CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION
CITY OF WATERTOWN
October 13, 2026
7:00 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: Karen Overton, Tom Compo, Kimberli Johnston, Brandi Smith, Erica Anderson

D I S C U S S I O N

Solar Landfill

Mayor Pierce opened the meeting by introducing Karen Overton, Interim Department of Public Works Superintendent, and Greg Royer of Energy Solutions and asked for clarification regarding Mr. Royer's affiliation with WillDan.

Mr. Royer introduced himself and explained that he was transitioning to WillDan during his initial conversations with Ms. Overton. He described WillDan as a national, publicly traded energy solutions company and stated that that believed the company would be a good fit for the proposed project.

Mayor Pierce disclosed that her husband is employed by a different division of WillDan.

Ms. Overton began the presentation by stating that staff had been working on the landfill solar project for several months with the support of Mr. Royer and they would be presenting their findings.

Mr. Royer reported that the landfill consists of 77.8 acres, with approximately 40 acres suitable for development due to limitations. He reviewed project sizes, noting that approximately 10 megawatts would be the maximum capacity the site could accommodate. He discussed preliminary costs, potential returns, grid connection requirements, and battery storage options, noting that further investigation would be necessary to determine actual costs and feasibility.

Council Member Kimball asked whether the costs presented were associated solely with connecting to the grid.

Mr. Royer confirmed that the costs presented were limited to the grid connection. He explained that the cost per kilowatt is calculated by the State and varies by area. He reviewed potential revenues for each project size, noting that the smallest option would generate a negative return. He stated that initiating the grid connection process would be a critical first step for the City to determine exact costs. He spoke about battery storage options and how it could integrate with the solar project. He asked about the hydro plant and the timeline of the expiring National Grid contract, stating that there is potential to tie everything together while also updating infrastructure to the hydro facility.

Council Member Osborne asked how weather-dependent energy production would perform locally and benefit the City.

Mr. Royer explained that additional studies would evaluate energy production, including potential coordination with the City's hydroelectric facility. He outlined City-owned, developer-led, and hybrid ownership options, noting that the preferred approach would depend on the City's willingness for funding and risk. He also reviewed WillDan's services and experience and recommended submitting an application to further evaluate the project if the City wishes to proceed.

Council Member Garrabrant asked for a dollar amount per watt.

Mr. Royer provided a preliminary estimate of a couple of dollars and explained that the pricing included a turnkey project. He discussed the timing of federal incentives and the potential for material cost to decrease.

Council Member Garrabrant asked whether the project would support grid resiliency or provide economic benefits.

Mr. Royer explained that the proposal primarily focused on development and financial benefit to the City, although resiliency features could be incorporated.

Council Member Garrabrant asked about battery storage safety.

Mr. Royer discussed newer battery technologies, cooling systems, and monitoring capabilities.

Council Member Garrabrant asked about available grant opportunities.

Mr. Royer discussed potential funding assistance, including an investment tax credit for battery storage covering approximately 30 percent of installed costs. He noted that grant writers could assist in identifying additional opportunities.

Council Member Shoen asked how future price changes could affect the project.

Mr. Royer explained that future development, including Micron, could affect projections and incentives. He also noted that potential reductions in material costs could provide additional flexibility.

In response to Council Member Shoen's discussion on anticipated grid updates within surrounding areas, Mr. Royer noted that upgrades could increase grid capacity and reduce connection costs.

Council Member Shoen expressed support for exploring the next steps and requested additional information. He discussed rising costs associated with energy and stated this was a good use of the landfill to generate revenue. He asked about rooftop solar opportunities, including the capacity of the ice arena roof.

City Manager Eric Wagenaar stated there had been previous discussion about possibly expanding the project to the west.

Council Member Shoen asked about upgrades to the hydro facility and what the findings showed.

Mr. Royer stated that the facility appeared to have older equipment and that additional operating data would need to be reviewed. He noted that the proximity of the hydro facility and the proposed solar site would be beneficial in making a connection.

WOTS Update

City Engineer Tom Compo provided an update on Western Outfall Trunk Sewer (WOTS), including requirements under the Western Outfall Order on Consent and a requested extension of the December 31, 2026 completion deadline.

Mr. Compo reviewed short-term projects, including the Backwater Prevention Devices program, and reported that five of 124 households had backwater prevention devices installed.

Mayor Pierce asked why only five households had participated.

Mr. Compo explained that the available funding provided was insufficient to cover the homeowners' costs.

Council Member Shoen asked whether residents had identified cost as a barrier and discussed increasing credits to encourage participation.

Regarding long-term projects, Mr. Compo reviewed ongoing coordination with the Town of Watertown and reported that improvements were underway to correct identified issues. He said that the City is awaiting the Town's final report quantifying anticipated reductions, which, upon approval, would be incorporated into the joint Sewer Bank Offset Plan.

Mr. Compo reviewed completed and ongoing sewer improvements and a prioritized plan to reduce inflow and infiltration (I &I), with recommended work estimated at $29 million. He stated that staff would evaluate design firms and present fee proposals and potential recommendations to Council in November.

Mr. Compo reviewed available grant opportunities, stating that the City was awarded two out of five.

Council Member Kimball wished to know what 14,000 GPD would allow for new connections.

In response to Council Member Kimball's question, Mr. Compo stated that DEC has a 3:1 allowance, translating to approximately 4,800 credits earned. He noted that the City had not denied water service to any applicants and that the City is in a significantly improved position to approve future developments using accumulated credits.

Mr. Wagenaar referenced the Circle K project's anticipated usage of 2,800 gallons for comparison to answer Council Member Kimball's question.

Council Member Shoen asked about diversion methods used to identify I & I.

Mr. Compo discussed completed studies and ongoing corrective efforts. In conclusion, he said that he would be providing an update in December.

Permanently and Totally Disabled Veterans Property Tax Exemption

Assessor Kimberli Johnston began the presentation by informing Council the City has had this tax exemption program for years, but the State has simplified requirements and it's a local option for municipalities to adopt.

Ms. Johnston reviewed eligibility requirements for the proposed exemption, including documentation from the Department of Veterans Affairs, and noted that the requirement for federal assistance for specially adapted housing had been removed.

Council Member Kimball requested clarification regarding the proposed 100 percent exemption.

City Manager Wagenaar asked what percentage of City residents would qualify.

Ms. Johnston reviewed eligibility statistics and stated that applicants would need to provide supporting documentation. She discussed the application deadline and a possible State extension for the City.

Council Member Shoen expressed concern about the definition of permanent and total disability, noting that the designation did not limit earned income. He discussed the City's existing exemptions and the potential shift in tax burden to other taxpayers, questioning whether eligibility could distinguish those unable to work.

Mayor Pierce asked how other municipalities were responding to the proposed exemption.

Ms. Johnston stated that responses appeared evenly divided and noted that school districts did not recognize the current exemption.

Council Member Kimball referenced 142 potential properties meeting the criteria and discussed the effects of increasing the exemption from 50 to 100 percent.

Ms. Johnston reviewed the exempt assessed value and differences among veteran's exemptions.

Council Member Kimball estimated a potential tax revenue loss of $75,000 to $85,000 if this exemption were to be passed.

Ms. Johnston stated that she would review estimates of the fiscal impact with the City Comptroller.

Mayor Pierce requested additional financial information.

Council Member Kimball stated that a vote would be premature without that information.

Council Member Garrabrant also requested financial estimates before moving forward.

Senior Citizens Property Tax Exemption

Ms. Johnston informed Council that there is a current maximum exemption of 50% for those with an income less than $17,400 and no exemption over $23,100 income. She indicated that the City's exemption sits low compared to other programs such as HEAP, HUD and SNAP.

Council Member Kimball mentioned that, in the past, the City had adjusted their numbers to reflect the County numbers.

Ms. Johnston informed Council that there are two possible paths for the City going forward. She noted the first is the Social Security option which was discussed in 2024 and the second is the income ceiling option. She explained details of the different options and the impact of each, adding that Option 1 has a bigger overall impact.

Council Member Kimball requested clarification on the current Social Security exemption and how it would affect tax revenue and assessed taxes.

Ms. Johnston advised there is no way to know this information as income information is not given to the City and only New York State could request this.

Council Member Garrabrant asked for clarification on the number of residents who will receive a 50% exemption.

Mayor Pierce agreed that she would also like to see those numbers.

Regional Transit Coordinator

Mayor Pierce welcomed Transit Director Brandi Smith.

Ms. Smith began her discussion by informing Council that Jefferson County had launched its Public Transit system in September She explained how the City and County's public transportation systems work together, with CitiBus providing transportation within the City and Jefferson County Public Transit (JCPT) covering other areas throughout the region. She noted the goal is to not duplicate services, but to benefit residents by offering more connections.

Ms. Smith discussed some of the complaints received from riders as well as operator reports and then informed Council that safety was the number one concern. Citing a September passenger survey which was made available to the public in numerous formats, she mentioned that they had received a 93% positive rating on driver courtesy. She noted that collecting data from riders helps to find opportunities for improvement. She discussed the base fare and indicated they were considering increasing the fare to $2.00 to keep up with the operational increases.

Ms. Smith informed Council that the current transfer station needs more room to operate so they can reach their goal of providing safe, reliable transportation.

Council Member Osborne asked about current transfer sites.

Ms. Smith advised that Butler Pavillion and Marshall Place are under consideration, and she noted that they are interested in non-city-owned properties while also staying close to downtown.

In response to Mayor Pierce's question about County ridership numbers, Ms. Smith advised that the number of riders had doubled in just a few months.

Council Member Kimball inquired about the bus route to Syracuse.

Ms. Smith explained that the JCPT connected to Pulaski and then the Pulaski bus went on to Syracuse.

City Manager Wagenaar informed Council that he would like to see the JCPT system link to Trailways Bus Systems in future expansion as long as connectivity to the downtown area was maintained.

Ms. Smith commented that Flix Bus expressed interest in using the City's transfer site but there are space constraints that prevent this.

Mayor Pierce offered kudos to the hard work provided by the team and drivers.

City Manager's Update

City Manager Wagenaar informed Council that the request for proposal (RFP) for the Golf Course was closed out with one bid received.

He indicated that Council would be voting on the new City Social Media Policy at the October 19th meeting and requested feedback before that Council Meeting.

He further advised that the recruitment for a new Superintendent for the Department of Public Works is ongoing and will close on October 18.

Council Member Shoen requested a list of the properties the City owns and is not using and indicated he would be interested in getting rid of those properties.

City Manager Wagenaar said there is a group working on that and there would be an update at the November meeting.

Work session ended at 8:50 p.m.

Jessica Leroux
Deputy City Clerk