CITY OF NORWALK
PLANNING COMMISSION
January 19, 2021

PRESENT: Fran DiMeglio, Chair**;** Brian Baxendale; Tamara Shockley; Mike Mushak; Mary Peniston; Tammy Langalis; John Lesko (arrived after the break)

STAFF: Steve Kleppin

OTHERS: Sherelle Harris; Mayor Knopp; David Westmoreland; Jessica Casey; Sabrina Church; Brian Bidolli; Mike Yeosock

I. CALL TO ORDER

Ms. DiMeglio called the meeting to order at 5:32 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. DEPARTMENT REVIEWS

A. LIBRARY

Sherelle Harris began with a discussion of the digitization of Norwalk newspapers which should be completed in 2023. The auditorium refresh at the Sono library has been completed and now the Main library would have to start. There was also a discussion of the equipment cost. There has not been an upgrade of the audio in either of these auditoriums. The library's Capital Budget request included funding for streaming capabilities.

There was a discussion as to whether there were any monies from previous years. Due to COVID, they were not able to spend some of their money but hoped to do that before July 2021. They hoped to have some work done during Spring Break since students will not be in the library's Pod School. The auditoriums in both libraries are being used by Norwalk Public Schools for high school students. Mayor Knopp explained further how this hybrid model worked to help the city's students. Some households do not have the connectivity that other families do. There was a discussion about whether these pods would continue post-COVID. Ms. Harris did not think they would need them but would look into it further. She said that the pods were used because of social distancing. There was a discussion about how the Main Library auditorium would be affected by the eventual expansion of the library. Mayor Knopp noted that the construction had been put off for several years. By revamping the auditorium's audio system would help with rentals to corporations.

B. HISTORICAL COMMISSION

David Westmoreland began the presentation by noting that the Historical Commission's requests were in priority order. The first item was the old city jail which needed to be compliant under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). They had also been using grant money in order for projects to be completed. There was a discussion about the number of visitors to the jail and whether there was a fee charged. He said that since they worked with the Historical Society, they would charge fees for visitors to attend events. He then described the number of visitors in pre-COVID years that attended certain events.

The next Capital Budget request was for work to be done at the Lockwood-Mathews Mansion which included the exterior repointing, and upgrade to interior mechanicals. In order to do that major project, the furniture, etc. would have to be moved out of the mansion and stored. It would be closed at the end of the year for 18-24 months.

Mr. Westmoreland then discussed the Mill Hill project to redesign the parking lot and the stairs and sidewalks, which have been crumbling.

The next Capital Budget request was for the Norwalk Museum collection in order to either purchase or restore more items. There was then a discussion about where some of the items were stored. Mr. Westmoreland explained that much of it was stored in the basement of the Public Health building. They hoped to eventually refurbish the area so that visitors could see the full collection and it would be a better way to store them.

Mr. Westmoreland discussed Pine Island Cemetery which required restoration. The other city cemeteries had been completed in the recent past.

Some Works Progress Administration (WPA) murals, at the Crystal Theater, needed to be restored. Although not an emergency, they should be restored in place. There was also a discussion about some of the artists that had painted several of the Norwalk murals.

Mr. Westmoreland said that the Historical Commission would be happy with funding for the first three Capital Budget requests. There was a discussion about the first priority, the jail. He explained that they would like to have it back in service.

C. ECONOMIC & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Jessica Casey began her presentation about the Small Business Main Street program. She explained what they had done over the past year with their Capital Budget funding. Some of the projects included signage, holiday lights and new garbage and recycling bins. She also noted that one of the Capital Budget requests had been moved to a later year.

She then discussed the Main Library expansion project and what had been done last year. She explained the option on 11 Belden Avenue for a parking lot. However, they would be pushing the funding for the parking lot and expansion out 1 year due to COVID. There is more work to do with the 1st Taxing District as well. There was a discussion about 11 Belden Avenue and how the parking would be used. Ms. Casey also explained the expansion at 1 and 3 Belden Avenue.

D. CODE ENFORCEMENT

Ms. Casey noted that this is the first time they have come to the Planning Commission for a request. The first Capital Budget request was for gateway signage. She explained that they had already worked with Stew Leonards for the new sign off I-95 at Exit 16. They would like to replace signs at Exits 13 and 14 as well. They would like to get additional sponsors from area businesses. The sign would include local amenities and at the bottom of the sign would be the name of the business that had sponsored the sign.

The next Capital Budget request was for landscaping for different traffic islands and medians as well as the holiday decorations. There would now be a neighborhood improvement team. However, in the past it had been in the Redevelopment Agency budget but now would be under the City's purview. There was a discussion as to why the landscaping item would be a capital item and not an operating item. Ms. Casey said that it may be moved to the operating budget in the future. There was also a discussion as to how prioritization worked for which neighborhoods would receive holiday decorations. Since it had previously been under the Redevelopment Agency, decorations had been done in the urban core of Norwalk. She said this would be revisited. Brian Bidolli explained a little further about the line item moving from the Redevelopment Agency back to the city.

E. BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT & TOURISM

Sabrina Church began the presentation with two Capital Budget requests, the first a Micro-Entrepreneurship program. The Capital Budget request was for the program to be run by a consulting firm and would last 3 months. At that point, the entrepreneurs would be assigned mentors and then they would receive their grant. The program would happen twice a year. There was a discussion about a similar program that was being offered by the Chamber of Commerce. Ms. Church explained that some of the other programs are loans, as well as other differences between the programs. There was a discussion about other mentorship programs in the state. She explained her research into these programs. There was also a discussion about how businesses would be picked. Ms. Church would send further information to the Planning Commission.

Ms. Church then discussed the requested funding for the arts and culture plan. The plan would outline what assets the City owned and what they would do with them in the future. These are items that have not been analyzed before.

There was a discussion about which of the Capital Budget requests are the main priority. Ms. Church said this would be their priority. There was then a further discussion as to exactly how the Capital Budget funds would be used. There was also a discussion about the Plan of Conservation and Development (POCD) and how the arts and culture plan tied into it. Ms. Church elaborated on this.

Ms. Casey then explained what the Historical Commission and the Economic & Community Development are doing and how they will work together. Ms. Church also explained that all artwork would be inventoried so that they would know what the city owns.

F. ARTS COMMISSION

Ms. Casey explained which commissions were under which umbrella and explained that she was the staff for the Arts Commision. She noted that the MLK Corridor project was moving along and that the installation would be completed by the summer. The name of the line item had been changed and is now under the Arts Commission. The request would be recurring and the funds would be used in other areas of the city as well, not just the MLK Corridor. She explained how the funds would be used as well as the timeline. She then explained how the curator would be selected. There was a discussion about picking artists from Norwalk only. There was a discussion about how art benefits the public spaces.

Ms. Church then discussed the Capital Budget request for the public art inventory. There is no central location for the art pieces and how much they are worth. It was also necessary for insurance purposes.

Ms. Church then discussed the art on the Washington Street barriers which they would like to remain up, not only during COVID times. The cost would be for the artist and not printed materials. There was a discussion about how the funding would be used. Past tarps would be returned to the artists or the city would keep them; however, the tarps were not meant to be kept. The ones that are printed on the tarp are easier to keep.

G. REDEVELOPMENT AGENCY

Brian Bidolli began the presentation and noted that the first Capital Budget request was for affordable housing. He noted that the Capital Budget request was for $500,000 and that they usually received less. He also explained the Soundview Landing project. There was a discussion as to the location of this project. Mr. Bidolli noted that it was also called Washington Village. He explained the housing income mix. It is owned by the Norwalk Housing Authority and developed by Trinity. He noted that Phase 1 and 2 are occupied. The monies being requested are for Phase 3.There was a discussion about the number of units in the project. There was a discussion about the funding that the Redevelopment Agency would receive from the city for affordable housing.

Mr. Bidolli explained the next Capital Budget request for historic structures throughout the urban core. It would help with beautification projects. There was a discussion as to how the funding was used in the previous year and how it would be used in the future.

Ms. DiMeglio noted that she had sent an email to Mr. Bidolli and Mr. Kleppin to have a plan for benches at the Park at 50 Washington Street.

At 7:18, the commissioners took a break and returned at 7:25 p.m

H. TRANSPORTATION, MOBILITY & PARKING

Mike Yeosock began the presentation by explaining the Department's first Capital Budget request for crosswalks and then for the Norwalk River Valley Trail. He explained that they were connecting the trails. Another Capital Budget request was for Safe Routes to School. He explained they would work with the Sidewalk Task Force to upgrade sidewalks. There was a discussion about some bike lanes near Roton School which had not been installed as of this year. There were some items that the department would be asking for funding in the future. Mr. Yeosock then discussed the funding for the Hamilton Street staircase which would be needed in 2023. He also discussed the staircase on MLK which was a larger one. There was a discussion about the background of the infrastructure for this staircase.

Ms. Casey then discussed a transportation master plan for which the department would be interviewing for vendors.

There was a discussion about new sidewalks construction. Ms. Casey noted that some of these items would be prioritized in the transportation master plan. Mr. Yeosock noted which projects would be completed this year from last year's Capital Budget request.

There was a discussion of the Norwalk River Valley Trail and that Capital Budget funds would be leveraged to receive grants. They are working on the trail near Grist Mill. Some areas do need repairs and amenities. They would work on a priority list to identify uses for the funding. There was some discussion about funding for future years which included shuttles around the city. There was then a discussion about intersection signals including on West Avenue. There was also a discussion about traffic signal enhancement. There was a discussion about the Scribner Avenue intersection which continues to see the volume of traffic grow.

I. PARKING AUTHORITY

Ms. Casey noted that there were several Capital Budget requests. For parking garages, they would request money in future years. This year they would use monies that they had already received. The next item was for payment machines and how they would install new machines that were contactless. The last item was for parking wayfinding in the city. There would be signage for commuter parking as well as for parking for shopping, restaurants, and people visiting Norwalk. There was a discussion about revenue from parking income. Much of the revenue came from the commuter parking. This revenue declined last year because of COVID. There was a discussion about using EZ Pass in Norwalk parking garages.

J. PLANNING & ZONING

Mr. Kleppin began the presentation with a discussion about their request. They would like to digitize the old tax assessor cards which are stored in various locations all over City Hall. There was a discussion about what information is on the card. He then noted that his department has old permits, etc. that are in boxes and should be digitized as well. A consultant would be hired to do the work off-site. There was a discussion about hacking into the city's computer systems. There was a discussion about whether to do these 2 projects together. Mr. Kleppin noted that he needed more manpower to clean out the files before they were scanned. There was also a discussion about records management for all departments in City Hall. Many commissioners were in support about further digitizing record keeping.

There was a discussion about integrating EZ Pass for the Parking Authority. However, it would be a separate system from what the city currently has installed.

IV. ADJOURNMENT

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

The meeting was adjourned at 8:40 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Diana Palmentiero