

**MINUTES OF THE COMMON COUNCIL
BUDGET MEETING
NOVEMBER 12, 2025**

A special meeting of the Common Council of the City of Oneida, NY was held on the twelfth day of November 2025 at 6:00pm at the City of Oneida Common Council Chambers, 109 N. Main Street, Oneida NY 13421.

The meeting was called to order by Mayor Rick Rossi

<u>Attendees</u>	Present	Absent	Arrived Late
Mayor Rossi	☒	☐	☐ _____
Kyle Lovell, CM	☒	☐	☐ _____
Councilor Szczerba	☐	☐	☒ 6:03pm
Councilor Laureti	☒	☐	☐ _____
Councilor Hitchings	☒	☐	☐ _____
Councilor Winchell	☒	☐	☐ _____
Councilor Pagano	☒	☐	☐ _____
Councilor Simchik	☒	☐	☐ _____

Also Present

City Attorney Nadine Bell	☐	Lee Ann Wells (Consultant)	☒
City Clerk Sandy LaPera	☒	Councilor-Elect McHugh	☒
Fire Chief Scott Jones	☒	Councilor-Elect Jones	☒
Police Chief Steve Lowell	☒		

Call to Order/Pledge of Allegiance/Roll Call

**2026 BUDGET WORK SESSION
POLICE-FIRE-PLANNING-CODES**

2026 City of Oneida Budget Session – Police Department

Commissioner Salary

The City Manager explained that the Commissioner's salary was reduced to \$100 at the request of the Public Safety Commissioner. While the position has been beneficial under the City Manager form of government, its long-term continuation will be evaluated. For the 2026 budget, maintaining the position with a nominal salary keeps operations consistent while honoring the request. City Manager Lovell commended Public Safety Commissioner Jones for being the consummate public servant.

Police Expenses

Evidence Custodian Technician

The Evidence Custodian Technician position, initially removed from the budget, was reinstated following discussions with the Chief and recent developments. This part-time civilian role (27 hours per week) oversees daily evidence processing and purging under the supervision of sworn staff. The model is widely used across agencies and helps prevent "mission creep," ensuring officers are not overwhelmed with administrative tasks at the expense of field operations.

Staffing Levels and Personnel Requests

Request for Additional Officers

The City Manager noted that the Chief requested four additional officers. Each new hire—approximately \$100,000, when equipped and trained, represents a roughly 2% tax increase, making the request financially unsustainable for the 2026 budget. He asked that Council reconsider staffing needs and meet the Chief halfway by allowing for the hiring of 2 officers, as personnel shortages directly affect overtime and operational efficiency.

Historical Context

The Chief stated that staffing concerns are longstanding. He referenced Chief Thompson who sought additional personnel five, six, even eight years ago, but those positions were cut at the time. As the demands on law enforcement have grown and community expectations have risen, staffing levels must adapt to these realities.

Overtime and Operational Demands

The Chief reported that the overtime allotment he requested was significantly reduced. Over the past 2.5–3 years, overtime expenditures have consistently exceeded the budgeted amount, requiring constant transfers to maintain operations. He cited Gordon Graham's principle—"If it's predictable, it's preventable"—emphasizing that underbudgeting overtime has become a recurring and avoidable issue.

While his request was for four new officers, the Chief stated that even one additional position would provide meaningful relief. Several upcoming retirements expected over the next year and a half make early hiring essential, as academy training and onboarding require significant lead time. Proper staffing, he stressed, would reduce reliance on overtime, provide scheduling stability, and enhance overall departmental readiness. Please Add: Reliance on overtime cuts directly reduces the level of services we are able to provide to the community and increases the risk to both our officers and the public. When staffing is not properly increased to meet the expectations and requirements of the job, those same risks grow even further. Adequate staffing is essential to maintaining safety, responsiveness, and the quality of service our community deserves.

Upcoming Retirements, Recruitment, and Staffing Pipeline

The Chief noted that although the department was fully staffed briefly, multiple upcoming retirements will soon create new vacancies. Despite heavy competition for qualified candidates, the city continues to attract strong applicants. The five recruits currently in the police academy have shown exceptional dedication, frequently volunteering for community events and strengthening police–community relationships.

He explained that academy tuition is approximately \$2,500, with an additional amount under \$1,000 for uniforms, books, ammunition, and other required equipment. The costs associated with sending a recruit to the academy vary depending on which academy we use. Generally, we can expect to spend around \$1,000 on uniforms and books, but there are additional expenses such as ammunition and other required training equipment. These costs differ from academy to academy.

Mental Health Considerations

During the discussion, Councilor Hitchings raised concerns about the mental health impacts of sustained overtime on officers. She highlighted the strain caused by prolonged staffing shortages and emphasized that supporting officer well-being is essential for maintaining a safe community. Members echoed the importance of proactive staffing measures rather than reacting to chronic shortages.

Financial Impact of Adding Officers

The City Manager clarified that hiring one additional officer—approximately \$100,000—would increase the tax levy by about 2%.

- Current proposed impact per household: \$86 annually

- With one officer added: about \$93 annually
This represents an increase of roughly \$10–\$12 per household, a modest dollar amount but a meaningful percentage increase.
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Call Volume and Service Demand

The Chief reported that the department handles approximately 12,000 active calls for service annually, excluding property checks and low-level self-initiated activity. These represent true response or substantive enforcement calls, reinforcing the need for sufficient staffing to meet service demands.

Operational Realities, Risk, and Strategic Planning

The Chief described the challenging operational environment, noting that the department may have multiple arrests before 9 a.m., including stolen vehicles and individuals traveling between Syracuse, New York City, and Oneida. He emphasized the need for adequate staffing, equipment, training, and technology to meet community expectations and support the development of a five-year strategic plan.

Five recruits are currently in the academy and are expected to enter field training in February or March, although they will not be eligible for officer-in-charge responsibilities for several years. The department anticipates up to three retirements within the next year and a half and currently has two vacancies, with additional hires planned for December.

Despite reaching full staffing earlier in the year, overtime remains high due to unpredictable events such as National Guard deployments and extended sick leave. Year-to-date overtime expenditures are approximately \$300,000. Required training, including firearms certification, pulls officers from shift coverage for weeks at a time, further contributing to staffing strain.

Lateral Transfers and Minimum Staffing Risks

Lateral transfers have become rare across Central New York, leaving departments dependent on new recruits who require extensive training before reaching full effectiveness. Retaining experienced officers and investing in staffing now will reduce long-term overtime expenses and stabilize operations. The Chief emphasized that staffing requests are based on professional standards and best-practice research, not arbitrary numbers, and are designed to reduce risk and improve service quality.

He noted the significant geographic size of the City of Oneida—22 square miles—and that at times only two officers are on duty to cover the entire city. Outside agencies often cannot assist promptly due to their own call demands and large patrol areas. The Chief shared an example of handling a burglary with only one other officer while waiting a prolonged period for backup, underscoring the real danger posed by limited staffing. Predictable risks must be addressed proactively to prevent harm to both officers and the public.

DCJS Workload Analysis and Ideal Staffing Levels

The Chief explained that a prior Department of Criminal Justice Service (DCJS) workload analysis assessed whether the department had enough personnel to meet its operational workload. The finding was clear: current staffing levels are insufficient for basic service demands.

The analysis showed that sergeants—intended to serve as first-line supervisors—are frequently required to take zones and respond to calls, preventing them from performing critical supervisory duties such as reviewing reports, guiding new officers, evaluating use-of-force incidents, handling personnel complaints, and assisting with investigations. This dual role creates inefficiency and strains leadership capacity.

Long-term, the Chief aims to restore sergeants to true supervisory roles and ultimately add two additional officers per shift—days, evenings, and nights—representing approximately 12 additional officers needed to achieve a fully functional and efficient model.

Shift Structure, Flex Staffing, and Mental Health Response

The Chief explained that staffing levels vary by shift, with the midnight (ABC) shift staffed lighter than days and evenings. The department also utilizes flex shifts to provide additional coverage during the busiest overlap periods.

When asked about whether social workers could replace officers on certain calls, the Chief stated that while alternative response models have value, they cannot replace the fundamental need for trained police officers who are authorized to intervene in dangerous or criminal situations. He praised the department’s mental health worker, noting strong outcomes and ongoing data tracking, and plans to present those results at a future Council meeting.

A Council member expressed appreciation for the department’s responsiveness, noting positive personal experiences and thanking officers for their service.

In response to a question pertaining to what “Dog Other” line was for, the Comptroller consultant responded that this was typically used for the feral cat TNR program.

2026 City of Oneida Budget Session – Fire Department

Staffing Levels, Academy Status, and Anticipated Retirement

Fire Chief Jones reported that four firefighters were hired in August. Three remain in the academy, while one recruit suffered an injury and will be sent back to the academy at the end of March or early April. The department also anticipates a retirement early next year.

While the department is currently close to full staffing for budgeted positions, this stability is fragile; injuries and retirements frequently create new vacancies, producing a recurring cycle similar to the Police Department's staffing challenges.

The Chief emphasized that a minimum of five firefighters per shift is required to safely and effectively respond to fires. With staff working 24-hour shifts followed by 72 hours off, there is limited availability for weekday administrative work. He noted that he is the only Monday–Friday position in the department, which creates a gap for training oversight, reporting, fire investigations, and clerical tasks. He and the City Manager have discussed the value of adding a weekday administrative support position in future budgets.

Apparatus Needs, OSHA Requirements, and Long-Term Capital Planning

The City Manager acknowledged the staffing concerns but emphasized that the most pressing priority for the Fire Department is apparatus replacement. Fiscal responsibility requires focusing first on equipment given its age, cost, and compliance requirements.

Aerial Truck Condition and Compliance

The Chief reported that the department's aerial truck is 28 years old (a 1997 model). Industry and OSHA recommendations suggest:

- **10 years:** Move apparatus to reserve status
- **20 years:** Expected end of reliable service life

The aerial was refurbished in 2016 and appears cosmetically improved, but the mechanical systems remain nearly three decades old. Maintenance and testing are performed regularly, and the truck continues to pass inspections, but repair costs continue to rise.

When the aerial is out of service for maintenance, the department must place another department on standby—typically Sherrill or Canastota. This reliance on outside agencies or volunteer companies is not ideal for meeting the City's level of service obligations.

Fleet Age and Replacement Pressures

The newest apparatus in the fleet will reach its 10-year mark next year. Without a replacement schedule, the city risks multiple apparatus aging out simultaneously. The department has already accumulated \$36,000 in annual maintenance and testing costs, leaving little capacity for major repairs.

Need for an Apparatus Reserve Line

An apparatus reserve line exists in the budget but remains unfunded. The Chief strongly recommended that the City begin contributing to this reserve to mitigate the financial burden of future replacements. A suggested contribution level was \$100,000 annually.

Rescue Truck Replacement – Priority for 2026

The Chief reiterated that the rescue truck must be replaced in 2026. A traditional replacement would cost \$250,000–\$300,000, but he is proposing a ¾-ton or 1-ton pickup-style rescue unit with a service-body configuration, estimated at approximately \$100,000. This design meets operational needs while significantly reducing costs.

Leasing Options and Financing Flexibility

The City Manager provided additional detail on Community Partners, a municipal financing provider often described as “leasing.” In New York State, municipalities must retain ownership of fire apparatus, meaning this structure functions as a loan rather than a true lease.

Key financing points:

- Aerial truck financing estimated at \$40,000 per year
- Options include immediate payments, deferred payments for up to two years, or vendor-fronted costs to secure discounts
- Financing through this model does not appear as bonded debt
- Leasing can be used for apparatus, SCBA units, or even fire station projects

Concerns With Traditional Bonding

Traditional bonding can extend 30 years, while apparatus generally has a 20-year life expectancy, causing the city to continue paying on equipment that has reached end-of-life. Flexible leasing-style financing can align payment schedules more appropriately with service life.

2026 City of Oneida Budget Session – Planning Department

Overview and Department Update

The City Manager opened the Planning Department budget review by noting that the new Planning Director, Steve Vonderweidt, has been in the role for approximately six weeks and is doing an excellent job. He has been instrumental in improving the Planning Commission/Zoning Board of Appeals (PCZBA) process, coordinating applications, and helping guide the City through recent DRI-related issues.

He has also taken on significant administrative responsibilities within the Codes Department and has been

proactive and willing to assist across departmental functions. His background and experience have already contributed greatly to stabilizing operations.

Expense Lines and Contractual Services

The City Manager explained that the contractual line for Planning was built based on historical use, referencing prior years for consistency. This line is typically used for outside professional services such as:

- Appraisals (e.g., calendar appraisal)
- Appraisals related to the property sale near Dunn's
- Land surveys
- Other consultant-based or technical services as needed

The line was maintained at a level consistent with previous budgets to ensure flexibility for similar needs that arise during the year.

2026 City of Oneida Budget Session – Codes Department

Expense Lines and Operational Needs

The City Manager opened the Codes discussion by inviting questions or concerns from the Council. He noted a clarification regarding the Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) line, explaining that items such as steel-toe boots and hard hats were previously funded under the contractual line, but are now reflected in the appropriate PPE account. This adjustment aligns expenses with their proper classification and improves clarity in the budget.

Motion to Adjourn by Councilor Hitchings
Seconded by Councilor Simchik

Ayes: 7

Nays: 0

MOTION CARRIED

The Budget meeting concluded at 6:57pm.

SANDRA LAPERA
CITY CLERK

