

THE GENEVA CITY COUNCIL

JOURNAL OF PROCEEDINGS

SPECIAL COUNCIL MEETING

March 11, 2024 - 5:15 PM

City Hall - Second Floor Teams' Room
47 Castle Street
Geneva, NY 14456

Presiding - Steve Valentino, Mayor

1. ROLL CALL

Present: Clr. Brennan, Clr. Lavin, Clr. Grimaldi, Clr. Petropoulos, and Clr. Gillotte
Absent: Clr. Pealer and Clr. Whitfield

2. RETREAT WORKSESSION

Ian Coyle began by providing the councilors with a handout that he compiled of their collective input to serve as a reminder and be considered in the future. He explained that he divides input into four categories defined as SWOT analysis which stands for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. He emphasized that one councilor's identified strengths may not be the same for another councilor.

Ian listed the strengths that the councilors see in the city which included the location, history/ architecture, natural resources, professional staff, the colleges, the lake, public safety services, and the IDA/ LDC. Clr. Lavin added that he sees diversity as a strength, even if it brings negatives with it. Mayor Valentino pointed out that many of the items they may discuss could end up in multiple categories. Clr. Petropoulos said, compared to other cities and towns in the area, the downtown area is thriving and most storefronts are filled. Ian asked him to elaborate on how he defines thriving. Clr. Petropoulos feels they are viable, imaginative, unique, and a variety of restaurants so he feels he sees more people wandering around than he used to. He also added that the downtown area by these shops is clean and there is less litter.

Clr. Gillotte said he thinks healthcare could be a strength but also a weakness to the area. He hopes believes the transition in providers could add to the area, if they can grow, and become a major healthcare hub between Syracuse and Rochester. He explained it could also be a weakness because if they can't keep up with the surrounding standards people will go elsewhere but he'd rather people feel confident here so they don't need to.

Clr. Brennan said another strength is the central geographic location. He pointed out that we are almost equal distance between Rochester and Syracuse but also central in terms of the Finger Lakes Region.

Mayor Valentino explained he feels many of these play into momentum, which he considers to be a

great strength of the city. He believes we're heading down the right path, and Clr. Brennan agreed. He elaborated that in terms of momentum he means the ability to leverage, utilize, and execute grants to improve lakefront, downtown and neighborhoods.

Clr. Petropoulos said he feels public safety is another thing that has strengthened.

Clr. Brennan noted that he feels there is a collective interest in making Geneva a better place.

Ian moved on to direct them to the weaknesses that were identified prior to the meeting. He listed

income mix (needing to bring in more middle class), blight/decay on properties, perceived competitive tax rate/ levy, business attraction, government efficiency at times, self-esteem, and the storm/ sewer systems or aging infrastructure. Clr. Gillotte stated another is the perception of the school system which he feels is pushing a lot of potential residents away. Mayor Valentino added the amount of property off the tax rolls and limited developable land.

Clr. Petropoulos stated another is a collective drug problem that doesn't seem to be going away.

Mayor Valentino said he perceives it as more of an embedded drug problem than a permanent one, due to being located between Rochester and Syracuse, but believes there is data on that which the city manager confirmed. Clr. Lavin said when he's looked at crime in comparison to other places, he has found it is low, especially for stranger-on-stranger crime, despite the perception being that Geneva has a high crime rate. Clr. Brennan added that there is a relation to the poverty level. The city manager added many of these things are perceptions, so the lower crime rate may be a strength, and Clr. Brennan agreed that the weakness may be the perception. Ian jumped in to say there are a lot of things like that and asked them to think about how they can combat something that isn't true but is a public perception.

Next, Ian transitioned to opportunities, noting their responses which included marketing/press,

capitalizing on natural resources/ lake, Cornell Ag Tech, the lakefront, S. Exchange/ Middle St area, BID, IDA/ LDC, and state-county relations or grants. Clr. Petropoulos said, in terms of the press, he has heard that Canandaigua has an agreement with the FLT not to print anything negative about the city. Clr. Lavin and the city manager confirmed that isn't true and Clr. Lavin explained that Canandaigua just isn't covered as much. Clr. Petropoulos said the positive note then is that we're receiving more publicity and Clr. Brennan added that having a newspaper within the city is an opportunity. Ian said he read an article showing that municipalities with a newspaper in them performed better than peer cities which he found to be an interesting proposition. Clr. Brennan added that voting rates tend to be higher in places with print newspapers as well.

Ian asked them to think, if someone in Rochester or Livingston County were to mention Geneva, what

comes to people's minds because that is bigger than what the press writes. Clr. Lavin said he feels a community who writes their own news, rather than allowing someone else to, allows for more control. He desires having a micro-news hub, run by college students, to cover the news by telling our own story as opposed to the print. Clr. Brennan suggested, since the publisher is a small one, simply cultivating a better relationship rather than going through multiple layers. Clr. Petropoulos, in relation to

Ian's question, said he feels they can't control what the press does and pointed out that the negative is always put first because it catches people's attention.

Mayor Valentino suggested another opportunity is shared services, which he feels we don't do enough

of, but there are a lot of opportunities. Numerous councilors agreed and Ian asked what he would be a shared service opportunity he wishes for? Mayor Valentino answered that one is the town, to share development opportunities more freely, in order to create more developable land. Others included shared fire and police services with surrounding communities or the sewer district to increase capacity to allow for economic development. Clr. Brennan noted that the Town of Geneva is often the relationship goal that is focused on but feels Phelps and Waterloo matter just as much. City Manager Hendrix added that part of that includes looking at what agreements are already in place with those places since it isn't about the boundaries but more about the service delivery. Clr. Brennan agreed, saying he likes the idea of building off the existing agreements, rather than building from the ground up.

Mayor Valentino said he feels shared services with non-profits would benefit the city too, but

sometimes we don't fully know what they bring to the table or already provide. The city manager explained that the Ag Tech facility is an interesting public-private partnership which is going through a strategic plan process currently. She said another piece becomes how do we sustain these places here as opposed to losing them? Ian asked about the taxation, and the city manager replied that the Ag Tech Park is exempt but not all of the property is exempt. Clr. Brennan proposed using the fact they're largely tax exempt as leverage for shared services even just for relationships and knowledge. City Manager Hendrix stated knowledge is something we do get, including products, and they provide jobs which make residents as well as the connections/ relationships. She added that tech farm 2 is a project that will likely be built this year and she wanted to be clear Ag Tech and Tech farm are two different entities. Clr. Lavin added that these types of businesses supply a large percentage of the economy so going after them for taxes or payment in lieu of taxes may not be in the city's best interest. In the end, he said even if HWS and the hospital doubled what they pay and Cornell chipped in it would still be a relatively small amount in the grand scheme of things and they are businesses at the end of the day.

City Manager Hendrix said having these partnerships is key and is similar to working with other

municipalities because they have a lot of power and it is important to acknowledge that Cornell main campus and subsidiary programs operate very differently.

Clr. Lavin asked if, in terms of county resources, the city is getting their full share and as connected as

we should be? The city manager said she feels they can do better with those connections. She added that while she has had experience with the county side of things every county operates differently.

Mayor Valentino went back to the properties Cornell owns, saying they own it both in and out of the

city, so they could develop their town land and provide the developable land to us, to put housing.

City Manager Hendrix explained the sales tax agreement was settled last year, now on an annual

renewal basis to be reviewed. She said the challenge is when the population deteriorates it is easier to keep it as is since the population weighs into the agreement so it was easier to keep it where it is.

Ian next went on to threats which included recruitment/ retention, drugs/crime, dis-investment, ignorance/ parochialism, housing stock/ types, failing to capitalize on the lake, and the tax base. Clr. Brennan and Lavin pointed out that the landfills are a continued economic and environmental threat. Clr. Petropoulos feels the old army depo is another environmental threat of old firefighting foam (PFAS) which he is told has been moving toward the lake. The city manager said the water treatment plants are preparing for it and there is litigation which we have joined regarding it.

Another threat the mayor brought up inflation, which is across the board, since the rising costs of everything is a constant struggle. Ian asked when the revaluation is coming out and the city manager said they'll be going out around April 1st.

Ian said these exercises were to lead into a more defined set of goals to achieve in their time together. Going off of that he presented the acronym SMART, to set those, which is being specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound. He said to him focusing on the time, resources, and money are the most important. As for time, they can choose to set those big 20-year goals they mentioned, but they have to recognize that and continually be cognizant of their limited time. As for resources he said it is time, staff, bandwidth, equipment and more but if these don't have the time and finances matched up then they're bound for failure. Lastly, he stressed the importance of looking at money, and how you can afford these various things that have costs but acknowledged not everything does have large costs.

Clr. Lavin asked what Ian's opinion is of the city's financial position. Ian addressed that the tax rate/levy are perceived as tight but feels they aren't while clarifying he'd like to look closer to say more. He asked them to consider what they're getting for what they're paying. Clr. Lavin said he feels the evidence suggests there is no leeway but he thinks there needs to be a balance rather than all or nothing. He continued, saying he isn't trying to be cavalier about it but wants to ask how they're being proactive? Clr. Brennan said his priorities are the economics, which entails focusing on where the revenue growth is. He wants to look at ways to cut expenses or use things differently. He gave an example of the skating rink which he feels could be used differently, that could create revenue growth, as opposed to operating as a break-even operation. The city manager reminded council that there is an RFP about to go out, from the previous council, to look into how the rink operates and what revenue it generates. She added another thing to look at is looking at the fact there would need to be significant investments in order to do a lot of those changes.

Clr. Lavin expressed his urgency in getting together to set their goals and communicate those with the city manager. He said once that is done then ideas could be discussed for situations like these, saying he has proposed the colleges operating the skating rink during the winter since they are the greatest beneficiaries of it. He feels they would have no choice, and save the fee they normally spend for using it, but first there needs to be direction and

urgency. He reiterated many of the projects in the works the new council doesn't support, such as the market at the lake, so he feels these lists should be prioritized. The city manager said there needs to be time to dive into budgeting and wants them to recognize that they may cut the levy by \$600,000 but that could be gone if something like a sewer-main breaks and needs to be replaced.

Mayor Valentino asked if council understood what a \$600,000 reduction would be, cost wise, to the taxpayers? He said it would be about 8% off of the tax rate which wouldn't be a big change. Clr. Lavin said he feels he needs more information to fully understand the exact financial position of the city. The mayor said he knows it, and maybe takes it for granted, but they are in a good spot and not distressed. The city manager added that, in the actuals they were shown last meeting, they saw a surplus in the general fund which is very strong budgeting from the comptroller. She feels they've done a good job of forecasting which means they've only taxes just slightly over that they needed to in order to get the budget aligned. Looking at that she feels it is a good strategic priority to get into the budget so they can all understand and be aware of what is going on. Clr. Lavin said that is where he is coming from with wanting a monthly budget committee to provide those monthly updates and how the performance is.

The mayor said, in terms of economics, he wants efficiency and to continue the economic development projects that they've already begun. He said the DIR, OEO, and legion property are still outstanding but he wants to figure out how to finish them and get them behind us. He would like to decide a certain number of projects to have ready by the end of the year and feels that focus would drive economic development. Clr. Brennan agreed, saying they could even be reduced down to 2 or 3, for end of the year goals. Clr. Petropoulos also agreed, saying you have to spend money to make money, so if the projects can be pushed along then they can start making the city money.

Clr. Gillotte said he doesn't want to fall into the trap of being a council that only talks about taxes but also look at revenue and make both a priority. Clr. Grimaldi spoke next, stressing the government exists to spend money on things it wouldn't make sense for an individual to spend money on. He said they're going to spend money on things that don't look like it is a good investment, so he doesn't think they can solely look at what is going to create revenue. He said if that was always the case then someone else would be doing it but they need to consider what is good for the citizens. He feels they should focus on things people can justify their taxes with. While he doesn't feel our taxes are high, even if others do, he wants them to feel that what they're receiving in return is worth it. He does not believe they will make money on government projects or should try to. Ian agreed the government may not be in the business to make money but they can try to spur some things along such as encouraging development or getting properties back on the tax roll.

City Manager Hendrix jumped in to address the DRI, which isn't complete, but said they can apply for the second round. First, she wants them to give their broad vision so staff can map where to go. She said that is where the farmers market project came from, it was a way to not develop the lakefront but to use it. Clr. Petropoulos said he wants something for their money and believes finished projects will attract new ones. Clr. Gillotte agreed, saying he isn't told taxes are too high but people ask him what they are getting for them? Clr. Lavin stated this is a great city with opportunities but it is council's job to tell

the city manager what they'd like to see. He believes after that then they can deal with the realities and allow her to make it happen with their version of success. Clr. Brennan agreed, saying they should work for her, because they provide their ideas and she makes it happen. Clr. Lavin said he feels they're kept at bay whereas Clr. Brennan asked for her to guide them.

Mayor Valentino said he feels council is hungry for knowledge because there are many things that they don't know about yet. Clr. Lavin said he wants to have conversations and it is important to recognize that they were voted in and talked to the voters so now it is their turn to represent what they want.

Clr. Petropoulos asked the city manager to look at which projects are the most realistic to help them prioritize rather than struggle with conflicting projects. He asked, for example, how long the marina will take to build and is it worth it? He also wanted to hear from her what he thinks could be done more efficiently? City Manager Hendrix said in terms of efficiency now that she's been here almost two years, she is working on straightening things out such as the policy on policies, which may not be fancy or feel like a lot, but it is important. As for the marina, she said there is a timeline on the marina funding, and she doesn't know if we could get any more but the building of the marina is surprisingly fast. Another thing she is looking at is investing with the comptroller so there may be some revenue there. In terms of seeing projects build, she said most take 3-5 years, but getting it into the hands of the developer is the most important because they will be paying taxes.

City Manager Hendrix said in terms of infrastructure, the weather plays a part, and they've experienced new issues which mean planning and training. She acknowledged that the government often moves slower than people would like, noting that the DRI project began 2 city managers ago. She often hears that things looked different 20 years ago, but she pointed out that staffing looked different. For example, the recreation department had a lot more staff then and there used to be an engineering team whereas now there is one junior engineer. In terms of taxes, she said they will see an increase in the property values across the city, but that does not mean that the tax rate has to increase to match that as it is up to them to decide. Clr. Lavin said he feels a well-informed council would consider it reasonable to give that direction now so they can begin working on it.

Ian asked them to put it all together by looking at how to put the funding supports around their goals, connecting plans with staff, partnerships, the community, and communicating priorities. He shared his thoughts that they should look at how things such as taxes are compared, being data-driven, and looking at investments. Additionally, he said he's big on communication, which is a continued focused area. He suggested asking how they can get to where they want, and doing so incrementally. Ian noted that inter-governmental relations are important and collaborations seem to be a priority to council.

Ian went back to their wants which were revenue generation, economic development, relations, downtown vacancies, marketing/ communications, neighborhoods/ quality of life, and recreation. Mayor Valentino felt he captured it well and mentioned, in relation to marketing, that there was a video made for the city. It was a shared campaign about

being Geneva made between the city and numerous partners but got paused during the pandemic. He said he wasn't sure if anyone has seen it but an outsider watching it would see the potential in Geneva. He hopes that the communication person coming onto staff mid-year will be able to leverage some of these opportunities to drive a strategic goal.

Clr. Brennan said he feels if they can identify the items they want to achieve, identify the projects

that've been started, and focus on revenue that can be their brand for their time in office.

Clr. Lavin said he's suggested a leadership committee before, to emphasize what is being done in the city, and look at what can be achieved. He feels, even clean ups that cost next to nothing, can show the community that they're getting something done rather than just talking about issues. Clr. Brennan agreed, saying that's what they're yearning for, and it builds confidence in the city. Mayor Valentino said working together with community leaders is one of the city manager's goals is to improve and promote the city as a whole.

Clr. Grimaldi said Geneva had advertised Geneva as a retirement destination before 2020. He feels

that's what cleaned up S. Main Street and those higher-end people moved into the row houses and now they look great. City Manager Hendrix said that was similar to the idea of lake's edge or American legion development to become a retirement community.

Clr. Petropoulos went back to the events in the city for the community, saying that Colt Street has an

annual Easter egg hunt which they've opened up to the city. He feels this is what will generate volunteerism and thinks it's important for them to share events in different wards so the community can see them being active. Mayor Valentino said events like this can develop a neighborhood and spark more events.

City Manager Hendrix noted that events go through an event process so she told them to ensure they're communicating with Liz Toner if they're helping residents with an event. She made it clear that fees are not waived for events but neighborhood events are treated a little differently. Additionally, city sanctioned events are slightly different, but if someone wanted to do an event that isn't city sanctioned there is a process and a fee which she feels is helpful for them to know. Clr. Grimaldi asked if there was neighborhood funding budgeted for these events and the city manager answered that there is no neighborhood funding. Clr. Lavin jumped in, saying that he ran the city's basketball program for years until the funding was cut, so he raised the money for the program. He feels if they can get the financials in order he feels there is money that could and should be spent on things like this that improve the overall quality of life.

3. ADJOURNMENT

ACTION TAKEN by Clr. Petropoulos ; seconded by Clr. Grimaldi

MOVED THAT the meeting be adjourned at 7:09pm

MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY (6-2 Absent)

Nicole Wright

City Clerk

