

Finance Committee Meeting Minutes Thursday, March 2, 2023

Present: (Z – zoom)

Finance Committee

Roll Call 11 in attendance

Dennis Crowley (Chair)

Douglas Shea (Vice Chair)

Josette Burke (Clerk)

Brian Bain

Audrey Grace

Jean Kenney

Adrienne Rogers

Mark Sullivan

Mark Trudell

Lisa Van der Linden

Scott Wassel

Absent: Kathleen Foley Greulich, Leigh Ann Luetzen, Steve Hendricks, Lawrence Pitman

Additional attendees:

Jim Johnson, Patrick Shield, Tamarah Green, Scott Gustafson, John Hasenjaeger, Bill Abbott, Jeff Fisher

The meeting was called to order by Dennis Crowley at 7:00pm.

Meeting minutes of recorded meetings include time stamps from the video for viewing actual content.

The video can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-V2YsVBIUQ0>

Approval of minutes is based off of the printed word and not the video

FY23 Snow and Ice Budget Article (1:11)

Town Administrator Jim Johnson recommended No Action on the Snow and Ice Budget Article.

(1:24) Motion by Douglas Shea and seconded by Brian Bain for **No Action** on Article 9.

The motion passed 11-0-0.

Jim Johnson Recommended No Action on the two Sewer & Water current in-year budget adjustment articles.

(2:50) Motion by Josette Burke and seconded by Douglas Shea for **No Action** on Article 5.

The motion passed 11-0-0.

(3:10) Motion by Mark Trudell and seconded by Brian Bain for **No Action** on Article 7.

The motion passed 11-0-0.

Walpole Media Corporation FY24 Budget (3:34)

Tamarah Green, Executive Director of the Walpole Media Corporation, gave a brief summary of Walpole Media's work for the town and presented its FY24 Budget. She stated that funding for Walpole Media comes entirely from cable television subscribers and has no impact on the Town's budget.

Mark Sullivan asked how many staff members Walpole Media employs. Tamarah Green stated that there are three full-time staff members and one part-time staff member, not including some additional work done by the high school TV Production teacher. Finances are audited by Walpole Media's own CPA Firm.

Brian Bain asked why Telview's costs have increased significantly. Tamarah Green stated that they had refrained from raising fees during COVID, but have now had to substantially increase them since the end of the pandemic. Dennis Crowley asked what would happen to Walpole Media as fewer and fewer younger residents are subscribing to cable. Tamarah Green stated that they and other municipal cable corporations are brainstorming alternate means of revenue, such as business sponsorships and monetizing video-on-demand services.

Josette Burke commended the Walpole Media Corporation's excellent work for the Town. Jim Johnson stated that cable subscription numbers are not declining at such a rate that he is worried in the short term, but long-term there may be some difficult decisions to make. He acknowledged that the service is essential and that he'd find a way to make things balance out. The Town has recently reached an agreement in contract extension negotiations with Comcast and is close to the end of negotiations with Verizon.

Lisa Van der Linden asked about the Walpole Media Corporation's grant. Tamarah Green stated that Walpole Media provides an educational grant to help fund school technology classes for the younger generation. Mark Trudell asked if unspent money rolls over to the next year. Jim Johnson confirmed that all unspent money rolls over to the next year to help offset costs of the next budget.

(14:50) Motion by Mark Trudell and seconded by Douglas Shea for **Favorable Action** on Article 17 in the amount of \$519,414,059.

The motion passed 10-0-1 (Jean Kenney abstained)

Surplus Properties Article (15:35)

Jim Johnson stated that Article 18 would authorize the Select Board to sell three town-owned properties: The Old Town Hall, The East Walpole Library, and the vacant lot on Plain Street.

Dennis Crowley questioned whether the Old Town Hall will be easy to sell. Jim Johnson confirmed that because of the historical nature of the building, renovations would be difficult due to the requirement to keep the exterior how it is.

Jim Johnson stated that the East Walpole Library is zoned for residential and could be converted into a single-family home. Douglas Shea asked if the Town would have to pay to clean up any hazardous materials on the property. Jim Johnson confirmed that the Town could sell it as it is.

Josette Burke asked about the parking situation at the Old Town Hall. Jim Johnson stated that the Fire Station parking lot behind Jalapenos could be converted into parking for the Old Town Hall and the Fire Department lot could be moved elsewhere.

Mark Sullivan asked if Walpole could keep the Old Town Hall but just stop paying all utility and maintenance fees. Jim Johnson stated that he would not let the Old Town Hall fall apart on his watch. If this Article does not pass Town Meeting, that will be his message that the residents of Walpole want the Town to invest in the Old Town Hall and he will consider other options. A lot of work has gone into studies on the Old Town Hall and all findings point to the property being incredibly expensive to maintain convert into anything useful.

Josette Burke asked whether renovation would be easier if the Old Town Hall had not been deemed a historical building. Adrienne Rogers stated that it would be easier, but also some buyers may be more interested in purchasing the property because it has been deemed historical.

Lisa Van der Linden expressed her desire to keep the Old Town Hall a municipal property but acknowledged that it would be good to bring the article to Town Meeting so that they have a mandate from the people. She asked if it would be possible to break the article up in case people have differing opinions on the three properties. Jim Johnson stated that the RTMs could vote separately on the three properties as

Brian Bain stated that he feels the Town has done all it could to come up with ways to utilize the Old Town Hall and that it was time to see whether anyone would be willing to take it off Walpole's hands.

(36:32) Motion by Brian Bain and seconded by Josette Burke to break Article 18 into three separate motions.

The motion passed 11-0-0.

(38:40) Motion by Douglas Shea and seconded by Brian Bain for **Favorable Action** Article 18A (Old Town Hall).

The motion passed 11-0-0.

Mark Trudell wished to make it clear that this unanimous vote simply conveys the Finance Committee's view that Town Meeting members should be the ones who decide whether the Select Board should be granted authority to sell the Old Town Hall if they choose to do so.

(41:00) Motion by Mark Trudell and seconded by Brian Bain for **Favorable Action** on Article 18B (East Walpole Library).

The motion passed 11-0-0.

(41:20) Motion by Mark Trudell and seconded by Jean Kenney for **Favorable Action** on Article 18C (Property at the intersection of Kingsbury Street and Plain Street).

The motion passed 11-0-0.

Mark Sullivan asked where the proceeds of any sale would go if the Article passes. Jim Johnson stated that the funds would be placed into Free Cash.

Water and Sewer Articles (42:02)

Jim Johnson introduced the Water and Sewer Articles and handed it off to Water and Sewer Superintendent Scott Gustafson and Sewer and Water Commissioners John Hasenjaeger and Bill Abbott and Jeff Fisher.

Brian Bain asked why there was a discrepancy in the figures for the cost of labor. Jim Johnson stated he added more into that line item because of a predicted rise in personnel costs in anticipation of union contract negotiations. Brian Bain asked about the professional services pump. Scott Gustafson clarified that this refers to the cleaning and maintenance of wells and treatment plant pump stations.

Mark Sullivan asked if there were going to be more water usage restrictions later this year because this winter has been relatively snowless. Scott Gustafson stated that the restrictions would likely remain the same as usual unless there was a drought. Precipitation has been usual this winter; it has just been falling in the form of rain due to higher temperatures.

Josette Burke asked if the department plans to refrain from dipping into retained earnings in future years. Jeff Fisher stated that principally all the commissioners present agree that it is wise to not rely on retained earnings for regular operating budget items. If a situation arises where rates have to go up, they may consider using retained earnings to offset the burden on residents.

(51:00) Motion by Mark Trudell and seconded by Scott Wassel for **Favorable Action** on the motion that the following sums be appropriated to the Water Enterprise Fund and expended under the direction of the Department of Public Works for the purposes of operating the Water Department in FY24: Personnel Services in the amount of \$1,101,814; Expenses in the amount of \$1,993,010; Debt Service in the amount of \$1,713,217, (the sum being \$4,808,041 to be raised as follows: User Fees in the amount of \$4,232,646; Fire Suppression Fees in the amount of \$50,000; and Miscellaneous Receipts in the amount of \$525,395).

The motion passed 11-0-0.

Bill Abbot stated that they are trying to increase the amount of revenue raised by the septic facility by lowering the price charged per gallon of loads dumped, in hopes that a greater number of haulers will use Walpole's facility. Because Walpole's facility can only accept waste water from towns that are part of the MWRA, the Town is losing business from haulers who have mixed loads containing septic material from neighboring non-MWRA communities. They are also looking into other customer service-oriented solutions to incentivize more haulers to utilize Walpole's facilities.

There is no worker permanently stationed at the septic facility because its usage is inconsistent, resulting in long hauler wait times. Josette Burke asked if the department has enough staff to keep the facility manned on a more permanent basis. Scott Gustafson stated that they will do a trial run to see if stationing a staff member at the facility full-time will increase revenue.

John Hasenjaeger stated that waste water has become a research resource for health scientists to test and study the prevalence of COVID and drug use in communities.

(1:04:05) Motion by Mark Trudell and seconded by Mark Sullivan for **Favorable Action** on the motion that the following sums be appropriated to the Sewer Enterprise Fund and expended under the direction of the Department of Public Works for the purposes of operating the Sewer Department in FY24: Personnel Services in the amount of \$326,973; Expenses in the amount of \$4,975,595; Debt Service in the amount of \$77,200 (the sum being \$5,379,768 to be raised as follows: User Fees in the amount of \$4,833,733 and Miscellaneous Receipts in the amount of \$546,035).
The motion passed 11-0-0.

Town Administrator Update (1:05:27)

Jim Johnson stated that Walpole is projected to receive \$1.5 million more in state aid than what was originally expected, a much greater increase than other towns in the area. He plans to take the rest of March to decide what his recommendation for how to spend it will be.

The Tri-County vote will take place on October 24th to determine whether a new school will be constructed or not. In a recent meeting of Town Managers in the area, it was proposed to tie the question to a debt override so that the funding source is already determined if the measure passes. This action would require a Mass General Law to be amended by the state legislature.

Jim Johnson stated that he recently added an Article 31 to the Spring Town Meeting Warrant, which authorizes any and all necessary easements onto the middle school property coming from East Street or Washington Street during construction.

The next Finance Committee Meeting is scheduled for Monday, March 27th.

Adjournment (1:18:40)

Motion by Brian Bain and seconded by Mark Trudell to adjourn.
The motion passed 11-0-0.

The Finance Committee adjourned at 8:15pm.