

MEETING SUMMARY

The RTM Transit Committee
February 13, 2020 7:30 PM

Transit Committee Members Present

Peter Gold, Chair
Candace Banks
Amy Kaplan
Greg Kraut
Sal Liccione
Dick Lowenstein

Other RTM Members Present

Karen Kramer

Officials Present

Chief Foti Koskinas, Westport Police Department
Deputy Chief Sam Westport Police Department
Pewte Ratkiewich, Director, Westport Public Works Department
Martin Fox, Director, Westport Transit District
Patsy Cimarosa, Director, Westport Transit District

Members of the Public Present

Pippa Bell Ader
Jennifer Johnson

The Committee met to hear from the Police Department about Railroad Parking and traffic, from the Director of Public Works and from the Directors of the Westport Transit District about their operations and their plans for the upcoming year and to discuss the Committee's priorities for the year.

Railroad Parking

Chief Koskinas provided an overview of Railroad Parking operations which includes custodial services such as changing lightbulbs, cleaning the stations and bathrooms, plowing the lots and clearing the platforms, and providing security. It is a very labor intensive operation. He pointed out that Railroad Parking spaces have increased by 23% since 2014 without the need to acquire more land through the more efficient use of the existing lots and that Railroad Parking operations have operated in the black since 2011, including capital projects. Funds for Railroad Parking operations come from annual parking permit fees, daily parking fees and rentals from concessions at the train stations.

The wait list for annual parking permits is approximately 18 months long now and will be approximately 12 months long by Labor Day after additional permits are issued in July to replace the permits for people who do not renew their annual permits. About 30% to 35% of permit holders are non-Westporters.

Chief Koskinas said future projects include repaving Lot 4 at Saugatuck and Lots 2 and 3 at Greens Farms. The stairway at Lot 5 at Saugatuck is also slated for repair to improve safety. Future budgets may also include a transfer to the Public Works Department to cover the cost of services the Public Works Department provides to the Railroad Parking operations.

Traffic

Chief Koskinas explained that the Police Department has six officers and one supervisor on the road for the day and evening shifts with fewer officers on the road for the late night shift when things are less busy. He used to

have two officers dedicated solely to traffic enforcement but that no longer happens. The officers on patrol use whatever time is available to them while not engaged in more pressing concerns during their normal shifts to enforce traffic regulations. Chief Koskinas said there were approximately 1,300 fewer traffic stops this year than last year. He attributed this in large part to the time needed for officers to download information from their body cameras and to the time needed to respond to the volume of Freedom of Information requests the Department receives. This year he added back one officer dedicated to traffic enforcement which has resulted in a significant increase in enforcement activity. He is also proposing to acquire new smartphones which will permit officers to save camera data in real time, thus freeing up additional patrol time which can be used for traffic enforcement.

Pete Ratkiewich pointed out that the Town only owns two of the traffic lights in town, both on Main Street. All the other traffic lights in Town are owned by the State and the timing of all traffic lights in town, including the two owned by the Town, is controlled by the State.

Chief Koskinas said he encourages residents to report problems to the Police Department, either directly or through their RTM representatives. However, he cautioned that care needs to be taken not to overpromise when talking to constituents as the Police Department needs to prioritize how its resources are used.

One member of the Committee suggested the Police provide data on traffic enforcement to the public so help reassure them that things are being done. However, it was pointed out that this may be counterproductive if the data is mis-interpreted and creates more e-mails and phone calls to the Police. Several Committee members also suggested the Board of Finance should provide more funds for traffic enforcement. The use of passive traffic control measures such as "No Trucks" and "No Through Trucks" signs and speed humps was also discussed as they do not require additional manpower. Signage has to comply with State requirements and speed humps impede fire trucks, slowing down response times and shortening the truck's useful lives.

Public Works

Pete Ratkiewich explained that the Public Works Department is responsible for building and maintaining the Town's roads, bridges, sidewalks, bike lanes, parking lots, road markings etc. The Town has 123 miles of road and the Public Works Department has been trying to upgrade their condition for the last 10 years. In 2008 the Town's roads averaged a rating of 66 to 68 on a scale of one to 100 with a target of 72. The average now is above 72. However, maintenance of the Town's sidewalks has been neglected with overall sidewalk condition averaging about 50 on a one to 100 scale. The goal is to bring the sidewalks up to a 72 rating over time. Mr. Ratkiewich explained that the Public Works Department is trying to develop a policy to help determine where and when to build new sidewalks and repair existing sidewalks. Priority areas are sidewalks near schools, downtown, in Saugatuck, along Riverside from downtown to the train station, to provide access to Compo Beach, and along Compo and Hillspoint Roads. He said sidewalk repair and construction is costly, about \$200,000 to fix less than one mile of sidewalk. He is seeking state and Federal grants to help with the costs but has a manpower shortage to pursue and implement grants.

Mr. Ratkiewich said he would be in favor of a change to the Town's sidewalk ordinance to make homeowners responsible for shoveling the snow on the sidewalks fronting their property. He said Westport is one of only two out of the 169 towns in Connecticut that don't require this. Commercial landlords are already responsible for repairing sidewalks in front of their businesses if the Public Works Department thinks the sidewalk's condition is a public safety hazard, as well as shoveling the snow on those sidewalks. He said changing the sidewalk ordinance to make homeowners responsible for the sidewalks in front of their homes would help get the sidewalks cleared faster as he only has 14 people who can work on clearing sidewalks and would save significant dollars now spent on clearing sidewalks, funds which could be put to use repairing sidewalks at a more rapid pace. He also pointed out that the problem would increase as more and more sidewalks are built.

Mr. Ratkiewich said bridge repair is also a priority as many bridges are in poor condition. However, he said there are State and Federal funds available to pay for at least a portion of the cost of these repairs.

Mr. Ratkiewich said creating bike paths poses a challenge as the Town does not have sufficient right of way on many roads to create bike paths.

Westport Transit District

Mr. Fox and Ms. Cimarosa went over the attached presentation. In addition, they pointed out that the job of Director of the Westport Transit District has become a significant part-time job. It is their feeling that it is not sustainable as a volunteer position.

Committee Priorities

Following the presentations the Committee decided to focus on the following issues:

- Provide input to the Public Works Department on a sidewalk policy
- Propose an ordinance requiring residents to clear the sidewalks in front of their homes
- Review Planning and Zoning regulations to get a better understanding of their impact on traffic and parking
- Review and make recommendations on how best to restructure the governance of the Westport Transportation District and how to better coordinate its operations with Railroad Parking, with special consideration being given to combining both Railroad Parking and the Westport Transit District into one operation with a paid, part-time director
- Review Railroad Parking to determine the optimal number of spots needed to serve Westport's needs and the fees for annual parking permits and daily parking.

The meeting adjourned at approximately 12:00 PM.

Peter Gold, Chair
RTM Transit Committee