

**MINUTES OF THE COMMON COUNCIL
BUDGET MEETING
NOVEMBER 17, 2025**

A special meeting of the Common Council of the City of Oneida, NY was held on the seventeenth day of November 2025 at 6:00p.m. 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>	<u>Present</u>	<u>Absent</u>	<u>Arrived Late</u>
Mayor Rossi	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> _____
Kyle Lovell, CM	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> _____
Councilor Szczerba	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> _____
Councilor Laureti	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> _____
Councilor Hitchings	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> _____
Councilor Winchell	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> _____
Councilor Pagano	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 6:07pm
Councilor Simchik	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 6:06pm

Also Present

City Attorney Nadine Bell	<input type="checkbox"/>	Public Safety Comm. Dave Jones	<input type="checkbox"/>
City Clerk Sandy LaPera	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Comptroller Lee Ann Wells	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Fire Chief Scott Jones	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Other: _____	<input type="checkbox"/>
Police Chief Steve Lowell	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		

Call to Order/Pledge of Allegiance/Roll Call

BUDGET RECAP MEETING

At the November 13, 2025, Special Budget Meeting, the Council agreed to resume budget discussions, giving the City Manager time to re-examine the proposed budget and explore options to lower the proposed 7.25% tax rate.

Opening Discussion

Mayor Rossi opened the discussion by noting that City Manager Lovell had circulated an email summarizing where the Council left off on Thursday evening after a series of productive conversations, including whether the tax rate could be reduced to 6.25% while retaining a full-time police officer in the

budget. City Manager Lovell accepted that challenge and, after considerable work with Comptroller Wells, was able to achieve a 6.25% rate without using fund balance and while maintaining the 20% reserve.

Mayor Rossi then asked if any Council Members wished to discuss specific items. Councilor Laureti inquired about the two traffic boxes that City Engineer Rowe previously stated had been removed from the budget and whether a breakdown had been provided for the remaining \$49,100 in that line.

Traffic Box & Streetlight Line Review

The Council revisited the earlier discussion regarding the double allocation and questioned why the amount remained high despite the removal of the traffic boxes. City Manager Lovell reported that the expenditure reflects outsourced work and various streetlight and equipment repairs. Comptroller Wells advised that year-to-date spending is \$24,439 as of today, including costs such as light heads and traffic signal repairs. With the traffic boxes no longer included, the consensus was that reducing the line to \$25,000 would be reasonable. This adjustment would lower the tax rate to approximately 5.75%.

Evidence Function & Staffing

Councilor Laureti asked whether the evidence function could be adjusted this year given the proposal to add a full-time police officer. Chief Lowell clarified that no additional position had ever been created for evidence; rather, an officer had been reassigned from road patrol. He explained that the plan is to move evidence duties to a civilian, return the reassigned officer to road patrol, and add the new full-time officer, which would eventually result in two additional officers on the road once hired and academy timelines allow.

Chief Lowell stated that the civilian evidence position is not negotiable this year due to significant mission creep, with officers being pulled into casework at the expense of evidence management. He noted that substantial evidence remains to be purged, including property eligible for auction and funds that could revert to the City. Adding an officer would not eliminate mission creep, as it affects all personnel.

Police Equipment Purchase

Councilor Laureti asked about the police equipment item listed on the next day's agenda. Chief Lowell explained that he had originally submitted this as a 2026 capital project but, in an effort to be fiscally responsible, attempted to move the purchase forward to this winter. The request is for department-wide firearm replacements, as the current Glock pistols are approximately nine years old and due for replacement. The department intends to transition to 9mm firearms, which would reduce ammunition costs because 9mm practice rounds are significantly less expensive than .45 caliber rounds.

The estimated cost of the replacement is \$45,000. Chief Lowell noted that handling this purchase now avoids the need to bond for it next year, especially given the limited capacity for capital projects while maintaining the 20% fund balance threshold.

Funding & Overtime Impacts

Councilor Laureti asked whether shifting funds for the purchase would affect the overtime line. Chief Lowell stated that overtime is stable for now and continues to be closely monitored. He clarified that multiple budget lines were temporarily adjusted to open the necessary purchase order and that internal adjustments would continue over the next several weeks, with any needed corrections occurring in early January.

Councilor Laureti then asked whether the \$45,000 estimate included a trade-in value for the existing firearms. Chief Lowell confirmed that there is a trade-in value, but he still must have full appropriation available to process the purchase. Councilor Laureti asked whether the trade-in credit could be applied toward next year.

Chief Lowell explained that the trade-in value for the existing firearms is \$275 per pistol, totaling approximately \$8,800. The department can either take the value as a credit, which would reduce future ammunition expenses, or request a check for the same amount. Either option results in the same overall benefit.

Councilor Laureti asked whether applying for the \$8,800 would reduce the department's expenses or be returned as revenue to the general fund. Comptroller Wells clarified that if the trade-in is issued as credit and used toward ammunition, it would reduce expenditures in the year the ammunition is purchased. If a check is issued, it must be deposited in the year it is received.

Chief Lowell noted that timing is dependent on when the firearms are delivered. The purchase order will be issued in 2025, but the trade-in credit or check may not be received until 2026. Wells advised that if the credit or check is dated in 2025, it would fall under the 2025 budget; otherwise, it would apply to 2026. She also cautioned that taking the credit as reduced expense rather than revenue affects how it appears in the budget.

Chief Lowell added that training funds have already been reduced for 2026 and emphasized that further cuts to his 2026 budget lines would not be sustainable.

New Officer Hiring Timeline

Council discussed whether adjusting the hire date for the new full-time police officer could help reduce costs, and Chief Lowell explained that pushing the start date to May 1st would not be feasible. He stated that the goal is to place the new officer into the March Police Academy so the city can have the officer on duty by September, and delaying the hire beyond that would prevent Academy enrollment. He noted that it would not make sense to budget for the position if the officer cannot enter the March Academy.

Chief Lowell confirmed that recruits are paid at the entry-level training rate—approximately \$24 per hour—while attending the Academy. Council then discussed whether a slight delay could still provide savings while maintaining the Academy timeline.

Savings from Delayed Hire

Comptroller Wells advised that delaying the hire by approximately six weeks would save about \$8,642, reducing the tax rate from roughly 5.75% to approximately 5.5%. Council agreed that allowing a short buffer, such as a mid-February start date, could achieve the savings needed while still permitting recruitment and Academy placement. The original suggestion was for a delay of 8 weeks.

Evidence Custodian Hiring

When asked about the anticipated hiring timeline for the Evidence Custodian and the availability of qualified candidates, the Chief stated that he is currently in the middle of a major evidence-room initiative. He has been working with a retired police chief who would be a preferred candidate, and he noted that there are a few others he could consider. Because the project requires continuity, he emphasized that the position cannot be put on hold and will need to be filled right away. He confirmed that the individuals he

has approached are willing to accept the position.

Target Tax Rate Discussions

Councilor Laureti stated that he would like to see the tax increase brought down to 5% if possible, and Councilor Szczerba agreed. Councilor Laureti also commended City Manager Lovell for reducing the budget as much as he did. City Manager Lovell explained that he went line by line, trimming wherever feasible. He reviewed historical spending trends, evaluated current-year projections, and made reductions in areas where he felt confident the city could responsibly cut.

Comparative Budget Analysis

Councilor Szczerba discussed comparative budget figures that he researched, noting that Utica's increase stands at 3.1%; Rome's is 2.6% for the inside district and 3.0% for the outside district; Oneida County is at 2.9%, while Madison County is at 5.0%, placing the city above that level. Councilor Szczerba questioned how those jurisdictions could arrive at their current rates and our rate was higher. Mayor Rossi and other Councilors noted that their previous-year increases may have differed from the City of Oneida's history. Councilor Winchell advised that the city experienced multiple years of zero or lower increases, which significantly affects how the current percentage appears. Without historical comparison data from other municipalities, it was agreed that meaningful evaluation is difficult.

TMA Funding

The Council acknowledged that the City would receive TMA funds this year, totaling roughly \$200,000—an atypical revenue source—which has been incorporated into the proposed budget. Several members stated that reaching an approximate 5% increase is considerably more acceptable than remaining at 6% or 7%.

Progress Toward the 5% Goal

Using the working estimate of \$50,000 per 1% change in the tax rate, the Council reviewed the progression from the earlier 6.25% figure presented at the start of the meeting. After accounting for \$32,700 and \$42,000 in reductions already identified, it was determined that an additional reduction of approximately \$42,000 would be required to bring the rate down to 5%. Achieving a 5% increase was viewed as a more reasonable outcome.

Parks & Recreation Staffing

While eliminating the full-time Parks maintenance worker could save \$31,283, the department's reliance on a single full-time employee and a reduced seasonal crew makes such a cut problematic. Mowing support is already shared across departments. Discussion also touched on a potential sale of the Kallet Civic Center, appraised at \$230,000, though Mayor Rossi and Councilor Simchik cautioned that selling the City's only other usable indoor facility (in addition to the Rec Center) would not solve the staffing concerns.

Engineering & Equipment Needs

Council reviewed staffing cuts in Water and Sewer and discussed a potential restructuring in which the Water Superintendent could assume Assistant City Engineer duties for a stipend, saving \$70,000–\$100,000. Savings from combining Planning and Codes operations were also noted. The group then discussed delaying the yearly Ferris mower purchase—cut for this budget—which saves \$5,000 now but will increase costs later due to warranty loss and reduced trade-in value, with caution expressed by Councilor Simchik that postponing equipment replacement creates larger future expenses.

Further Discussion on Parks Staffing

Council members discussed the proposed full-time Parks and Recreation maintenance position, noting that part-time status would hurt recruitment and that seasonal workers cannot replace the need for a second full-time worker. The department currently operates with just one full-time maintenance employee, and while shared services help, staffing remains tight. Delaying the hire to May fits the seasonal workload, but cutting the position would lower the tax rate to about 5.2–5.3%. Concerns were raised that eliminating it would strain operations.

Budget Balance & Structural Review

The conversation shifted to reassurance that the budget is balanced without drawing from fund balance, keeping the City above the 20% threshold. Members noted this is a major accomplishment, particularly while still adding a police officer and a Codes officer. They also confirmed that the Assistant City Engineer position remains separate for now, though future restructuring may create opportunities to merge overlapping duties between the tech role and the administrative support role.

Rental Registry Initiative

Another initiative discussed was the development of a rental registry program. Modeled after systems in cities such as Utica, Rome, Syracuse, Oswego, and Corning, the registry would require a \$150 permit renewed every three years, aligned with the residential inspection cycle. The program would include a public-facing website where tenants can verify compliance, fees paid, and inspection status. This would generate new revenue, strengthen enforcement capability, and help combat problem landlords. While not included in the current budget due to uncertainties, staff anticipate meaningful future revenue and operational benefits.

Digital Sign Advertising

Councilor Hitchings is exploring a digital sign advertising program, focusing on “happy ads” using pre-approved templates to avoid nondiscrimination issues related to business advertising. The City Attorney’s concern is that if business ads are allowed, the city must accept all businesses, even questionable ones that might not be legitimate. City Manager Lovell advised that having templates would prevent that problem. Councilor Hitchings advised that the application and pricing structure are already drafted, with estimated first-year revenue around \$10,000 at roughly \$25 per weekly ad. More ideas, including City-branded swag, are being considered for future implementation. Councilor Hitchings advised that she has other revenue-generating ideas in mind that she will explore next year.

Evaluation Process & Raises

The updated Water and Sewer sheets were distributed to ensure everyone was working from the same numbers. In response to questions from Councilors Laureti and Szczerba regarding salary increases and the evaluation process used to determine the rates, City Manager stated that he used four performance ratings: Exceptional, Proficient, Needs Improvement, and Unacceptable. Each employee was assessed across several categories, including leadership, supervision, effectiveness, judgment, initiative, communication, and cooperation, with additional comments included.

Raises were determined by combining performance ratings with market research. For the two department chiefs rated Exceptional, the City Manager noted that he could not match contract-based increases, so a compromise was reached by reviewing comparable salaries for similar positions in nearby municipalities. Their increases reflected both merit and market-rate adjustments, resulting in one receiving 11% and the other 12%. The next tier received roughly 7%, followed by 4%, and some received no increase. The City

Manager stated that while not universally popular, the decisions were fair and grounded in daily observations of performance. All agreed that an Executive Session would not be necessary to review the individual performance evaluations.

Final Tax Rate

The final tax rate increase, after all adjustments, according to City Manager Lovell, is projected to be approximately 5.3%. Comptroller Wells will finalize the remaining calculations and provide the exact figure.

Adjournment

The meeting concluded at 6:56pm.

Motion to adjourn by Councilor Hitchings

Seconded by Councilor Simchick

Ayes: 7

Nays: 0

MOTION CARRIED