

**CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION
CITY OF WATERTOWN
September 8, 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: Thomas Compo, Dana Aikins, Aaron Harvill, James Mills, Erica Anderson

DISCUSSION

City Hall Court Renovation Project Update

The following panel introduced themselves to City Council and presented a staff report: City Engineer Thomas Compo, Code Enforcement Supervisor Dana Akins, 5th Judicial District Executive Donald Doerr Esq, 5th Judicial Security Chief Steven Bizgia, City Court Chief Clerk Benjamin Cobb along with GYMO's Bill Boulter, Scott Soules, McKenzie Fisk-Kamide and Peter Clough.

Mr. Aikins began the discussion by reminding Council that this proposal was last presented to them on October 15, 2024. He informed Council that City staff, the architects and New York State Unified Court System have completed the design portion, and this project is ready to be advertised for bid. He noted that this project has been 10 to 11 years in the making.

Mr. Doerr explained that in 1987 the Judicial System instituted rules that municipalities must provide specific space for Court operations. He told Council that around 2013 or 2014, the City was notified that City Hall was not in compliance with local, state and federal standards and stated that some of the items included, but were not limited to, the following: Compliance with the American with Disabilities Act (ADA); Building and courtroom security; Secure holding areas for detained defendants; Access control for personnel; and, Heating, cooling, windows, roof, siding and insulation. He discussed at length the letters that have gone back and forth between the City and the State and informed Council that the City will be able to get funding through serial bonds. He stated that within the last month or two, additions were made to the proposal, such as cameras, security, a new roof and HVAC system, and will all be funded by the Court system. He told Council that the proposal was acceptable, and he presented additional information regarding requirements established to bring the City Court facility into compliance with current standards.

City Engineer Thomas Compo stressed that the ADA standards must be met. He reminded Council that City Hall is 61 years old and the building and maintenance workers have done a miraculous job in maintaining it. He said security on the first floor is a concern and moving the magnetic scanner to the entrance will be a huge improvement. He noted that people will not be allowed to enter City Hall without going through security unless they are employed in the building and added that this is a huge safety upgrade for City Hall and its employees.

GYMO's Scott Soules spoke regarding the project overview and informed Council that not much has changed to the original design from a year ago. He said that part of the Court project is to address issues with the exterior envelope of the first floor and includes replacement of the air handling unit located on the roof of City Hall. After noting that this portion of the project is not required by the Court, he explained that the HVAC will be relocated outside its existing penthouse on the roof because of space constraints and the existing roofing system. He added this was last replaced in 1996, is beyond its useful life and leaking, and will be replaced. Mr. Soules advised Council that the entrance will have a canopy and be enclosed with glass, the floors on the first floor will be refinished, and new light fixtures will be installed. He highlighted that insulation will be installed in the walls of the first floor since there currently is none, and all windows will be replaced.

Council Member Ruggiero asked if the windows would be able to be opened and closed or be sealed.

Mr. Soules said the windows will be operable but added that he was hopeful they would not need to be opened and closed since the building will be sealed up tight for heating and cooling.

Mr. Compo pointed out that there is asbestos in the building and it will be addressed.

Mr. Aikins explained to Council the impact on the public should be minimal and all departments currently located at City Hall will remain at City Hall. He indicated public access to the building would be through the front doors facing Washington Street and noted that a temporary ADA access ramp would be constructed in the lobby to allow proper access from the entrance level to the first floor and elevator.

Addressing parking, Mr. Aikins said parking impact should be minimized because Court staff will be temporarily relocated to off-site facilities. He went on to explain that of the 85 spaces in the parking lot (including four ADA spots) available for employees and the public, 28 spaces will be used for construction, staging and building access. He noted this will leave 57 parking spaces (including four ADA spots). He added that additional parking will be available in the City-owned gravel parking lot on Goodale Street.

Mr. Aikins informed Council of the measures which would be taken to lessen the impact on City employees. He explained that the Code Enforcement Office will temporarily move to the second floor of City Hall, and to accommodate that four staff members currently located on the second will be relocated to vacant spaces on the second and third floors. He indicated the City Clerk's Office will remain in its current location on the first floor and construction will be coordinated to minimize disruptions. He said there might be a couple weeks when operations will be disrupted while the floors are being done but added that staff will work with the contractors to minimize any noise from the demolition. He explained that once the renovations are completed, displaced staff will return to their original locations.

Mr. Doerr explained that the State has facilities close by to utilize during construction due to asbestos mitigation and that help will make construction time shorter.

Council Member Olney said he was unaware of any leaks in the roof and added that he did not realize how old the building was. He asked questions about scheduling, timing and cost.

Mr. Clough said GYMO has prepared a construction schedule for this project with an anticipated start date of December 1, 2025. He noted there is a prepared estimate of the probable cost for the project and added that an estimate for the exterior first floor envelope has been provided. He said this work directly

impacts City and Court spaces on the first floor of City Hall. Mr. Clough advised that estimates have also been provided for HVAC unit replacement, and he reiterated that the existing mechanical unit is beyond its useful life.

Mr. Soules indicated that he hoped to get the project out for bid soon to get the asbestos portion of the project started this December and the interior work started in January. He indicated that work on the outside access ramps was slated for April and the building envelope, which includes the new entrance and lobby, should also begin in the spring. Mr. Soules noted a proposed June start on the interior, which should find the project wrapping up by the end of July 2026.

Council Member Olney asked many questions about the phases and cost. Much discussion occurred with Council and City Manager Eric Wagenaar.

Mr. Compo responded that the overall cost is \$7.6 million and summarized the design fees, construction management, air monitoring and administrative costs.

Mr. Boulter reminded Council that inflation has changed the initial proposal and may continue to affect the overall costs.

Discussion regarding bonds and grants that are, and are not, available continued and all agreed to begin the bid process and start this long-overdue project.

Water Treatment Plant Disinfection By-Product Project Update

Superintendent of Water Aaron Harvill began the presentation by giving a summary of the EPA administrative work from 2018 to present, reviewing funding, and the regional impact of the project. He informed Council that about 350 million gallons of water a day is being flushed. He discussed at length EPA administrative orders beginning from July 5, 2018 to January 2025. He drew Council's attention to the handout, which explained the EPA order that began on September 1, 2024 and ends on September 1, 2027.

Regarding funding, Mr. Harvill explained to Council that they have applied for and been passed over three times for grants from the Office of Local Defense Community Cooperation (OLDCC) and Defense Community Infrastructure Program (DCIP) and indicated this has been very disappointing. He said they are currently working on intermunicipal agreement grants (IMG), which are due at the end of this week (September 12th). He noted that staff are hoping to have the results by the end of December or the beginning of January. He stated that on August 29th the City applied for the third time for the Northern Border Resource Commission Grant (NBRC). He then explained in detail the Bipartisan Infrastructure Legislation (BIL) and Water Infrastructure Improvement ACT (WIIA). Mr. Harvill informed Council that if the City is awarded the grant, they will need to back contribute the matching percentage awarded the IMG. He informed Council that the City has re-applied for Congressional Discretionary Spending for 2025 and was awarded \$1 million from Senator Schumer through the Congressional Discretionary (CDS) for 2024.

Mr. Harvill reminded Council of the importance of this project and explained that the City provides drinking water to nearly 60,000 people including the Town of Pamela, Town of Watertown and parts of the Town of Hounsfield, as well as the communities served by DANC. He noted that City water is

critical support to Fort Drum and discussed at length the importance of sustaining the \$3.4 billion regional economic impact of Fort Drum.

Kevin Castor, GHD Principal, began his portion of the presentation with a slide show of the new design of the pre-treatment facility and summarized the different facilities which will be housed there. He also discussed the latest outline for the project status, project cost, funding picture and what the next steps will be. He pointed out that the last EPA administrative order was issued in January 2025. He discussed the phasing plan developed and accepted by EPA, which includes Phase 1: WTP GAC filters to be completed by July 2027 and Phase 2: pretreatment, ozonation and sedimentation to be completed by November 2029.

Mr. Castor informed Council of the designs that have been completed, or nearly completed, which consist of five separate contracts. He explained that contract one was for the clearing of trees and contracts two through five are for general, electrical, HVAC and plumbing. He highlighted that the design has been submitted to the New York State Department of Health, the Town of Pamela and Route 3 Sewer Board for review and approval. He then discussed at great length GHD's opinion of the project cost with a total cost of the two phases being \$67,100,000. He also summarized the funding picture but noted that Mr. Harvill did a good job at giving those details. He directed Council's attention to the next steps and summarized the main goals that need to be accomplished. He also showed Council a picture of the proposed new sedimentation facility as it has been designed.

Carl Farone, Executive Director of the Development Authority of the North Country, reminded Council that he and DANC Chief Operating Officer Carrie Tuttle had appeared before Council in 2023. He explained to Council that it has been a long-term compliance issue and DANC is still under an administrative order and stressed that this project is not just a City project but a community project. He noted that, unfortunately, they have not been successful with the grant funding they had hoped to receive. He said the potential for phasing if they do not receive the 40 percent IMG Grant is a great concern, and he added that the cost to the communities will increase 100 percent if additional grant funding is not received. He informed Council he is requesting to phase the project if they do not receive the IMG grant.

Council Member Ruggiero asked why there has not been an explanation regarding the reason the application for funding was rejected again.

Mr. Wagenaar explained there has not been a schedule to discuss feedback but stressed that all the guidelines were followed. He informed Council that the reason they cannot apply again is because as soon as they break ground, the City will no longer qualify for the grant.

Council Member Ruggiero noted that the water quality was fine in 2023, all of 2024 and parts of this year and asked what has changed to reduce the by-product.

Mr. Harvill explained that weather can have an impact on the water quality, and it goes up and down with the seasons.

Mayor Pierce asked if the City was to attempt the work in a phased approach, whether the City could still apply for other existing grants.

Mr. Wagenaar said he would have to look into this further to see about the timing but added there may be some wiggle room.

In response to Council Member Kimball's question regarding capacity for output of the water treatment plant, Mr. Harvill said it was 15 million gallons a day.

Council Member Kimball asked if the project would affect the output capacity and whether Watertown could be asked to provide more water to communities that have smaller facilities.

Mr. Harvill said, if anything, the new project will enhance the output.

Responding to Mr. Kimball, Mr. Farone replied that communities with smaller facilities could actually lose flow if the City does nothing because the communities would have to do something else rather than utilize City water.

Council Member Kimball clarified he was not suggesting holding off on the project but was wondering if the City could get any payback by expanding the water output.

Ms. Tuttle said that they have not found this to be true historically and stressed that, with potential cost increases of 100 percent, the communities will be drilling wells or looking elsewhere for a cheaper water source.

Discussion turned to finding ways to generate revenue.

Council Member Olney asked if water is still being sold to Fort Drum

Mr. Farone indicated it is and summarized the details of how well water is mixed with City water.

Much discussion then revolved around the grants and funding of the project.

Council Member Olney requested more information on the grants, stating he would like to review how they are written and by whom.

Mayor Pierce said, in her opinion, the people seated at the table in front of Council were the ones best suited to write the grants, noting the years of expertise for all of them in their respected fields.

Council Member Shoen asked Mr. Mills how the water fund will be paying for this project and how it would affect City users as it stands right now at \$64 million.

Mr. Mills stated he foresees a potential 30% rate increase.

Council Member Shoen expressed concern about the operational cost and told GHD he would like to see how much it will actually cost to run the plant compared to what the costs are now.

Mr. Castor replied that the operations and maintenance cost estimates have been provided to the City.

More discussion ensued regarding financing and tax increases.

Council Member Olney asked Mr. Mills if this project will affect property taxes.

Mr. Mills explained that property taxes are separate from water bills.

City Manager Update

Mr. Wagenaar said that in addition to all the grants that were just discussed, the WASP Project Grant will be submitted on Friday.

He indicated that City staff is working on implementing the Cannabis process and mentioned that the Christmas Parade will be held on December 12, 2025

Work session ended at 8:45 p.m.

Margaret M. Puccia
Deputy City Clerk