



Onondaga County Legislature

HASSINA K. ADAMS
Clerk

NICOLE WATTS
Chairwoman

SPENCER BERG
Deputy Clerk

COUNTY FACILITIES COMMITTEE MINUTES – AUGUST 18, 2026 CHAD RYAN, CHAIR

MEMBERS PRESENT: Mr. Ryan, Mr. Thompson, Mr. Bush, Leader Hernandez, Mr. McCarron
ALSO PRESENT: Ms. Denton, Chairwoman Watts

Chair Ryan called the meeting to order at 3:03 p.m., and the previous meeting's minutes were approved.

1. DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION: Brian Kelley, Commissioner

- a. **RESOLVED**, that Onondaga County applied for financial assistance from the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation ("OPRHP") under the Clean Water, Clean Air, and Green Jobs Environmental Bond Act of 2022, Article 58, Title 5 of the Environmental Conservation Law for the purpose of funding of the Beaver Lake Nature Center Boardwalk Replacement Phase 2
- County has already accepted these grant funds under Resolution No. 170-2025
- New York State has requested that this resolution be adopted in the exact format it requires, including additional language needed to initiate the transfer of funds
- Grant is necessary for the second phase of the boardwalk project at Beaver Lake; phase two
- Replacing the remaining 523 feet of boardwalk
- First phase was completed last spring; covered 2,053 feet of boardwalk
- Change to the correct wording to transfer funds and finish the project

Questions/ Comments:

- Mr. Thompson: Can you elaborate on the change in the wording and any material effect that might come along with it?
- Mr. Kelley: The change of the wording is literally one sentence; in the first resolution, the county did not cite the Clean Water, Clean Air and Green Jobs Environmental Bond Act of 2022, Article 58, Title 5 of the Environmental Conservation Law. That's the only change to the wording
- Mr. Thompson: So that also doesn't really change anything materially in terms of the way the operation is going to be conducted?
- Mr. Kelley: Not at all

A motion was made by Ms. Hernandez, seconded by Mr. Bush, to approve this item; MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY.

2. HARBORVIEW AQUARIUM: Brian Donnelly, Deputy County Executive

- a. **INFORMATIONAL:** Aquarium Project Status Update
- Harborview Aquarium is located in the Inner Harbor; total square footage of the building is just under 80,000 square feet

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- Approximately 600,000 gallons, including salt and fresh water tanks
- Will have 19 signature exhibits, including five touch exhibits where visitors can interact with the animals, and 16 jewel tanks
- Fully outfitted classroom, with the educational component overseen by the MOST, as well as an event center for private events and space for community events
- One of the walls in the exhibit center will look into the main tank
- 297 different types of saltwater animals inside the facility and 74 freshwater animals
- Construction is ongoing; currently completing the life support systems, in the process of commissioning and turnover, and doing rock and vegetation work in the tanks
- Exterior site work, grading, sidewalks, and landscaping is underway
- Encountered a challenge this summer with the main piece of acrylic for the large tank, manufactured in Italy
 - Due to its size, not easily transported
 - Height and width requirements applied both in Italy and upon arrival in the United States
 - Challenging to get it across Italy from one side of the country to the other; getting it on a ship and over to the United States was the easy part
 - Once it arrived, required transport by road across three states, a portion of New Jersey, a portion of Pennsylvania, and then into New York
 - Height and width requirements make that leg challenging as well; those requirements and available routes can change on almost a day to day basis, depending on road construction
 - With help from the Canal Corporation and former Mayor Walsh, the piece was brought up the Erie Canal by barge directly into the Inner Harbor; this caused some delay to the project
- Current target is a fall 2026 opening; no more specific date available yet
- Still reviewing the admission structure for pricing; will have different pricing for adults and children ages 3-12, discounted tickets for students, veterans, and seniors, special pricing for student groups and field trips, and family and individual season passes
 - Pricing is being developed based on the feasibility study; a review of pricing at other large aquariums nationally suggests the facility's pricing will be very reasonable
- County Executive expected to have additional announcements about the facility in the near future

Questions/Comments:

- Mr. Thompson: You mentioned the unexpected delay with the massive acrylic being shipped from Italy? With the timetable changing, has there been any change you've noticed in the overall budget for the project?
- Mr. Donnelly: No, it didn't cause any increase in cost to the county for those delays; when we were here the last time, our budget was just shy of \$104 million, around \$103.8 to \$103.9 million, and that's where the project still stands
- Mr. Thompson: You said the construction is ongoing; I know just from being a big fan of the zoo, one of the things they run into is like the aquarium with the penguins in it sometimes having leaks. How are things going with the tanks being installed here? Are there any leaks, are they holding water?
- Mr. Donnelly: To the best of my knowledge, everything is running well; we're in the process of doing leak testing, but there's nothing that has happened that wasn't planned for or isn't being adjusted for
 - They all have to be filled and held for a certain period of time before we have a comfort level that there are no leaks; if we find any, we'll go through and address them and move forward
- Mr. Thompson: One of the ongoing questions was about parking; has there been any development on your plans for parking to accommodate the number of visitors you want to see on any given day?
- Mr. Donnelly: Parking is addressed based on the feasibility study, I believe, and anyone behind me can correct me if I'm misspeaking; at peak time we believe we're going to need space for 300 vehicles,

allotted between the spaces we have on site and an agreement between ZoOceanarium, our operator, and the adjoining property owner, which will have more than enough space

- Mr. Ryan: Is that paved?
- Mr. Donnelly: It is not currently paved, but it will be treated; I'm not going to say it's going to have parking lot paving, but it will certainly be very parkable
- Mr. Thompson: And who will be responsible for preparing that parking area?
- Mr. Donnelly: ZoOceanarium; they will
- Mr. Ryan: So will that be not a pay lot but a free lot for attendance to the aquarium, or is that separate?
- Mr. Donnelly: It won't be, it's undetermined at this point whether ZoOceanarium will manage the lot itself, i.e. staff it, or contract that out to a parking operator; as far as the lot being paid, I don't know, I'd have to go back and look at the cost analysis and feasibility study, I don't know if it's going to be a free lot or a charge lot
- Mr. Ryan: And the ZoOceanarium contract, how long is that contract for, that you guys had done originally?
- Mr. Donnelly: I don't know; typically county contracts are either three or five years with three one-year renewals
- Mr. Ryan: We haven't been amending as we go through this project?
- Mr. Donnelly: The only amendment we've done so far was on the parking, to put that in their scope of services, because they needed that for insurance purposes
- Mr. Thompson: Speaking to the contract with ZoOceanarium, one of the things we talked about, and Commissioner Donnelly was very kind to reassure us, was AZA accreditation across the board
 - You mentioned there are going to be a number of touch tanks; I know as a lay person at least the level of animal care that AZA has.
 - Can you describe what the touch tanks might be and how they still fit within that AZA model? Because I know from my experience, again at the zoo, they've scaled back more and more contact between any animals and any visitors
- Mr. Donnelly: I absolutely cannot. There are people here that can
- Mr. Kelley: So yeah, in terms of AZA accreditation that is happening, it's about a year and a half process; they start with a mentorship program, and then your first inspection with the AZA is already pretty tough, so they give you some time to gear up
 - We've been in contact with them, speaking of them; because the zoo is an AZA-accredited institution, currently any animal species that comes from an AZA program, our zoo team, our zoo director Dan Meates, has to inspect that himself to make sure these animals are coming to a safe place, we wouldn't allow them to come if Dan didn't give it the okay
 - The AZA puts a lot of faith into our other AZA-accredited institution to make sure these things are up to snuff; as you know, we've gone through two accreditations in the past year and a half and our relationship is very solid
 - Everything that's going to be in that aquarium in this vein will have AZA's blessing for sure, and Dan is certainly going to be the ambassador to all that on our zoo team
- Mr. Thompson: Really appreciate that; to the extent that you can, can you give a sense of how the touch tanks, the contact with the animals, falls within the AZA paradigm? For instance, you used to be able to pet Siri the elephant, and then AZA guidelines became more stringent, around visitor and animal contact
- Mr. Kelley: That is per species
- Mr. Thompson: These are particular species that are okayed for that?
- Mr. Kelley: That is correct, they wouldn't be going in those tanks if they weren't. So any of that, if we had otters, in certain aquariums you have otters you can't touch, you have otters you can pet their paws; that is all taken care of beforehand, all checked out, all inspected, all talked about before the AZA would even consider signing off on those animals
- Mr. Ryan: While we're on the topic of the animals, have we procured all these animals? Are they there?

- Mr. Kelley: That is probably a better question; Jonathan from ZoOceanarium is here, he could probably answer that
- Mr. Evans: Jonathan Evans, I'm the executive director of the Aquarium. We have sourced probably 95% of the animals at this point; there's a portion of them that are in some of our other facilities that we operate, some other projects, that are being cared for as we speak, just working through the logistics on the timing and getting those transferred in. But all of the animals have been sourced, not all of them are in holding or in our possession just yet
- Mr. Thompson: Can you speak to the process of getting them here? That seems like a delicate process
- Mr. Evans: Varies by the animal; sometimes we use our own transport truck unit, some of our smaller deliveries, again our internal transfers, we can move from one of our facilities to the next
 - Some of them will go to other AZA-accredited institutions to grab those animals, and we've got a whole rig with the water temperature and generator on it to keep those animals happy and healthy; anything beyond our capabilities, we'll have a contract with some of our really reputable known suppliers to help us out with those bigger animals, some of our bigger sharks that are a little bit more than our ability
 - We try to work with AZA partners and we have a core group of suppliers and logistics personnel that can help us even with international transports, customs, that kind of stuff, even bringing in some of our more exotic animals into the country as well
- Mr. Thompson: And then I think we spoke about this in the past, when we have the animals here, are they part of the species survival program? Are we trying to breed within so we're not catching wild?
- Mr. Kelley: They are 100%, they will be part of the species survival program; those species will all be part of that program
- Mr. Ryan: While Jonathan is standing there, at the zoo the AZA accreditation comes from Dan Meates' accreditation level, or whatever the technical term may be; is that the same as with Jonathan, or is it the entity?
- Mr. Kelley: So what would happen is ZoOceanarium would go out and apply for AZA accreditation for the facility, under ZoOceanarium's name, under the Harborview Aquarium facility
- Mr. Ryan: I thought that was the case
- Mr. Bush: As far as accreditation, are there different levels or different types of accreditation for aquariums?
- Mr. Evans: There are different accrediting groups; for AZA specifically, it's kind of a one-stop shop accreditation, you either meet the criteria in the process or you don't. There are other organizations, the ZAA for example is an alternative to the AZA, but for our specific facility we are seeking specifically AZA accreditation
- Mr. Bush: Aren't some accredited as recreational and some for research?
- Mr. Kelley: Not through the AZA
- Mr. Evans: That's correct, again the AZA, there's one single accreditation for the AZA facilities, specifically
- Mr. Kelley: The same accreditation as our zoo, so it's the same process; they would go through the same accreditation process at the aquarium as we did at the zoo
- Mr. Ryan: Correct me if I'm wrong, but the AZA is your gold standard, and that's why we're talking about the ZAA; it's good, but the AZA is what you want?
- Mr. Kelley: Right
- Ms. Hernandez: We get a lot of calls and we were telling our constituents it was going to open for Labor Day, so folks, you know, we're planning things. You did say fall, but we know fall is September, October, November; do you have more of a rough estimate, is it going to be November or October?
- Mr. Donnelly: It will be sometime between September 21st and December 21st. I don't mean to be facetious; we are working to open it as soon as possible, it's in the community's interest, it's in our interest, but I'm not in a position right now where I can commit to a date

- Mr. Thompson: But are you suggesting that Santa might be bringing the last fish?
- Mr. Donnelly: I would not suggest that; I would like to think that would not be, but sometimes Santa comes early too
- Ms. Hernandez: I think it's going to be too cold to get through the ice with those animals
- Ms. Denton: My question is more like, once this facility is open, how does the maintenance and maintaining the structure work? Is that ZoOceanarium?
- Mr. Donnelly: Yeah, so day-to-day responsibilities of the facility fall to ZoOceanarium; custodial, maintenance, making sure the life support equipment is working, that's where their expertise comes in. From a building perspective, it's a county facility; if a window were to get broken or a door threshold needs to be replaced, they very well may wind up calling facilities to address that
- Ms. Watts: Does ZoOceanarium have labor agreements or community benefit agreements in play at all so far? I'm wondering if the workers who are going to be working at the aquarium are going to be unionized or represented
- Mr. Donnelly: That was not a requirement in their contract
- Ms. Watts: So, so far there is nothing in place?
- Mr. Donnelly: Correct
- Mr. Bush: The revenue stream, there will be admission fees; will those fees come into the county's general budget, or will they go to the contract that's running the place?
- Mr. Donnelly: So the way the contract is structured with ZoOceanarium is that the county is responsible for costs, and will receive revenues; so they're paid a flat fee to operate the facility on an annual basis. They don't share in revenue, nor do they share in expense; whatever they spend gets billed to the county, we reimburse them for that amount and offset it with the revenue that comes in
- Ms. Hernandez: And this is just more of a statement. I know that you do the hiring, right, and you're coming to an environment where we're very impoverished; we wanted to make sure that stayed kind of community based, with a wage that can allow and help those folks come out of poverty but not be in a situation where they're working at the aquarium and still not getting paid enough to live

C. Adjournment

A motion was made by Mr. McCarron, seconded by Mr. Thompson, to adjourn the meeting; MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY.

The meeting was adjourned at 3:28 p.m.



Respectfully submitted,
SPENCER BERG, Deputy Clerk
Onondaga County Legislature