

**CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION
CITY OF WATERTOWN
November 13, 2023
7:00 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: Logan Eddy

DISCUSSION

Town of Pamela Water Agreement

John Condino of Barton & Loguidice spoke briefly with Council regarding the Town of Pamela Water Agreement and changing the terms of the contract from 10 to 30 years. He began by recapping a letter from City Manager Kenneth Mix, dated November 2021, regarding the negotiations between the City and the Town of Pamela for the water supply agreement connection on Bradley Street. He explained that, at the time the agreement was negotiated, the attorneys had suggested a 10-year term. He told Council, that two years later, the project is nearly completed and closing in on a permanent finance package with the Environmental Facilities Corp. (EFC) for \$20 million. He noted that the attorneys for the EFC instructed them to wait until there was a water supply agreement with the City and DANC, and explained that both contracts must reflect the same terms as the EFC's financing term, which is 30 years. He explained this would mean a single change in the current agreement from 10 years to 30 years would make it possible for them to close on the financing.

Mayor Smith said that he is doing his due diligence for the City residents, and asked if this would mean an increase in City revenue.

Mr. Condino said that negotiating was not on the table at this point. He said the main concern currently is to get approval to change the terms from 10 years to 30 years, so the financial closing could be done for the December 5th closing date.

More on the topic will be discussed at next week's Council meeting.

Zoo New York

Representatives from the Thompson Park Conservancy, Mark Irwin, Board Chair, and Philip James, Treasurer, presented a slide show to Council (on file in the City Clerk's office) regarding the future of the Zoo.

City Manager Mix began the presentation by reviewing some of the history of the Zoo and Park. He drew Council's attention to the beginnings of the Park in 1917 and the Zoo in 1921 and went on to

mention the deplorable conditions in the 1970s and the City's approval in 1989 to convert the Zoo to a Natural Habitat wildlife park. He described the vibrant period of growth beginning in 1991, noting this was when the Thompson Park Conservancy was formed. He then summarized the different strategic plans between 2017 and now, citing the effects of the Covid Pandemic, the 100-year anniversary, the hiring of Larry Sorel and other management positions and, most currently, the austerity budget with a skeleton crew. In conclusion, he mentioned the retirement of Mr. Sorel.

Mr. Irwin explained to Council the five pillars of a strategic plan, which consist of mission focus, conservation and education, animal wellbeing, guest experience, organizational culture and operation and financial stewardship. He highlighted the key points of why having a Zoo is such an important asset for the community. He stressed that quality of life is important for the area, especially with Fort Drum and their families. He pointed out that the Zoo is also a regional attraction and is the 2nd most visited attraction in the Thousand Island Region. The Zoo is also an educational destination for schools, outreach programs and community events within the five counties. He discussed at length the comparisons of the Zoo with the Rosamond Gifford Zoo and the Akron Zoo. He informed Council on how those Zoos are funded by the cities and/or counties in which they are located, along with grants and other government support. He told Council about other opportunities for community growth and the potential of partnering with places, such as Micron and Convalt Energy at Fort Drum, along with having other attractions besides the animal exhibits. He mentioned having an aquarium, science center, museum and planetarium.

Mr. Irwin then drew Council's attention to the organizational vitals and discussed at length the 2023 budget. He said the budget was \$922,000 and had a staff of 12 full-time and four part-time employees along with some seasonal staff, depending on the time of year. He summarized the attendance and the operation of the zoo hours throughout the year. He explained the cost to feed the animals.

Philip James, drew Council's attention to the budget projection for 2024. He explained that with no changes being made to the financial structure, there would be an estimated income of \$815,000 from the City, County and State, also from admission and sales and miscellaneous donations. With expenses of approximately \$968,000, this leaves a shortfall of \$154,000. He expressed concern that the current financial situation will not cover payroll and there will be temporary layoffs. He told Council that they do receive a NYS Zoo Grant in February but, since it is the slowest time of year financially, it basically is just a "band aid" for the financial crisis. He added there are volunteers and staff that have graciously stayed on to help care for the animals.

Mr. Irwin then explained the current options and what the Zoo is hoping to accomplish. He explained the plan for the short term, which will be until June when funds will start to come in. He then stated that the next period, June to September, will be their main revenue season, noting the current austerity budget consists of five keepers, one maintenance worker and a leadership volunteer.

Mr. James informed Council that the first option is staying with the austerity budget through May and summarized the details of this option. He then detailed option B which would be to return to full operation and bring staff back immediately, adding this option would require an additional \$190,000 in funding. Lastly, he explained that Option C is a hybrid and transitional approach, which would commence on March 15th and the expense for this would be \$75,000.

Mr. Irwin addressed the Council saying that there are two potential long-term options: Conservancy and City operation. He discussed at length the scenario if the City takes over the operations of the Zoo as it

once did in the past and noted the City would then have the option to close and decommission it, which could cost possibly close to a million dollars. He highlighted that it is important to remember the Zoo has been running on a bare bones budget of \$900,000 and it is estimated to be updated to close to \$2 million. He talked at length about the pros and cons of the City taking over the Zoo and the operational finances compared to other Zoos. He then discussed the long-term options of the Conservancy retaining control of the Zoo, which consists of an influx of transformative support. He discussed at length each goal and suggested having a Blue-Ribbon Panel.

Mayor Smith commended the presentations and said there are a lot of difficult questions that need to be asked. He said the Zoo is currently at a fork in the road, and he cannot foresee the City creating a new department to run the Zoo. He explained it would be very costly for the City to do so especially factoring in health insurance, retirement and CSEA jobs among other things.

Mayor Smith made several key points as to why the City stopped running the Zoo years ago and noted it was not cost-effective, stressing that taxes could potentially go up 10 to 15 percent.

Council Member Ruggerio asked about the results of the community survey.

Mr. Irwin said he purposely did not put the results in this presentation because there were a lot of logistics to work out. He did note, however, there is great public support for the Zoo from all different ages and economical groups.

Council Member Ruggerio asked if they have asked for County support.

Mr. Irwin replied that they have not yet approached the County as the Zoo is City property and the first point of contact should be the City.

Council Member Pierce asked when the Blue-Ribbon Panel will start meeting and how often.

Mayor Smith said that is between the Conservancy and the new Mayor-elect. He said he is hoping that by tomorrow there will be more clarity on the Blue-Ribbon Panel.

Council Member Pierce also asked if there are any proposed fundraising campaigns, noting that with the Zoo currently in the spotlight, this might be a good opportunity to do so.

Mr. Irwin said he agrees, but currently there is no staff to help. He did note that they receive small donations and offers to help, so the support is there. He suggested forming a grant committee.

Council Member Hickey asked about the \$60,000 that is supposed to last until February.

Mr. Irwin replied that funding is meant to last until February but, with the austerity budget and the addition of State funding, they will be able to get through until May now.

Council Member Olney asked what amount of money it would take to keep the employees working. He stated that he researched the Zoo financials from 2022 and discussed his own financial projections. He asked about insurance if the City was to take over the operation of the Zoo.

Mr. Mix said he would have to investigate this, advising that, currently, the City has insurance on all City-owned buildings in the Park.

Council Member Olney went over the data from previous surveys and told Council his findings. He expressed concern about losing the current staff and their experience and knowledge and offered his support of spending the money to keep staff employed for four months rather than training new people if the current staff finds new work. He stressed he is in support of an immediate return to full operation and the return of all staff.

Mayor Smith concluded the meeting by thanking Mr. Irwin and Mr. James for a great presentation and indicated there is a lot to think about. He said he would contact them soon regarding the Blue-Ribbon Panel.

Work Session ended at 08:15 p.m.

Margaret M. Puccia
Deputy City Clerk