



Town Council and Finance Committee

May 24, 2022, 9:00 AM

Virtual Meeting

Minutes

Pursuant to Chapter 20 of the Acts of 2021, this meeting was conducted via remote means.

1. Call to order, Review Agenda

Members participating remotely: Steinberg; Griesemer; Schoen; Walker; Miller; non-voting members: Hegner; Holloway; Kubiak

Members absent: none

Others participating remotely: Town Councilor Ana Devlin Gauthier; Town Councilor Dorothy Pam; Town Councilor Jennifer Taub; Finance Director Sean Mangano; Comptroller Sonia Aldrich; Town Clerk Susan Audette; Assistant Director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Jennifer Moyston; Assistant Comptroller Holly Drake; Treasurer/Collector Jennifer LaFountain; HR Director Donna-Rae Kennealy; IT Director Sean Hannon; Assistant Town Manager Dave Ziomek; Planning Director Chris Brestrup; Clerk of the Council Athena O'Keefe; Minute Taker W. Kaizen

Steinberg declared the presence of a quorum, called the meeting to order at 9:01 am, then confirmed all participants can hear and be heard, and announced audio and video recording

Griesemer declared the presence of a quorum of the Town Council, called the meeting to order at 9:10 am, and confirmed Councilors can hear and be heard.

2. FY23 Budget Review: Overall Budget Review

Steinberg briefly reviewed the budget review process; Steinberg and members returned to this issue at the end of the meeting and discussed in detail how the final part of the budget review process will work, which has to take place before the end of the month

3. FY23 Budget Review: General Government

Griesemer said, in response to a question from Miller on budget increases, that another \$3000 was added to cover stipends for the School Committee, and there were other general increases related to inflation; she also addressed the issue of a Council stipend increase, saying a modest increase would work, but a large increase would put serious strain on the budget; Pam suggested a stipend for committee chairs and a course for Councilors on running Zoom meetings

In response to submitted questions Mangano, discussed with members:

- the Town's partnership with the colleges and university; he said that they are ongoing
- the partnership between the town and the BID and Chamber of Commerce; that ARPA funds have allowed the town and the BID and Chamber to work together recently; metrics for ARPA money; using ARPA funds to hire an economic empowerment director focused on promoting art and cultural organizations, as well as working with high ed institutions, and on entrepreneurship
- budgeting for CRESS and DEI in the next couple of years; ten people are budgeted for CRESS, two for DEI moving forward; members and staff discussed the CRESS hires; members stressed only hiring how many people we need for these positions;
- the history of operating expenses history relative to the Town Manger's budget, members noted that the Town Manager has too many direct reports

Mangano reviewed the sections of the Finance Department; of the Assessor's office, he said that the housing market has been volatile; of Accounting, he said that the grants have been great, but these have management costs; of Collection/Treasury, he said that they are the face that greets the public when they come into Town Hall, that they track and organize the town's many revenue sources as well as town debt, and that, while there were a number of retirements last year, the replacements have been working out well.

Pam asked about commercial tax rates and adding rental houses to this class of taxes; Kim Mew responded that all residential tax rates must be the same under MGL; we could value rental properties differently, but it has a high cost to administer; Mangano said that with a split rate, there would be a big increase for commercial properties vs. rental properties; members discussed this issue and its complexities further with staff.

Members and staff discussed procurement, and that only one person is currently doing this job; Procurement's workload is heavily stretched; Aldrich said that there is more work in general for the Finance Department since the town changed to Town Council government, especially procurement.

Mangano reviewed the list of submitted questions from Miller and discussed:

- investment income, which he said has been high because of interest rates on CDs, and because of grants and reserves, the Town has more money than it's ever had
- refining the budget cycle to make it more equitable; in the fall he wants to begin holding informal meetings with stakeholders before the budgeting process, which he's done before with the schools
- consolidating personnel services
- hiring a fulltime grant writer
- real estate collections, which have been great
- the third-party agencies that the town uses for collecting unpaid bills, as well as the deputy director who also does this

Griesemer said a grant writer could be used for support, especially for administering grants, but not as a primary writer; members and staff discussed the negotiated overhead rate on

grants to cover grant-related expenses; members and Mangano discussed the town's investment advisor; members discussed further issues related to grants with Mangano

Moyston reviewed DEI and said in response to member questions:

- the new director is starting July 1
- she's working with HR to help with staff diversity and human rights issues
- re. the operating budget, she'll work with new director to develop an on-going DEI-related training program

Kennealy reviewed HR and discussed in response to member questions:

- hiring challenges in most departments, DPW in particular; Hegner raised the issue of training and having people leave; Kennealy said that mandating a stay period after training would have to be approved by the union
- attracting new workers; she's working with Town Manager on this
- the 10% projected increase in HR costs; she's trying to be cautious projecting the increase given health care, especially post-COVID
- internal equity for positions; she has asked for money to review this issue and is already working on it

Hannon reviewed IT and said in response to member questions:

- cyber security costs are on the rise, especially for insurance software
- the remote working trend produced by COVID will be up to the Town Manager and individual departments; this shouldn't have big budget implications one way or another; IT bought a good number of laptops from CARES funding
- the schedule for tech replacement is about every four years and CARES money has really helped during COVID
- having committee meetings on Zoom and posting them to YouTube does add to workload and Zoom's license is an expense; he's not aware that there have been any savings in the contract with Amherst Media

Audette reviewed the Town Clerk's office and discussed in response to member questions:

- redistricting and the change in polling locations
- that she's waiting to hear about vote by mail, which is coming down from the state
- ranked choice voting, which is also pending
- opportunities to increase voting turnout
- that election workers are hired, as per state mandate
- Board of Registrars members payment started in 1965 and was last increased in 1985
- raising notarization fees from \$5 to \$10; they've done 1100 to date this year and it's very time consuming
- dog licenses were down because of COVID, because they couldn't reach out to people in person
- new voting machines for ranked-choice voting are coming soon; they're out to bid

4. FY23 Budget Review: Conservation, Planning, Inspection

Ziomek gave an overview on these departments with a focus on Conservation and answered questions on Conservation; he said that there is a comprehensive plan for Hickory Ridge and that the solar bylaw, and developing the East Street school are the big projects that they're working on

Devlin Gauthier asked about hiring more staff to work on sustainability; Ziomek said Ciccarello is working across departments on this; He wants to focus on implementing the climate action plan and sees this position growing over time; he's not clear yet if they will need additional staff

Kubiak asked about municipal green energy aggregation; Mangano said that it's in process; the Town is working to hire a consultant, who will work with us and the surrounding communities

Schoen asked if there is a plan for developing part of Hickory Ridge into multi-unit housing or for selling part of the land; she also asked about the floodplain and wet lands on the Fort River School site; Ziomek said that they're moving as quickly as possible on Hickory Ridge; they currently are working on trail permitting, and the natural heritage program assessment and solar assessment are happening; he's not rushing to make a decision about the buildable land; he hopes to have a plan for the site by the end of the year; Brestrup said we'll need someone to map the wetlands on the Fort River Site, as well as having conservation looking at the site relative to the river; members and staff further discussed the Fort River site and the need to better understand it in relation to the new elementary school building project

Brestrup gave an overview of Planning and answered questions; Hegner asked about home ownership for economically disadvantaged people; Brestrup said that they have been looking into this

Ran out of time for Inspection Services—pushed to next meeting

5. Public Comment

None

6. Items not anticipated by the Chair 48 Hours in advance

None

7. Announcements and next agenda preview

Next meeting: 5/26/22

8. Adjourn

Steinberg declared the meeting adjourned at 12:15 pm

Minutes prepared by W. Kaizen

Record of Agenda Packet Materials and Documents Presented:

05-24-2022 Town Council and Finance Committee Agenda

Conservation Questions 5.24.22

Inspections Questions 5.24.22

Planning Questions 5.24.22