

ASH PLANS \$3M TO UPDATE INFRASTRUCTURE

Leaky pipes, old computer servers, rough roadway surfaces and a new park are among the items to be fixed, replaced, acquired or constructed through the City's annual "Capital Improvement Plan" filed by City Manager Jay Ash this week. The CIP calls for \$3 million in spending on infrastructure, a reduction of 27% over last year's CIP.

"We remain steadfast in our commitment to vital infrastructure improvements and even more steadfast in our commitment to maintain the City's overall fiscal health. While the fact that we can even fund a CIP in this terrible economic environment is a noteworthy achievement, we can't lose sight of another fact: continued local aid reductions are seriously threatening our ability to address both today's needs and those of tomorrow," reflected Ash, whose CIP is entitled aptly entitled "Steadfast."

The tenth CIP Ash has filed, the most recent addition follows the previous nine in providing for projects in six main areas: Utility Enhancements, typically water and sewer pipes; Surface Enhancements, like streets and sidewalks; Parks & Open Space, including the rehabilitation of existing and construction of new parks; Public Buildings & Facilities, supporting repairs at City Hall and other City buildings; Equipment Acquisition, which includes assets from computers to plows, and Public Safety, providing for the capital needs of the Police and Fire Departments. Also like the previous nine, Ash's new CIP identifies funding for the first year of implementation and plans the City's capital needs for the next four years after that.

"The CIP continues to be a systematic and comprehensive approach to maintaining, updating and, where prudent, expanding our capital resources. We've been doing them here for fifteen years and, as a result, we are promoting the reliability of our entire system, avoiding 'spikes' in costs that ignoring capital improvements can sometimes cause and, most importantly, we're preventing the types of failures that can cause public inconvenience, or worse," stressed Ash.

In terms of categories, Utility Enhancements will receive \$1.4 million for improvements to sewer lines on Webster Avenue and John Street, as well as further design work for the reconstruction of Washington Avenue and a future project on Lash Street. Another \$890,000 is programmed for Surface Enhancements, including the completion of the County Road and Chester Avenue projects, the resurfacing of portions of Marlboro Street and Spencer Avenue, and a pilot "traffic calming" project to reduce speeding on Grove Street. The latter was part of a community-led visioning process organized by Chelsea Neighborhood Developers (CND) and embraced by the City.

“The improvements above and below ground are critical projects,” said City Council President Leo Robinson. “For generations, those types of projects weren’t completed, and we’re still playing catch-up as a result. That’s a major difference between today and yesteryear; even in bad times, we are still finding ways to do the right thing by our infrastructure and, as a result, our residents and businesses that depend on it.”

The single biggest ticket item, at \$488,000, is funding being set aside for the acquisition of land and a portion of the construction costs for a new park in the Box District. Ash said there are still numerous details to work out with CND, the City’s primary partner on the development of the Box District and the entity with controlling interest in the parcel targeted for the new park. However, he says the City remains committed to again expanding its inventory of parks.

“This will be the sixth new park we’ll build-out during my tenure,” boasted Ash, who also credited the City Council with its leadership on open space development. “It’s quite remarkable in an older, built-out community that we continue to find places to develop meaningful open space that enhances local neighborhoods and makes our overall community greener.”

Councillor-at-Large Roseann Bongiovanni said she couldn’t agree more.

“It’s fantastic, what we’ve been able to accomplish on both maintaining our existing parks and creating new and enlivening open spaces. The new parks and walkways add significantly to our quality of life here in Chelsea. And,” hinted Bongiovanni, the City’s leading advocate for open space, “there’s even more to come!”

Other projects of note include the replacement of skylights at City Hall and the rotunda at the Library, both to prevent water damage from leaks. Absent are major investments in capital equipment for public safety, which has typically been included in previous CIPs.

“This past year, we made an historic commitment to the Fire Department, funding both the rehabilitation of the Engine 3 Firehouse and the acquisition of two new pieces of equipment. Even with the Federal funds that are paying for a bulk of the firehouse work, the remaining City funds approach \$2 million. With that commitment and the general state of the police cars being in good working order, we’ve decided to skip a year of funding major projects in Public Safety, in large part to watch the overall spending levels in the CIP,” explained Ash.

Councillor-at-Large Calvin Brown was especially pleased to see the City continuing to practice fiscal discipline.

“We have to be careful in this very difficult period of municipal finance not to spend or borrow our way into the poor house. This CIP is affordable and will make important investments in many aspects of our infrastructure. I’d say that’s a win on both matters!” projected Brown.

The CIP goes before a subcommittee review of the City Council and then a public hearing being planned for the early spring. If all goes well, available funding will be in place for a July 1st start for the new projects. In terms of funding, approximately half is expected to be received through a variety of State grant programs.

“We remain grateful that Representatives (Eugene) O’Flaherty and (Kathi-Anne) Reinstein continue to find infrastructure funding for specific projects. Without that support, we’d be doing only half as much, which would be a total shame,” concluded Ash.

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