CITY OF ONEIDA
COMMON COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES

Date:	November 2, 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	☐	☐	☒:5:44pm
Councilor Simchik	☐	☐	☒:5:51pm

Also Present: Sandy LaPera, City Clerk
Lee Ann Wells, Comptroller
Jessica Kaiser, Deputy Comptroller/Human Resources Manager
Steve Vonderweidt, Planning Director
Steve Lowell, Police Chief

CITY OF ONEIDA COMMON COUNCIL

2027 BUDGET WORK SESSION

The Common Council conducted a budget work session to review departmental requests for the proposed 2027 City Budget. Presentations were provided by Deputy Comptroller/HR Manager Jessica Kaiser for Civil Service, Planning Director Steve Vonderweidt for Planning and Codes, and Police Chief Steve Lowell for the Police Department. Discussions focused on staffing, departmental operations, employee morale, public safety, potential revenue sources, and the City's ongoing efforts to reduce the proposed property tax increase.

CIVIL SERVICE BUDGET PRESENTATION

Deputy Comptroller/HR Manager Jessica Kaiser presented the proposed 2027 Civil Service Budget, reviewing salary allocations, employee recognition, and contractual services.

Kaiser explained that her original request included a 3% cost-of-living increase and a ten-year longevity adjustment. She clarified that she was not seeking an increase to her base salary and expressed that she would prefer funding for the Employee Recognition Program over the proposed salary increase.

Kaiser discussed the proposed $600 Employee Recognition Program, explaining that the allocation would provide $50 per month to recognize employees for the many positive contributions they make to City operations each day. She emphasized the importance of acknowledging employees for their hard work, dedication, and willingness to assist others, noting that their efforts often go unrecognized. Although funding had been included in the 2026 budget, the program had not yet been implemented. Kaiser explained that she would be launching the program in November and was requesting continued funding in the 2027 budget. Employees would have an opportunity to recognize coworkers through appreciation cards highlighting their contributions and accomplishments. The cards would be collected and displayed, with monthly drawings for prizes from local businesses. Kaiser expressed her preference to retain the $600 annual allocation but indicated that, if the full amount could not be funded, she would appreciate Council's consideration of a reduced allocation of $300, allowing $25 per month, rather than eliminating the program.

Regarding contractual expenses, Kaiser reported that Bridges had submitted its 2027 Employee Assistance Program proposal at approximately $2,200, with no increase from the prior year. The program provides employee assistance services, training, and critical incident support. Other expenses included federally required drug testing for employees holding commercial driver's licenses, program membership fees, and certified monitors for police physical ability testing.

During discussion, Kaiser expressed concern regarding employee morale, particularly in response to public discussions about potential layoffs. She explained that employees were experiencing uncertainty about their positions and suggested that any consideration of workforce reductions should involve a developed plan before public announcements were made.

PLANNING AND CODES BUDGET PRESENTATION

Planning Director Steve Vonderweidt presented the proposed 2027 Planning and Codes budgets, reviewing departmental staffing, development initiatives, inspection requirements, enforcement challenges, and potential revenue opportunities.

Vonderweidt explained that the combined department operates with four employees, consisting of the Director, two Code Enforcement Officers, and one clerical employee. Responsibilities include planning and zoning, development projects, grant administration, building permits, property inspections, code enforcement, and property accountability initiatives.

Planning Budget and Staffing

Vonderweidt reviewed the proposed increase in the Planning salary allocation, explaining that it included funding for a Development Specialist position at $60,000 rather than an increase to his personal salary. He requested consideration of increasing the proposed salary to $70,000 to attract a qualified candidate capable of managing Downtown Revitalization Initiative projects, grant administration, economic development activities, commercial property inventories, and the proposed property accountability program.

He also reviewed contractual expenses, including funding associated with the Comprehensive Plan grant. Vonderweidt explained that certain administrative and personnel costs could potentially be reimbursed through grants, helping offset the expense of additional staffing.

Code Enforcement Staffing and Inspection Requirements

Vonderweidt reported that the addition of a second certified Code Enforcement Officer in June 2026 had improved departmental productivity and reduced the inspection backlog. Outstanding inspections declined from 88 properties containing 494 units in January to 40 properties containing 164 units by the end of October. Inspection delays had also decreased from approximately six months to four months.

However, he explained that a review of City Code §77-15(B)(1) identified a requirement for multifamily buildings containing two or more apartments to be inspected every two years rather than the three-year schedule previously followed by the department.

Based on an inventory of approximately 397 multifamily structures, the two-year requirement increases the annual inspection workload from approximately 132 to 199 properties. Vonderweidt also reported that 259 multifamily properties, representing approximately 1,200 rental units, lacked documented completed inspections during the preceding two years.

He estimated that approximately 325 initial inspections would be necessary during the coming year to address the backlog and ongoing requirements. He explained that two Code Enforcement Officers could complete approximately 180 initial housing inspections annually, compared with approximately 270 with three officers and 360 with four officers.

Vonderweidt requested consideration of an additional Code Enforcement Officer in 2027, at an estimated cost of $75,000, with a longer-term goal of four full-time officers. He also requested approximately $10,000 for review and potential reclassification of the department's clerical position, citing expanded responsibilities. Neither request was included in the City Manager's proposed budget.

Rental Inspections and Property Accountability

Council discussed whether the City should retain the two-year multifamily inspection requirement or consider returning to a three-year schedule. Vonderweidt recommended retaining the existing

requirement, citing health and safety concerns and the potential deterioration of rental properties between inspections.

He explained that the proposed property accountability program could eventually establish inspection frequencies based on property conditions and compliance histories, allowing the department to focus additional attention on properties with recurring violations.

Council also discussed enforcement difficulties, including repeated court appearances, extended compliance periods, and penalties that may not provide sufficient incentive for property owners to correct violations. Vonderweidt reported improved cooperation with City Court but acknowledged that some cases continue for extended periods. Potential legislative changes to strengthen enforcement were discussed.

Department Operations and Revenue

Vonderweidt reported that the consolidation of Planning and Codes had generally been successful, although the expanded responsibilities had increased his workload. He recognized departmental employees for improvements in productivity, responsiveness, and service.

Council discussed opportunities to improve permitting procedures through electronic applications and technology. Vonderweidt indicated that existing software presented challenges and that many applicants continued to prefer paper submissions.

He also reported that proposed Planning and Codes fee revisions could generate approximately $17,250 in additional annual revenue. Council had not yet acted on the proposed fee schedule.

Vonderweidt concluded by emphasizing the need for adequate staffing to meet inspection requirements, support development initiatives, and maintain effective enforcement.

POLICE DEPARTMENT BUDGET PRESENTATION

Police Chief Steve Lowell presented the proposed 2027 Police Department Budget. He opened his presentation by reading a prepared statement, a copy of which was provided to Council and will be incorporated into the minutes.

Following his prepared statement, Chief Lowell reviewed the proposed 2027 budget line by line, explaining the purpose of the various appropriations and the reductions that had already been made to his original requests. He emphasized that the department's budget had already been significantly reduced and expressed concern that any further reductions would compromise its ability to meet operational needs and maintain essential police services.

Following his budget review, Lowell invited questions from Council.

Staffing, Operations and Investigations

During discussion, Lowell addressed staffing shortages, increased demands for police services, and the department's ability to maintain proactive policing, investigations, and adequate patrol coverage. He reviewed investigative assignments involving narcotics, general investigations, and juvenile matters, explaining that officers frequently assume multiple responsibilities.

He emphasized that proactive policing extends beyond responding to calls and includes community engagement, school programs, traffic enforcement, crime prevention, and other public safety initiatives. He also discussed the department's work with Cornell University on a community survey to obtain public input regarding police services.

Council reviewed the department's 30 authorized positions, including four officers attending the Police Academy. Lowell explained that academy and field training require approximately nine months before new officers become fully operational. Anticipated retirements could create additional staffing challenges during 2027.

Overtime, Retirement and Operational Expenses

Council questioned overtime expenditures, staffing requirements, and reimbursements associated with STOP-DWI and Selective Traffic Enforcement grants. Lowell explained that reductions to the overtime appropriation would not eliminate the need to cover required shifts, investigations, court appearances, and other operational obligations. He also discussed the requested special detail funding and approximately 200 outstanding warrants requiring enforcement attention.

Council reviewed anticipated retirement expenses, including the requested $150,000 allocation. Lowell indicated that at least one retirement was expected in 2027, with additional retirements possible. Council requested more specific calculations to determine the appropriate funding requirement.

Discussion also addressed uniforms, protective equipment, training, technology, and police vehicles. Lowell explained the distinction between contractual clothing allowances and the initial cost of outfitting new officers, as well as the need to replace aging protective equipment.

Regarding vehicles, Lowell explained that three replacement vehicle leases had already been approved and that the vehicles would require upfitting before being placed into police service. He estimated the expense at approximately $15,000 per vehicle, depending on the equipment available for transfer from existing vehicles.

He further reviewed mandatory training, certifications, and technology necessary to support departmental operations.

School Resource Officer and Grant Revenue

Councilor McHugh questioned the School Resource Officer agreement and whether the corresponding reimbursement revenue had been included in the 2027 budget.

Discussion indicated that the reimbursement should be reflected appropriately in the revenue projections, including the applicable salary and benefit reimbursement.

Council also reviewed grant-funded personnel and confirmed that an existing grant-supported position was expected to continue into 2027.

Employee Morale and Staffing Concerns

Council discussed employee morale and the potential impact of further staffing reductions. Lowell expressed concern that public discussions regarding layoffs were creating uncertainty among officers and affecting the department's ability to plan for future staffing needs.

Council acknowledged the importance of maintaining essential police services while emphasizing the need to address the City's financial constraints. Lowell reiterated the importance of developing a long-term staffing plan to ensure adequate public safety coverage.

Additional information regarding retirement payouts, reimbursement revenue, overtime, and other departmental expenses was identified for consideration during the continuing budget review.

GENERAL BUDGET DISCUSSION AND NEXT STEPS

Following the departmental presentations, Council reviewed the overall status of the proposed 2027 budget.

Council emphasized the importance of identifying anticipated expenses, verifying reimbursement revenue, and reviewing departmental requests before determining additional reductions.

Members acknowledged that further adjustments would be necessary to reduce the proposed property tax increase while maintaining essential City services.

Council agreed to continue budget deliberations at the next scheduled meeting.

ADJOURNMENT

Motion to adjourn by Councilor McHugh
Seconded by Councilor Jones

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

The meeting adjourned at 7:11 p.m.

CITY OF ONEIDA

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Sandra LaPera, City Clerk