

**CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION
CITY OF WATERTOWN
March 13, 2024
7:00 p.m.**

Mayor Sarah V.C. Pierce Presiding

Present: Council Member Robert O. Kimball
Council Member Lisa A. Ruggiero
Council Member Benjamin P. Shoen
Mayor Sarah V.C. Pierce

Also Present: Eric F. Wagenaar, City Manager

Not Present: Council Member Clifford G Olney III

City staff present: Geoffrey Urda, Jennifer Voss, Mike Lumbis, Logan Eddy

DISCUSSION

Viability of Expanding Transportation

Former Council Member, Ryan Henry-Wilkinson, presented Council with information pertaining to the viability of expanding transportation. He began by giving Council some background on how the idea started. He explained that he met with Mayor Pierce and discussed with her the importance of expanding the bike lanes in the City over the next five to ten years. He reminded Council that the City already has some bike lanes and trails, but they do not go anywhere. He explained there is a Complete Street Policy, which looks at projects as they come up but is not a concerted effort to connect the network. He told Council some of the reasons why the City should consider bike transportation within Watertown.

Mr. Henry-Wilkinson explained in detail the benefits for businesses and residents alike, noting it also benefits employers by giving employees other means to get to work. He went on to explain that the City could see an increase in sales tax collections from shopping opportunities and pointed out that designing corridors for all modes of transportation reduces crashes and increases safety for all users. He summarized other benefits, which would encourage residents to bike or walk, reduce automobile noise and reduce the demand for parking spaces. He told Council that New York State appears to be going forward with its ban on the sale of new combustion passenger vehicles beginning in 2035 and explained the sale of eBikes is outpacing the sale of new electric cars. He showed Council a picture of an Urban Arrow style cargo bike, explaining these bikes are made to carry family and groceries and he noted they are becoming popular with families and people looking to replace vehicles. He discussed how other cities, such as Kingston, Ontario have utilized bike transportation and discussed at length why the City should invest in bicycle travel. He commented that residents from either end of the income spectrum could be empowered to make informed choices about how they travel throughout the City. He asked Council to direct the City Manager to have staff prepare proposals, which could be developed for Council to act on once the orders are given and to make the Complete Streets Policy a living document.

Mayor Pierce said she thought Mr. Henry-Wilkinson gave the Council some good ideas and provided some long-term goals to work towards.

Factory Square

Tony D’Arpino, Vice President, Greenleaf Builders; Scott Burto, WCP Consultants, and Michael Lumbis, Director of Planning and Community Development presented Council with a handout (on file at the City Clerk’s office) and slide show for their project “Carriages On the River.” Mr. Lumbis began the presentation by reminding Council about the Restore NY Grant Program. He said that a couple weeks ago, New York State announced that round eight of the grant program is available, which allows developers to apply for projects for building restoration. He pointed out that the developers were here in August to discuss the Restore NY round seven request. He stressed that the deadline for the first step, which is the intent to apply, is due on March 25th which is why they wanted to meet with Council to discuss the project. After this step, a formal application is due May 22, 2024, which must be submitted in a couple of weeks.

Mr. Burto addressed Council by reminding them of their meetings last year to seek support for last year’s Restore NY project, noting that Council and staff were very helpful. He then discussed at length the details of last year’s Restore NY project, which was the YMCA. He explained that the City can submit one application for a two-million-dollar grant. He indicated there is also a special category project that allows the City to ask permission to submit a special application for housing in an area of need, which leads them to the properties on 629 Factory Street and 567 Fairbanks Street. He told Council he submitted a \$47 million dollar project, which included a 108-unit housing facility and requested a \$10 million maximum grant for special project categories. He said that unfortunately they were not awarded the grant and he then discussed at length the steps that were taken to strengthen their application to move forward. He added that they met with Steve Hunt at Empire State Development (ESD) for a better understanding as to why the application was denied. He explained that with the advice they received in mind, they decided to separate the project into two options. He explained that with the changes made, the project is now the Restore NY round eight project, which is only one property at 629 Factory Street and noted it was broken into two potential projects. He described how the new project will utilize 629 Factory for affordable workforce housing, while 567 Fairbanks will have an alternative use of possible office, daycare or a boutique hotel. He said he is requesting to submit a special project Restore NY grant with Council’s support. He explained topics such as the market analysis, letter of credit and collaborative partners, such as DANC Watertown Local Development Authority, ESD and a variety of State Senators.

Council Member Kimball asked for confirmation that the two options being submitted are entirely for 629 Factory Street.

Mr. Burto indicated that Council Member Kimball was correct and added that nothing will be tied to 567 Fairbanks Street, which is in a flood plain.

Mr. D’Arpino informed Council of the different options for the 567 Fairbanks Street property.

In response to Council Member Ruggiero’s question regarding how many units are at 629 Factory Street, Mr. D’Arpino said it is hard to say exactly since they would need to revitalize the whole building because it currently does not meet New York State Code. He said he feels confident there will be between 72 and 85 units.

Council Member Ruggiero asked about demolition costs.

Mr. D'Arpino replied that the building is an asset so they would stabilize the building. He stressed that his company is about restoring buildings not razing them.

Council Member Ruggiero, Council Member Kimball and Mr. Lumbis discussed the NYS Restore Grant application, the timeframe and options for strengthening the application.

Council Member Shoen asked for clarification on what affordable workforce housing is.

Mr. D'Arpino said it is housing based on medium income not subsidized housing such as Section 8. He noted that most of the renters for this type of housing are teachers and people that work within the businesses in the City. He added that he will also be looking into a possible project at the Henry Keep Apartments.

Mr. Lumbis added that the City has a 90% grant with a 10% match, and pointed out that the developer will be responsible for the match. He said there will be assistance with the application process and Council will review it. He said there will need to be a resolution drafted and a public hearing will be scheduled.

Council Member Kimball said he would like more information and asked to meet with Mr. Lumbis at some point.

All of Council and Mayor Pierce agreed to move ahead with the resolution.

Zoo New York

Mayor Pierce informed Council that she had distributed packets (on file at the City Clerks office), which contained information from the various sub-committees of the Zoo Task Force, memos from the City Manager and City Comptroller and a memo she had written. She added there were representatives from the Zoo in attendance to answer any questions.

Council Member Ruggiero pointed out that, at the last task force meeting, it was said that the Zoo needed \$750,000 and that Council had been asked for \$75,000 to help reopen this year. She asked for clarification since the City is now being asked for \$375,000 with a guarantee of five years. She asked where the other half of the Zoo funding would be coming from and wondered if the County had stepped up to help.

Interim Zoo Director Mark Irwin replied that the \$75,000 requested from Council in November was to open in this Spring and did not include any of the underlying issues, such as staffing. He reiterated that the Zoo is on City property and there needs to be a decision from Council before further discussion can be made with the County.

Kenneth Mix, Friends of Thompson Park, confirmed that the \$75,000 was what was needed to re-open and start generating revenue. He stressed that come Fall, the Zoo will be right back in the same situation as it is now. He expressed concern that if the Zoo is not going to continue operating, the money will give them opportunity to start looking at options for dispersing the animals and shutting down the zoo. He said that the County is waiting to see what the City does first. He stressed no progress can be made without knowing what Council wants to do. He explained that, once Council decides, then a formal request can be made to the County.

Council Member Ruggiero expressed concern with what would happen if the City agreed to give the Zoo \$375,000 and the County decided not to help. She asked what happens after the five-year commitment expires.

Mr. Irwin said the funding would have to be done in stages. He added the community loves the Zoo, but they want to see accountability. He summarized the manager-approach and the different ways things could be handled as an organization.

Mr. Mix explained the intent is a yearly allocation starting with \$375,000 from the City. He noted five years would allow them to plan ahead and know the money is there. He added that, in five years, discussions would once again be brought up about the future of the Zoo, but hopefully, there would be enough progress with fund-raising, attendance and exhibits. He said there would be a yearly evaluation to determine what the next year will bring. He pointed out that a five-year plan will also help with recruiting staff and provide stability for those positions.

Mr. Irwin told Council that, moving ahead, some things that would be different and there would be a phasing-in approach to staffing and any new activities. He explained that they would start with part-time staff. He said he wants to set clear expectations, noting that zoos take significant operating funds from municipal governments.

Mr. Mix informed Council that the two main positions needed are an animal curator and a business manager. He summarized the job requirements of each position. He noted that, in the future, he would like to see a horticulturist hired to maintain the grounds.

Council Member Kimball said he is in favor of maintaining the Zoo. He pointed out that things are going to get tricky with the City finances down the road and he is unsure how to make a five-year promise moving forward. He said he believes the Zoo has been under-funded for quite a while. He stated that he hopes they can find funding for the Zoo but realizes it will require further study.

Council Member Shoen questioned whether City property owners should be the only ones responsible for funding the Zoo. He noted that if the Zoo should be considered a regional asset, then the County should have been approached before the City since they have more money at their disposal and a much larger population to draw on. He also asked how much money has been raised by the public since the Fall.

Mr. Irwin informed Council Member Shoen that they have met with the County and are given \$59,000 from the County each year. He reiterated that it is City property and the communications he has had with the County stress that fact. He summarized the number of people who visit the Zoo each year. He explained that the Winter Fund Drive this year pulled in \$30,000 and this year's Winter Lights event was the most successful one to date.

Mayor Pierce asked if there have been any discussions about which exhibits are the most expensive and suggested the possibility of reimagining the Zoo to replace some of the more expensive exhibits with other options.

Mr. Mix and Mr. Irwin discussed at length the different ideas and projects that have been proposed.

Discussion ensued over the finances and the long- and short-term goals for the zoo.

Mr. Mix introduced the Board Members from the Zoo.

Council Member Ruggiero thanked everyone for coming to the work session. She said she supports the Zoo but feels their needs to be further discussion. She added that she agrees the sooner the Zoo can open, the better.

Mayor Pierce thanked everyone for their input but added that, unfortunately, no decisions can formally be made this evening. She stated that Council will continue to review the information and reach out with any further questions.

Manager's Update

City Manager Eric Wagenaar informed Council that a new Human Resources Manager has been hired, Ms. Erica LeClerc, who will start on April 1. He noted a new City Engineer was also hired, Mr. Tom Compo, who will start March 25.

Mayor Pierce clarified, for the record, that Mr. Compo is not her father, also named Tom Compo, nor is the new City Engineer related to her.

City Manager Wagenaar summarized the key positions that are currently open for the City, adding that Parks and Recreation will be hiring lifeguards. He advised that he attended a meeting last week with DANC to discuss grants and other funding options. He informed Council there was also a public safety meeting to discuss the Eclipse week, noting some of those in attendance were representatives from the State Office of Emergency Management, State Homeland Security, Jefferson County Emergency Management, Samaritan Medical Center and City Emergency Services.

Work session ended at 8:40 p.m.

Margaret M. Puccia

Deputy City Clerk