CITY OF NORWALK
PLANNING & ZONING COMMISSION
CAPITAL BUDGET SUBCOMMITTEE
January 20, 2022

PRESENT: Steve Ferguson, Chair**;** Brian Baxendale; Tammy Langalis; Jacquen Jordan-Byron; Louis Schulman

STAFF: Steve Kleppin

OTHERS: Alex Knopp; Sherelle Harris; David Westmoreland; Patsy Brescia; Jim Travers

I. CALL TO ORDER

Mr. Ferguson called the meeting to order at 5:32 p.m.

II. ROLL CALL

Mr. Kleppin called the roll. He had to do it again when it was realized that Zoom was not recording. It should be noted that this meeting was held on Zoom.com with all participants calling in, separately.

III. DEPARTMENT REVIEWS

A. NORWALK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Alex Knopp, the president of the Board and Patsy Brescia, the Vice Chair of the Board, were both on the call.

Sherelle Harris began the presentation with the first request for the Norwalk Newspaper Digitization project. This is the last phase so it can be searched. It has been a 5 year project. The Hour is one of the newspapers that is being digitized. She noted that there was backup information in the packet that was reviewed. There was a discussion about a difference that was on a summary page which was different that was presented. Ms. Harris said that the amounts had been updated. It would cost $33,000 in the last phase.

The next request was for SONO Branch repurposing. The last time it had been updated was over 15 years ago. They were requesting funding to repurpose rooms. She noted that one account had money left over in several accounts so they would use that in the first phase. She gave a description of all the projects that they would like to implement. She hoped that phase 2 would begin in July, if funding was approved. There was a discussion about funding that was provided to the Main Library which was now in the Economic Development funds. She also said they would like to put in a new circulation desk, new signage that was not static. The total funding requested was $350,000 but if they used other funding from ARPA that amount would be reduced.

The next request was for technology upgrades to the WiFi to broaden that throughout the library. She said they had worked with the city's IT department to determine what was needed. They need new MAC computers for all of the library. The current ones are now 7 years old and cannot be serviced any longer. They would like to request a poster printer for their in house programming so that they did not have to go to outside printers. She then discussed items that would be requested in the future, one of which was a 3D printer. Some items that were made on them were jewelry, parts for a watch.

The last request was for a new library van since the one they currently have is 15 years old. It is used daily. Sometimes it is used by the city if there are no other available vans. She said they had worked with the city's Fleet department and were able to get the amount requested reduced to $42K.

There was a discussion about the priorities for the department. She said that digitization was the first priority, the SONO branch repurposing was number 2, then the technology upgrades and lastly, the van.

Mr. Knopp noted that a project to expand the Main Library had been on hold so they thought it would be a good time to do the upgrade of the SONO branch. There would be less interruption of services.

Ms. Harris thanked Mr. Westmoreland and the Historical Commission for funding the lighting at the library. He said that he was in support of the digitization of the newspapers since it was so important.

B. HISTORICAL COMMISSION

The first request was for electrical upgrades to the Lockwood-Mathews Mansion. Mr. Westmoreland gave a brief history of the project. He noted that there was a Master Plan to upgrade all of the mechanical systems in it, as well as making it ADA compliant. He discussed what had been completed, many of it with grants that they had received. He then explained what remained to be done. He explained the challenges in the building. He noted that the Governor had visited the mansion in 2018 so that they could ask for funding. They ultimately received $7.5 million from the state and the city. They are still $6 million short. They cannot do any other projects because they would be re-doing work since the mechanicals project has not been completed. Ms. Brescia then said that she had been working on these projects for many years. She explained that they are still in the design phase and had not drawn from any city funds. She also explained what she had worked on for the last three years. She explained that in order to do this, it would take 2 years. The offices would have to move out of the building for that long, as well as other programming. If they could not find the funding, they would have to put it on hold indefinitely. There was a discussion about how the $6 million would be used. It was noted that if the mansion was fixed it could be used year round which would, in turn, increase the revenue. There was a discussion about how much the Historical Commission received for this project in the previous year.

Before Mr. Westmoreland began discussing the next item, Mr. Kleppin noted that this year the format was slightly different in that the committee was determining whether projects were consistent with the Plan of Conservation and Development (POCD). Mr. Westmoreland then said that the next requests were for smaller amounts of funding, especially since there were leftover funds from other projects.

One project that the Historical Commission was requesting funds was for the Smith Street Jail, aka the old City jail. He reminded the commissioners of a fire in the building in 2010, after which it needed extensive repairs. Although they did receive insurance money to restore the outside, there were still interior projects that needed to be completed. They hoped with Capital funding they could complete these projects.

The next item for funding was for ADA compliance and the Master Plan. He explained some repairs would be necessary for the Mill Hill building. There was a discussion about what previous funding had been spent on.

The next item was the museum collection of paintings and other historical items that the city owns. They are working on digitizing the catalog so that they can lend pieces to other museums around the world.

The next item was for work on 4 cemeteries in the city. He noted that much of it is done with volunteers but there are times that work had to be done by professionals.

C. ECONOMIC & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Jessica Vonashek began the presentation, noting that her department would be making two Capital Budget requests. The first request was for the Small Business Main Street program which has awarded grants for the last several years. She described all they had done with the funding in the first year. Some monies were used for COVID assistance grants.

The second request was for $25 million for the expansion of the library in 2026 which the commissioners had received the day prior. She then explained that this would help prepare the City during the next few Capital Budget processes.

There was then a discussion about measuring the success of the Main Street Grant program. Ms. Vonashek said that some of the businesses did go out of business, mostly due to issues from COVID.

There was a discussion about the library expansion and why this was a project under Economic & Community Development. Ms. Vonashek explained that they thought that they could leverage some state funding.

D. BUILDING AND CODE ENFORCEMENT

Ms. Vonashek began the presentation with a funding request for streetscape landscaping. She explained why this department oversaw this program. Ms. Langalis said that she appreciated the work they were doing. There was a question about improvements on Ely Avenue in the amount of $275,000 but she noted that this was not on her funding request lists.

E. BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT & TOURISM

Sabrina Church discussed why the first request for the Entrepreneurship Microgrant Program was zero and that they would be requesting funds in later years.

She then discussed the second request which was for an Arts and Culture Plan and noted that the City had been investing in public art. Last year they had only received half of their request so this year they were asking for the remainder in order to have a plan that is citywide. They had also received grants as well.

Ms. Church was then asked to introduce herself. Ms. Vonashek said that she had been in the Redevelopment Agency prior to her work in the business development and tourism department.

F. ARTS COMMISSION

Ms. Church began the discussion with the commission's first request for funding for the Art in Public Places program. She explained that they had been funded last year and that they had been at work on installing art around the city. She noted that the installation of art was weather dependent.

She then discussed the public art inventory and the goal. She said it was important to inventory and value correctly for insurance purposes. The system is currently out of date. The public inventory would be a database. There would also be installations in the MLK corridor, as well as underpasses that would install art on.

There was a discussion about the public art and who owned the art. Ms. Church said that there was a call for artists, the city pays for it and then the city owns it.

G. REDEVELOPMENT AGENCY

Brian Bidolli, the Executive Director of the Redevelopment Agency, began the presentation with the first request for the funds for the match of DECD $3 million grant for the streetscape at the PInnacle site. There was a discussion about seeing renderings of how the project would look. Mr.Bidolli noted that the funding had expired but that they had received an extension.

The second request was for funding for the South Norwalk Train station and the roadway around it. The project would be $12 million which he broke down how the funds would be used. It was a matching grant so the city had to match $6 million. There was a discussion about the brown field remediation which was underground. Mr. Bidolli said that they were completing the work.

There was a discussion about the lack of information in the Capital Budget request. Ms. Vonashek then explained the Executive Grant. She said that they would forward information that was a part of that paperwork the next day. Mr. Ferguson reminded them that there should be an alignment with the POCD in their paperwork.

There was a discussion about the Community Challenge Grant. There was also a discussion about the empty lot on Chestnut and Henry.

The final request was for affordable housing. Mr. Bidolli explained that they would be paying off the principal balance and then this request would go away. He thought they should build up the affordable housing fund moving forward.

h. Transportation, Mobility & Parking

Ms. Vonashek introduced the newest members of the team including Jim Travers and Garrett Bolella. Mr. Travers noted that the Capital Funding request sheet that they had received was a little outdated since the priorities had changed.

The first item was for fleet equipment for a sign truck for the installation of signs. Mr. Travers said that they were responsible for the signage around the city. Currently, they needed to use personnel from the Department of Public Works (DPW) to do the work. They would now be able to hire their own personnel to install the signs.

The next item was for roadway design and reconstruction which Mr. Travers said it was a new item. It would allow the city to be better able to apply for grants from the state quickly . He gave some examples of this.

The next item was for traffic signal equipment. Mr. Travers said they look at grants to help modernize them. The city has 8 traffic signals that are 50 years old. He noted that this would be an ongoing request. There was a discussion about how much the cost of a traffic signal has increased. There was also a discussion about how the older traffic signals break down. There is a bucket truck that is used on a daily basis to fix these older signals.

The next item was for Gregory Boulevard at Fifth Street/Marvin Street/Calf Pasture Beach Road Intersection Improvements. Mr. Travers said that the city was made aware of this challenging intersection. They studied this intersection and decided that the best way to make this intersection safe was to install 2 roundabouts. There were asked about the traffic accidents in the area, which Mr. Travers said that they would provide that information to the commissioners. There was a discussion about the design costs.

The next item was for new sidewalk construction. Mr. Travers explained why this amount was higher than in the past. He noted that DPW maintained sidewalks, while TMP constructed new ones. He also explained that they would meet with Ms. Valadares on a weekly basis to see where DPW is paving roads so that his department could install sidewalks. He also said that he had spoken to many residents who want sidewalks. Norwalk has a low walkability score. Many people use the track behind City Hall because they don’t have sidewalks in their own area of town. This only increased traffic in Norwalk. Sidewalks would help improve the quality of life. Mr. Bolella said that they have hired a firm to complete an inventory of sidewalks in the city which included which ones are ADA compliant. It would help them discover what their priorities should be to fill the gaps.

The next item was for traffic system enhancement, which would help them improve intersections, as well as speed signs in a corridor.

The next item was for improvements on Seaview Avenue. Mr. Travers said that this is a request for design funds. The request in the following year is for the construction. He said that they would hold community meetings as well. There was a discussion about the bike lanes that have recently been put on these roads. There were concerns about whether there was an overlap. Mr. Travers said that there were challenges in the area. There was a discussion about the possibility of making the area more of a walking boulevard. Mr. Bolella said there are safety concerns for bicyclists in this area.

The next item was Safe Routes to Schools which is an ongoing program. It does improvements for the sidewalks which makes it beneficial for the kids. If kids can walk to school, it will be less likely for the parents to drive them, thus alleviating some traffic on the roads. There was also a discussion about the Tracy School. However, Mr. Travers noted that it is a problem at every school. There was a discussion about the work done on a footpath on Wilson Avenue. Ms. Langalis said that it had recently been improved which had made a better situation for people walking to school in that area.

The next item was East Avenue which Mr. Travers said they were requesting funding for design work for enhancements around the green on East Avenue. It is difficult for pedestrians to get to it. This funding would improve the intersections.

Wall Street Corridor - Mr. Travers said that they were working on obtaining grants which they were hopeful to continue work on Main Street, Isaacs and Commerce. He also noted that they were working on the Norwalk River Valley Trail. There was a discussion about the signage on the trail and how it could be better. Mr. Travers also said there could be branded bike racks.

The next item was for protected crosswalks. Mr. Travers said that he had success with this in New Haven and Stamford, where he worked in the past. This funding would allow for safe crossings.

The next item was for the pedestrian crosswalk at 40 Cross Street. Mr. Travers said that this was a challenging area. There could be a hawk signal. They want people to cross safely. The funding is for design.

George Avenue Sidewalks - This request is part of the Transportation Master Plan. This area would finally have sidewalks.

Autonomous Shuttle Pilot - Mr. Travers noted that he did not think it would be funded but he wanted the city to be forward thinking. He hoped that they would begin to investigate this.

Mr. Travers then discussed the future projects that they would be requesting funding. There was a discussion about Rowayton Avenue Sidewalks.

There was a discussion about what the department's priorities were which followed their funding request as reflected in the Capital Budget spreadsheet.

i. Parking Authority

Mr. Bolella said that there were 2 Capital Budget requests, although the Parking Authority had not been voted on yet.

Mr. Travers said that there is a $1 million request for the Yankee Doodle garage improvements. They have engaged design consultants and are working with the Board about improvements. There would be structural improvements to the building. The other building would be the Maritime Aquarium garage. They would like to have contactless payment and improvements to get people in and out of it quicker. The request for funding was $200,000. They would provide their paperwork to the department the following day.

There was a discussion about widening the egress and ingress of the Yankee Doodle garage. There was also a discussion about capital improvements in the past to the garage as well as the maintenance plan. There was a discussion about the revenues for the Parking Authority and that it bonds through their revenue.

j. Planning & Zoning

Mr. Kleppin said that his department was asking for a replacement plotter. They could not use it any longer and are using another department's plotter. Mr. Ferguson asked if there was anything else that they needed since Mr. Kleppin's department was conservative in their requests.

Mr. Ferguson thanked everyone and noted for the new members of the committee that they take notes and refer to them year to year. He also thought that some projects may have been delayed especially due to COVID. Many of the department heads were referencing the Plan of Conservation and Development. Mr. Kleppin said he hoped to get Excel spreadsheets from the Finance Department and would send them to the commissioners once received. A summary page was requested. Mr. Kleppin said that as soon as he received it he would forward it to the commissioners.

IV. ADJOURNMENT

Ms. Langalis made a Motion to Adjourn.
Mr. Baxendale seconded.
Steve Ferguson; Brian Baxendale; Tammy Langalis; Jacquen Jordan-Byron; Louis Schulman approved.
No one opposed.
No one abstained.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:29 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Diana Palmentiero