

**CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION
CITY OF WATERTOWN
April 25, 2023
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: Michael Lumbis, Michael Delaney, Jennifer Voss, Logan Eddy

DISCUSSION

New Leaf Energy Easement Proposal

Jerry Leone, Senior Civil Engineer at New Leaf Energy, began the discussion by explaining to Council the details of the Honey Ridge Solar Project. He said it is a utility scale and the main purpose for tonight's presentation is to ask for the Council's approval for an easement that will allow them to cross under the Black River, which is City owned property. He told Council there is a package that will be presented with compensation for the City.

Alex Yager, Project Developer for the Honey Ridge Project, addressed Council. She explained that the project is a 125-megawatt-based solar facility with a battery that will exclusively charge from the solar facility and not from the grid. She said Honey Ridge is on Ridge Road located mostly in the towns of Black River and Leray. She noted that by going underground, the impact will be less invasive.

Mayor Smith asked about the compensation package.

Ms. Yager confirmed that the package proposal would be up to 450k at different project milestones. She summarized the different steps of each milestone.

Mr. Leone clarified to Council that, regarding the deed, they have sought legal counsel about how the deed might affect the alienation process and is interested with working with the City's legal counsel to confirm that alienation is necessary do to the land being waterfront property.

Council Member Ruggiero asked if they would have to gain access to the completed underground work in the future.

Mr. Leone said it would be constructed in a concrete fixture which would make it so there should not be a need to have to access it in the future and will be designed to be a permanent fixture.

Mr. Mix explained that he received the proposal from Honey Ridge and will forward the breakdown of compensation to Council.

Mr. Leone pointed out to Council that they were given a proposal for a co-development project on the City's closed landfill. He said he has investigated the proposal and feels it is something that has potential.

Ms. Yager explained to Council that the company also works with New York State and has experience with landfills. She went on to explain they have a developer assigned to the landfill project and there is the potential to add storage to the landfill, which could increase the lease rate. She also noted that any surveys done on the properties would be turned over to the City.

Council agreed that the projects sound good.

Mr. Mix said that, unless there are objections, he plans to move forward and suggested looking more into the alienation process. He said he will get the proposal to Council.

Local Waterfront Revitalization Plan (LWRP) Update

Planning & Community Development Director Michael Lumbis introduced John Behan, from Behan Planning and Design.

Mr. Behan thanked Council for taking the time to listen to his proposal (on file at the City Clerks office.) He said he grew up in Watertown and is looking forward to working with Council and City staff on his proposal. He began by going over the names of the Local Waterfront Revitalization Program planning team, New York State Department of State representative, City staff and consultants. The presentation consisted of a series of projects, complete with photos and ideas from other cities in New York State. He told Council the completed proposal will be done in June of this year and explained that the goal for tonight is to go over some of the ideas. He said that many of the ideas came from public forums and suggestions from City residents, noting many suggestions came from the Fall Fest when a booth was set up specifically to get feedback from residents. He pointed out that this presentation outlines a set of projects that will advance the goal of creating a vibrant waterfront that will attract additional investment and improve the quality of life for both residents and visitors to the City. He explained to Council the Waterfront Revitalization area is organized into four areas, beginning upriver, on the eastern city boundary at Huntington Island, and ending downriver along Interstate 81 in the west. He discussed at length the different ideas that could be utilized along the river in between these two areas such as: completing the connection to Marble Street and completing the connection to the Black River trail, western expansion; continuing development on Sewall's Island with public spaces, trails, overlooks, signage and whitewater access; implementing Sewall's Island Factory Square Feasibility Study; and interpreting industrial and historic heritage. He suggested integrating public art into a wayfinding system in order to celebrate the City's unique identity and history. He added slides which could be the future for waterfront access and enhancing public spaces and also included engaging activities such as public swings, fishing, waterfront restaurants and kayaking. He discussed the magnitude of opportunities available for the area, noting the history of ideas and improvements to the River which have been done for hundreds of years. He drew Council's attention to a rock formation he titles "The River Keepers" which could be turned into a formation of faces appearing to look over the River and he noted could be something interesting for kayakers to visit.

Mr. Behan continued the presentation by showing many examples of similar cities that have revitalized waterfronts. He gave many more suggestions of ways to enhance and bring potential investors to the City's waterfront and potential ways to incorporate Jefferson Community College into the mix.

Members of Council, Mr. Lumbis and Mr. Behan had a long discussion involving the next steps in the process for the proposal.

Mayor Smith pointed out that a lot of the proposed restaurants would be private sector investments. He said that while the idea of a restaurant on the River is nice, there must be an individual that is willing to make that investment. He added that although that is possible, it can take time for private sector development. He expressed concern that the population has declined and noted that New York State is not known for being business friendly.

Council Member Olney and Mr. Lumbis discussed the current and past zoning ordinances that have affected and/or could affect any future plans for the Waterfront.

Mayor Smith and Council thanked Mr. Behan for his great presentation and Mr. Behan ended the discussion with a video and song entitled “Watertown,” made by his brother Paul Behan.

Zoo New York

Larry Sorel, Executive Director of Zoo New York, thanked Council for allowing him to speak about the Zoo and where the Zoo will fit in the City’s future plans. He suggested that, to complement the presentation from Mr. Behan, a great idea would be an aquarium somewhere along the River. He pointed out some other cities throughout the country that have aquariums like the one he is proposing. He drew Council’s attention to his handout (on file at the City Clerks office) and reflected upon the park’s history. He summarized who founded the Park and how the Park was donated to the City and renamed Thompson Park in 1924. He also discussed the origin of the Zoo and the decline of the Zoo in the 1970s. He mentioned that in 1991 the non-profit Thompson Park Conservancy was formed by three Watertown residents, and over the next ten years, many exhibits opened including: the Little Tree Visitor Center; North Country Nights; The Children’s Farm, and Phantoms of the Empire State. He summarized how over the years, there have been multiple Executive Directors and significant staff turnover. He pointed out the Zoo is, once again, faced with the challenge of how to refresh and become a modern AZA-accredited zoo. He expressed concern over the current challenges, which consist of aging habitats, operational and capital expenses, weather-dependent fundraising events and no substantive change in guest experience since initial improvements in the early 2000s. He voiced his concern about how Covid affected the Zoo, and noted that, although they survived, he would say they are just barely surviving. He noted that with the \$75,000 from the City, the Zoo has been able to pay GYMO and move forward with the first phase of their Master Plan. He informed Council that, moving forward, the current operating model is not sustainable. He added that like the situation in 1988, the Zoo is at a decision point regarding the future of the Zoo. He would like to see a “Blue Ribbon Panel” formed to consider all options for the future of the Zoo. He added that Jefferson County should be part of that panel.

Council Member Olney pointed out that the City already committed \$1 million to the Zoo.

Mr. Sorel agreed that City Council had committed \$1 million for the first phase of the Master Plan.

Council Member Olney asked where those plans are and requested the cost for the Master Plan.

Mr. Sorel said the Zoo is very close to getting things finalized with GYMO.

Council Member Olney asked if GYMO has even completed the plans.

Mr. Sorel said they are waiting on the Zoo design specialist to get in touch with GYMO and then they will be able to do cost estimates.

Mayor Smith said that he thinks a Blue-Ribbon Panel is a promising idea. He said he would get some names together and then they would sit down and discuss things further.

The work session ended at 8:45 p.m.

Margaret M. Puccia
Deputy City Clerk