

Finance Committee
May 20, 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: Town Manager Paul Bockelman, Finance Director Sean Mangano, Assistant Superintendent of Public Works Amy Rusiecki, IT Director Sean Hannon, Treasurer Jennifer LaFountain, Treasurer Cheri Boucher, Principal Assessor Elizabeth Duffy, Comptroller Sonia Aldrich, Human Resources Manager Joanne Misiaszek, Human Resources Director Donna-Rae Kenneally, Town Clerk Sue Audette, Facilities Manager Jeremiah Laplante, Building Commissioner Rob Morra, and Minute Taker Scott Belden.

For video:

1. Call to Order

Steinberg called the quorum at 1:02PM, and confirmed everyone could hear and be heard as well as video/audio recording (Copy and Paste old one from previous minutes)

2. Budget Review

d. Information Technology

Hannon gave a brief overview of the Information Technology (IT) department's current projects, noting the past year had been busy building up remote systems due to the pandemic. Mangano expressed gratitude to Hannon and IT for their work for the Town over the past year.

Pam asked a question about cybersecurity training.

Schoen asked if IT's budget was sufficient for system maintenance and if the CARES act contributed funds to the IT department. The answer was yes.

Griesemer asked how much IT is involved in software selection for municipal programs. Hannon replied that they are involved in the selection process and help curate on a department by department basis. Steinberg asked if there is expanded capacity for in-person recordings in the future. Hannon and Bockelman replied that there has not been an expansion, but that they were preparing for the transition back to in-person and hybrid meetings.

Hegner asked about upgrading phone systems, and individual security permissions. Hannon answered they were transitioning to a newer system to improve call quality issues, and that they are working to find a balance between security permissions and ease of access.

Steinberg expressed gratitude to the IT department and thanked Hannon for his time.

a. Town Council/Town Manager

Bockelman gave a brief overview of the Town Council and Town Manager positions. He explained turnover in the department was mostly due to retirement and the current pandemic economy.

Bockelman answered a question regarding stipends put towards the Community Response for Equity, Safety, and Service (CRESS) program.

Schoen asked whether these funds would be a recurring part of the budget. Bockelman replied that there was still a lot of work to be done in this area, especially with organization-wide training, and that the Town wanted to have the funds on hand to address those costs generally.

De Angelis asked about Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) coordinator specific funds and requested a detailed report of where the funds are going, and whether there are other sources of funds already in the budget for these needs. Mangano provided specific figures with regards to American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds as well.

De Angelis asked about loss of BiPOC staff and whether the Town was partly responsible for their departure. Bockelman replied that the Town is working towards investigating their leaving.

Pam expressed concern regarding the efficacy of training, relations between the Town and public, and the need to address the issue of reparations. Bockelman replied he felt the training was effective, that he was hoping to have an outlined plan of action soon to address her concerns, and that the Town was looking at the issue of reparations.

Members briefly discussed the difficulties making sure documents and reports were readily available and accessible.

Schoen asked where to find the Town's budget for legal expenses. The reply was it was within another budget but agreed should be highlighted as in the past.

Bockelman answered a question as to how School Committee stipends are handled. (These appear in the Town Manager budget)

b. Finance, Assessor, Accounting, Treasurer/Collector, General Services, Debt, Assessments, and Other Post-Employment Benefits (OPEB)

Mangano provided a brief overview of the Finance Department and the present Finance Office members, and expressed his gratitude to Boucher for her work with the Town. Boucher thanked the Town for all the years she had worked there. Members expressed their gratitude in response.

Mangano gave a brief overview of the Collector's Office, and mentioned big projects undertaken by the office in FY21.

Schoen commended the efforts towards making finance and taxes more transparent and accessible to the general public.

Hegner asked about a possible trend in tax dollar abatements. Duffy replied it is due to who is abating tax dollars and for what, and that there is not a trend developing. Mangano confirmed they were keeping the abatement level relatively stable.

Steinberg asked about any issues over the past year. Mangano replied that the major struggle has been keeping up with the changes in policy over the past year due to the pandemic.

Pam asked if the Town could reduce excise tax for electric vehicles (EVs). Mangano replied they do not have the power to do that, and Steinberg confirmed that was calculated at the state level.

Schoen suggested lowering parking rates and fees for EVs. Mangano replied that he and LaFountain were actively looking at ways to incentivize EVs moving forward. Kubiak expressed concern with reducing rates for EVs penalizing lower income individuals who cannot afford an EV.

Aldrich gave an overview of General Services.

Mangano gave an overview of Debt, Assessments, and Other Post-Employment Benefits (OPEB)

Schoen asked a question regarding how decisions made for FY22 will affect the FY23 budget.

Pam asked if it was worth it for the Town to make efforts into OPEB if there's a likely possibility that OPEB will be overtaken by the federal government in the future. Mangano replied that they were in a good place with OPEB and would not be relying on a possible government oversight on them.

Members discussed increased benefits in the public sector in comparison to the private sector.

c. Human Resources & Human Rights and Employee Benefits

Kenneally introduced herself to the members, and provided a brief overview of the Human Resources (HR) department and their current projects and policies.

Schoen asked about compensation review, built up health insurance reserves, and premium holidays.

Steinberg asked if there were trends of employees picking individual versus family health care coverage.

Mangano replied the benefits were still strong.

Pam asked about hiring from within, and what the Town is doing to encourage internal hiring. Bockelman replied they are required to post jobs externally, and the Town is working on a balance between maintaining good employee retention and promoting diversity by hiring externally.

Members discussed positive changes to the HR department as a result of Misiaszek and Kenneally's new contributions to the department.

e. Town Clerk, Elections and Registrations

Audette introduced herself to the members and gave a brief overview of the Town Clerk's Office, Elections, and Registrations.

Pam asked about ranked choice voting and when it would be in place, and a question regarding passports and REAL ID. Audette replied that passports were taken out of the Town Clerk's Office due to a conflict of interest. Bockelman further clarified that passport services could be provided by the Town in the future, but they would have to look further into which department provides those services.

Schoen asked about ranked choice voting education for the public, and expressed her gratitude for the Town Clerk's services. Steinberg asked when they would be buying new equipment, and if there would be any major changes to the ballots as a result. Audette replied that new equipment would read both old and new ballots, but that the Town is on a waiting list for purchase of the equipment due to demand and the shortage of supply parts for machines.

Steinberg asked if Audette had any recommendations regarding the number and locations of polling stations. Audette mentioned the difficulties between locations, precinct voters, and logistical issues in finding suitable locations. Bockelman brought up the idea of a central voting location.

Griesemer stressed the importance of addressing these locations in the upcoming year with ranked choice voting, upcoming elections, and redistricting. But keeping locations for 2021.

Steinberg asked if voters could pick their polling station due to increase in technology. Audette replied they could only vote at their specific precinct.

De Angelis asked how the Town would address voters who rely on public transport if there were to be only a central polling station. Audette suggested possible bus route changes, a trolley system, or a vanpool.

Pam asked how the Town handles voter lists and received clarification. Steinberg expressed his thanks to Audette.

f. Facilities Management

Laplante introduced himself and gave a brief overview of Facilities Management.

Schoen asked about maintenance at the old school North Amherst Campus and North Amherst library and how the buildings are currently being used. Laplante described each.

Members discussed how the libraries in town are being utilized.

Schoen asked a question regarding maintenance and use for vacant schools following the construction of a new school in the future. Bockelman replied that major vacant buildings would be subject to extensive discussion with Facilities Management and the Town as to how they could repurpose the building.

Steinberg asked a question regarding energy efficiency funds, and if solar opportunities are being looked at. Laplante mentioned that energy efficiency helps determine decisions to ensure sustainability and keep an eye on energy conservation, and mentioned that there are some locations for solar being considered.

(Reword this whole thing)

3. Public Comment

None

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

Members discussed various deadlines for different reports regarding their recommendations, and what sort of content would have to be included in those reports. Steinberg reminded the members of 2 meetings on May 27th and where they could fit in discussion on reparations.

Sheffler returned at 3:55PM (When did she leave the meeting?)

5. Adjourn

Steinberg adjourned at 3:58PM.

Draft Respectfully submitted,

Scott Belden, Minute Taker

Reviewed and finalized: 8/9/21

Record of agenda packet materials and documents presented

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