

**CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION  
CITY OF WATERTOWN  
November 1, 2023  
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:** Vicky Murphy, Aaron Harvill, Joshua Satchwell, Logan Eddy

**DISCUSSION**

**Watermain Break of October 18-19, 2023**

Mayor Smith welcomed Water Superintendent Vicky Murphy, Chief Water Treatment Plant Operator Aaron Harvill and Supervisor of Water Distribution Joshua Satchwell and explained the purpose of this special work session, which was requested by Council Member Ruggiero. He thanked the staff of the Water Department and the Department of Public Works (DPW), who he said worked around the clock and did a phenomenal job finding and repairing the leak in order to get the water system operational. He commented that the community was appreciative of this hard work and commended everyone that was involved. He also thanked the County and State agencies and surrounding communities, including Fort Drum for the tremendous support and assistance during the emergency. He explained the various means of assistance that were provided by these agencies and their corresponding staff and also thanked the many politicians, local and State representatives, that were involved in the emergency response. Lastly, he apologized to the Water Department and DPW staff for recent comments made by individuals indicating that more could have been done to prevent this situation and that information was being withheld by staff. He stressed that this was caused by aging infrastructure. He pointed out that staff had asked for more time to gather all the information and prepare for this meeting, but Council Member Ruggiero had requested that it be sooner than staff wanted.

Council Member Ruggiero explained why she wanted the meeting now rather than wait until the November's work session. She referred to the staff report that was presented to Council, which contained the following: a memo from the City Manager summarizing the information attached; GIS maps of the watermain pipes leading to the water reservoirs in Thompson Park and the water pipes in the yard of the Water Plant and surrounding area of the break on Huntington Street; a timeline of the events leading up to the break, during the discovery and repair of the break and activities of the emergency response center; a memo presented to Council in August 8, 2021 with the description and estimated cost of projects to be considered for ARPA funding and the corresponding minutes for that meeting; memos and resolutions readopting the budget for the list of projects chosen for ARPA funding presented to Council on September 7 and September 20, 2021; and, a memo presented to Council in April 26, 2022 with the description and estimated cost of projects to be considered for ARPA funding and the corresponding minutes for that meeting. Council Member Ruggiero inquired as to who prepared the timeline and noted that it was very informative and in-depth so it should answer all of the public's

questions. She offered the Water Department representatives an opportunity to discuss how they felt the situation went, whether they had everything that they needed to handle the emergency, and what they learned from it.

Ms. Murphy explained that the timeline is the explanation of what did occur and advised that the department could have used their own vac truck, in addition to the DPW vac truck. In regard to what was learned, she stated that none of them had experience with an emergency such as this one, but that their emergency response plan was followed and worked. She said it went as well as it could have and indicated that they received a lot of help, mentioning that Town of Watertown provided additional manpower.

Council Member Ruggiero agreed that it went very well and was a coordinated effort, as the Mayor had mentioned, with all the different parties that were involved. She noted that the break was fixed, and the water was back online much faster than was originally expected.

Ms. Murphy pointed out that the Department of Health (DOH) dictated much of the process in regard to the boil-water advisories and the testing involved. She explained further the need for an additional vac truck and also mentioned the importance of having the location of the valves geolocated, which the GIS staff will assist with because the old documents were drawn instead of geolocated.

The condition, inspection, types and location of the valves were discussed, and Mr. Satchwell responded to questions posed regarding the 25 valves that needed to be operated to isolate the area and control the loss of the reservoirs.

Council Member Hickey questioned the possible use of backflow or check valves to prevent the draining of the reservoir.

Ms. Murphy stated that she has worked with city water systems, here and at another city, for 15 years and has never seen a check valve on a transmission line. She advised that a check valve would be installed at a business or home. She clarified for Council Member Olney that the break was not in the transmission line as originally thought by staff. She said the break was on Huntington Street and then one of the valves broke so it could not be shut down. She referred Council Member Olney to the map showing the exact location of the break.

Referencing a memo included in Council's packet, Council Member Olney read the description of the Treatment Plant Yard Valves project listed for \$1,250,000 and asked if these were the valves that Ms. Murphy mentioned that they were trying to locate and turn off.

Ms. Murphy confirmed that these were the valves and that the project was part of the list of projects that were recommended for ARPA funds.

Council Member Olney questioned whether this project was done and, stating that this problem was known, he asked how important this project would have been in shutting off the water once it was determined there was a leak.

Ms. Murphy indicated this project was very important and that is why it was listed in the report of possible projects to be chosen for the use of ARPA funds.

Mr. Mix pointed out that these valves in the yard would not have affected this leak because shutting the valves in the yard would not have stopped the water coming back from the reservoir.

Council Member Olney asked additional questions and Ms. Murphy reiterated that the break was not in the main transmission lines and stressed that it was on Huntington Street. Again, Council Member Olney was referred to the map that showed the location of the break.

Council Member Olney complimented staff for the work that they did, stating his criticism is about the system that the City has, what led to this and what could have been done differently had he known about certain things. He criticized comments made by Mr. Mix to the media and decisions made by the prior Council.

Mayor Smith noted that all of the ARPA funds could have been dedicated to water projects but there still would not have been enough money to complete all the water projects that need to be done.

Council Member Olney questioned why some of these projects were not addressed prior to the City receiving the ARPA funds. He referred to the Huntington Street project that was listed as a possible ARPA funded project and asked if it was listed as high priority.

The process of deciding what projects were chosen for the use of ARPA funds and how they were prioritized was reviewed at length. Council Member Olney disagreed with this project not being chosen, considering its condition and age. It was noted that there are water pipes throughout the City that were in worse condition and/or older than this one, for example one installed in 1889. It was also stressed that no one can predict when a water break will occur. Mr. Mix and Ms. Murphy defended themselves in response to the questions posed by Council Member Olney.

The conversation turned to the possibility of other breaks that could cause these types of ramifications.

Mr. Satchwell and Ms. Murphy continued to respond to questions about the supply of pipes that the department has in reserve, the condition of the transmission lines, pumps, reservoirs and elevated tank, the need to wait for dig safe clearance, the use of leak detectors, and the overall handling of this situation.

The initial indication that there may have been an issue and staff's investigation of the Water Plant yard was discussed.

Council Member Olney opined that staff should know the infrastructure within the yard of the Water Plant and, if it was apparent there was a leak then it would be obvious that the main supply line should be the first thing to be looked at in order to be proactive.

Mayor Smith interjected and defended staff and their actions based on their experience and expertise.

Council Member Olney accused Mayor Smith of politicizing this by making statements to the media that money should have been spent on infrastructure instead of the money spent on the pool and golf course.

A heated discussion ensued with Council Member Olney commenting that the truth should be “known by the public of what went on, what did not go on and what could have gone on” and Mayor Smith continuing to defend staff and their actions. How money was spent in recent years, priorities and decisions made by this Council and the prior Council were debated.

Council Member Olney advised that he still thinks there needs to be a thorough outside investigation into every detail of this matter because he said he was not informed until the day of the break. He said he feels there are a lot of things that are not told to him but are told to the Mayor.

Mayor Smith clarified, for the record, that this current Council was given the information about the needed water projects in April of 2022.

Council Member Pierce turned the conversation by thanking staff for working around the clock to fix this problem and said everyone in the community shares the same sentiment. She mentioned the various thank you notes displayed on the tables in Council Chambers. Noting there have been some accusations by people on Council that someone on staff was withholding information that could have prevented this from happening, she said Council had the information a number of times and the priority list of water projects. She apologized to staff for the comments made, stating that she does not feel that way. She asked if the priority ranking of the lines is part of the Community Water System Risk and Resilience Assessment.

Ms. Murphy explained the system used to rank the priority of the projects and how projects are chosen, stating she appreciates that money was set aside for more water projects.

The condition and age of the City’s water system as a whole was discussed further. More details of the handling of the event, the notifications to the public and what was known prior to the break were reviewed.

The leak at the reservoir, the actions that have been taken and proposed investigation were discussed. Ms. Murphy noted that the leak was repaired and fixed every three years until 2021 when a much bigger leak was discovered. It was noted that, at that point, the reservoir project was added to the capital budget. The cost of the project and the cost of producing the amount of water that is leaking were analyzed.

Lastly, various members of Council offered their final thoughts about the emergency water break.

Work session ended at 7:27 p.m.

*Ann M. Saunders*  
City Clerk