

**CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION
CITY OF WATERTOWN
August 11, 2025
7:00 p.m.**

Mayor Sarah V.C. Pierce Presiding

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

Also Present: Eric F. Wagenaar, City Manager

City staff present: Brian MacCue, Michael Lumbis, Geoff Urda, Dana Aikins, Chief Matthew Timerman, Erica Anderson

DISCUSSION

Refuse

Superintendent of Public Works Brian MacCue offered a presentation on the City's Refuse and Recycling Program. He explained that the City Manager had assembled a committee out of 10 staff members to discuss the existing guidelines, map and calendar among other things. He then presented the committee's findings which included: a lack of specific explanations in the guidelines, daily changes to the customer address list, a need to prioritize operator safety, a need for an update to the collection map and schedule, an update to curbside collection, an update to the commercial pickup policy, and concerns about customer credits.

He then reviewed the current refuse and recycling guidelines, the current pricing structure and the curbside pickup dispensation program, which he explained was working well.

Mr. MacCue proposed changing City Code to mandate the use of a tote to hold all refuse at the curb and to offer refuse collection to certain commercial properties at the Superintendent's discretion.

He informed Council that the current map of refuse and recycling zones is more than 40 years old, so his department is working on developing new zones which will contain approximately 600 customers per zone. He indicated staff hoped to implement the new plan in November.

Going forward, Mr. MacCue suggested increasing media and marketing to expand the customer base, finalizing the new routes, test hauling the waste to DANC and eliminating customer credits. He explained that the customer credits were too expensive to continue and noted that no other trash hauler offers them. He also advised Council that the bond for a new truck needed to be increased to account for the increase in the cost of a new vehicle going from \$300,000 to \$365,000, and he mentioned that the ordering time was now 2+ years.

In response to City Manager Wagenaar's question about a possible grant for recycling vehicles, Mr. MacCue indicated that the department is working on acquiring what he described as a buy-one-get-one grant and La Bella is assisting.

Council Member Kimball questioned the use of the word "tote" and questioned how the vehicle operators would know if a non-City tote had a stickered bag inside.

Mr. MacCue indicated the blue stickers would have a separate sticker to be applied to the outside of the non-City tote, so the haulers could see it from the road.

In response to Council Member Ruggiero's question on whether the pricing would be any different for commercial properties, Mr. MacCue stated it would be the same.

City Manager Wagenaar noted that the move toward totes is all about the safety of the operators.

In response to Council Member Ruggiero's query on whether a vote would be required, City Manager Wagenaar said there would be something to present to Council next week.

Mayor Pierce questioned whether a smaller tote could be made available.

Mr. MacCue indicated there was a smaller tote but that, oddly, it held the same amount of waste, and it did not make financial sense to spend more money to acquire additional sized totes.

There was discussion about safety and aesthetic concerns with totes at curbside, especially when there is snow accumulation.

Council Member Kimball expressed concerns about the mandatory totes and indicated his preference to use his own container.

Council Member Shoen said he has been a proponent of using totes for garbage in the past and he had received massive pushback from the public. He commented that he would not want to force people to use totes and suggested outreach to customers still using stickers. He also clarified that some streets in the City have no margin and that can add to the confusion.

A lengthy discussion about where the City currently takes its trash and recyclables and other possible options.

Council Member Shoen noted that the County currently sits on a fair amount of recycling.

City Manager Wagenaar indicated that it was likely many recyclables end up in landfills as there is no longer a market for many of them.

Council Member Olney proposed a recycling drop-off in the City to decrease the amount delivered to the County site.

Mr. MacCue explained the capital expense would be too high and noted the drop-off site would need to be overseen by staff. He mentioned that the City would also have to truck the recyclables somewhere. He stated that the current methods the Department of Public Works uses are the cheapest.

In response to Council Member Olney's question of whether the City could just end recycling, City Manager Wagenaar said the City wants to encourage recycling.

The City Manager redirected the conversation to the new pickup routes, noting it is hoped they will increase productivity, prevent delays and provide additional coverage.

Responding to Council Member Olney's questions regarding the refuse service's profitability, Mr. MacCue responded that the customer basis has flatlined but that there is a small profit of around \$40,000.

Council Member Olney proposed marketing better and asked why the base is not growing.

Mr. MacCue said that was a good question as the City still provides the least expensive option and picks up five days a week.

Council Member Shoen commented that many of the other trash haulers have larger logos. He jokingly suggested that the City use ice cream truck music to recruit more customers.

Mr. MacCue indicated that the department is planning a bigger logo with the phone number in large print on the trucks.

Staff Report on Court Street Parking

Senior Planner Geoffrey Urda provided Council with information regarding the suggestion for more parallel parking on Court Street. Displaying an image from 2018, he noted that the area in question featured a sign on the cobra light pole which indicated the area was a no-parking zone. He said during the Downtown Revitalization Initiative (DRI), the cobra light pole was replaced with a Victorian light pole, and the signage was not replaced. Mr. Urda noted that after concerns were raised by area business owners regarding cars parking there, staff consulted with Barton & Loguidice and it was determined that two on-street parallel parking spots could be added. He reminded Council that the City Code was amended to add these spots in March of 2024.

Regarding the potential to add more parallel parking, Mr. Urda explained the City Engineer determined that additional spaces in this area would be hazardous to public safety. He added that the Complete Streets Committee discussed the additional spots at its most recent meetings and concluded that the spaces were not safe and recommended against it.

Council Member Ruggiero commented that she brought this up last year and noted no one complained when there were no signs. She said it was reasonable to add two more spots

Mr. Urda explained that the concern is reaction time as traffic approaches Court Street from the Square. He said he felt that the City was lucky there were no accidents while there was no signage. He noted that once the City stripes an area for parking, they assume liability.

Planning and Community Development Director Michael Lumbis added that the concern is the sight distance from the intersection and noted again that the City Engineer believes it would not be safe.

Council Member Ruggiero commented that when staff removes parking, it is the Council Members who hear the complaints, mentioning the removal of parking in front of Key Bank. She mentioned that she rarely sees anyone parked in the reverse parking spots further up Court Street.

Mr. Lumbis explained that there are 250 parking spaces in the lot behind Court Street and suggested drivers preferred parking in a lot to street parking.

Council Member Olney asked about the 2019 Comprehensive Plan which was meant to provide more walkability and bike lanes.

Mr. Urda reminded Council that many steps have been taken to improve walkability and clarified that bike lanes were ruled out on Court Street as they did not connect to any other existing bike lanes. He also explained that Court Street was narrowed to calm traffic and increase pedestrian comfort.

Mayor Pierce commented that the City did not remove parking on that portion of Court Street, but they had, in fact, added two spots.

Mr. Urda clarified that overall, some spots were eliminated during the DRI initiative but, in the area currently under discussion, two spots were added where there were none.

Council Member Kimball stated that he has found that, since the YMCA relocated, he has not experienced any difficulty finding a parking spot downtown.

Council Member Shoen, mentioning a motorcycle parked downtown taking up a whole spot for the entire day, suggested adding motorcycle parking on the disputed portion of Court Street. He also reminded Council that he has proposed charging for parking to encourage turnover and keep parking fair.

City Manager Wagenaar advised Council to remember that the images of Court Street displayed tonight are still photos with no traffic. He noted concerns are when fast-moving traffic rounds that corner while drivers emerge from their parked cars. He commented that in a debate like this, he will side with the City Engineer and the consultants.

Council Member Ruggiero commented that she understood safety concerns but added that no one had consulted Council when speed bumps were added in Thompson Park.

Mayor Pierce suggested consulting the City Engineer about the potential for an added motorcycle parking spot on Court Street.

Vacant Rental Improvement Program Grant Application

Mr. Lumbis announced that the New York State Office of Community Renewal (OCR) is offering a grant opportunity to support repairs and rehabilitation of vacant rental units to bring those properties into use. He noted a key component is that the properties must be vacant and uninhabitable dwellings with 1 to 5 units. He further explained that the amount that can be allocated is \$50,000 to \$75,000 with a higher limit for participants who will rent to lower income households.

Mr. Lumbis explained that only not-for-profit organizations with a history of providing relevant housing services can apply and he suggested partnering with Neighbors of Watertown (NOW). He noted that NOW is considering applying for the full amount of the grant which is \$2,500,000 to assist the City with the rehabilitation of 35-40 rental units.

Mr. Lumbis informed Council NOW is looking for support from the City not just for their application but in the administration of the program. He indicated that Code Enforcement will work with the agency during the inspection phase and will provide information on vacant housing within the City. He stated that, if Council is in favor of supporting NOW, this will require a memorandum of understanding, and he will prepare a resolution for next week's Council meeting.

Mayor Pierce asked for clarification on whether this was a matching grant.

Mr. Lumbis indicated it was not.

Council Member Olney wondered whether other organizations could apply for the grant as well as Neighbors of Watertown.

Mr. Lumbis indicated that a stipulation of the grant is that the non-profit organization have experience with housing rehabilitation and he did not know of another agency in the area that could handle a project of this scope.

Council Member Olney offered his support.

Mr. Lumbis commented that this program could go a long way to addressing the City's housing issues.

City Manager Wagenaar added that the City's recommendation is to work with Neighbors of Watertown on the grant application.

Council Member Ruggiero offered her support.

Council Member Kimball said he supported the initiative but wondered if Code Enforcement staff would be spread too thin.

Code Enforcement Supervisor Dana Aikins reassured Council that his office could handle the workload and noted that this would directly address those vacant properties which scored 40-70. He noted this grant could save a lot of time and effort.

In response to Council Member Shoen's question of how much the administration costs would be and whether the costs could come out of the award, Mr. Lumbis indicated the grant did cover administration costs and mentioned that there would be a limit as to what could be charged.

Council Member Shoen offered his support for the project and noted that it had been a long time since the City had undergone a rental rehab program.

Mr. Lumbis confirmed the last one was in 2018.

City Manager's Update – Chief Timerman Hazard Mitigation and Terrorist Threats

City Manager Wagenaar noted that instead of his update he was turning the floor over to Fire Chief Matthew Timerman, adding that this item had been scrapped from the agenda at the last minute.

Chief Timerman informed Council that he was presenting an update on the County's Hazard Mitigation Plan and advised no action was required tonight.

He explained the background of the plan, noting that it is a requirement of New York State and FEMA. He noted the plan starts with risk assessment and, despite the name, is not about hazardous materials but rather about potential disasters that can occur and how a community can plan to react to it. He noted the mitigation strategy would be reviewed every five years.

Chief Timerman informed Council that the county had received a grant and each municipality within the county had produced an annex describing the municipality's plan, and he mentioned the City's is 64

pages long and was rather dense reading. He listed the various departments within the City which had contributed to the mitigation plan and advised the City had also worked with not-for-profits like Samaritan Medical Center and Watertown School District.

Chief Timerman advised that the rough draft of the City's mitigation plan had been submitted to a consultant for refinement and will be presented to Council to adopt in 6-8 weeks.

Council Member Olney asked where he could read the City's portion of the County's Hazard Mitigation document.

Chief Timerman said he would send Council the online link.

City Manager Wagenaar cautioned that this is a sensitive document.

Chief Timerman advised Council that the department is working with New York State Fire Prevention Control to improve delivery methods technical rescue services and mentioned some specific upcoming potential concerns for terrorist activity. They included the 250th Anniversary of the United States, the 25th Anniversary of 9/11 and the World Cup Soccer games.

Chief Timerman informed Council that the Fire Department is certified in water rescue, ice rescue, confined space rescue, trench rescue, rope rescue and structural collapse. He noted that the state can make use of the City's assets for statewide applications. He further advised that if the City was asked to provide assistance to the state or FEMA, they would be funded through federal resources. He indicated that eventually Council would need to pass a Memorandum of Understanding for how shared services would work.

Work session ended at 9:05 p.m.

Lisa M. Carr

Deputy City Clerk