

**CITY COUNCIL BUDGET SESSION
CITY OF WATERTOWN
March 31, 2026
5:30 p.m.**

Mayor Sarah V.C. Pierce Presiding

Present: Council Member Shane A. Garrabrant
Council Member Robert O. Kimball
Council Member Douglas E. Osborne, Jr.
Council Member Benjamin P. Shoen
Mayor Sarah V.C. Pierce

Also Present: Eric F. Wagenaar, City Manager

City staff present: James Mills, Erica Anderson, Thomas Compo, Erica LeClerc, Brian MacCue, Scott Weller, James St. Croix, Karen Overton, Michael Lumbis, Aaron Harvill

DISCUSSION

Parks and Recreation

Superintendent of Parks and Recreation Scott Weller and Program Manager James St. Croix were present to review their department's proposed budget.

Mr. Weller began by giving a year-in-review presentation which reflected the usage of indoor and outdoor events held by the department. He then turned Council's attention to page 138, containing the Parks and Recreation Administration account, and he said there were no significant changes. Turning to page 141 which contained the Parks and Playground Maintenance account, he stated materials had decreased \$15,000 and the funding for the zoo was eliminated. In response to Council Member Kimball's inquiry, Mr. Weller reviewed the staffing levels of this account.

City Comptroller James Mills pointed out that one facility worker will retire in the fall and not be replaced. It was confirmed that in-kind services would still be provided to the zoo, costing approximately \$75,000.

Regarding the Athletics and Facility Maintenance account, Mr. Weller said the major change was that the basketball court would be resurfaced for \$18,000, and then, he pointed out the request for a hot water heater for the Grandstand (page 147) and the rear snow blower attachment (page 148). The usage of the basketball court and the last time it was resurfaced was discussed, as well as the usage of other fields such as Kostyk and Marble.

Turning to the Recreation Programs and Events account listed on page 151, Mr. Weller explained that the major change was the elimination of the playground program, which was a reduction of approximately \$39,000. He responded to questions regarding the program's staffing requirements, hours of operation, and usage.

Council debated the possible consequences of cutting the playground program and wondered what else the children would do. Council Member Shoen noted there is a public health benefit to the playground

program and wondered if the County would help fund it. He also mentioned that North Hamilton Street playground is heavily used, and he suggested keeping that one open.

The cost of the harvest festival was reviewed, and City Manager Wagenaar indicated the City does receive a revenue from this event, which comes close to covering the cost of it.

Turning to the Pools account listed on page 155, Mr. Weller noted there were no proposed changes except for a \$5000 reduction to the cost of chemicals. He then drew Council's attention to the proposed fee schedule at the end of the budget book, which shows fees for the use of pools for everyone.

Council Member Garrabrant wondered if the City did not open one pool whether the cost for this account would be cut in half.

Mr. Weller agreed that it would be approximately half of the cost.

There was a lengthy discussion regarding whether the two pools could be opened on alternating days and what type of cost savings that would provide the City. The attendance of the pools was discussed and Mr. Weller encouraged Council to keep the Thompson Park pool open seven days a week because it is heavily used. He then suggested Flynn pool could be opened on weekends only.

Council Member Kimball said he was against closing a pool.

Council Member Garrabrant said that closing a pool should be on the list of options for Council to consider.

Mayor Pierce said that she does not disagree, but if a pool was to be closed then the splash pads at both pools should remain open.

The Golf Course account (page 159) was discussed next, and Mr. Weller explained the budget only considers the cost of half a season to get through this October and then the golf course would be closed next season. He added that no funding for the winterization of the golf course was in the budget. He pointed out that this decision was made mainly due to the upcoming capital improvements and expenses needed for the golf course.

Council Member Garrabrant said he would like to pursue leasing the golf course or potentially selling the golf course after this season.

Council Member Osborne said he does not disagree with Council Member Garrabrant, but he wondered if selling the golf course was even possible.

Mayor Pierce explained that, in order to sell the golf course, the City would have to get approval to sell parkland from the State, which she added is a process but not impossible to do.

Council Member Osborne asked if the City could seek a request for proposals (RFP) to see if someone is interested in leasing the golf course.

Mr. Wagenaar mentioned the City needs to consider that there will still be a cost for maintaining the land as parkland and he also discussed the capital expenses that would be needed in the future to continue operating the golf course. He commented he is not sure where that funding would come from.

Council Member Osborne said if the City cannot afford the golf course in the future, then it should consider making this space into a more cost-effective use, such as trails.

Council Member Kimball said that even though the Mayor stated it is possible to sell parkland, it will take some time. He said he does not want to see this sold, but the City cannot profit like a private golf course because most of the profit from private courses comes from liquor sales. He added that he is not in support of this City becoming involved in selling liquor. Lastly, he stated if the City continues to mow the land there is still an expense, but keeping the golf course going is not the best use of taxpayer money.

Turning Council's attention to the Arena account, listed on page 163, Mr. Weller pointed out there was a decrease in temporary wages of \$10,000 and he mentioned the request for an auto fryer which is listed on page 167.

Council Member Shoen questioned the revenue of the arena and mentioned there is a subsidy when you add in the debt service.

Mr. Weller responded to questions about the number of visitors to the arena, stating there are thousands that attend the various events at the arena.

Mr. Wagenaar responded to Council Member Shoen's questions regarding the naming rights for the arena and the advertising revenue from the hockey agreement.

The number of games during the professional hockey season and the number of non-ice events were discussed.

In regard to capital projects for his department, Mr. Weller indicated that there were none and then he reviewed the proposed changes to the fee schedule. He pointed out that a season pass for pickle ball will be new, pool fees will be the same for everyone, and ice rental fees will be the same for all groups. He responded to questions regarding season passes for ice skating, the reason for changing the pool fees, and the baseball field lease.

Mayor Pierce summarized that Council would like more information regarding the options for the playground program and a varied schedule for pool operation.

Department of Public Works

Superintendent of Public Works Brian MacCue and City Engineer Thomas Compo were present to review this department's proposed budget.

Mr. MacCue began by stating his department does an enormous amount of work with a very lean staff and he added that this budget has two additional positions eliminated. He directed Council's attention to the Public Works Administration account listed on page 60 and he noted the transmap updates, the exterior awning garage door, and the exterior door maintenance. He explained the need for each of

these. He then turned to page 67, which lists the Central Garage account and explained the reason for the main door replacement, the trench drains, and the fuel master main update.

Under the Municipal Grounds Maintenance account on page 103, Mr. MacCue indicated this account will be losing one motor equipment operator (MEO), even though this unit is already maxed with work for the number of people it has. He pointed out the line items for the NYS DEC grant tree work, noting that it was reimbursed by a grant except for the in-kind work.

Turning to page 109, Maintenance of Roads account, Mr. MacCue said this is the other area that will be losing an MEO and it will affect how the streets are maintained. In addition, he pointed out the line item for the exterior main door replacement. He also responded to questions about the street sweeping process the City uses, noting the whole City is done twice.

Regarding the Snow Removal account on page 113, Mr. MacCue pointed out that the loss of two MEOs will have a significant impact next winter in regard to snow plowing. He then discussed a request for a slide-in sander and a pick-up sander unit, which are both listed on page 115, and he noted the exterior door replacement under contract services. Lastly, he mentioned that materials have gone up because road salt usage has increased significantly due to the harsh winter.

Under Traffic Lighting and Control account on page 121, Mr. MacCue explained the reason for requesting a message board, solar crossing beacons, and grid smart system detection units (pages 124-125). He added that these requests will be charged to CHIPS.

The Parking Facilities account (page 133) was reviewed, and Mr. MacCue explained the reason why the Stone Street and Riverwalk parking leases were eliminated.

Mr. MacCue said there were no changes to the Storm Sewer account on page 173, and he turned to the Refuse and Recycling account on page 177 and said that tipping fees have increased significantly. He noted that refuse is no longer self-sustaining and there is a budgeted \$200,000 loss this year.

Under the Sewer Fund, Mr. MacCue drew Council's attention to the Sanitary Sewer account listed on page 217 and pointed out the cleaning-sewer expense. He explained this is new and will appear each year due to a new regulation.

Mr. Compo added that this will also allow the City to video sewer lines, which will help with the capital program in the future.

There was a lengthy discussion regarding the refuse program and how it used to generate revenue or be revenue-neutral but now would be running at a loss. Staff offered explanations as to why that loss is occurring at this point.

Council Member Kimball said the City needs to consider what happens if it shuts down its refuse program.

Mayor Pierce agreed and said if the program is running at a loss, the City may need to consider eliminating the service. She noted that private haulers are available to provide this service to the

residents. She also expressed concern with tipping fees increasing and the need for more capital purchases of equipment in the future.

In response to Council Member Garrabrant's inquiry into whether the loss includes equipment costs, Mr. Mills said that he factors fleet depreciation into his calculations as well.

There was further discussion over the recent change in policy for the refuse program and whether that was having an impact on the decrease in revenue. It was questioned whether there was any tracking system to see if the City had lost customers due to that change in policy. The sticker system was discussed further and the accounting process, as well as recycling being done weekly versus every other week.

Mr. MacCue explained the reason for changing the recycling pickup to weekly. He noted that, due to the large volume of recyclables, staff were unable to get to the transfer site at the end of the day prior to its closing. He said that providing weekly recyclable pickup was more efficient.

Council Member Shoen said he would like to see an RFP for a solar farm at the old landfill property and Assistant Superintendent Karen Overton provided an update regarding her research on this topic.

Mr. MacCue turned to the capital plan and explained the need for the following requests: equipment lifts (page 277), rear load packer (page 279), snowplow (page 280), snowplow and sander (page 281), traffic signal at intersection of Sherman and Clinton Streets (page 282), and the Main Street East reconstruction project (page 284). Lastly, he reviewed the streets that would be done through the CHIPs program, which are listed on page 285.

Council Member Shoen suggested other streets that he felt should be addressed, noting that they could be better maintained with a mill and fill and then a quick paving.

Mr. Compo pointed out that the transmap will also do a paving assessment for the City.

Under Sewer Fund capital projects, Mr. MacCue discussed the Pearl Street utility bridge project.

Lastly, Mr. MacCue reviewed the fee schedule and said there will be a 5% increase in refuse fees.

Turning back to the capital plan, Council Member Shoen suggested removing the following projects in the outer years and provided his reasons: Holcomb Street sidewalk (page 273), Fairgrounds YMCA parking lot paving (page 265), and baseball stadium field lighting (page 265).

Mayor Pierce summarized that Council would like more information regarding the potential of eliminating the refuse program.

Budget session ended at 7:38 p.m.

Ann M. Saunders
City Clerk