



Finance Committee
May 18, 2021 1:00 p.m.
Virtual Meeting
Minutes

Pursuant to Governor Baker's March 12, 2020 Order Suspending Certain Provisions of the Open Meeting Law, G.L. c. 30A, §18, this meeting of the Finance Committee is being conducted via remote participation.

Members participating remotely: De Angelis, Griesemer, Pam, Schoen, Steinberg, non-voting members Hegner, Kubiak, and Sheffler

Members absent: None

Others participating remotely: Finance Director Sean Mangano, Comptroller Sonia Aldrich, DPW Superintendent Guilford Mooring, Assistant Superintendent of Public Works Amy Rusiecki, Police Captain Gabe Ting, Treasurer Jennifer LaFountain, Town Manager Paul Bockelman, Town Clerk Athena O'Keeffe and Minute Taker Scott Belden.

For video recording: [Amherst Finance Committee: May 18, 2021 - YouTube](#)

1. Call to Order

Steinberg declared the presence of a quorum, called the meeting at 1:03 PM, confirmed all participants could hear and be heard, and announced audio and visual recording.

2. Budget Review

d. Transportation

Mangano mentioned the transportation fund was hardest hit by the pandemic. He screenshared a written list of questions regarding transportation. (see Packet) The presentation of questions included some answers. He explained that he and a team will be looking at parking permits and fee policies.

Mangano asked about the number of parking spaces and signage for parking lots. Guilford responded that additional parking could be added along roadways.

Schoen asked about parking policy and long-term lease reserved spaces in the Boltwood underground garage.. These spaces are often vacant in the underground garage. Could this policy be changed to allow space use after 5 and on weekends. Why not make this available after regular business hours. These are currently reserved 24/7 for a \$1,000 fee. Schoen point out these in a prime location. Often vacant during the summer. Mangano indicated this will be reviewed along with permit fee policies.

Steinberg asked a question whether these are downtown residents using parking spaces at Boltwood.

Griesemer asked a question regarding the price of rented spots in the Boltwood area. She remarked that the current fee appears low for an annual rate. Mangano mentioned the Town was comparing prices to the city of Northampton's spaces.

Schoen asked a question posing two-tier pricing rates for spaces one for seniors or disabled. And another for those with UMass parking options. She further asked whether we should require cars to be registered in the Town to rent a space- this is revenue to the Town. Mangano replied that this policy is also under review.

Pam asked about location of street parking permits. She observed that people park on Amity and had assumed these were residents. She discovered that this was not required for a permit. If a student, why not require to park at UMass.

Mangano stated the pandemic has exposed faults in the Town's parking and transportation policies. It was weak before the pandemic and needs to be analyzed for future policies. Schoen emphasized that the policies are revenue producing thus relevant for the budget discussion.

Mangano referred to the question regarding collection rates for parking. LaFountain replied that the change in rates and appeals was due to the pandemic resulting in less tickets/fines. She noted there is a mix of out of town plates and others.

Mangano went to the next question regarding variation in use of existing parking lots and the potential revenue gained if all lots were fully utilized. He noted that the Town would be working on signage.

LaFountain noted that the lots have different rates per hour contributing to some of the lot variation. Hegner made a comment regarding lower Boltwood spaces being at a premium and raised concern with getting people to use the parking that was there. Need to encourage people to use what is available now.

De Angelis asked a question regarding permit price rates and parking spaces in Boltwood garage. LaFountain remarked last updated several years ago. Mangano repeated that this will be examined this summer.

Schoen noted the hours that fee go off vary. It is possible to get better lights for underground garages to make them more hospitable. Mangano replied that better lighting was already being considered. This was recommended earlier. The non-reserved spaces are often full. Rates go off at 6 PM and are 50 cents an hour.

Mangano observed that they may be dividing by all spaces – revenue per space should adjust for long-term reserved. He will revisit.

Pam recommended increasing public accessibility at parking garages in the Town. Mangano replied that this could be a possibility. Mangano noted that a sign on vacancy is quite expensive.

Steinberg asked if there were any problems with the lower level garage. Ting replied that during the winter homeless individuals will camp in those levels, and that could be a possible deterrent to public use of the garage.

Mangano continued with questions sent in advance regarding changes in number of parking permits. LaFountain replied that mixed use buildings downtown drove increases in permit requests from FY16 to FY19, and the pandemic resulted in the decrease in FY20.

Steinberg asked a question regarding the transportation revenue line on pp. 228 of the Budget Book, whether FY21 is the original TM or recap. Mangano replied that the number will likely be much less in reality. Aldrich explained that the estimated revenue is set by what the council voted on, but the actual amount remains in flux until the tax rate is calculated, and that the number is based on prior town receipts. The expense budget is locked in place, but the revenue budget shifts around.

Steinberg and Griesemer asked follow-up questions regarding the recap and how that is helpful to the committee's decisions.

Steinberg asked a question regarding the reassignment of parking staff.

Mangano asked a question about parking staff handheld devices. Ting replied that the devices currently used are becoming increasingly outdated and difficult to repair.

Steinberg asked a question about parking boxes and their helpfulness to parking staff. Ting replied that they were indeed helpful.

Mangano mentioned future cost analysis of installing more charging stations, and that it could be a draw to downtown.

Steinberg stated the issues between PVRTA funding from the town and UMASS, and that it could be helpful in the future to assess the payment plans for the PVRTA. Pam mentioned that the PVRTA's reliability is questionable. Steinberg replied that having the PVRTA tied so much into UMASS creates an issue in maintaining a robust, year round bus service.

Steinberg thanked Ting and LaFountain for their contributions to the meeting.

Enterprise Funds General:

Mangano read general questions regarding Enterprise Funds and their accessibility to the public.

Kubiak asked about the potential of betterments and offsetting the cost to the Town, especially in the case of newer developments by private developers.

Schoen asked a question regarding the visibility of the Enterprise Funds in the capital improvement plan.

Schoen referred to the Town of Medford as an example of providing that information in the plan itself.

Pam asked whether the Town can handle an increase on water/sewer infrastructure due to new developments. Mooring replied that previous developments had been slow, but that the Town's current and future water supply is varied and resilient.

Pam asked about costs from converting from septic to sewer. Mooring replied that the cost is on the owner to connect to the sewer line.

b. Water

Mangano referred to his on-screen presentation about drought emergencies.

Hegner asked a question about having two water meters per house. Mooring replied that the Town was considering having two meters, but that it would be at a high cost.

Steinberg asked whether the second meter would be more for farms or residential. Mooring replied the focus was mostly on residential to discourage people from watering their lawns, and to track irrigation.

Mangano read a question about indirect costs being charged to the water fund. Mangano clarified it is reimbursement that should result in no change to current costs.

Mangano read a question regarding estimated water usage for the upcoming year, but mentioned that the Town was expecting to come in under budget for consumption.

c. Sewer

Mooring discussed the difficulties in obtaining supplies and parts, especially lumber and chlorine, and the speculation of shortages in the near future. Mangano stated the budget might not go as far as previously expected in this department. Mangano reviewed the remaining questions about dye testing and septic dumping rates in his presentation.

Steinberg asked if Hegner's questions were suggesting the council should get involved in septage rates.

Hegner said he was not.

Mangano mentioned it was unclear at this time whether the American Rescue Plan could help replace lost revenue for water/sewer revenue, but that the Town was looking into it.

e. Solid Waste

Hegner commended the quality of the Transfer Station during the pandemic.

Griesemer asked whether the Transfer Station will resume full operation with the state reopening and the Take It Or Leave It program.

Steinberg asked about the recycling pay rate and how that affected the viability of the fund. Mooring stated that the Town stopped being a Materials Recycling Facility (MRF) member years ago, and now finds the cheapest vendor for each material.

Schoen asked about the cost of garbage pick up, and whether the Town could eventually be responsible for consolidating garbage pick up.

Pam asked if there was an increase in illegal dumping. Mooring replied that there has not been an increase, but that the rate of illegal dumping has remained high.

a. Public Works

Mooring explained that implementing the EPA's Phase II Storm Water program could be an expensive project for the town and that new town bylaws allowed them to expand development of the stormwater system and address issues.

Mangano addressed a question about private roads the Town is still maintaining. Mooring stated that efforts have been made to transition private roads to care for themselves or become a public way, but that costs of maintaining private roads is minimal.

Steinberg asked if any private roads were being plowed by the Town. Mooring replied there were one or two, and cited Larkspur Drive as a private road in the process of going public that was being plowed.

Mooring mentioned a small surplus from the snow/ice removal budget for FY 2021.

Hegner asked about the cost of improving intersections where cars often idle.

Steinberg asked a question about camera installation at a North Amherst intersection. Mooring replied that they were installed, and provided potential costs for future upgrades.

Schoen asked a question about the limits of the "smart" traffic lights at the North Amherst intersection and whether it could count vehicles and pedestrians. Mooring replied that the light monitors the intersection and addresses traffic as it occurs, but that they were unable to count vehicles and pedestrians.

Schoen asked about the costs of solar powered lights at crosswalks. Mooring replied light installation depended on available electric infrastructure, and the cheapest alternative is reflective/flashing signage. Mooring stated the need for a position of electrical automation programmer. Mangano asked if both electrician positions were vacant, Mooring replied those positions had been filled.

Pam asked about the costs of an automation programmer. Mooring replied the main issue is the high cost, and the high turnover rate.

Steinberg asked if there were any other positions the department was struggling with filling long term. Mooring replied that many positions had a high turnover rate.

Hegner asked whether the Town wished to remain in the cemetery business. Mooring replied that vacant plots were becoming more rare, and that there is a possibility of expanding.

Schoen asked what the extent of maintenance for cemeteries was, particularly the historic cemetery downtown. Mooring replied the historic commission sets the standard for that cemetery and prevented modern maintenance. Sheffler clarified that modern machinery posed a danger to historic tombstones, but that the historic commission was considering sheep as an alternative maintenance team.

Schoen asked a question about the basketball/tennis courts at Mill River, and when they could expect to be open. This basketball courts have been delayed waiting for road repair coordination.

Steinberg asked Bockelman what his stance on whether the town should stay involved in cemetery maintenance.

Steinberg asked a question about the cost of chlorine. Mooring replied that the Town uses liquid chlorine which keeps cost low.

Schoen asked a question regarding the impact of the chemicals the Town uses for maintenance in the soil, such as salting the roads, and if the DPW had assessed that. Mooring replied they are aware of the chemicals in the building itself, but have not noticed any leaching into the ground or water.

Steinberg thanked Mooring for his time.

3. Public Comment

None

4. Topics not anticipated by the Chair 48 hours before the meeting

Steinberg mentioned a discussion the previous day at the Council regarding reparations, and how the Finance Committee could provide a long term fund to provide reparations. Griesemer added that she felt there was an expectation to consider the committee's actions for this current budget, with a possibility of looking at the Town's marijuana revenue.

Members discussed marijuana tax revenue and impact fees.

Pam expressed that she felt the Town has to provide some sort of change, or else people will lose faith in the Town's capabilities. Griesemer stated that the Town needs to have a better understanding of the issues at hand sooner rather than later.

Steinberg expressed he did not want to become too involved in this topic as it was not anticipated by the Chair 48 hours before. This will be a posted topic at the next Finance meeting. Members discussed the Town's legality to provide reparations.

Members discussed future meeting dates and the importance of consolidating their recommendations on the set time schedule.

5. Adjourn

Steinberg adjourned at 3:45PM.

Draft respectfully submitted,
Scott Belden, Minute Taker

Minutes reviewed and finalized. 8/9/21

Record of agenda packet materials and documents presented

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Questions sent in advance and staff answers.