

**CITY COUNCIL BUDGET SESSION
CITY OF WATERTOWN
May 22, 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: Fire Chief Matthew Timerman, Deputy Fire Chief Michael Kellogg, Police Chief Charles Donoghue, Police Captain Michael LaBarge, James Mills, Logan Eddy

DISCUSSION

Zoo New York Funding

Executive Director of Zoo New York Lawrence Sorel addressed Council about the financial status of the zoo and thanked Council for their support the last few years. He said that without that support the zoo may not have been able to continue. He then highlighted factors, such as inflation and minimum wage increases, that were impacting the zoo's budget this year and noted that operations continue to function on a narrow margin. Mentioning that he does not like coming back to Council to ask for more assistance, he advised that there is an increase of nearly \$40,000 in core payroll and requested that the City increase the \$100,000 funding to the zoo in the proposed budget by another \$40,000.

Council Member Ruggiero pointed out that, a couple of years ago, the City was asked to increase its funding from \$50,000 to \$100,000 and now is being asked for another \$40,000, which equates to a \$90,000 increase. She asked if Council agrees to this request for this budget, what will prevent the zoo coming back next year asking for more money.

Mr. Sorel explained that there are a number of operating plans for zoos nationwide which they would like to look at in order to make the operating model of the zoo more successful. He warned that, if the zoo is to stay open, he might have to periodically come back to Council for funding and that is why he feels it is important to have a "blue ribbon panel" formed to review everything.

Council Member Ruggiero asked for more information on the number of memberships, visitors and events held, stating she would like to see if there has been a change in memberships.

Council Member Pierce asked what the impact would be if the Council did not approve this request.

Mr. Sorel indicated that they would be fine through this fiscal year, which follows the calendar year, but then they would need to evaluate the situation. In response to Council Member Pierce's inquiry about the use of interns, he said that there are not many opportunities for unpaid interns. Regarding the status

of a “blue ribbon panel” being developed, he said that it was his understanding it was left in the City’s hands.

Council Member Pierce asked for information on the zoo’s marketing strategies.

Council Member Hickey asked about the zoo’s master plan.

Mr. Sorel explained that it is in the final stages of cost estimates for Phase 1 and noted what Phase 1 included.

Council Member Olney said he would like to see a revenue chart, noting that the zoo has been running in a deficit.

Mr. Sorel responded to questions about staffing levels, AZA accreditation, the County’s financial support, and the zoo’s marketing efforts. He also noted that the zoo offers different levels of memberships, as suggested by Council Member Olney, and explained that the “blue ribbon panel” would look at everything including the operating model, which is 30 years old.

Fire Department

Fire Chief Matthew Timerman began presenting the Fire Department budget, which begins on page 90, and stated the overall increase is due to contractual wage increases, otherwise the operating expenses were flat. He pointed out the sign for \$50,000 on page 97, stating that it is mostly grant funded, and the inflatable water rescue boat on page 96. He also noted the increase for OSHA physicals and turnout gear, mentioning that turnout gear has increased significantly. He responded to questions posed by Council Member Hickey about the portable radio software upgrade and the small equipment repair costs. Turnout gear was discussed further, and Chief Timerman indicated that approximately 12 full sets were budgeted for, and he explained that sometimes they mix and match old gear to make a complete set, so it has been beneficial to use the same vendor.

There was discussion regarding the transition from gas-powered equipment to battery-powered equipment and its reliability. Chief Timerman explained the issues that have been occurring but indicated that the department is working with the manufacturer for a resolution and staff is monitoring the charge of the batteries regularly. He replied to Council Member Hickey’s question about the possible use of drones by the department.

The topic turned to overtime and staff leveling and a lengthy discussion ensued. It was noted that 72 employees seemed to be the most cost-effective balance with overtime and personnel expense due to the 15 minimal manning requirement. Lastly, mutual aid provided by Fort Drum was discussed.

The capital projects were reviewed, and Chief Timerman explained the need for the Emma Flower Fire Station storage building conceptual plan on page 296. He answered several questions about the number and type of trailers operated by the department.

Conversation occurred about the City’s emergency preparedness/disaster planning plan and Insurance Services Office (ISO) rating.

Lastly, Chief Timerman explained the need for the front apron replacement on page 297, fire station entry door replacements on page 298, and Engine 5 replacement on page 305.

Mayor Smith surveyed Council for support of the Engine 5 replacement, and all agreed to it.

No changes were made to this budget.

Police Department

Regarding the Police Department Budget beginning on page 81, Police Chief Charles Donoghue stated the department is very short-handed and provided information about the candidates from the last civil service test held last fall. He reviewed the recruiting process up to this point. He advised that due to the shortage of personnel, the response to many of the specialty, non-urgent calls is delayed and the department is unable to provide some of training opportunities. He discussed overtime, noting there are limits to forced overtime. He advised a recruiting team has been formed in an effort to increase the number of candidates for the next civil service test this coming fall. Upcoming retirements were reviewed as well. Chief Donoghue also discussed the reaccreditation process, noting that the renewal process has already begun and, if approved, will be in effect for five years.

Chief Donoghue responded to questions about upcoming civil service tests, possible changes to the civil service testing process, age limits for candidates, and the City's tattoo policy. He also indicated that he would investigate Mayor Smith's suggestion of using voice to text software for officer's reports in an effort to improve efficiency.

Discussion turned to body camera videos and the processing of evidence, as well as the use of security cameras in problem spots within the City. Captain LaBarge explained there is \$20,000 in the proposed budget for a system and eight cameras are to be installed in various places throughout the City. He noted that these cameras are moveable and can be relocated as needed.

Conversation then turned to the special response team van replacement on page 88, the shooting range safety upgrades on page 89, and patrol vehicle replacements on page 87. The need for each was explained and further questions from Council were answered regarding these items.

Council Member Ruggiero inquired about the K-9 program and the City's policy for covering the vet bills after the dog is retired.

Chief Donoghue explained that when the dog retires the handler takes the dog and covers all the expenses. He said, however, when the dog passes away the City covers the cremation and final expenses.

In response to Council Member Hickey's inquiry about the use of drones, Chief Donoghue indicated that it is in their long-range plan.

Lastly, at the request of Council Member Olney, the damage done by renters and the landlord issues were discussed at length, as well as speed limits signs and speeding on various streets within the City.

Changes to the Proposed Fiscal Year 2023-24 Budget

Mr. Mix explained the report given to Council, stating it shows the effect of the changes already agreed upon by Council. Those were to eliminate the salary increases for the Mayor and Council and to

eliminate the Deputy City Comptroller position. He advised that these changes added up to \$104,358. He also informed Council that the City Comptroller would like to increase the part-time Accountant position in his office from 20 hours per week to 30 hours per week, equaling \$16,076. In order to decrease the property tax levy and keep the property tax the same, he indicated there would need to be a fund balance transfer of \$108,217.

Regarding the Water Fund and Sewer Fund, Mr. Mix reviewed the necessary changes, listed in the report, to reduce the proposed water rate increase from 10% to 6% and sewer rate increase from 10% to 3.5%. Lastly, he discussed the impact of these changes on the quarterly bill for a family of four and the minimum quarterly charge.

Updated Project Summary and Costs for Funding the Water Treatment Plant Improvements

Council was given a copy of a memorandum from GHD projecting the cost of the project dealing with the disinfectant by-products to be approximately \$50 million. Mr. Mix reviewed the report in detail and advised they are working on possible funding sources through grant applications and federal funding. He confirmed for Council Member Ruggiero that DANC is responsible, by contract, for 25% of the capital project cost.

American Rescue Plan Act Appropriations

Mr. Mix provided Council with a report summarizing the projects to be paid for with ARPA funds and noted that the total for all these projects over-subscribes the ARPA program by \$2,618,329. He recommended three projects be taken out of the ARPA program and gave his reasons why. They are the City Hall second floor reconfiguration budgeted for \$220,000, the sidewalk program budgeted for \$2,134,060, and the Recreation Needs Assessment for \$80,000. He said the total costs of these projects equal to \$2,434,060. He also reviewed the projects listed in the proposed budget which were to be funded by ARPA and could be eliminated to reduce the amount appropriated from ARPA funds, and he noted that there is also \$3,653,500 in ARPA funds left for Thompson Park that has not been allocated to specific projects.

Mr. Mix also reminded Council that the funding for the Flynn pool project still needs to be determined. He confirmed that projects funded by ARPA funds need to be under contract by 2024.

The current amount within the General Fund fund balance was discussed.

Mr. Mix also suggested Council consider using ARPA funds to pay for a portion of the disinfectant by-products project since the Water Fund cannot fund it without significant rate increases.

Hydro-Electric Facility Data

A report was available for Council to review.

Budget session ended at 8:56 p.m.

Ann M. Saunders
City Clerk