fallen through the cracks. She noted that they will be working with other agencies such as the Children's Home. The facility will be an open-door policy where they can come in, warm up, shower and have a meal. The goal is to help them feel safe and, when they go back out to the community the next morning at 8:00 a.m., they will hopefully use the resources that were presented to them during their time at WARM. She explained that it is not a guarantee that people will turn around the next day and make drastic changes to their lives, but it can be a start and hopefully foster a relationship with the individuals where they feel they can come back and re-engage

with staff and potentially become active members of society. There will be an incentive for individuals to come back and be a mentor or volunteer at the facility. She informed Council that WARM is not a homeless shelter because there are rules for the people that can stay there. A warming center is not governed by the same guidelines as homeless shelters so this will allow them to handle the population of people who are kicked out of homeless shelters, D.S.S. or housing facilities like the Pleasant Night Inn for not following the rules. Ms. Lago informed Council that, in order to provide this service, it will come with a cost. She said, most importantly, the organization needs a structure to foster a safe environment for males and females. She added they would also require security, a “hot button” for police, trash removal, maintenance, plus staff and training. She informed Council that the first-year cost would be close to \$600,000. They are currently looking at foreclosed property on Factory and Huntington Streets. She discussed at length the community impact.

Council Member Ruggerio asked how this is not a duplication of services of the other agencies in the area, such as Transitional Living and the Pine Street Property, and she inquired how WARM will sustain the facility financially going ahead.

Ms. Lago said a homeless shelter and a warming center are two different entities in terms of how they operate. For funding, she said that they will be working with Jefferson County along with agencies like the United Way and Northern New York Community Foundation and grants that are available.

Council Member Pierce asked what will happen the other times of year besides the winter.

Ms. Lago said currently that has not been discussed but added she is confident it will be a year-round facility.

Seth Buchman, WARM’s legal counsel, explained to Council that in other communities most of the warming centers turn into year-round operations since they can also be called cooling centers during the summer months. He explained at length to Council the different rules and regulations that will be in place regarding New York State.

Mayor Smith expressed concerns about security considering the clientele that will be welcomed into the facility.

Mr. Buchman said there will be two staff and a security guard on each shift, stressing there is a high concern for staff safety which will always be top priority.

Ms. Lago pointed out there will be trained volunteers also.

Mr. Buchman, Ms. Lago and Council summarized the pros and cons to the WARM Center.

### **NYS Urban and Community Forestry Grant**

Michael DeMarco, Planner, began his presentation by reminding Council that, in December of 2019, the City was awarded a Tree Maintenance Grant for \$50,000 through Round 15 of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation’s (DEC) Urban and Community Forestry Grant Program. He explained that through the guidance of the DEC, this funding was split up to allow for two projects: a tree removal project to remove potentially hazardous trees throughout the City, and an ash tree treatment project to protect some of the City’s ash trees from the Emerald Ash Borer. He summarized that, during the winter of 2022, bids were put out and the award went to B&R Tree Experts. They removed 45 potentially hazardous trees for a total of \$40,000. Rustic Pines was hired to treat 60 ash trees. He

informed Council that the ash trees are at the classic age in which they start showing damage from the Emerald Ash Borer. He added that the City match totaled \$12,500 which covered DPW labor and equipment costs for in-house tree work. He told Council that part of the agreement when receiving the grant is Community Outreach, which includes educating community leaders as well as sending personal letters to the property owners that are adjacent to any of the stricken trees. He added there have also been workshops and tours. He then provided Council with a handout (on file at the City Clerk's office) that showed where a majority of the troubled trees are located and he summarized the various trees besides the ash trees that were cut down due to damage. He added that National Grid helped with the removal of some of the trees due to wires and streetlights. He informed Council that there was a continuing education workshop called the NYS DEC-funded Ash Tree Treatment Project, which educated City DPW staff on other ways to identify damage and recognize trees that are unsafe for the residents. He said the City is proactively planting trees near the ash trees that will eventually be removed. He reminded Council that, many years ago, the 200 block of Washington Street was lined with majestic trees and the goal is to restore that look, noting the City is well on its way to achieving that.

Council Member Olney is in favor of getting a grant to treat the ash trees rather than cutting them down.

Mr. Demarco discussed at great length the Emerald Ash Borer, the damage it creates and the life span of the bug. He explained that the bug will not just go away. He suggested taking Council on a tour, stating that a good place to start would be at the traffic island on Holcomb Street along with Clinton and Massey Streets.

#### **Thompson Park Vegetation Management**

City Manager Kenneth Mix reiterated to Council that they have seen firsthand the work that has been done by City crews on vegetation at the park, mentioning that last week Council approved a contract for a significant amount of brush removal at the park. He added that some people may not approve of this, but he stressed the importance of the long-term ecological health of the park and also for use of the park. The areas that are covered in buckthorn are not usable to the public and therefore will be cleared and eventually made available for public use. He asked Council to voice any concerns they may have.

Mayor Smith said he thinks it is great for the park.

Mr. Mix pointed out that, over the past year, crews and volunteers have opened up a big chunk of wooded area that will eventually be good for picnicking.

Mayor Smith added how nice it is that the steps have been opened up and commented on how great it looks.

Mr. Mix informed Council that the crews are a little behind due to it being so wet. He said a substantial amount of work is going to be done downhill from the Gotham Street overlook.

Council Member Olney expressed concern over a wall at the park entrance that looks like it is slanting.

Mr. Mix stated that staff is aware of it and he expects crews to check it out.

Work session ended at 8:15 p.m.

*Margaret Puccia*  
Deputy City Clerk

