

Amherst Finance Committee Minutes

Meeting of April 2, 2009

CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order at 7 p.m. in the first floor meeting room of Town Hall

FINANCE COMMITTEE MEMBERS IN ATTENDANCE

Marilyn Blaustein, Kay Moran (Vice-Chair), Brian Morton (Chair), Robert Saul, Douglas Slaughter, Andrew Steinberg, Marylou Theilman.

STAFF AND OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE

John Musante, Assistant Town Manager/Finance Director; Jonathan Tucker, Planning Director; Judy Simpson and Harry Brooks, Town Meeting Coordinating Committee; Vincent O'Connor, Walter Wolnik

AGENDA

1. Town Meeting Coordinating Committee – Budget Presentation Proposals
2. Petition – Voting Rights - Morales
3. Petition – Gasoline Tax – O'Connor
4. Petition – 79 So. Pleasant Street – O'Connor
5. Petition– Human Services Budget – The Coalition to Support an Amherst Human Services Budget
6. Zoning Amendment – Taxi Services (Planning Board)
7. Zoning Amendment – Municipal Parking District (Planning Board)
8. Zoning Amendment – B-G & B-VC Lot Frontage (Planning Board)
9. Mullin Rule (Planning Board)
10. Updated Meeting Calendar
11. Legislative Update
12. Member Reports
13. Minutes
14. Miscellaneous

DISCUSSION

1. Town Meeting Coordinating Committee – Budget Presentation Proposals: Simpson presented three proposals for change, the first two intended to save Town Meeting time.
 - a. Presentations with no motion on the floor should be made at the Warrant Review meeting instead, where they're televised. Morton pointed out that the town's financial situation may change considerably between the Warrant Review meeting in April and consideration of budget articles in June, requiring an updated oral report to Town Meeting by the Finance Committee chair in June.
 - b. Budgets for individual town departments could be presented by a representative from the department instead of the Finance Committee, with recommendations to

follow from relevant committees. Morton said Massachusetts law gives the Finance Committee responsibility for submitting the budget. Steinberg said the proposal would likely be more, not less, time-consuming, since there are more department heads than functional areas to vote on.

- c. Use a lottery to determine the order of town budget articles, in order to avoid potential preferential treatment for any one department. This could apply to all articles involving spending. Steinberg said the elementary school and regional school budgets should be grouped together so the School Superintendent wouldn't have to attend multiple meetings. Blaustein suggested treating enterprise fund articles as a group. Morton said that, in any case, General Government should be the last of the five municipal functional areas considered since it includes the cost of employee benefits for the other four. Wolnik suggested that consolidating all five functional areas into one vote on the municipal budget would make Town Meeting go much faster.
2. Petition – Voting Rights – Morales: Not discussed because the petitioner was not present.
 3. Petition – Gasoline Tax – O'Connor: O'Connor said his article is a place-holder to allow more specific resolutions to be made at Town Meeting. The purpose is to raise more money for road maintenance and repair and more money for public transit, and to encourage purchase of more fuel-efficient vehicles.
 4. Petition – 79 So. Pleasant Street – O'Connor: Citing earlier purchases by UMass and Amherst College of other private properties, removing them from the tax rolls, O'Connor proposes taking this property recently acquire by Amherst College by eminent domain for resale to an entity that is not non-profit, in order to maintain the commercial viability of downtown and “send a message” to Amherst College. Blaustein thought this action might alienate the college. Morton questioned the funding plan and doubted finding a buyer would be easy. Steinberg asked whether this has been done anywhere else; O'Connor did not give other examples.
 5. Petition – Human Services Budget – The Coalition to Support an Amherst Human Services Budget: This article would provide the same amounts of town funding for FY 10 to seven human service agencies that they received in the FY 09 budget. The Town Manager's FY 10 budget does not do this, instead allocating CDBG money to three of the agencies. O'Connor said he and others haven't yet decided whether to make a motion under this article or move to amend the Town Manager's budget. Their purpose is to insure that the agencies get money if the town doesn't receive CDGG money, and to assure “the CDBG people” that the CDBG grants are not substitutions for previously appropriated money. Steinberg said making a separate article for a town budget item counters the TMCC's goal of making Town Meeting more efficient and quicker.
 6. Zoning Amendment – Taxi Services – Planning Board: Tucker said this would make more explicit inclusion of taxi services as principle use of a property in a renamed “Transportation facilities” section of the bylaw and regularize language there and in the existing “home occupation” section consistent with state law.

7. Zoning Amendment – Municipal Parking District – Planning Board: Tucker said this is intended to encourage dense development of mixed-use buildings in the town center by expanding the area in which off-street parking would not be required for selected uses. This would not affect any other zoning bylaw provisions or requirements.
8. Zoning Amendment – B-G & B-VC Lot Frontage – Planning Board: Tucker said this would further the goal of increasing residential density in the General Business district downtown and Village Center business districts by eliminating the 100-foot minimum lot frontage requirement. A great many downtown properties do not have that much frontage, so if they do not already contain residences, under the current bylaw residence units cannot be added. Slaughter said passage would bring those properties that do have residences on upper floors into compliance.
9. Mullin Rule – Planning Board: This article asks that the town adopt MGL 39 Sect. 23D, which would allow members of adjudicatory boards who missed no more than one meeting of an on-going hearing to vote on the issue if they read transcripts or watch tapes of the missed meeting and sign an affidavit. Tucker said adoption would be only for boards that want it. So far, the Planning Board and Conservation Commission are interested; the Zoning Board of Appeals and Health Board are not.
10. Updated Meeting Calendar: Musante distributed an updated calendar of Finance Committee meetings and deadlines through the Annual Town Meeting.
11. Legislative Update: Four committee members plan to attend State Sen. Stan Rosenberg's information session Saturday for local officials. The Legislature's Joint Committee on Revenue is holding a hearing Tuesday in Boston on local option taxes.
12. Member Reports: None.
13. Minutes: The minutes of the March 12 meeting were APPROVED as amended by a vote of 7-0. The minutes of the March 19 meeting were APPROVED as amended by a vote of 6-0, 1 abstention (Steinberg). The minutes of the March 26 meeting were APPROVED by a vote of 6-0, 1 abstention (Slaughter). The minutes of the March 28 meeting were APPROVED by a vote of 5-0, 2 abstentions (Moran, Saul).
14. Miscellaneous: Musante reported he is developing a worksheet to help town officials make decisions with implications for FY 10 and FY 11, and looking closely at local receipts and whether estimates should be revised downward.

ADJOURNMENT: The meeting adjourned at 9:46 p.m.

Submitted by Kay Moran, Acting Clerk