CITY OF ONEIDA
COMMON COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES

Date:	October 27, 2026	Presiding:	Rick Rossi, Mayor
Time:	5:30pm	Clerk:	Sandy LaPera, City Clerk
Location:	Common Council Chambers	Meeting Type:	Regular ☐ Special ☒

CALL TO ORDER
The meeting was called to order by Mayor Rick Rossi, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance and roll call.

Attendees	**Present**	**Absent**	**Arrived Late**
Mayor Rossi	☒	☐	☐:_____
City Manager Lovell	☒	☐	☐:_____
Councilor McHugh	☒	☐	☐:_____
Councilor Cimpi	☒	☐	☐:_____
Councilor Smith	☒	☐	☐:_____
Councilor Jones	☒	☐	☐:_____
Councilor Pagano	☒	☐	☐:_____
Councilor Simchik	☐	☐	☒:6:29PM

Also Present: City Clerk, Sandy LaPera, Contracted Comptroller, Lee Ann Wells, Water Superintendent, Andrew (Drew) Campany

2027 CITY OF ONEIDA BUDGET

WATER-SEWER

Mayor Rossi outlined the procedures for the 2027 budget work sessions, advising that attendees could observe the discussions but would not be permitted to speak or interject. He noted that additional Council meetings would be held before final adoption of the budget.

WATER DEPARTMENT – SUPERINTENDENT DREW CAMPANY

Water Superintendent Drew Campany presented an overview of the proposed 2027 Water Department budget, providing Council with a handout comparing 2026 and 2027 expenditures, projected revenues, and water rates in neighboring municipalities. He identified the department's largest expenditures as salaries and benefits, contractual wage increases, debt service for Capital Projects, property taxes on City-owned property, and health insurance.

Councilor Jones questioned how repayment of the debt associated with the dam project would be handled. Comptroller Wells explained that $8 million had been financed through long-term bonds, with annual principal and interest payments. Additional project costs were being financed through a Bond Anticipation Note (BAN), requiring interest payments until the remaining costs are finalized and converted to long-term financing. She confirmed that the anticipated 2027 payments were included in the proposed budget.

Superintendent Campany advised that he had made additional reductions since the initial budget submission and characterized the revised budget as essentially bare-bones, focused on maintaining operations and necessary infrastructure improvements. He also clarified that significant changes in certain office technology and contractual expense accounts resulted from the reclassification of software and technology costs.

PROPERTY TAXES

Superintendent Campany reviewed a comparison of 2025 and 2026 property and school taxes for the Water Department properties. He identified a 14.4% increase associated with properties in the Town of Annsville, resulting from higher assessments and a decrease in the equalization rate. The water treatment plant alone incurred approximately $104,000 in town and county taxes and $110,000 in Camden Central School District taxes.

He advised that he was working with assessors and exploring options to challenge the assessments, including an independent appraisal and formal grievance, with a goal of reducing annual property taxes by approximately $100,000. He emphasized that these expenses contribute to the proposed water rate increase and noted that the approximately $26 million dam improvement project could result in additional reassessments.

UTILITY COSTS AND WATER SUPPLY

Superintendent Campany reported a 17% increase in electrical expenses from January through October 2026 compared to the same period in 2025, with National Grid anticipating an additional 5% increase in 2027. He explained that three new pumps at the Lake Street Pump Station have increased electrical consumption, particularly during dry conditions when lower reservoir levels require greater reliance on pumping.

He reported that unusually dry conditions, combined with dam construction activities, contributed to record-low reservoir levels and prompted voluntary water conservation measures. He noted that the completed dam improvements would provide additional storage capacity.

In response to a question regarding water supplied to OCWA, he confirmed that the impact on the City's supply was minimal because the withdrawal occurred during spring snowmelt.

Superintendent Campany advised that the dam improvement project was nearing completion and offered to arrange tours for Council members. He also noted that a commemorative bronze plaque recognizing the Council had been installed.

CHEMICAL COSTS AND TREATMENT OPERATIONS

Superintendent Campany explained that the proposed budget includes a 10% allowance for anticipated chemical price increases due to supplier costs and global market conditions. Actual expenditures will depend on competitive bids, weather conditions, and chemical usage. He noted that the department had secured a price lock on chlorine for 2025 and 2026, while increased liquid alum usage during dry conditions required budget adjustments.

He emphasized the importance of maintaining consistent chemical specifications when soliciting bids to ensure effective treatment operations.

Superintendent Campany recognized the expertise of the certified treatment plant staff, particularly Chief Operator Travis Mehl, whom he described as a "genius" in water treatment operations. He commended the staff for maintaining around-the-clock operations, noting that the facility requires personnel on-site to monitor and adjust treatment processes.

WATER METER REPLACEMENT PROGRAM

In response to a question, Superintendent Campany explained that the department is transitioning from the Sensus metering system to Neptune meters due to increasing software costs and reliability concerns. The accelerated replacement program is expected to take five to ten years and will eventually eliminate the need to maintain two separate systems.

He explained that the new meters allow drive-by readings, reducing staff time, and include leak detection and usage history capabilities to assist customers in identifying unusual water consumption.

WATER REVENUES AND PROPOSED RATE INCREASE

Superintendent Campany recommended a 10% increase in water rates for quarterly, monthly, and wholesale customers to address rising expenditures and reduce reliance on the Water Fund balance.

He advised that the Verona Water District is transitioning its water supply to the City of Rome, resulting in an anticipated loss of approximately 15% of the City's wholesale water sales. However, the reduction in demand would free up capacity for future commercial development and potential wholesale customers.

He explained that the City's water withdrawals are regulated by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and that the system approaches its permitted capacity during summer months.

Superintendent Campany provided a comparison of current and proposed water bills, noting that the minimum quarterly charge would increase from $22 to $30, while sewer rates would remain unchanged. For an average household using approximately 20 units of water per quarter, the proposed increase would result in an additional $17.30 per quarterly bill, with the actual impact varying by consumption.

WATER WITHDRAWAL CAPACITY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

In response to a question regarding whether the City could petition the DEC to increase its permitted water withdrawals, Superintendent Campany explained that the treatment plant is already operating at maximum capacity. Increasing withdrawals would require substantial infrastructure improvements, including upgrades to approximately 30 miles of transmission mains and expansion of the treatment plant.

He advised that previous studies had evaluated options such as purchasing wholesale water from neighboring providers and developing additional reservoir capacity, but each would require multimillion-dollar investments.

WATER FUND BALANCE AND INFRASTRUCTURE CONCERNS

During the discussion, a Council member questioned how a proposed withdrawal of approximately $292,000 would affect the Water Fund balance. It was explained that the remaining balance would represent approximately 113% of the annual budget, exceeding the general recommended guideline of 25%.

Superintendent Campany emphasized the importance of maintaining adequate reserves for infrastructure emergencies, noting that the City's approximately 100-year-old, 24-inch transmission main could require $1 million or more in emergency repairs following a major break.

He outlined a proposed engineering assessment to identify weaknesses and undetected leaks in the transmission main, allowing the department to prioritize future repairs and improvements.

Superintendent Campany explained that his goal was to preserve reserves for emergencies and capital projects rather than recurring operating expenses. He expressed optimism that a 10% increase in 2027 could reduce the need for future increases.

LONG-TERM FINANCIAL PROJECTIONS AND RATE COMPARISONS

Superintendent Campany reviewed historical rate adjustments, noting a 15% increase in 2024. He presented projections indicating that without future rate increases, continued operating deficits could reduce the Water Fund balance to approximately $21,000 within five years.

He advised that a 5% rate increase option was also available for Council's consideration, particularly given concerns about the potential impact of property tax increases on residents.

Superintendent Campany compared the City's proposed rates with neighboring providers, including the Mohawk Valley Water Authority, which had announced a 5% increase, and OCWA, which had not yet announced its upcoming rates. He noted that billing structures and consumption tiers vary among providers.

He also explained that water rates are calculated by allocating expenses among four categories based on their purpose, consistent with American Water Works Association recommendations.

HEALTH INSURANCE

During the subsequent discussion, a Council member questioned the projected 9.7% increase in health insurance expenses and whether alternative coverage options were being considered.

It was explained that the City was working with its insurance representative, USI, to evaluate potential savings, including participation in regional health insurance consortiums. Preliminary reviews indicated limited savings and additional requirements, but other options continued to be explored.

It was clarified that Water Department employees participate in the same group health insurance coverage as other City employees, with the Water Fund paying its allocated share of the expense.

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC WORKS

The City Manager discussed the vacant City Engineer position and the possibility of contracting for engineering services rather than hiring a full-time replacement. He explained that most major City projects already have assigned engineers and project managers. Nelson Associates had been contacted regarding services at $155 per hour, with an estimated annual cost of $72,540 based on nine hours per week. The firm was considered because of its familiarity with City infrastructure and records. When questioned, the City Manager confirmed that no other firms had been contacted. Council emphasized the need to compare the total costs of contracted services with those of a full-time employee.

The City Manager also discussed improved coordination and shared resources among DPW, Water, and Parks and Recreation, as well as staffing adjustments to increase operational flexibility. These included replacing a position with a Laborer/CDL position, providing CDL training, and holding certain authorized vacancies open to control expenses.

Council requested a breakdown of DPW positions, responsibilities, salaries, and historical expenditures to assist in evaluating personnel costs and potential savings. Members also encouraged department heads to identify operational efficiencies.

Councilor McHugh questioned the equipment appropriation, noting that $4,600 was budgeted and only $962 had been expended. She requested that City Manager Kyle Lovell verify the anticipated expenditures and purpose of the appropriation.

Council reviewed Central Garage contractual expenses and employee tool allowances, including increases required under collective bargaining agreements. The potential use of County purchasing contracts was also discussed.

The general materials appropriation was reviewed, with approximately $10,000 expended from an $18,000 budget. It was explained that expenditures included materials used to secure vacant or abandoned properties. Council discussed possible reductions and opportunities to recover costs associated with property cleanups.

Councilor McHugh also questioned the $15,000 road materials and supplies appropriation, noting approximately $12,000 expended in 2025 and $7,400 expended to date in 2026, with an additional $4,000 committed. Following discussion, a $3,000 reduction to the proposed appropriation was identified and agreed upon.

Council reviewed tree maintenance and stump removal expenditures as potential areas for savings. The stump removal budget was $25,000 in 2026, with approximately $16,725 expended. Members discussed reducing contracted services while recognizing the City's responsibility to address hazardous trees and maintain sufficient resources for unexpected maintenance needs.

Council acknowledged that smaller reductions would provide some savings but would not substantially address the proposed tax increase. Members emphasized that personnel expenses represent a significant portion of the budget and cautioned against reducing necessary operating appropriations to levels that could require future transfers from General Fund balance.

Discussion also addressed a proposed capital project undergoing redesign to reduce costs. Updated plans and estimates were anticipated by year-end, with approximately $25,000 potentially available for design work and the possibility of advancing the project in 2027.

Council additionally questioned proposed reductions to gasoline and diesel appropriations, emphasizing the importance of budgeting realistic amounts for essential operations.

ASSESSOR

Council discussed the need for a full-time assessor, with concerns raised regarding the cost of the position, including salary and benefits, and whether a part-time assessor would be a more fiscally responsible alternative. It was noted that other municipalities successfully utilize part-time assessors, and Council suggested researching their staffing arrangements, particularly in communities that have recently completed reassessments.

City Manager Lovell explained that the City had experienced considerable difficulty recruiting a qualified assessor despite advertising the position for an extended period. Previous part-time arrangements had not been successful, contributing to declining assessment levels. Following recommendations from former City Assessor Jeff Lowe, the City ultimately retained Heather Garner, who assisted during the grievance period and demonstrated considerable experience and expertise. A full-time salary was subsequently negotiated and included in the proposed 2027 budget. If approved, Ms. Garner would relinquish her responsibilities with other municipalities and serve exclusively as the City of Oneida's full-time Assessor.

Discussion included the anticipated citywide reassessment, which would be conducted by an outside firm, and the importance of consistent assessment administration, accurate property records, and maintaining the integrity of the tax roll. Council discussed whether a qualified part-time assessor could effectively maintain those records and oversee the reassessment process. The City Manager emphasized the importance of having a knowledgeable, certified assessor to prevent further declines in assessment levels and protect the City's tax base.

Council also discussed the Assessor's Office's potential role in generating revenue through delinquent tax enforcement and the disposition of properties eligible for foreclosure. It was noted that approximately 15 properties could potentially be addressed, with an estimated $150,000 in revenue if each generated $10,000, although actual proceeds would depend on the disposition of

the properties. Additional delinquent properties were also identified as requiring attention. The City Manager indicated that addressing these properties and establishing measurable goals for their disposition would be priorities.

Councilor Jones questioned whether other assessors within Madison County had been contacted regarding potential part-time services. City Manager Lovell explained that several assessors throughout Madison, Oneida and Onondaga Counties had been contacted, but most were already committed to multiple municipalities and were unwilling to assume additional long-term responsibilities. Some had offered temporary assistance during grievance periods, but securing a permanent arrangement remained difficult.

Council discussed the possibility of contracting assessment services through an outside firm rather than maintaining a full-time position. The City Manager indicated that former City Assessor Jeff Lowe owns an assessment firm and could potentially provide a proposal for contracted services or recommend other qualified providers. He agreed to contact Lowe to explore available options, associated costs and the feasibility of outsourcing assessment services, and report back to Council.

Concerns were also expressed regarding the financial burden on residents, particularly in light of the proposed property tax increase. Census figures were referenced indicating that approximately 23% of homeowners with mortgages and 48% of renters spend more than 30% of their income on housing costs. Council emphasized the importance of considering residents' ability to absorb additional taxes and fees while evaluating departmental expenditures.

The City Manager acknowledged the potential financial benefits of contracting assessment services, including savings in employee benefits, but emphasized the importance of maintaining effective operations. He also noted that one of the most frequent complaints received regarding the Assessor's Office was the limited availability of an assessor for in-person assistance. Although designated office hours had been established, residents, particularly seniors, continued to express frustration when an assessor was unavailable.

Council discussed whether to retain the proposed full-time salary allocation or consider alternative staffing arrangements. It was suggested that no immediate decision be made until additional information regarding contracted services and associated costs could be obtained. Council also expressed a preference for reviewing departmental presentations and budget requests collectively before making final determinations.

The discussion concluded with the City Manager agreeing to investigate outsourcing options and provide additional information for Council's consideration. The distinction between the Assessor's six-year appointment term under the City Charter and an employment contract was also clarified.

GENERAL BUDGET DISCUSSION

Mayor Rossi explained that the purpose of the departmental presentations was to allow Council to hear from department heads, gather information, and consider their recommendations before making budget decisions. He stated that Council would review the information collectively after all department heads had presented and consider potential adjustments during subsequent budget deliberations.

Council discussed the distinction between its responsibility to establish financial priorities and the City Manager's responsibility to oversee departmental operations. It was suggested that Council focus on determining appropriate funding levels rather than identifying specific positions, programs, or services to eliminate, allowing the City Manager and department heads to determine how to operate within the approved appropriations.

The City Manager explained that the proposed 2027 budget was balanced without relying on additional General Fund balance and reflected efforts to limit operational expenses but required an approximately 23% property tax increase. He emphasized that his responsibility was to present the financial requirements necessary to maintain City operations and staffing, while Council was responsible for determining acceptable funding levels and making policy decisions regarding taxation and services.

The City Manager further explained that if Council established a specific tax increase or spending reduction target, such as 5%, his responsibility would be to identify the operational adjustments necessary to meet that direction. He noted that personnel represents the City's largest expense and that substantial reductions could affect staffing and municipal services.

Concerns were expressed regarding residents' ability to afford additional property taxes, particularly when combined with increases in school taxes, utilities, and other household expenses. Council discussed the cumulative financial burden on residents and the importance of maintaining municipal services at a reasonable cost.

Discussion also addressed the City's structural budget deficit and the long-term consequences of relying on General Fund balance to offset annual operating expenses. Concern was raised that continued use of fund balance could further reduce reserves without resolving the underlying financial challenges.

Council discussed the need to consider both expenditure reductions and opportunities to increase revenue, including continued examination of sales tax revenues and other potential funding sources. Members emphasized the importance of developing sustainable revenue strategies to reduce the likelihood of facing similar budget challenges in subsequent years.

Council further discussed the need for all departments to identify opportunities to operate more efficiently while maintaining essential services and public safety. Suggestions included reviewing staffing levels, evaluating whether certain duties could be reassigned, and considering whether vacancies created through retirement could remain temporarily unfilled.

The possibility of offering retirement incentives was also raised. Council discussed whether short-term staffing reductions through attrition or delayed replacement of retiring employees could provide savings without requiring permanent elimination of positions. It was acknowledged that

potential savings would depend on employee participation and the City's ability to maintain necessary services.

Council also discussed the need to review and prioritize planned capital projects and evaluate whether certain projects could be deferred or scaled back to reduce future financial obligations.

Discussion turned to electricity and natural gas expenditures and the City's use of solar energy credits. It was explained that credits generated through the City's solar arrangement are applied to utility costs at various municipal facilities, reducing expenses charged to the General Fund. Increased electricity usage at certain facilities has affected the distribution of available credits.

It was further explained that solar production varies seasonally, with lower generation during winter months requiring additional utility expenditures. Despite these fluctuations, the City's utility accounts were reported to be performing favorably, although the amount of savings and revenue credits may vary from prior years.

Council reviewed additional opportunities for expenditure reductions and discussed the importance of comparing proposed appropriations with prior-year budgets and actual expenditures. Members acknowledged that some reductions represented meaningful savings but emphasized the need to determine whether they were sustainable and whether changes in workload or service demand could affect staffing requirements.

Further discussion addressed the potential use of technology, including artificial intelligence, to improve administrative efficiency and reduce costs. It was noted that emerging software applications may assist departments with routine tasks and information processing, although accuracy, confidentiality, and applicable regulations would need to be considered. Council expressed interest in exploring technology-based improvements and other operational changes across departments as part of the City's ongoing efforts to control expenditures.

Councilor Cimpi expressed concern regarding employee morale, emphasizing that Council needs to be mindful of the impact its discussions have on the City's workforce. He stated that continually discussing potential staffing cuts and layoffs can negatively affect employees who are simply doing their jobs. He urged Council to be more sensitive to its employees and cautioned against losing experienced personnel, noting that the City has faced similar situations in the past, resulting in the need to hire and train replacements. In his opinion, Council needs to remain aware of these consequences when considering budget reductions.

Mayor Rossi added that Council needs to examine all aspects of the budget, particularly opportunities to increase revenue.

CANNABIS RETAIL OPT-OUT DISCUSSION:

Council revisited the City's earlier decision to opt out of the State's cannabis retail licensing framework. The discussion addressed concerns at the time regarding the conditions of participation and the City's understanding that the decision to participate could not subsequently be reversed.

Councilor Simchik discussed the reasoning behind the City's decision, explaining that the City had elected to opt out because of concerns regarding the State's program and the potential long-term implications of participating before its requirements were fully understood.

CONCLUSION:

The work session concluded following discussion of expenditure reductions, potential revenue opportunities, departmental efficiencies, employee morale, and the City's long-term financial obligations. Council emphasized the importance of considering both the financial and operational consequences of proposed budget adjustments while continuing its review of the 2027 budget.

The following adjustments were agreed upon:

2027 Approved Budget Changes

October 27, 2026

General Ledger / Account	Original Budget	Revised Budget	Change
001.1640.0401.0000 General Fund Gasoline	$110,000	$150,000	+$40,000
001.5132.0303.0000 General Fund General Materials	$15,000	$12,000	−$3,000
001.5110.0314.0000 General Fund Road Materials	$18,000	$16,000	−$2,000
Total	**$143,000**	**$178,000**	**+$35,000**

NET INCREASE TO 2027 BUDGET

$35,000

ADJOURNMENT

Motion to adjourn by Councilor Smith
Seconded by Councilor Simchik

Ayes: 7
Nays: 0
Absent: 0
MOTION RESULT: ☒Passed ☐Failed

The meeting adjourned at 7:46 p.m.

CITY OF ONEIDA

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Sandra LaPera, City Clerk