CITY OF NORWALK
PLANNING COMMISSION
January 26, 2021

PRESENT: Fran DiMeglio, Chair; Brian Baxendale; Tamara Shockley; Mike Mushak; Mary Peniston; Tammy Langalis; John Lesko; Steve Ferguson

STAFF: Steve Kleppin; Bryan Baker; Michelle Andrzejewski

OTHERS: Lamont Daniels; Darlene Young; Anna Keegan; Chief Thomas Kulhawik; Deputy Chief Susan Zecca; Michael Docimo; Chief Gino Gatto; Deputy Chief Al Bassett; Thomas Hamilton; Dr. Alexandra Estrella; Brenda Williams; William Hodel; Ralph Valenzisi; Barbara Meyer-Mitchell; Diana Carpio;

I. CALL TO ORDER

Ms. DiMeglio called the meeting to order at 5:33 p.m.

II. ROLL CALL

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

III. DEPARTMENT REVIEWS

A. HUMAN RELATIONS & FAIR RENT

Lamont Daniels thanked the commissioners for allowing the Human Relations & Fair Rent department to speak first at this meeting. Darlene Young began the presentation with a discussion about the Capital Budget request for the Senior Center to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). She also noted that there had been a past bathroom project on the second floor of the Senior Center. This one was on the first floor of the Center. Ms. Keegan further explained the reason for the project and the request.

B. POLICE DEPARTMENT & COMBINED DISPATCH

Chief Thomas Kulhawik began with the first Capital Budget request for a new firing range and new vehicles. He noted that the Marine Unit would be a request in an upcoming year. There was a discussion about replacement vehicles, which the Finance Department had asked to be in the Capital Budget and not Operating Budget.

There was a discussion about the firing range and its capacity. The targets no longer move and many mechanicals don’t work. The company that had installed it is no longer in business. There was a discussion about police specialized training at the firing range. Chief Kulhawik also said the firing range was in use every day. There was a discussion about the Plan of Conservation and Development (POCD) number assigned which indicated that this request for the firing range was a new project. Chief Kulhawik said it was not a new project. Mr. Docimo discussed the POCD and the codes that had been used for the Capital Budget requests.

There was then a discussion about the use of hybrid vehicles. Chief Kulhawik said that they would be purchasing hybrid vehicles. There was a discussion about canine vehicles which were assigned to police officers that have a dog in them. There was a discussion about the marine unit housing. Both the public and police would use this structure, according to Chief Kulhawik.

There was a discussion about body cameras since it was not in the Capital Budget request. He noted that all police officers have one. Ms. DiMeglio asked that any additional information that the commissioners gathered outside of what was presented during the Capital Budget meetings would have to be made a part of the public record.

It was noted that the federal government had recently announced that its fleet would be hybrid or electric in the next few years. Wilton and Westport also had hybrid vehicles. Several years ago there had been a concern about the maintenance of these new types of vehicles. There was also a discussion about the police vehicles idling and it was noted that although idling can be a problem with gas vehicles, it is not with hybrid vehicles.

There was a discussion about the use of force training. Chief Kulhawik noted that they train on de-escalation techniques. Some officers are completing this training, since the police force now has newer police officers. He explained the training program further for the commissioners. There was also a discussion about community policing. Chief Kulhawik explained all of the programs that the Police Department has been involved with, including through social media. However, during the pandemic these programs have been difficult to maintain because of social distancing requirements. He said he would be happy to speak with any commissioners further after the meeting.

There was a discussion about crisis intervention training which was in the operating budget, not the Capital Budget. Chief Kulhawik noted that the state would be encouraging this as well.

C. FIRE DEPARTMENT

Chief Gino Gatto began the presentation with a vehicle replacement Capital Budget request. He noted they would also like to add another vehicle for a new staff member. Another would be for a vehicle replacement for one that is used for fire investigations. There was a discussion as to whether they would be hybrid vehicles. Chief Gatto said he would look into it but that the fire department did have their own mechanics who had not worked on those types of vehicles. It was noted that the hybrid vehicles are easier to maintain, including the brakes. Chief Gatto said he would look into hybrid vehicles, at the commissioners' request.

The next Capital Budget request was for apparatus replacement which was a fire engine from 2007. Chief Gatto noted that vehicles were being replaced every 10-15 years. There were other vehicles that would be replaced in the next few years. There was a discussion about what codes to use for this Capital Budget request.

The next Capital Budget request was for the boats in the marine division. Chief Gatto explained that the one they currently use had reached the end of its life. They are replacing one that was manufactured in 1987. The boat would be one being refurbished from the Coast Guard.

The next Capital Budget request was for foam that was carried on the engines. It was used for when there were flammable liquid spills. The foam was required to be replaced every 10-12 years.

The next Capital Budget request was for high pressure air bags which helped to lift vehicles off of others. The replacement life was every 15 years and they were almost at that point now.

The next request was for security cameras and an intercom system at all the fire houses. They were asking for further monies from last year's request. If a fire house is vacant, no one would be watching the cameras but they would be recording the outside. They are meeting with vendors for costs. There was a discussion as to how many systems would be needed.

The next request was for a used tractor for hazmat regional trailers. Deputy Al Bassett explained how this trailer was used by 14 towns in the area. Several other towns maintain it as well. They would be purchasing a used vehicle which would be serviced by Fire Department mechanics.

The next request was for various fire house repairs. Chief Gatto explained that they requested the same amount of funds every year for unforeseen repairs of any station.

The next request was for a roof replacement on Meadow Street. It is the original roof from when the station was built in 1969 and had never been replaced.

There was a discussion about the landscaping at the new headquarters.

D. BOARD OF EDUCATION

There was a discussion about the changes to the Capital Budget requests due to the Board of Education's changes. Tom Hamilton introduced the Board of Education members and Superintendent, Dr. Alexandra Estrella, as well as other members of the staff that were present. He noted how much they were requesting as well as the fact that they would be receiving state reimbursements for some of the construction projects.

The first Capital Budget request was for the Briggs Family Welcome Center which was a new project. He explained the reason for it. The welcome center would be for central registration for kindergarten as well as new students. It would also be multilingual and house a special education ombudsman, student health services, student records, etc. Dr. Estrella explained further how the welcome center would work. Brenda Williams also explained how it was confusing for new families to register families in the school system since many times families would have to go to multiple buildings throughout the city to complete registration. The welcome center would allow it to be done in one building. It would be a family friendly welcome center.

Mr. Hamilton noted that a Career and Technical High School would be a project for 2025 to meet the needs of all Norwalk students. The cost would be substantial so the Board of Education had wanted the commissioners to know that it would be coming in the next few years. Dr. Estrella further explained the reasoning for the Career and Technical High School.

Mr. Hamilton noted that the remaining projects were ones that the commissioners had seen before and were continuations. The next request was for curriculum material and textbooks and an additional request for the school libraries. He noted that the student population was diverse and should be reflected in the libraries. The next request was for instructional technology which would be addressed later in the presentation. There would be a further explanation from a staff member for the air conditioning program. Another request was for asbestos abatement programs which had been increased in the upcoming few years to complete it over the next 5 years.

The Capital Budget request for bathroom renovations was a new project and would also be completed over the next 5 years. He noted that many bathrooms were original to the buildings from the 1950s and 1960s. The fuel tank replacement program was one that was required to be completed by the federal government. The next Capital Budget request was for emergency capital repairs that were unforeseen. They had received funding for this item in the past.

There was a Capital Budget request for kitchens and cafeterias to be replaced in the next few years to make them more family friendly and less institutional looking. Due to COVID, this is being pushed out to next year. The next item was for paving and sidewalks to make sure they are ADA compliant. The next item was for a district vehicle that was 17 years old and in need of replacement. The next item was for the Silvermine driveway which had been requested the previous year for design. This year's Capital Budget request was for funding for construction since there is severe congestion at Silvermine.

Mr. Hamilton updated the commissioners as to the air conditioning projects. Any schools that are being renovated as new or new construction would include central air conditioning. He noted which schools were fully air conditioned at this time. The cost for all school buildings to have central air conditioning would be cost prohibitive. In those buildings there would be window units or modular units. He noted which schools had those units. He then noted which schools would be fully air conditioned in the near future.

The commissioners then had a chance to ask questions. There was a discussion about adding solar panels to schools. Mr. Hamilton said that there are solar panels at Naramake, generating electricity. There is a plan for Ponus Ridge and Jefferson. New solar panels would be at future new schools. William Hodel further explained which schools had or would have solar panels. He also explained that carports could have solar panels. It was not in the Capital Budget requests since they are financed by the vendors, as an energy performance contract. The school district would pay less than they are currently paying for electricity. There are available tax credits for the vendors.

There was a discussion about the Family Center and if there would be any green infrastructure, as well as the services provided. Mr. Hamilton noted that new schools are now required by the state to be built to Silver LEED standards. Mr. Hamilton also noted that all school buses are now powered by propane which would help air quality. There was a discussion about vehicle replacements. For the Briggs Family Welcome Center, Dr. Estrella explained that they would be partnering with other Norwalk community based organizations.

There was a discussion about the Career and Technical Center and what the projected attendance would be as well as the size of it. Mr. Hamilton noted that it may be about 100 students. Ralph Valenzisi further explained this project and noted that there would be a presentation later in the week about it which the commissioners were welcome to attend.

There was a discussion about instructional technology refresh. Mr. Valenzisi discussed the refresh rate for students. He noted that this eventually should become an operating budget item but it would continue to be in the Capital Budget at this time.

There was a further discussion about the Briggs Family Welcome Center as to why there was a need for it. There was also a discussion as to whether there would be programs for high achievers and remedial students. Dr. Estrella explained why the particular student populations were being emphasized. She also explained that these families would have to go to several buildings to register for school and now they would be in one place. There was also a discussion about tearing down the Briggs school and building a smaller welcome center. Dr. Estrella noted that the current building fit their needs. There was also a discussion about physical recreation but the center would not be used for those types of services.

There was a further discussion about the Career and Technical High School and whether it would be used by predominantly minority students. There was also a concern about its location being in South Norwalk. It was suggested to have it near Norwalk Community College. Dr. Estrella explained why they chose South Norwalk as the location. Barbara Meyer-Mitchell also explained that every student would be afforded the opportunity to go to college and would take Ms. Shockley's comments to the board.

There was then a discussion about notifying the community about the welcome center. Diana Carpio explained how she would work with that as well as having equal resources for families. There was also a discussion about the name of the welcome center as well as moving personnel to the building.

There was a discussion about a prior feasibility study from the Board of Education in 2016. There was also a discussion about Norwalk High School which had been approved before the pandemic by the Common Council. Mr. Hamilton noted the total cost and what Norwalk's 20% share would be. The remaining cost would be paid for by the state. There was then a discussion about Norwalk becoming a district of choice.

There was a discussion about student dropoff and whether it was necessary for so many parents to drop their children off at school. In the past, most children rode the bus to school so that there was no congestion at the schools from parents dropping off their children. Many times, parents park on neighbors' lawns in order to bring their children to the school.

There was a discussion about the other buildings on the site of the Briggs school as well as the parking. Dr. Estrella explained where additional parking would be located.

There was a further discussion about bus transportation and how it could be better utilized.

There was a discussion about the central air conditioning and how it had become a priority for the school district. There was then a discussion about the air quality at Brien McMahon. Mr. Hodel said that there have been no complaints and in fact, it has been improved. The project will be completed this year. There was then a discussion about the asbestos program and the bathrooms.

Mr. Hamilton noted that curriculum items were higher on the priority list since they were directly necessary for student learning. The asbestos and the bathrooms are as high as they can be on the list. The Board of Education is requesting funds for the next several years in order to complete them quickly. There was a further discussion about the name for the Briggs Family Welcome Center. There was also a discussion about the expense of this building for a welcome center and its necessity. Dr. Estrella explained that there had been times that the Board of Education had to rent out other facilities for large presentations, as one reason for its necessity. Mr. Hamilton noted that the construction cost would be eligible for reimbursement from the state since Briggs was a Board of Education property. It could be more expensive to lease a space which was not owned by the Board of Education. It was discussed as to whether the name Briggs would have a negative connotation. Ms. Williams noted that this was a working name and not the final decision by the Board of Education. Dr. Estrella again noted that this welcome center would be one place for families to complete their children's registration. She said some personnel in City Hall would move to the welcome center. Currently, some people are doubled and tripled in offices since they don't have enough space there.

IV. ADJOURNMENT

Ms. Langalis made a Motion to Adjourn.
Mr. Baxendale seconded.
Fran DiMeglio; Brian Baxendale; Tamara Shockley; Mike Mushak; Mary Peniston; Tammy Langalis; John Lesko; Steve Ferguson approved.
No one opposed.
No one abstained.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:58 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Diana Palmentiero