

**CITY OF NORWALK
PLANNING COMMISSION
February 16, 2021**

PRESENT: Fran DiMeglio, Chair; Tamara Shockley; Mary Peniston; Tammy Langalis; Steve Ferguson; Mike Mushak; John Lesko; Brian Baxendale (arrived at 5:57 p.m.)

STAFF: Steve Kleppin; Bryan Baker

OTHERS: Henry Dachowitz

I. CALL TO ORDER

Ms. DiMeglio called the meeting to order at 5:36 p.m.

II. ROLL CALL

Mr. Kleppin called the roll. It should be noted that this meeting was held on Zoom.com with all participants calling in, separately.

III. DISCUSSION AND ACTION ON CAPITAL BUDGET

A. Discussion with Norwalk CFO Henry Dachowitz

Mr. Dachowitz began his presentation of his Capital Budget recommendations by noting that the commissioners had received his written memo about them. He said that there was money in the rainy day fund but there were expenses such as pensions and pay increases which were putting pressure on the city's finances. He noted that the debt service increases have an effect on the Operating Budget which, in turn, has an effect on the taxes that Norwalk's residents pay. He explained that the city could borrow tax free money for a long period. He also explained how the city borrowed funds from the government. He then discussed the Capital Budget process. He said that some projects have been approved but have not been bonded. He noted that the city is at 9% of debt service. Bond agencies do not like to see a city at more than 10%. This would cause the city to lose their AAA bond rating. He explained that some projects could be cancelled. He then explained how they could keep their debt level steady as well as how they could increase their purchasing capacity. He noted that he had asked City departments to push out some of their projects. He did not want to approve projects if they would not be started in the current year. Some projects were only partially funded.

Ms. DiMeglio asked about projects that had been marked as new by city departments but the Planning Commission had seen before. Mr. Dachowitz explained the difference between new and what had been requested in the past.

There was a discussion about the Open Space Fund. It was noted that this was requested by Recreation and Parks but the funds were spent by the Conservation Commission. Mr. Dachowitz noted since it was a commission, it did not have its own department. He said he would follow-up with the commissioners about this.

There was a discussion about the city's bond rating and which cities in Connecticut Norwalk had been reviewed. The bond rating agencies look at the rainy day fund to see if it is decreasing. Mr. Dachowitz said the city would not give up its AAA bond rating. He said that the rainy day fund had been critical during the pandemic. If it did increase, then the city could pay off some long term debt. He thought that the city had been fortunate during COVID, especially since residential home prices increased because of the influx of purchasers from New York City.

There was a discussion about increasing the Capital Budget by \$10 million and whether it would affect their bond rating. Mr. Dachowitz did not want to decrease the bond rating to AA as a strategy for the city's financial well-being. There was a discussion about the final Capital Budget number. Mr. Dachowitz noted that the scope of a project could be trimmed down. He also said that projects could be deferred. There was a discussion about the funding for the Norwalk High School project.

There was a discussion about whether there was a list of projects that had been approved in the last few years that could be deferred. Some had been started but not yet closed out or completed.

There was a discussion about the amount of money that has been funded in the past, approximately \$20 million worth of projects. There was also a discussion about what projects could be cut but Mr. Dachowitz noted that he had asked departments to defer projects. He explained how his department had made recommendations on projects that had been started but funding had not been spent.

There was a discussion about the COVID relief funding from the federal government that the Board of Education would receive. It was discussed about whether some of that funding would be used for ventilation in the public schools. Mr. Dachowitz noted that the Board of Education had received some indication of what funding they would receive from the federal and state levels. He also noted that the Board of Education could only use that funding for certain items but they could not plan the Capital Budget on the assumption that it would be received.

There was a discussion about what the bottom line Capital Budget funding would be so that the Planning Commission would not go over it. Mr. Dachowitz explained how they could defer, cancel or change the scope of some projects which could help the city's finances.

There was a discussion about Capital Budget funding that was still sitting in accounts, having not been spent. Mr. Dachowitz noted that not everything could be funded and that his department had to say no to some projects. There was also a discussion about offering an incentive for vendors that come in on time on projects. There was also a discussion about corporate sponsorships.

There was a discussion about the city being an Alliance district which meant that the Board of Education was not allowed to receive less funding, on the operating side, than the previous year. Mr. Dachowitz did not think it was the same for the Capital Budget.

There was a discussion about whether the city would be held to similar standards for next year's Capital Budget cycle. He explained that he would have to be tight on the Capital Budget because it would be difficult on taxpayers. There was then a discussion about the tax assessments received from rental buildings. There was also a discussion about the interest rates the city pays which Mr. Dachowitz explained was a blended rate. Most of the fundings were below 2% interest rates. There was also a discussion about the Operating Budget.

At this point, Mr. Dachowitz left the Zoom call. Ms. DiMeglio said there would be a break at 6:54 p.m. The commissioners returned at 7:03 pm.

B. Discussion and action on Capital Budget 2021-22 to 2025-26

There was a discussion about the spreadsheet and what is available for Capital Budget funding. Ms. DiMeglio noted that they would look it over line by line. There was a discussion about whether they should be adding funding to the Finance Department's recommendations. Ms. DiMeglio noted that the meeting would end at 9 pm. Mr. Kleppin reminded her that the meeting agenda would have to be posted so they decided to hold another meeting on Thursday, if the work on the Capital Budget requests was not completed at this meeting.

The commissioners began by reviewing the Finance Department's recommendations. They would have a discussion when they did not agree with the Department's recommendations. They funded the Police Department requests as well as the Fire Department. There was a discussion about the roof on the Meadow Street Fire Station. They then agreed to all of the Fire Department requests.

The next department, Public Works, had been almost fully funded per the Finance Department's recommendations. It was suggested to cut back on some items that were funded annually and take those funds to be used in other one time projects. It was suggested to cut the Pavement Management project by \$1 million and put it into the Watercourse Maintenance and Stormwater Maintenance projects. There was also a discussion about taking the \$1 million and giving it to another department. They decided to come back to these 2 Capital Budget requests.

The next department they reviewed was the Operations Department which they decided to fund according to the Finance Department's recommendations.

The next department they reviewed was the Recreation and Parks Department. There was a discussion about the Broad River Complex. There was also a discussion about turf fields and whether these should be deferred especially due to health concerns about using turf. There was a discussion about some projects that had funding requests removed. There was a discussion about the Veteran's Memorial Park Capital Budget request which had been increased by the Finance Department. The commissioners wondered why it had increased. Mr. Kleppin was asked to contact Mr. Dachowitz to clarify this discrepancy. The commissioners agreed with all of the other Capital Budget requests as they were recommended by the Finance Department.

There was a discussion about funding for the Open Space item. Mr. Kleppin explained the rationale for funding this item. The commissioners discussed whether to fund it this year because of Mr. Dachowitz's reminder that they should be conservative. Some commissioners decided to leave it as recommended by the Finance Department. It was noted that the Planning Commission was not against open space.

The next item was for Buildings. There was a discussion about the Nathaniel Ely building not being as well maintained as other school buildings. This building, however, is not under the purview of the Board of Education, since it is used for pre-school children. They decided to recommend fully funding this building although the funding request had been removed. There was then a discussion about the Police Facilities Capital Budget request.

The next item was for the Water Pollution Control Authority Capital Budget request which the commissioners decided not to change.

The next item was for the Economic and Community Development Capital Budget request which the commissioners decided not to change.

The next item was for the Transportation, Mobility and Parking Capital Budget requests. There was a discussion about the transportation master plan and traffic signal equipment. They also discussed the traffic light at Scribner and whether this request should be funded. There was a discussion about the Rowayton Avenue sidewalk which the commissioners decided to partially fund. They decided to fully fund the Norwalk River Valley Trail which the Finance Department had declined to fund. They also funded the Transportation Master Plan which the Finance Department had also declined to fund. There was a discussion about traffic signal equipment and whether it was an item that should wait until the city hired it's new Transportation Director. There was then a discussion about the West/Belden/Mott intersection.

The commissioners decided to fund the traffic signal equipment by a vote as follows:

Ms. DiMeglio, Mr. Lesko, Mr. Ferguson, Ms. Shockley and Mr. Baxendale voted yes to funding the traffic signal. Mr. Mushak, Ms. Peniston and Ms. Langalis voted no for funding the traffic signal equipment.

There was a discussion about the funding for the West/Belden/Mott intersection. There was a discussion about not funding this and deferring this item to the following year. The commissioners decided to vote on this matter as follows: Ms. DiMeglio, Mr. Baxendale, Mr. Lesko, Mr. Mushak and Mr. Ferguson voted yes. Ms. Peniston and Ms. Shockley voted no. Ms. Langalis abstained.

The next item was for Planning and Zoning. The commissioners decided to fund this department's requests as recommended by the Finance Department.

The next item was for Business Development and Tourism. There was a discussion about the Entrepreneurship Microgrant Program and whether to fund it. Ms. DiMeglio noted that there were other similar programs in the state. Mr. Ferguson explained that there was a similar program with the Chamber of Commerce which the city could offer its support to the Chamber. There was then a discussion about the permitting process for businesses in Norwalk. Ms. Langalis said she had read an article about how difficult it was. The commissioners discussed how much to fund this item. There was a discussion about how the city would be hiring a consultant to handle this program.

There was a vote about not funding the Entrepreneurship Microgrant Program which failed as follows: Ms. DiMeglio and Ms. Langalis voted yes. Mr. Mushak, Ms. Shockley, Mr. Baxendale, Mr. Ferguson, Mr. Lesko and Ms. Peniston voted no. Since the vote failed, the commissioners compromised and decided to fund it for \$75,000.

The next item was for the Historical Commission which the commissioners decided to fund as recommended by the Finance Department. It was noted that the Historical Commission spent their funds wisely.

The next item was for the Arts Commission and Code Enforcement and Parking Authority which the commissioners decided to fund as recommended by the Finance Department.

The Capital Budget request from the Human Relations and Fair Rent department had been deleted by the Finance Department but the commissioners restored funding.

The Capital Budget request from the Library department had been deleted by the Finance Department but the commissioners restored funding. One of the projects was for digitization of the newspapers. Most commissioners wanted to fund it so that it could be finished. They did not fund the auditorium refresh.

The next item was for the Board of Education. There was a discussion about whether the Board of Education could be spending the COVID funding that they would receive from the federal government. There was a discussion about funding the curriculum and technology Capital Budget requests which the Finance Department had not recommended. The commissioners decided to fund half of what the Board of Education had requested.

There was a lengthy discussion about funding the renovation of bathrooms in the public schools. Ms. DiMeglio thought that this type of renovation could be done quicker by hiring local plumbers. It was suggested to reduce the funding to \$1 million and that the projects should be completed at two schools within a year.

There was a discussion about the Silvermine driveway project which the Finance Department had removed funding. The design had not been completed. Some commissioners thought that the funding should be restored to this project. There was a discussion about why the design had not been completed, but some thought it was because of loss of staffing and COVID. There was a discussion about not funding the entire amount but rather, they decided to recommend funding it for \$1 million.

The next item was for the Redevelopment Agency which the commissioners decided to fund as recommended by the Finance Department. There was a discussion about affordable housing since many 2 income families could not afford to live and work in Norwalk.

The next item was for the Information Technology which the commissioners decided to fund as recommended by the Finance Department. There was a discussion about having more automated payments on the city's website.

The commissioners then looked at the grand total for all of the Capital Budget requests which the Planning Commission would recommend. However, there were still a few items that had to be reviewed. Ms. DiMeglio also asked whether they could revisit this on Thursday, February 18. The commissioners decided to complete the review at this meeting.

There was a discussion about the items that would still have to be reviewed. The commissioners decided to add \$500,000 more to the Storm Water Management Plan and fund the Watercourse Maintenance as recommended by the Finance Department.

There was some discussion about items from the Recreation and Parks Department that needed input from the Finance Department. Ms. DiMeglio asked Mr. Kleppin to inform them of those answers the following day. Mr. Baker noted that for Veterans Memorial Park there had been a mistake on the request. For the athletic fields, it was asked that Mr. Dachowitz inform them why the Finance Department had recommended funding when the department had not requested it. At this point, the item was zeroed out.

The commissioners then reviewed the grand total for all of the Capital Budget requests which the Planning Commission would recommend

The commissioners would receive a copy of the spreadsheet the following day once the Finance Department had responded to their request. Ms. DiMeglio noted that the letter to the Mayor was due to him on March 5, 2021.

*Whereas the Planning Commission held meetings on January 19, 2021; January 26, 2021; and January 27, 2021 to review the capital budget requests

*Whereas the Planning Commission held a Capital Budget public hearing on February 3, 2021

**** MS. DIMEGLIO MOVED: THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED** by the Norwalk Planning Commission that the Capital Budget be **APPROVED**, as modified, with an amount of \$31,441,822 for fiscal year 2021-2022; and:

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that notice of this action be forwarded to Mayor Rilling; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that notice of this action be forwarded to the Common Council.

Mr. Baxendale seconded.

Fran DiMeglio; Tamara Shockley; Mary Peniston; Tammy Langalis; Steve Ferguson; Mike Mushak; John Lesko; Brian Baxendale approved.

No one opposed.

No one abstained.

IV. COMMENTS OF DIRECTOR

There were no comments from Mr. Kleppin.

V. COMMENTS OF COMMISSIONERS

There were no comments from the commissioners.

VI. ADJOURNMENT

Ms. Peniston made a Motion to Adjourn.

Mr. Baxendale seconded.

Fran DiMeglio; Tamara Shockley; Mary Peniston; Tammy Langalis; Steve Ferguson; Mike Mushak; John Lesko; Brian Baxendale approved.

No one opposed.

No one abstained.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:27 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Diana Palmentiero

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