

**CITY OF NORWALK
FINANCE/CLAIMS COMMITTEE
REGULAR MEETING
SEPTEMBER 8, 2022**

ATTENDANCE: Greg Burnett, Chair; David Heuvelman, John Kydes, Jen McMurrer, Bryan Meek, Nora Niedzielski-Eichner

STAFF: Chitsamay Lam, Comptroller; Lisa Biagiarelli, Tax Collector; Henry Dachowitz, Finance Director; Tom Ellis, Budget Director; William Ford, Tax Assessor; Joyce Lui, IT Director

OTHERS: Joe Andrasko, Oak Hills Chair; Michael Docima, Norwalk Police Department; Deputy Police Chief Susan Zecca; Patrick Donovan, Brian Reilly, QDS IT Management; John Valente, Safeground Analytics Inc.

CALL TO ORDER

Mr. Burnett called the meeting at 7:03 p.m.

ROLL CALL

Mr. Burnett called the roll. A quorum was present.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Mr. Burnett said that no emailed comments had been received. There was no one present on the call that wished to address the Committee at this time.

**APPROVE THE MINUTES OF THE FOLLOWING FINANCE
COMMITTEE MEETINGS:**

• July 14, 2022 – Regular Meeting

Mr. Burnett noted that the correct set of minutes listed on the agenda should be for August 11, 2022.

**** MR. HEUVELMAN MOVED THE MINUTES OF THE AUGUST 11, 2022 MEETING.
** THE MOTION TO APPROVE THE MINUTES OF THE AUGUST 11, 2022
MEETING AS SUBMITTED PASSED WITH FOUR (4) IN FAVOR (BURNETT,
HEUVELMAN, KYDES AND NIEDZIELSKI-EICHNER) AND TWO (2)
ABSTENTIONS (MEEKS, MCMURRER).**

Claims Committee: September 2022

Narrative on Tax Collections dated September 2022 – Receive Report and discuss.

Monthly Tax Collector’s Reports dated August 2022– Receive Report and discuss.

Ms. Biagiarelli presented her report. The staff is in the process of sending out the past due notices. These notices include the phrase “Demand Letter” which is required statutory language. She informed the Committee members that there were a number of recent incidents where checks were removed from the mail stream and cashed by fraudsters.

There will be a levy notice in the newspaper for businesses. The next tax sale will be held in 2023. A number of accounts have been turned over to the State Marshals for collection.

Mr. Burnett asked for confirmation that there were no claims over \$10,000 this month. Ms. Biagiarelli confirmed that this was so and noted that those claims were being processed.

Mr. Burnett asked if they were aware of the magnitude of the check fraud. Ms. Biagiarelli said that some of the checks were mailed from the Darien Post Office. She outlined how these checks were stolen and suggested that the residents mail their checks early and monitoring their bank statements. Another possible solution could be using echecks.

Mr. Heuvelman asked about the staff shortage. Ms. Biagiarelli said that there was one staff member out sick and there were also two vacancies.

Mr. Meek said that there were mail collection boxes that had been modified to prevent the check thefts.

Mr. Burnett thanked Ms. Biagiarelli for all her hard work.

Report of the Tax Assessor's Office: Elderly Homeowner Senior Tax Relief Programs

Mr. Ford greeted the Committee members and explained that there were two forms of benefits, a State allocation and a local allocation. Norwalk has a two tier table for allocations. He displayed the information on the screen and narrated an overview of the details for the tax relief programs.

Mr. Heuvelman asked if there were any deferral programs. Mr. Ford said that there was a deferral program and there were currently five participants in that program. The deferred amount is recorded in the land records. A resident can pay a portion of any given year’s taxes.

Ms. Niedzielski-Eichner asked if the City was offering the maximum amount of credit to be applied. Mr. Ford confirmed that the City was offering the maximum amount. The discussion moved to the percentages offered in other states.

Ms. Niedzielski-Eichner asked what percentage of the taxes due would represent. Mr. Ford said that he would sent the Committee that number. Discussion followed about the increase in home sales due to the increased real estate property value during COVID.

Ms. Niedzielski-Eichner said that there were programs for disabled individuals and veterans. She wished to know if the exemptions could be stacked, such as an individual who was both elderly and a disabled veteran. Mr. Ford reviewed the details with her.

Ms. Niedzielski-Eichner asked if there was any type of outreach to the home owners. Mr. Ford said that there was no way for him to know who qualified, but the information is available at the Senior Center and from other resources.

Mr. Ford said that he would include the information about the disabled and the veterans programs with the Committee information.

Mr. Meek had a question about the deferral calculations. Mr. Ford reviewed the details with him.

Mr. Meek said that Norwalk was fairly generous but he would like to see Norwalk offer the same type of benefits that the surrounding towns have. Mr. Ford said that it was important to remember that the median incomes in the surrounding towns were significantly different from those in Norwalk. He added that he would review the Westport Elderly Tax Relief program.

Ms. Biagiarelli added that the State has a requirement that the residents must pay at least 25% of their taxes. That includes the residents who are in the deferral program. She gave a brief overview of the statute and the details.

Mr. Burnett said that this particular report was for Informational Purposes Only. He noted that the number of program participants had increased.

Ms. Niedzielski-Eichner asked who initiated the last increase for the Elderly Tax Relief program. Mr. Burnett said that the recommendation comes from the Tax Assessor's Office and the Committee reviews it. He gave a brief overview of the process. Discussion followed.

Mr. Meek said that he would like to see the instructions expanded. He felt that the awareness was fairly thorough. He had some concerns about the application process and listed some of the details. Some of the seniors are not required to file a return. Mr. Ford said that the individuals would be advised to bring in their documentation for the staff.

Received Oak Hills Authority Monthly Financial Statements for July 2022.

Mr. Andrasko, the Oak Hills Authority Chair, greeted the Committee members. He said that the course had done well for the first month of the new fiscal year. August appeared to also be a strong month. At this time, their revenue has exceeded expectations. However, there has been a challenge in filling seasonal staff. The Authority has made the required payments to the City. The 2022 audit is underway. The cash reserves will be drawn down in the winter and they do not expect to have to draw on their line of credit. This may be the second year in a row that they have not needed to draw on the line of credit.

Mr. Burnett said that at the last month's meeting, there had been a discussion about the restaurant situation. Mr. Andrasko said that they were working on having a breakfast offering and they will continue to discuss this.

Mr. Meek said that he was pleased with the progress at Oak Hills and noted that Mr. Gartner had reviewed the financials with him. Mr. Meek felt that the Authority needed to take a stronger stand on the cash flow situation.

Mr. Burnett thanked Mr. Andrasko for his report.

RESOLUTION:

A. Requesting a Special Capital Appropriation in the amount of \$200,000 to increase the appropriation to fund the Police Cars and Vans Replacement Account #09213010-5777-C0665 to purchase three new vehicles. This capital appropriation shall be funded through a reallocation of \$200,000 of authorized but unissued general obligation bonds or notes of the City from Project #09213610-5777-C0638(Police Communications Console). The \$200,000 of bonds or notes of the City shall be issued in accordance with the provisions and terms set forth in the original bond resolutions that authorized the issuance of bonds or notes of the City for Project #09213610-5777-C0638 (Police Communications Console).

Mr. Burnett said that the two part resolution would be considered separately.

**** MS. MCMURRER MOVED THE ITEM.**

Mr. Burnett said that Deputy Chief Zecca and Mr. Docima were present to speak about the item, along with Mr. Dachowitz.

Mr. Dachowitz said that when the Police Department shifted from analog to digital communication, the project was done on time and under budget. The Police Department would like to transfer the excess funding towards the cost of three new vehicles.

Mr. Docima said that he felt this was a way to purchase the vehicles and was in favor of this.

Deputy Chief Zecca said that the communication work was still underway and would continue until sometime next year. Mr. Docima said that he believed that there were no issues with the funding for this.

Mr. Burnett said that he was pleased that they were able to find a way to make this happen.

Ms. Niedzielski-Eichner said that it was time to convert over to electric vehicles. She appreciated that they were using the existing capital budget, but urged everyone to undertake the planning necessary for an electric infrastructure. She asked if the vehicles would be hybrids.

Deputy Chief Zecca said that the vehicles would be gas powered. The electric vehicles are very hard to come by at this time.

**** THE MOTION REQUESTING A SPECIAL CAPITAL APPROPRIATION IN THE AMOUNT OF \$200,000 TO INCREASE THE APPROPRIATION TO FUND THE POLICE CARS AND VANS REPLACEMENT ACCOUNT #09213010-5777-C0665 TO PURCHASE THREE NEW VEHICLES. THIS CAPITAL APPROPRIATION SHALL BE FUNDED THROUGH A REALLOCATION OF \$200,000 OF AUTHORIZED BUT UNISSUED GENERAL OBLIGATION BONDS OR NOTES OF THE CITY FROM PROJECT #09213610-5777-C0638(POLICE COMMUNICATIONS CONSOLE). THE \$200,000 OF BONDS OR NOTES OF THE CITY SHALL BE ISSUED IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE PROVISIONS AND TERMS SET FORTH IN THE ORIGINAL BOND RESOLUTIONS THAT AUTHORIZED THE ISSUANCE OF BONDS OR NOTES OF THE CITY FOR PROJECT #09213610-5777-C0638 (POLICE COMMUNICATIONS CONSOLE) PASSED WITH FIVE (5) IN FAVOR (BURNETT, HEUVELMAN, KYDES, MCMURRER AND MEEK) AND ONE (1) OPPOSED (NIEDZIELSKI-EICHNER).**

Mr. Burnett said that as the Council moves in to the Capital Budget cycle, he would like to know if there were additional items in the Capital Budget that had come in under budget. He would like to have a Capital Item Budget review for the October or November meeting. Mr. Dachowitz explained that it was not easy to calculate the budgets, but suggested that when the project closes out, they can considered transferring funds to other projects. He added that the inflation that has occurred in the last 15 or 16 months may cause the cost of estimated projects to increase. This is being monitored carefully.

Mr. Burnett asked if there were closed out projects that had come in under budget with excessive funding available and requested a report of these projects.

B. RESOLUTION: Deauthorize in the amount of \$200,000 of authorized but unissued bonds from the Police Communications Console Account #09213610-5777-C0638 to purchase three vehicles for the Police Department.

**** MS. MCMURRER MOVED THE ITEM.**

Ms. Niedzielski-Eichner said that her earlier vote of opposition was against the fact that the vehicles were gas powered rather than electric.

**** THE MOTION TO DEAUTHORIZE IN THE AMOUNT OF \$200,000 OF AUTHORIZED BUT UNISSUED BONDS FROM THE POLICE COMMUNICATIONS CONSOLE ACCOUNT #09213610-5777-C0638 TO PURCHASE THREE VEHICLES FOR THE POLICE DEPARTMENT PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

A. Authorize the Mayor Harry W. Rilling to enter into contact with Vision Government Solutions for Revaluation of Residential Properties in an amount not to exceed \$900,000 Account No. 011321-5258 Tax Assessor Revaluation Other Professional Services.

**** MS. NIEDZIELSKI-EICHNER MOVED THE ITEM.**

Mr. Ford said that every five years, the City must do a revaluation. They have split the project into two components, residential and commercial. Vision Government has been chose to perform the residential properties.

Mr. Donovan said that his company was providing the revaluation services for the residential component. It is a large project.

Mr. Dachowitz said that there had been concerns about the last reval when the valuations increased significantly. The areas of concern were included in the RFP and were addressed. Mr. Dachowitz said that they were working on communicating with the residents. There has been a migration from New York and Boston to Norwalk. The reval will increase on the residential side and they want to have the residents understand the evaluation process and why there is an increase.

Mr. Meek asked if Vision had been used in 2013. Mr. Dachowitz said that this was so. Mr. Meek asked how they would evaluate the properties that were still in litigation from the botched reval done four years ago. Mr. Dachowitz said that this company would only be handling the residential component.

Mr. Heuvelman asked how the selection process was done. Mr. Dachowitz said that they had reviewed the submitted RFPs and selected two candidates who qualified. Mr. Dachowitz said that he had reached out to the two finalist to negotiate the costs.

Mr. Kydes asked if Council Members were involved in the RFP process. Mr. Dachowitz said that there were no Council Members involved in the RFP process.

Mr. Kydes asked for clarification regarding whether the inspectors would be visiting properties. Mr. Ford said that this would be a full physical inspection and boots on the ground. Every ten years, the State requires a physical inspection.

Ms. Niedzielski-Eichner asked why they had split the reval into pieces. Mr. Ford said that they had broken it into segments because he had done it in the past and felt that the results were more accurate.

**** THE MOTION TO AUTHORIZE THE MAYOR HARRY W. RILLING TO ENTER INTO CONTACT WITH VISION GOVERNMENT SOLUTIONS FOR REVALUATION OF RESIDENTIAL PROPERTIES IN AN AMOUNT NOT TO EXCEED \$900,000 ACCOUNT NO. 011321-5258 TAX ASSESSOR REVALUATION OTHER PROFESSIONAL SERVICES PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

Authorize the Mayor Harry W. Rilling to enter into contact with Safeground Analytics Inc. for Revaluation of Commercial Properties in an amount not to exceed \$160,000 Account No. 011321-5258 Tax Assessor Revaluation Other Professional Services.

**** MS. MCMURRER MOVED THE ITEM.**

Mr. Ford said that Mr. Valente, of Safeground Analytics Inc. would present the item. Mr. Valente said that he had been in the field for 40 years. His company has been working in Norwalk on the new mall. The company is focused on cooperation, collaboration and communication. He said that they work on giving the residents and business owners an explanation. While the owner/resident may not agree with the assessment, they often have a new understanding of the process. Discussion followed.

Mr. Meek said that there were still a number of commercial properties that were still in adjudication. Mr. Ford said that they had started with 435 properties that were in adjudication, but now were down to less than 89 outstanding properties.

Mr. Meek asked about the large percentage increases that some properties experienced. Mr. Ford reviewed the process. Mr. Dachowitz said that they settle when they feel it is appropriate. When no agreement can be reached, they go to court. They are working hard to get the values correct.

**** THE MOTION TO AUTHORIZE THE MAYOR HARRY W. RILLING TO ENTER INTO CONTACT WITH SAFEGROUND ANALYTICS INC. FOR REVALUATION OF COMMERCIAL PROPERTIES IN AN AMOUNT NOT TO EXCEED \$160,000 ACCOUNT NO. 011321-5258 TAX ASSESSOR REVALUATION OTHER PROFESSIONAL SERVICES PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

Authorize the Mayor Harry W. Rilling to enter into contract with Quality Data Services, Inc. for a one-year managed. Cloud service in an amount not to exceed \$22,500 Account No. 09221370-5777-C0375.

**** MS. MCMURRER MOVED THE ITEM.**

Ms. Lui presented the item. She said that Mr. Reilly from Quality Data Services was present to answer questions. The server will be exclusive to the City of Norwalk. The current provider has the information on a shared server.

Mr. Dachowitz said that he felt that having one company handling the software while another one is the host was dangerous. He was in favor of this contract.

Mr. Reilly said that they would be the one vendor that they will have to call if there is a problem. They will handle the problems for the City.

Mr. Meek said that it was a great price for the service. Mr. Reilly said that there were some advantages in terms of paying for software licenses.

Mr. Burnett asked about cyber security. Mr. Reilly reviewed the details with the Committee including the type of data that would be stored on the server.

Mr. Meek said that he was pleased with the direction that the City was moving in terms of cloud storage.

Ms. Niedzielski-Eichner asked about renewals and what the termination clause addressed. Mr. Dachowitz said that this was a one year contract, but that they were expecting to have a long term relationship with the company. He added that he expected that there would be another request before the year was out for a long term contract.

**** THE MOTION TO AUTHORIZE THE MAYOR HARRY W. RILLING TO ENTER INTO CONTRACT WITH QUALITY DATA SERVICES, INC. FOR A ONE-YEAR MANAGED. CLOUD SERVICE IN AN AMOUNT NOT TO EXCEED \$22,500 ACCOUNT NO. 09221370-5777-C0375 PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

ADJOURNMENT

**** MS. NIEDZIELSKI-EICHNER MOVED TO ADJOURN.**

**** THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

The meeting adjourned at 8:46 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

S. L. Soltes
Telesco Secretarial Services