

**CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION
CITY OF WATERTOWN
September 14, 2026
7:00 p.m.**

Mayor Sarah V.C. Pierce Presiding

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

Not Present: Council Member Robert O. Kimball

Also Present: Eric F. Wagenaar, City Manager

City staff present: Geoffrey Urda, Erica Anderson, Thomas Compo, Karen Overton, Michael Lumbis, Joseph Abinus

DISCUSSION

Mayor Pierce opened the meeting by welcoming newly appointed Deputy City Clerk, Jessica Leroux, who was attending her first meeting.

Strategic Plan Update

City Manager Eric Wagenaar introduced the strategic planning process, explaining that it would provide a framework for gathering input and identifying priorities.

Senior Planner Geoffrey Urda advised that the City adopted a Comprehension Plan and Strategic Plan, both in 2019, and explained the different purpose of each plan. He noted that the Comprehensive Plan is a long-range, high-level vision for the City, while the Strategic Plan is more focused and operationally driven. He noted that the Strategic Plan is ready to be updated to reflect current conditions, changing costs, and the importance of spending wisely, and he explained the steps that have been taken so far in this update process.

Assistant to the City Manager Erica Anderson discussed the interview process, which included meetings of up to two hours with department heads to review, organize, and streamline information. She explained that information was then returned to the department heads for review. She noted that several versions were developed and significant time was spent creating the 2026 draft plan.

Mr. Urda read the four central goals listed in the draft plan, noting the underlying strategy is based on predictability, communication, delivering results, and obtaining the best “bang for the buck”. He then stated that each goal contains multiple objectives, which implements the goal and operates consistently with the underlying strategy.

Mr. Urda explained that Strategy 1, predictability, served as the starting point. He reminded Council that each department exists to serve its customers and that the goal is to deliver the best possible service. He added that many services are necessary to meet the needs of people throughout the city.

Mayor Pierce questioned whether a system was used across all departments to track calls from City residents and monitor response times.

Mr. Wagenaar responded that there had previously been a standard timeframe for responding to issues and mentioned that reinstating the standard would be beneficial.

Mayor Pierce further discussed the benefits of using software to track calls and maintain a history, allowing another employee to follow up and respond when necessary.

Mr. Wagenaar stated that the city currently uses an analog system and that he is exploring whether a similar process could be implemented through the City's website.

Mr. Urda agreed, noting that digital records would make it easier for another staff member to take over and respond when necessary.

Mr. Urda went on to explain that Strategy 2 focuses on identifying who needs to know information, encouraging departments to work together, and communicating externally with a unified voice to ensure the message is clear.

Mr. Urda stated Strategy 3 focuses on results rather than discussions. He reminded Council that although internal discussions take place, the public primarily sees the resulting actions. He also encouraged the use of external resources to provide support and create opportunities for collaboration.

Mr. Urda summarized Strategy 4, which focuses on maximizing the value of funds spent and avoiding costly rebuilding or duplicate work. He emphasized the importance of examining data and considering all available options when planning for future budgetary needs.

Mr. Urda concluded that all goals work together to deliver exceptional service to the city residents. He stated that feedback is being sought before moving forward with the next draft.

Council Member Osborne thanked staff for presenting the information in a concise and streamlined manner. He questioned whether Strategy 1 could include a process for determining realistic staffing needs.

Mr. Wagenaar responded that staff could meet with department heads to determine optimal staffing levels.

Council Member Garrabrant expressed appreciation for how the plan was presented and asked whether quality-of-life concerns, including homelessness, blight, and crime could be identified as an additional goal. He noted that feedback received from residents would help align with the plan.

Mr. Wagenaar responded that those concerns are included in the plan but could be highlighted more prominently.

Mr. Urda noted that staff partnered with Code Enforcement while developing the plan to proactively address and emphasize these concerns. He added that they could potentially be incorporated as a fifth goal.

Mayor Pierce suggested adding language regarding the encouragement of economic development.

Mr. Urda stated that economic development falls under partnerships, but that specific bullet point could be revisited. He encouraged Council to continue providing feedback and asking questions.

Layout of 2027-2028 Projects / Project Updates

City Engineer Thomas Compo provided updates on several ongoing projects and noted that work addressing driveway concerns on Seward Street is anticipated to occur this fall. He stated that the Burlington Street project was substantially completed in 2025, however paving was delayed until Spring to avoid creating additional disruption. He noted work is expected to be completed by the end of 2026 and remains on budget. Mr. Compo also provided updates on the City Hall Court Renovation project, which remains on schedule and within budget. He thanked City staff and residents for their patience during construction.

Mayor Pierce praised staff for their work and communication with Seward Street residents.

Council Member Shoen noted that repairs on Burlington Street progressed more quickly than Seward Street and asked whether a different firm had completed the work.

Mr. Compo confirmed that the projects involved different firms and management.

Council Member Shoen discussed differences in the completed slope work and requested clarification regarding the issues and responsibility for reconstruction costs.

Mr. Compo stated that the matter had not yet been discussed with the contractor, but that staff would continue following up. He noted that the work involved some complications and that efforts were underway to correct the issues.

Mr. Wagenaar asked who would be responsible for the associated costs.

Mr. Compo responded that he did not anticipate the City would be responsible for the costs.

Council Member Shoen stated that he was more satisfied with the Burlington Street work and suggested considering contractors' previous performance when awarding future bids. He also suggested developing a system for evaluating contractors used by the City.

Mr. Compo continued with an update on the coagulation building, noting that the work is complete and only closeout paperwork remains. He provided background of the pump station project and informed Council that LaBella is scheduled to conduct inspections this week and provide recommendations for remediation. Regarding the Huntington Street Water Main Replacement Project, he advised that the kickoff meeting would be held this Thursday. Mr. Compo also said that City Engineers contacted thirteen residents on Richards Drive, seven of whom responded. He noted that of those residents, five had sump pumps connected to the sanitary sewer system. He mentioned that the City would receive credits if the sump pumps were set up properly. He discussed previous work done on Iroquois Avenue and noted that the City had not returned to confirm that the work on the residents' property was complete. He requested that staff contact residents and verify completion.

Mr. Compo stated that the East Reservoir Project would move forward once the proposal was received. He reminded Council that the City received a \$5 million grant for the project. He also reported that the Water Distribution Roof Replacement Project had fallen behind schedule after it was determined that the current amount of insulation did not meet Code requirements.

Council Member Shoen asked about the bid status for the East Reservoir Project.

In response to Council Member Shoen's question, Mr. Compo said that the project had not moved forward because the City was awaiting the results of a grant application.

Mr. Wagenaar explained the process of RFQ and what steps the City needs to take before progress could be made.

Council Member Shoen inquired about lining maintenance, the anticipated timeline, and the Department of Health requirements. He requested an update as soon as additional information becomes available.

Mr. Compo explained that the project would require both completion of the work and construction of the supporting infrastructure. He also reviewed the proposal requirements.

Mr. Compo advised Council that, due to a lack of bids, two projects involving Mill Street would be re-bid in late fall or early winter. He commented that the project is relatively small compared with other projects occurring throughout the region.

Mr. Compo stated that the CDBG-funded ADA ramp project has taken longer than anticipated. He noted that the Central Street project is also CDBG-funded and is a significant undertaking. He mentioned the project will need to be separated and brought back before Council for additional funding.

Council Member Shoen asked if the 800 and 900 intersections of Bronson Street would be included, noting they need patch work.

In response, Mr. Compo said that CHIPS money could not be used but he would look into it.

Referring to the Mill Street project, Council Member Shoen inquired about the urgency of the project and what it entailed. He shared concerns that the City might fall behind on their timeline due to ongoing work on bigger bridge projects happening in the region.

Mr. Compo stated that the project is currently anticipated for 2028 and indicated design has been completed. He explained that the project involves more than the bridge alone.

Mr. Compo talked about the Flower Memorial Library projects. He reported that the roof has reached its useful life status. He noted that a previous leak was found and will be taken care of this week. He said there are bids for the project going out in the spring.

Mr. Compo discussed the Marble Street Fish Bypass Project and reported that the leak did not affect operations and that no additional leaks had occurred following repairs completed by Ampersand.

Interim Department of Public Works Superintendent Karen Overton provided an update on completed CHIPS projects and added that Palmer and Emmett Streets are also on the list for 2027.

Council Member Osborne thanked the staff for clarifying the project details and answering Council's questions.

CDBG Demolition Projects Update

Planning and Community Development Director Michael Lumbis provided an update on anticipated project timelines. He stated that the City had sought to demolish 405 Arsenal Street the previous year and planned to use leftover funds from the 531 Bradley Street demolition project.

Mr. Lumbis stated that the 518 Pine Street project was not moving forward due to the closure of the facility. He said that staff would need to reallocate the funding and revise the draft. He noted that the required public hearing was anticipated for October 5, but, due to time constraints, will now take place on November 2.

City Planner Joseph Albinus reviewed the next steps in the project, noting that the asbestos survey could not proceed because the building was determined to be unsafe. He stated the demolition would take place between November and March. He noted that staff would be applying for a permit from NYSDOT since a part of Arsenal Street would need to be closed. He said there is some paperwork to be finalized before public notice is issued.

Mr. Lumbis provided an update to the 383 Flower Avenue East demolition project. He noted that they are waiting on grant agreement funding which is behind. He stated once it is received, it can be brought before Council.

Mr. Albinus said that draft bids have been started on the project and gas will be shut off for the property in the upcoming weeks.

In response to Council Member Shoen's question about the condition of 383 Flower Avenue East, Mr. Albinus stated that the property had sustained significant fire damage and had been used by the Fire Department for training. It was also noted that a previous owner had attempted to repair the structure.

Council Member Shoen commented on the building's distinctive character and questioned whether its history made it worth preserving.

Mr. Lumbis stated that Code Enforcement had recommended demolition. He acknowledged the property's history but noted that preservation could be difficult due to its current condition and zoning requirements.

Council Member Shoen questioned whether the demolition was an appropriate option. He also referenced a property on Emerson Street with a fallen tree on it and asked about proposals for other properties on the demolition list.

Mr. Lumbis noted the difference is that the City does not own the property on Emerson Street, whereas the City has owned the property on Flower Avenue East for a few years. He stated that the goal was to

award the demolition bid in November so the properties could be removed sooner and the CDBG funding could be spent promptly in a timely manner.

Mayor Pierce advised that anyone interested in the Flower Avenue East property should connect with the Planning Department.

City Manager's Update

Mr. Wagenaar went over proposed changes to the Code brought forth by Council Members Council Member Garrabrant and Osborne and he recommended working with the City Attorney regarding possible changes to the City Code.

Council Member Garrabrant thanked staff for their openness and stated that the recommendations presented were useful. He noted that staff had listened to concerns from the community and Code Enforcement and were working to develop potential solutions.

Council Member Osborne favored that the proposed changes should address the concerns that have been raised.

Mr. Wagenaar agreed that the recommendations were beneficial and stated that they would need to be reviewed with the City Attorney.

Council Member Osborne acknowledged that not every matter requires Council approval but requested greater Council involvement when proposals, such as the demolition of J.B. Wise Place, could result in significant costs.

Council Member Shoen agreed, particularly regarding larger items that could affect the budget or create future liabilities. He supported a shared process that includes discussions with other parties regarding responsibility for demolition costs. He noted that the County collects property taxes but does not currently share the financial burden of demolition. He also emphasized the importance of insurance and the consequences of being uninsured.

Mr. Wagenaar discussed the possible future use of vacant property insurance.

Mayor Pierce stated that the City had previously requested assistance from the County but was denied because insufficient notice had been provided.

Council Member Shoen suggested establishing a shared fund for vacant properties so the financial burden would not fall entirely on the City.

Mr. Wagenaar then provided an update on the upcoming Harvest Festival, scheduled for October 2 - October 4 at the Alex Duffy Fairgrounds. He anticipates favorable weather and a successful weekend. He also noted a change in schedule to the Friday night movie schedule, with Toy Story to be shown on October 2.

Mr. Wagenaar reminded Council that this year's budget did not include funds for a Christmas Parade but added that the Christmas Tree Lighting would be held December 11 at City Hall and would include Santa at Flower Memorial Library.

Mr. Wagenaar also provided an update on the landfill solar project and stated that additional information was being gathered to determine how to proceed. He added that environmental considerations related to battery energy storage were also being reviewed.

Council Member Shoen expressed support for the proposal and was pleased that the City could generate revenue from the property.

Work session ended at 8:44 p.m.

Jessica L. Leroux
Deputy City Clerk