

**CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION
CITY OF WATERTOWN
August 10, 2026
6:30 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: Aaron Harvill, Josh Satchwell, Tom Compo, Scott Weller, Kimberli Johnston, James Scordo, Amber Fowler

Mayor Pierce opened the meeting.

Motion was made by Council Member Robert O. Kimball to move into Executive Session to discuss proposed, pending, or current litigation and collective bargaining.

Motion was seconded by Council Member Benjamin P. Shoen and carried with all voting in favor thereof.

Council moved into Executive Session at 6:32 p.m.

Council reconvened at 7:02 p.m.

DISCUSSION

Water Treatment Facility Course Correction

Superintendent of Water Aaron Harvill, joined via teleconference by Erica Goldin and Kevin Castro, both Project Engineers from GHD, presented Council with plans for course correction at the Water Treatment Facility.

Ms. Goldin offered a brief status update on the project, noting the tree clearing which has been completed, and she mentioned that the completed design is awaiting approval by the Department of Health. She also advised the overall projected costs for the project had increased to \$70,100,00 since the time the Council voted to bond for \$61.7 million. To account for this increase, Ms. Goldin suggested that Council now consider a phased approach with Phase 1 seeing pump station upgrades and new equipment and construction at the pretreatment facility and Phase 2 focusing on ozone equipment and filter improvements. She then presented a timeline of the two phases with completion of the first phase expected in June of 2029 and the second phase running from February 2031 to February 2033. Regarding funding, Ms. Goldin indicated there would need to be a determination of how a phased approach would affect funding.

Mr. Harvill advised Council of the next steps in the process, which were a scheduled meeting with the Department of Health (DOH) on September 2, preparation of the Phase 1 bid documents and the advertising phase for those bids, which is targeted for October 1.

In response to Council Member Osborne's question whether the water treatment plant would be operational after the completion of Phase 1, Mr. Harvill indicated that it would.

Council Member Osborne asked if there would be any kind of savings involved in a phased approach.

Mr. Harvill stated that there are downsides to a phased plan, noting the overall project would cost more due to the added mobilization.

In response to Council Member Osborne's question regarding the portion of the cost the City would be paying, Mr. Harvill said he was not sure how the funding would be affected by this. He explained that DOH is receptive to the phased approach knowing that this is a large investment, but they would like the project completed as it was piloted.

City Manager Eric Wagenaar commented that the phased approach will change the funding because the current grant was based on 40% of the total cost, so they are not sure if it will now be based on 40% of the first phase. He said this will need to be discussed further with NYS Environmental Facilities Corporation (EFC).

In response to Council Member Garrabrant's request for a total cost for Phase 1, Ms. Goldin replied that it was roughly \$45 million.

Council Member Kimball inquired how a phased approach would be a benefit and asked if it was just for funding.

Mr. Harvill replied that in the interest of fiscal responsibility, spreading the project out may allow the City to apply for more grants particularly in the two-year gap between the completion of Phase 1 and the start of Phase 2.

Mr. Wagenaar reminded Council that this project is being completed due to an administrative order and that document is what drives the grants.

Council Member Kimball asked if there was a possibility the EPA would rescind the order after the first phase. He noted that the City has been in compliance for several years already and, after addressing the largest problem in Phase 1, perhaps the City would not have to complete the rest.

Mr. Wagenaar agreed that was possible.

In response to Council Member Shoen's request for a complete cost for Phase 1, Ms. Goldin replied that she would get that for Council.

In response to Council Member Shoen's question about the redesign costs after the first phase is completed, Mr. Castro advised that there would not be a significant impact on design.

Council Member Shoen indicated that he would support the phased approach as a savings to the ratepayers, mentioning the possibility of the administrative order being rescinded after the Phase 1 work is completed. He noted the installation of the ozone system in Phase 2 will result in significant operational costs due to electricity needs, which will also increase cost to ratepayers.

Mayor Pierce asked if the next step was to get DOH approval of the changes.

Mr. Wagenaar advised that staff were seeking Council approval to strengthen their argument with the DOH and EFC.

Council Member Shoen asked for clarification on the options for the water line conduit being either inside under concrete inside the building or running alongside the building.

Ms. Goldin said GHD would evaluate the options on the burial of pipes.

Mr. Harvill added that his department does not want to build a difficult legacy.

Lead Service Line Replacement Update

Water Superintendent Aaron Harvill and Water Distribution Supervisor Josh Satchwell advised Council that the intent of their presentation was to keep Council informed of pending milestones, planned actions and the options necessary to meet the requirements of the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Lead and Copper Rule Improvements (LCRI.) Mr. Harvill indicated that the EPA had established the milestones which the City water systems must meet and noted that it begins with an inventory of service lines. He commented that the City has met all milestones to date and listed the next deadlines. He explained that the focus of the presentation was to address unknown services and replacements.

Mr. Harvill explained that the inventory of services of concern had been updated due to a flaw in reporting, which has been corrected, and he noted that moving forward they will continue to validate the logic and further refine. He explained that the LCRI requires all service lines be identified, certified and an approved replacement plan in place by November 1, 2027. He informed Council that the current inventory shows 1,242 service lines of concern that must be replaced by November 2037. That inventory, he said, contains six known lead service lines (LSLs), 954 galvanized requiring replacements (GRRs) and 282 unknown materials (UNKNs). He noted that the minimum replacement requirement will be 10% per year (around 125) to meet the 2037 deadline. He further explained that identifying as many UNKNs as possible will be in the City's best interest.

Mr. Harvill offered a detailed explanation of the City's service lines and how they work, stressing that the NYS Department of Health (DOH) requires three points of verification to categorize a service line. He then explained the three methods used to identify construction materials, which are excavation, home inspections and predictive modeling. Mr. Harvill noted that none of the methods can be used alone, but, in combination, can reduce time and material costs.

Mr. Harvill informed Council of the Water Department's recommendations moving forward, which include entering into an agreement with a third-party vendor to assist the department, revisions to the City Code to allow PEX tubing in some applications, entering into an agreement with a contractor to perform the service and applying for funding.

Council Member Kimball expressed surprise that there were only 1,242 unknown lines and suggested that the age of the neighborhood might be helpful in predicting what materials were used. He mentioned his own home was built in the 1970s and he plans to identify what material is in his water lines.

Mr. Harvill indicated that one of the advantages of using a third-party vendor with proven track records, would be their expertise in predicting and determining materials.

Council Member Garrabrant inquired if other communities make use of these third-party vendors.

Mr. Harvill indicated that many do and that using them will help the City get caught up in identifying the lines with unknown materials.

In response to Council Member Garrabrant's question on whether the identifying process would take a year, Mr. Satchwell replied that spending a year assessing the unknowns will speed up the process of replacement by removing some from the list.

Council Member Garrabrant asked for the approximate cost to replace a water line and wondered whether neighborhoods could be grouped together and potentially replaced all at once during a CHIPS-funded street replacement.

Mr. Satchwell noted that costs to replace the lines vary and that it is likely that many of the older sections have clusters of pipes that will need replacement.

In response to Mayor Pierce's question of when the plan is due, Mr. Harvill said he hoped to have it in place by the end of the year so they could apply for the spring round of funding.

Council Member Kimball asked if homeowners were receiving an annual notification about the need for pipe replacement.

Mr. Harvill said the homeowners get a notification if they have materials that need replacement and if they have pipes with unknown materials.

Council Member Shoen questioned the allowance of PEX piping, questioning its durability when buried.

Mr. Satchwell indicated that the allowable PEX is specifically designed to be buried.

In response to Council Member Shoen's question of who pays if the City excavates a water line and it is not material that needs to be replaced, Mr. Harvill answered the City.

Mr. Harvill clarified for Council Member Shoen that the homeowner owns the entire water service line from the house to the water main per City Code.

Council Member Shoen asked if there would be financing plans for homeowners.

Mr. Harvill suggested that question would need to be addressed by the Comptroller.

In response to Council Member Shoen's question regarding the number of line replacements which could be performed by City staff in a year, Mr. Satchwell reported that the best year was 63 and that was a year when they did nothing but line replacements. He noted in an average year staff completes about 25 but noted both numbers are well short of the 10% per year number of 125.

Pawling Street Options for Water

City Engineer Thomas Compo advised Council that both Pawling and Moffett Streets are dead ends and have similar water issues. He explained that Pawling Street has a 6-inch main built in 1934 and Moffett Street has a 4-inch main from the 1930s. He noted that if the City plans to address one, they may as well also include the other. He advised Council that consideration should be given to the WOTS separation the City will be performing in the next two to three years. He further noted that any work on water mains requires the City maintain water service throughout construction and may require easements. Mr. Compo also noted that any work on water mains requires approval from the Department of Health.

In response to Council Member Kimball's question of whether the primary issue on Pawling Street was water quality, Mr. Harvill said it was and there had been several complaints, mainly from one address.

Mr. Compo presented four options for Council to consider addressing the persistent water issues on Pawling Street. He indicated the first extends Pawling Street to Gotham Street and includes the installation of a 6-inch line, the second and third options involve combining Moffett and Pawling Streets and connecting to Gotham Street and the fourth combines Pawling and Moffett Streets and connects to South Hamilton Street.

Mr. Compo then listed the costs for each, noting that the cost is just for line replacement and does not factor in road repair and other costs which tend to arise during any kind of construction.

In response to Council Member Kimball's question about how staff would account for the catch basins on Pawling Street, Mr. Compo explained that Gotham Street has a separated storm sewer.

Council Member Shoen expressed his concerns about attaching the line to Gotham Street but agreed that Pawling Street was overdue for line replacement. He also suggested that Moffett Street could probably use a complete rebuild similar to the one recently completed on Burlington Street.

In response to Council Member Garrabrant's question about the Department of Health approval process, Mr. Compo said he would call the department to see what they say and added they may have their own recommendations.

Council Member Garrabrant wondered if CHIPS funding could be used.

Mr. Compo advised that the decision is up to Council on how they wish to proceed and which option they prefer.

Mayor Pierce asked if the next step would be to reach out to the Department of Health.

Mr. Compo advised that if the work begins now, none of the project will likely be reimbursed, but if work is held off until the City receives its WOTS grant, the sewer costs could be reimbursed.

Council agreed that staff should contact the Department of Health to get their input.

Winter Ice Schedule

Parks and Recreation Superintendent Scott Weller informed Council that the purpose of this presentation was to discuss ice time at the Arena.

Program Manager James Scordo began the presentation by explaining how the distribution of ice time had been handled in the past, noting that the consistent and reliable ice times have allowed the Watertown Hockey Association and the Figure Skating Club of Watertown to develop and grow their organizations.

Mr. Weller advised that his department had searched several other public ice arena allocation policies and noted similarities in themes and methods among them including historical precedent and priorities.

Mr. Scordo listed the organizations requesting ice time and displayed the Watertown Hockey Association Ice Turn-In summary from last year.

Mr. Weller displayed Option 1, which mirrored last year's schedule with the only difference being an earlier start time for the Watertown Wolves Hockey team. He explained Option 2 transferred approximately 3.5 hours from Watertown Hockey Association to Power Play Sports. He advised that staff recommends staying with Option 1 and giving future consideration to limiting the number of groups using the ice.

Council Member Osborne asked how it was determined which hours to transfer.

Mr. Weller advised that this was driven by Power Play Sports' request for additional prime hours and he then referred Council to the Turn-In times from earlier in the presentation. He noted that Watertown Hockey Association was primarily using morning slots and their number of hours had dropped from the previous year.

Council Member Osborne suggested choosing Option 2 and treating it as a pilot program and seeing how the season goes while also drafting a policy for future seasons.

Mayor Pierce asked if the Arena could be opened earlier.

Mr. Weller informed Council that the Arena could open earlier or stay open later, but organizations do not want those early or late times. He added that everyone wants the prime hours between 4 p.m. and 8 p.m.

In response to Council Member Garrabrant's query of whether public skate was well attended on Tuesdays and Thursdays, Mr. Weller admitted there was not a lot of usage but, unfortunately, those hours will not work for the hockey and figure skating organizations due to work and school.

Mayor Pierce mentioned she has heard from residents that the weeknight public skates are too late for their children on a school night. She wondered if those spots could be given to Power Play Sports.

Council Member Shoen asked for some numbers on attendance for public skating and asked about usage of the ice times before the Watertown Wolves began using the Arena.

Mr. Weller advised that the public skate and Rock and Skate formerly used the hours now used by the Wolves and those nights had high attendance rates of three to four hundred.

Mr. Wagenaar advised that the decision on the option is time sensitive as the resolution will be presented next Monday.

Mayor Pierce offered support for Option 1 while Council Members Osborne, Shoen and Kimball supported Option 2.

Assessment Re-Evaluation Process

City Assessor Kimberli Johnston addressed Council to explain what revaluation is and how it works. She then listed the total number of City parcels, the assessment level and the total assessed value. She then detailed the concept of assessment quality and explained the various metrics used in determining it.

Ms. Johnston then explained the process of revaluation and cited both the benefits and the concerns with doing a City-wide revaluation. She explained that the purpose is to have an equitable tax roll. She indicated that the process would take between 18-24 months and noted the City would enlist the services of a third-party entity that specializes in revaluation.

In response to Council Member Kimball's question of when the last complete revaluation was done, Ms. Johnston indicated that partial ones were done in 2017 and 2009.

Council Member Kimball asked if there were any State guidelines that advise when a City should do a revaluation, for instance, when their equalization gets below a certain number.

Ms. Johnston informed Council that there was no standard and that while the City of Watertown's equalization is at 73%, some municipalities have equalizations as low as 10-12%.

Council Member Shoen asked if, once a complete reassessment is done, if the City can continually update as properties are bought and sold.

Ms. Johnston indicated that the assessed value is based on the market, but assessors are not able to pick and choose particular properties to assess individually, a procedure known as "selective assessment."

Council Member Shoen expressed displeasure with the City's equalization score of 73 and suggested it should be up in the 80 or 90s.

Council Member Kimball commented that it seems some properties never get reevaluated and are sitting at an assessed value of \$200,000 when they should be \$500,000.

Council Member Garrabrant mentioned that a city-wide reassessment seems daunting and asked if it was possible to reassess in phases over five years.

Ms. Johnston explained that this would probably not be cost-effective as the rates could not be changed until the complete project was done and then there would be new discrepancies.

Council Member Garrabrant expressed concerns about the costs of the project.

Council Member Shoen stated that it would be valuable to do the revaluation and suggested that buyers who buy a house, assessed at \$150,000 for \$400,000 be prepared to pay on the full value.

Mr. Wagenaar asked if Council would want to do the reassessment in this budget year or the next.

Council Member Shoen suggested starting it in this budget year and finishing it in the next.

Mayor Pierce suggested putting out a RFP and to see what the potential costs are.

Clean Watertown Refuse and Recycle Initiatives

City Manager Wagenaar reported the feedback gathered by staff in response to Council's request for a review of the "Clean Watertown" initiatives proposed by Council Member Garrabrant. He noted that the City is already executing some of the initiatives, such as increased public awareness, but others, such as giving away trash stickers and discounts, will need Council approval through a resolution.

Regarding the initiative to increase public awareness, Mayor Pierce mentioned that is already being done by staff. Regarding Council Member Garrabrant's second initiative to offer free garbage stickers to new residents, she explained the alternative was to include information about the refuse program in the new City welcome packet.

Mr. Wagenaar noted the new welcome packet is about 95% developed and will be implemented soon and put on the City's website. He confirmed for Mayor Pierce that if free garbage sticker are to be included, then Council approval would be required.

Council Member Garrabrant suggested putting a QR code in the welcome packet that would refer people to the information about the refuse program and the form for requesting a tote.

Mayor Pierce stated that she would prefer to do that rather than include a free garbage sticker based on the legal opinion.

Mr. Wagenaar explained the legal concerns with using taxpayer dollars to give away something free that does not apply to the entire City.

Noting that he had done research on the topic, Council Member Osborne said he felt there were exceptions to this rule and provided examples of what he felt did not cause liability to the City. He said that he still likes the idea, even though it is considered a gift because he thinks the City is benefiting more than an individual. He agreed with the suggestion of a QR code.

Regarding giving away a free sticker, Council Member Shoen commented that he does not think it would be an illegal gift and the cost of the free sticker could come out of the refuse advertising budget because it should qualify as an advertising expense. He noted that businesses do this all the time to create new customers.

Mr. Wagenaar read the legal opinion, stating municipalities are prohibited from providing gifts of public funds for private purposes pursuant to Article VIII, Section 1 of the New York State Constitution and private benefit could occur if the benefit is merely incidental to the goal of achieving an overall public good. He reminded Council that the refuse program only serves approximately 30% of the public.

Council Member Kimball noted that he supports anything the City can do to promote the service but is hesitant about giving out free garbage stickers because he does not think it will generate a consistent following on its own. He added that the public needs to be educated more about the program and it needs to be easier to use.

Council Member Osborne stated he supports giving away stickers, but wants staff to look at the criteria required to be met in case the State was to audit the City.

Council Member Garrabrant discussed improving the inventory and tracking system for the stickers, noting past issues that the City has had.

In response to Council Member Shoen's suggestion to put a UPC on the stickers, Mr. Wagenaar said that this option could be reviewed by staff, although there may be additional production costs to the sticker.

Referring back to the staff report, Mayor Pierce noted there were administrative and legal concerns with the next three proposed initiatives (multiple property program, returning customer program and customer referral program), but the seventh initiative regarding the program operation review is already being addressed by staff.

Council Member Shoen said he does not feel it is necessary to discount multiple property customers, noting that other vendors do not do this.

Council Member Garrabrant clarified his proposal for the fourth and fifth initiatives and addressed the legal concerns regarding the variable rates. He mentioned that the City offers varying rates in other areas, such as the golf course. He added that under these conditions there would only be a temporary rate change as an incentive.

Mr. Wagenaar pointed out that the City Attorney said he would help with language within a resolution if Council decides to proceed with these initiatives.

Mentioning she understands the intent on these initiatives, Mayor Pierce said the concern will be from the longstanding customers looking for a discount for their loyalty. She added that the City is doing an overall better job of marketing the refuse program and increasing public awareness.

Council Member Osborne offered his support for a new customer discount in hopes of increasing the City's market share.

The administrative and logistic concerns of tracking the discounted rates were discussed in relation to the current financial system and transition to the new financial system.

Council Member Kimball stated that he is not in favor of the fourth and fifth proposed initiatives and said they create more work for staff than they would attract more customers.

Council Member Garrabrant suggested that if there is interest in any of his proposed initiatives, then they should be rolled out one at a time.

Mayor Pierce summarized that she hears there is support from Council Member Garrabrant, Council Member Osborne and Council Member Shoen for the second initiative to offer a free sticker to new residents and suggested that this initiative be the first to be rolled out. Regarding the other initiatives, she indicated Council can give more thought to them and decide at a later time.

Mr. Wagenaar said a resolution for this can be prepared for the next meeting.

City Manager's Update

Mr. Wagenaar informed Council that there is an email scam occurring involving the Planning Commission and Zoning Board of Appeals, which asks businesses and residents to send money in order to process their applications and actions with these boards. He said that it is impersonating Planning and Community Development Director Michael Lumbis' email address and that there will be a public service announcement (PSA) issued to warn the public.

Work session ended at 9:35 p.m.

Lisa M. Carr
Deputy City Clerk