

Finance Committee Meeting Minutes Monday, February 13, 2022

Present:

Finance Committee

Roll Call 10 in attendance

Dennis Crowley (Chair)

Douglas Shea (Vice Chair)

Josette Burke (Clerk)

Brian Bain

Steven Hendricks

Kathleen Foley Greulich

Leigh Ann Luetzen

Mark Trudell

Lisa Van der Linden

Scott Wassel

Absent: Audrey Grace, Jean Kenney, Lawrence Pitman, Adrienne Rogers, Mark Sullivan

Additional attendees:

Jim Johnson, Patrick Shield, Jodi Cuneo, Lisa Sinkus, Annmarie Raymond, Elizabeth Gaffey, Dennis Flis, Carl Balduf, Kristine Brown, Brendan Croak, Rick Mattson, Don Anderson, Richard Kelleher, Timothy Bailey, Jim Crowley, Melissa Ranieri, Kerri McManama, Sal Genovese, Brendan Croak

The meeting was called to order by Chair 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=-u_ijD8QCA

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

Town Administrator Update (0:25)

Town Administrator Jim Johnson stated that the budget this year is less complicated than in previous years. Most departments have no major changes. The only new municipal staff position added is the Deputy Fire Chief.

General Government Budget Review (1:37)

Dennis Crowley stated that the General Government budget is a 0.6% increase over last year.

Josette Burke asked about the potential retirement of the current Treasurer / Collector. Jim Johnson stated that the retirement is only anticipated and not confirmed.

Douglas Shea asked about the vacant clerk position that appears to be split between the Town Administration and Select Board budget. Jim Johnson stated that they are sharing the responsibilities with a position in the Clerk's Office and the proposal is to transfer a union position from the Finance Department to the Clerk's Office.

Josette Burke asked if the current Assistant Town Clerk would be interested in attaining her Municipal Clerk Certification in order to act as the Town Clerk during any potential absences or vacancies. Town

Clerk Elizabeth Gaffey said that she is open to it and will look into whether the Assistant Town Clerk would like to pursue that in the future.

Josette Burke asked how much more funding will need to go into preserving old books and periodicals. Jim Johnson stated that there is still a lot more to do and he may submit a capital request in the future to finish the project.

Douglas Shea asked about the increase in pay for the Environmental Consultant. Jim Johnson stated that the position is shared with two other towns and it is currently vacant, so the increase reflects the estimated cost to hire a proper candidate for the open position.

Brian Bain asked about the concession stand cleaning services fee. Jim Johnson stated that because the concession stand is new, the town will be taking care of all maintenance until the department is familiar enough with what it takes, at which point the cost may be passed onto another party.

Josette Burke asked what the Town is going to do with the Marathon House. Jim Johnson stated that he is in talks with the food pantry to see if they are interested in utilizing it. Eventually the building may end up being demolished.

Leigh Ann Luetzen asked whether the Town Clerk is scheduled to retire soon. Jim Johnson stated that this was not the case. Douglas Shea asked if there are any upcoming retirements planned in the DPW. Rick Mattson said that to his knowledge there are none.

Douglas Shea asked why the Boyden School is cheaper to heat than the other schools. Don Anderson stated that much of Boyden is heated by electricity, so it does not require as much oil to heat as the others.

Leigh Ann Luetzen asked about the Assessor's Department's subscription to the house listing service. Dennis Flis stated that they are notified whenever a house in Walpole is listed so the department can check if the listing matches the Town's assessed value of the property.

Public Safety Budget Review (17:15)

Dennis Crowley stated that the Public Safety budget is a 1.8% increase over last year.

Josette Burke asked about the age and mileage of the two police cruisers that are being replaced. Police Chief Richard Kelleher stated that they are about 3 years old and have approximately 80,000 miles each.

Leigh Ann Luetzen asked about the increase in police department stipends. Richard Kelleher stated that per the most recent agreement, police officers now get stipends for all their medical trainings.

Josette Burke asked if there is a requirement that the fire department employ a staff member who is also an electrician. Fire Chief Timothy Bailey stated that there is no mandate in existence of which he is aware.

Mark Trudell asked if the Fire Department is fully staffed. Timothy Bailey stated that there is one more firefighter who is currently in the Academy who will join the force in March and fill the gap.

Leigh Ann Luetzen asked about the decrease in the ambulance maintenance budget. Timothy Bailey stated that repairs are unpredictable so that number bounces around to meet what is required.

Leigh Ann Luetzen asked about the line item for 'Other Supplies'. Timothy Bailey stated that the line item pays for the large increase in the cost of gear that is largely due to supply chain issues.

Brian Bain asked about the new Weights & Measures inspectional position. Jim Johnson stated that the state used to pay for weights & measures inspections but have stopped, so a new part-time position needed to be added to fulfill the requirements.

Leigh Ann Luetzen asked about the Animal Control Officer position. Jim Johnson stated that the position is shared with the Town of Norwood, and this line item funds our portion of the agreement. Mark Trudell asked how long the contract is, and Jim Johnson replied that it is renewed annually.

Department of Public Works Budget Review (30:05)

Douglas Shea asked about the dam inspection line item. Town Engineer Carl Balduf stated that to simplify the chart, he combined all related professional services into one singular line item.

Dennis Crowley asked how much is left in the DPW Snow and Ice budget for the current year. Jim Johnson stated that there is about \$625k left in the budget. Any that goes unused will flow into free cash. Any salt currently purchased has a long enough shelf life that it can be safely used next year. The Town is not allowed to decrease the snow and ice budget per state law.

Brian Bain asked about the increase in the equipment funds in the traffic control budget. Jim Johnson states that ever since Walpole purchased its streetlights from Eversource, it is now on the Town to repair any that go out.

Per a question sent in from Mark Sullivan, Health Director Melissa Ranieri stated that the compactor installed at the compost site is now up and running, and it will save the Town money on dumpster collection fees.

Mark Trudell asked about the trash collection contract, and Jim Johnson stated the upcoming fiscal year will be year two of a five-year contract. He also stated that the Robbins Road Center is bound by a Zoning Board decision from the 1990s that restricts hours of operation and other qualities.

Josette Burke asked if there are any DPW employees who are close to retirement and Jim Johnson said that he is not aware of any.

Health and Human Services Budget Review (40:12)

Dennis Crowley stated that the Health and Human Services budget is a 2.7% increase over last year.

Josette Burke commended the work of the Council on Aging and remarked that many new younger senior citizens are attending events and activities at the center. Jim Johnson stated that there is still a parking issue with high school students parking in the Council on Aging lot and they are working on solutions that will hopefully keep everyone involved happy.

Scott Wassel asked about the Veteran's Agent position. Jim Johnson stated that this is a joint position shared with Medfield, and Walpole is in the lead position of this agreement. The Board just appointed someone to fill the position and she will begin at the end of the February.

Culture and Recreation Budget Review (46:12)

Dennis Crowley stated that the Health and Human Services budget is a 1.62% increase over last year.

Douglas Shea asked about the increase in the permanent part-time positions in the Library budget. Library Director Sal Genovese stated that the jump is mainly due to the increase in hours for the Children's Programmer, in addition to standard cost of living adjustments.

Mark Trudell asked what the next population threshold Walpole will meet is. Sal Genovese stated that it is 50,000, which Walpole will not be hitting any time in the near future.

Douglas Shea asked about a seemingly underfunded technical position in the Recreation Department. Recreation Director Brendan Croak stated the remainder of that position which is not covered by the regular budget is actually paid for by the Revolving Fund.

Josette Burke asked if the Historical Commission would need to grant her permission to sell a house that was built in the 1800s. Building Commissioner Jim Crowley stated that the Historical Commission would only need to get involved if a demolition were requested.

Jim Johnson stated that the big jump in the Town Celebrations budget will help pay for Holiday lights, July 4th Fireworks, and the 300th Anniversary Celebration.

Debt and Interest Budget Review (55:50)

Jim Johnson stated that the reason the debt budget has gone up significantly is largely due to the Middle School Construction Project. The Town recently borrowed \$70 million before the rates went up, which Jim considers to be a very wise financial decision. A future High School Project is still on the radar. A future Tri-Country Regional Vocational High School Project could also be in the cards if a majority vote of all 11 towns approves it in October.

Dennis Crowley asked if the town is nearing the maximum safe borrowing amount. Finance Director Jodi Cuneo stated that the town is not anywhere near the maximum safe borrowing figure, which is about \$5 billion.

Assessments and Fringe Benefits Budget Review (1:00:53)

Jim Johnson stated that increases in the cost of health insurance are mostly responsible for the rise in the fringe benefits budget. He stated that some increases in unemployment funds were due to teachers finding out that they were able to claim unemployment during summer breaks.

Brian Bain asked if the Town offers any cheaper alternatives to the employee health insurance such as a Health Savings Account. Human Resources Administrator Kristine Brown stated that the Town does not qualify for an HSA because it does not offer a High Deductible Plan.

Jim Johnson stated that the new jump in the net metering number is due to the Town now being required to include funds coming in and out due to an agreement with one of the solar farms that was not previously included in the budget. This higher figure will be addressed in a future in-year budget adjustment.

Jim Johnson stated that the South Street Solar Farm deal was stalled briefly but is now progressing. Josette Burke asked what happens to any unused unemployment money. Jim Johnson stated that just like with any other budget, unused funds go back into Free Cash at the end of the fiscal year.

Jim Johnson stated that the final draft of the Spring Town Meeting Warrant will be ready and available shortly. One article of note is the Select Board's proposal to sell off three town-owned properties: The East Walpole Library, a lot near Kingsbury Street, and the Old Town Hall. Because the Old Town Hall is deemed a historical building, the new owners would have to keep the exterior of the building the same.

Douglas Shea remarked about his concern for how big the debt budget has become and stated that he would like to see more funds placed in Capital Stabilization when possible. He requested that the Finance Department outline to the Committee what percentage of the budget is non-negotiable in the future. Mark Trudell discussed how eliminating personnel is not an easy budgeting tactic because for every person you lay off you have to add more into the unemployment budget.

Jim Johnson stated that all six municipal union contracts are up this year and he has entered negotiations to renew them. They have reached tentative agreements for three of them, and Jim expects them all to be finalized by Spring Town Meeting in May.

Adjournment (1:30:03)

Motion by Brian Bain and seconded by Kathleen Foley Greulich to adjourn.
The motion passed 10-0-0.

The Finance Committee adjourned at 8:30pm.