

Amherst Finance Committee Minutes

February 26, 2009

Location: First Floor Meeting Room, Town Hall

Attendance: Marilyn Blaustein, Kay Moran (Vice Chair), Brian Morton, (Chair), Douglas Slaughter, Andrew Steinberg, Marylou Theilman

Others present: Assistant Town Manager and Finance Director John Musante, Town Manager Larry Shaffer, Police Chief Charles Scherpa, Police Capt. Michael Kent, Fire Chief Keith Hoyle, Asst. Fire Chief Michael Zlogar, Leisure Services Director Linda Chalfant, LSSE Program Director Barbara Bilz, Financial Analyst Maria Racca, LSSE Commission members Peter Blier and Afranio Torres, Walter Wolnik, Fred Vanderbeck.

Agenda:

- 1) Budget Presentations
 - a) PUBLIC SAFETY
 - i) Police
 - ii) Animal Welfare
 - iii) Communications Center
 - iv) Regional Lockup Assessment
 - v) Fire / EMS
 - b) COMMUNITY SERVICES #2
 - i) LSSE
 - ii) LSSE – Municipal Pools
 - iii) LSSE – Cherry Hill Golf Course
- 2) Legislative Update
- 3) Member Reports
- 4) Minutes
- 5) Miscellaneous

Discussion and Action:

- 1) Budget Presentations
 - a) PUBLIC SAFETY

Theilman stated that she would recuse herself from any discussion or vote on the Fire Department budget because her son is a Fire Department employee.

 - i) **Police:**

Shaffer praised the police department for working this year toward greater efficiencies and reorganizing to take on direct supervision of the Communications Center as the Center Director's position is eliminated. Recent replacement of the

HVAC system should decrease energy costs and improve conditions in the police station. Scherpa said that, despite the loss of two officer positions last year, remaining members of his department continue working hard to maintain public safety and assume the additional duties of supervising dispatchers. The need for additional officers remains, he said. In response to a question about the mutual aid agreement with UMass Police, he said that has helped UMPD more than APD, that both departments are busiest at the same times (i.e., weekend nights) and therefore don't generally have officers available to assist in each other's territory. Kent said he and his department work closely with UMPD and other UMass officials with the Campus and Community Coalition on mutual problems; one result is the Nuisance House Ordinance approved by Town Meeting last year. A civilian domestic violence counselor funded by Everywoman's Center was based at and worked with APD over the past year, until funding ended. In response to a question about speeding tickets, Scherpa said his department does not issue them to raise money. Scherpa distributed a list of Amherst police vehicles, explained why each one is needed, and outlined a future request for a canopy behind the station to shelter parked cruisers from ice and snow. Shaffer and Morton praised Scherpa, who will retire later this year, for his years of dedicated service to the town.

- ii) **Animal Welfare:** As proposed in the Town Manager's printed budget. Not discussed.
- iii) **Communications Center:** Schaffer said the center director's position has been eliminated to save money and the former director is now one of 12 dispatchers. Supervisory and grant-writing duties have been taken on by police lieutenants. Reorganized scheduling places three dispatchers on duty at night, and morale is high, Schaffer said. Amherst, UMass, Hadley, Pelham and Belchertown are actively exploring establishment of a regional dispatch center. They expect to hear soon whether they've been awarded a state grant for a feasibility study. Further grants may be available to construct and help operate a regional center.
- iv) **Regional Lockup Assessment:** Not discussed. The Manager budgets this at \$31,323 for FY 10, unchanged from FY 09.
- v) **Fire / EMS**

Shaffer pointed out that in his FY 10 budget tax support for the Fire Department actually declines by 6.3%, due to revenue from increased ambulance fees and contributions from UMass, Amherst and Hampshire Colleges, and surrounding towns served by Amherst's ambulances. Hoyle distributed several pages of department statistics, including a list of the number of firefighters on duty and on staff in Amherst compared to the number in 29 other Massachusetts communities of similar size, to point out that Amherst has by far the least. Amherst manages with backup from call and volunteer (student) firefighters. Because call firefighters are not able to respond to cover the stations as often as they once did, now off-duty members of the permanent force are called in during the daytime when all the on-duty firefighters are out on calls. Hoyle said the department received a three-year, \$179,000 grant to help

recruit and train call and volunteer firefighters. Zlogar said fire prevention duties have increased with the size and complexity of building projects at UMass and Amherst College, with the introduction of the new state building code, and with new requirements such as for sprinkler systems in night clubs. Integration onto the Munis system of Fire Department inspections with Inspection Services and the Planning and Conservation departments has been a big effort for all but will improve efficiencies. Hoyle and Shaffer said the Fire Department's eight members who are trained to do technical rescues need specialized equipment to stabilize collapsed trenches while trapped people are rescued. There were two such incidents in the previous year. Several attempts to get outside funding for this equipment have failed, so it is now the Fire Department's top priority for funding in the town's FY 10 capital budget. Hoyle, too, is retiring later this year; Shaffer and Morton praised him for his years of dedicated service to the town.

b) **COMMUNITY SERVICES #2**

i) **LSSE**

Shaffer and Chalfant distributed copies of a three-page spreadsheet, a detailed program analysis of all Leisure Services and Supplemental Education offerings for FY 09 and FY 10 including their costs and the revenue they produce. Also distributed was a Feb. 26 spreadsheet showing the history of tax support for LSSE, which includes a downward revision to the Manager's January budget. Tax support for the proposed LSSE FY 10 budget of \$1,953,913 would be \$256,653 (\$50,140 for the operating budget plus \$206,513 for employee benefits), or just 12%. The remaining 88% would come from fees charged for the programs. In FY 08, tax support was 26%, and in FY 05 and 06, 38%. Shaffer said the reduction in tax support, without an appreciable loss of programming, is due to the elimination of one full-time position, eliminating the indoor swimming program, reducing the size or length of some programs, and increasing fees. Morton praised the effort that has gone into the detailed analysis. Shaffer noted that facilities costs are not included in the analysis but will be in future years. Field maintenance, for instance, is currently in the Public Works budget. In response to questions submitted earlier by Steinberg, Chalfant said they carefully reviewed past experience when projecting future numbers of participants, and Shaffer said that if LSSE does not meet its revenue projections, it will have to cut expenses. The new program analysis model should make it easier to monitor that. Theilman asked whether LSSE might sometime consider offering academic programs; Chalfant said they'd consider it.

ii) **LSSE – Municipal Pools**

Bilz said the program will be monitored closely to maintain safety despite the elimination of the aquatics director's position. No money is in this budget to continue programming at the Amherst Regional Middle School pool; Bilz said it was very expensive for the volume of users of the indoor pool. She is trying to work out a way to offer indoor swimming lessons, perhaps purchasing pool hours with fees. The Manager's budget assumes both outdoor pools will be open, but Shaffer and Bilz pointed out that the War Memorial Pool, built in 1958, is near the end of its life.

iii) **LSSE – Cherry Hill Golf Course**

Golf course revenue increased 32% between FY 06 and FY 08, a period during which revenue at other Massachusetts courses declined, Bilz said. Cherry Hill aims for a volume of users, and there's been a big increase in daily users. Consultation with and assistance from several University of Massachusetts programs has helped, she said. Slaughter asked if increased use is "beating up" the course. Bilz said course condition has never been better. Musante pointed out that golf course revenue has covered all its direct and indirect costs and most of its capital costs. Steinberg said previous efforts to contract out course operations haven't worked, and that it's time to move on. This is a year, he said, when more people may have to find affordable recreation close to home, like Cherry Hill.

- 6) **Legislative Update:** There's no word yet on how much money Amherst might get from the federal stimulus package, Musante said, and the best source of information seems to be on the web site, www.recovery.gov. The state Legislature's Municipal Relief Committee has not yet issued its report on its proposals for legislative approval. Shaffer said the town was not awarded the grant it applied for to help purchase the quint apparatus for the Fire Department.
- 7) **Member Reports:** Theilman reported on Regional School Committee discussions of possible cuts to the regional school budget. Slaughter reported on requests made to the Joint Capital Planning Committee by public safety departments.
- 8) **Minutes:** No minutes available.
- 9) **Miscellaneous**
 - a) At next week's meeting, concerning employee benefits, we will hear from Patrick Brock of the Hampshire County Retirement Board and from Bob Webb of the USI Consulting Group who completed in 2008 the actuarial analysis to estimate the accrued unfunded liability of post-employment benefits.
 - b) The ACTV web site now offers on-demand views of town board meetings.

Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 10:17 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Kay Moran, Acting Clerk