

Amherst Finance Committee Minutes

Feb. 11, 2010

CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order at 7:01 p.m. in the first-floor meeting room, Town Hall.

FINANCE COMMITTEE MEMBERS IN ATTENDANCE

Marilyn Blaustein, Kay Moran (vice-chair), Douglas Slaughter, Marylou Theilman.

STAFF IN ATTENDANCE: John Musante, Assistant Town Manager/Finance Director; David Ziomek, Director Planning, Conservation & Inspections; Jonathan Tucker, Planning Director; Bonita Weeks, Building Commissioner; Roy Rosenblatt, Community Development Coordinator; Guilford Mooring, Superintendent of Public Works; Robert Pariseau, Director of Water Resources.

OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE: Fred VanDerbeck, Pelham Finance Committee; ACTV.

AGENDA

1. FY 11 budget

a. Planning, Conservation and Inspections

The Town Manager's recommended FY 11 budget for this functional area is \$745,073, a 9% reduction from FY 10. If the Prop. 2 ½ override fails, extra help by an administrative assistant and training, supplies and advertising would be cut for a total budget of \$727,530, or 11.1% less than FY 10.

Ziomek distributed the organization chart for this functional area, which has the new name of Conservation and Development. In the past year, despite loss of two positions, Planning, Conservation and Inspections personnel have consolidated physically on the second floor of Town Hall; consolidated records and permits on the new Munis software; completed several major projects including development and adoption of the Master Plan; shepherded significant zoning changes through Town Meeting; and successfully applied for \$771, 121 in grants for the Town. Ziomek, Tucker, Weeks and Rosenblatt all said the consolidation has greatly improved communication among their staffs and with members of the public seeking information from them. The total recommended FY 11 budget for this functional area is down 9% from FY 10, Musante said, due to consolidation and assumption of Community Development Block Grant administration.

(1) **PLANNING**: Tucker said his big challenge is starting comprehensive code revision as outlined in the Master Plan. In addition, the Planning Department will assume Rosenblatt's community development duties, and in FY 11 another position will be eliminated when Rosenblatt retires. Community

Development Block Grant money that has funded Rosenblatt's salary will then pay parts of the salaries of others in this department, as they take over his work. He will continue as part-time consultant. In most communities planning departments handle CBDG duties, Tucker said.

- (2) **INSPECTIONS:** Ziomek said Weeks has mastered the MUNIS system and is making progress with it on improving permitting and record-keeping. Having Inspections in the same office with Planning and Conservation has been productive and helped get permits issued more quickly. Weeks agreed, and said they're working to develop a system for electronic filing. Planning, Conservation, Inspections and Fire Department inspectors meet weekly to discuss projects. Her department's big challenge will be dealing with the impending Building Code change, only 1 ½ years after the last one. There's a six-month overlap between successive codes, and people with permits can choose which code in effect at the time to follow. In addition, updates of the national energy code are not done at the same time as Building Code updates. She hopes to get all residential properties with common areas on a regular inspection schedule, not just the larger rental complexes.
- (3) **COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT:** Rosenblatt said he'll seek CDBG money to help rehabilitate dilapidated rental properties, as well as \$200,000 for social service agencies serving Amherst.
- (4) **CONSERVATION:** Ziomek said this department will continue trying to do more with less funding. One goal for FY 11 is to facilitate grants and private fundraising for such activities as Puffer's Pond and wildlife management.

b. Public Works – General Fund

The Town Manager's recommended FY 11 budget for this functional area is \$1,941,540, a 7.1% increase from FY 10. If the Prop. 2 ½ override fails, two laborer positions would be eliminated and the snow and ice budget would be reduced, for a total departmental budget of \$1,788,240, down 1.3% from FY 10. Mooring said the recommended budget would maintain existing crews and increase the budget for snow and ice removal to the level of previous years' experience. Due to previous years' budget limits, four members of the highway crew are paid entirely from project money during the road work season, leaving nobody to do routine road maintenance. That means less staffing flexibility and, last year, no laborers to fill potholes even though there was money for patching material. If the department loses another position or two, it won't have staffing to continue maintaining school athletic fields. He's investigating machinery that would allow recycling of old asphalt, saving costs.

c. Enterprise Funds – Water, Sewer, Solid Waste

Pariseau said no rate increase is being recommended for FY 11 for either the Water Fund or the Sewer Fund. The average annual costs for homeowners in Amherst are below those for systems statewide (\$396 for water in Amherst, vs. \$426 statewide; \$390 in sewer charges in Amherst, vs. \$584 statewide). The wastewater treatment plant is 31 years old and in excellent condition. Sometime

in the future Amherst may be required to remove nitrogen and phosphorus from wastewater, which will be costly.

Mooring said changes are ahead for the Solid Waste Fund. Revenue continues to decline, this budget has to be supplemented from Solid Waste Reserves, and revenue-raising plans have not worked out. Stickers for access to the transfer station and recycling center will increase from \$50 to \$75 a year for residents. (However, at the end of the semester college students can show a student ID and pay to dispose of their trash without buying a sticker. This policy is to discourage roadside dumping, Mooring said.) There's no contract yet for a cell phone tower at the closed landfill on the northeast side of Belchertown Road, and hopes for selling carbon-exchange credits for burning off methane haven't been fulfilled. The town will again issue a request for proposals for a solar collecting facility on the even older closed landfill on the southeast side of Belchertown Road. With Northampton's landfill about to close and South Hadley's due to close soon after that, Amherst and its private haulers will have to find other alternatives, almost certainly at greater cost.

2. News affecting budget
3. Budget Coordinating Group report

Slaughter reported that the Budget Coordinating Group agreed Feb. 10 to recommend that the Select Board put a lump sum override of \$1.76 million on the March 23 ballot, with \$537,252 earmarked for the Town operating budget, \$400,000 for the Elementary Schools budget, \$739,195 for the Regional School District Assessment, and \$88,994 for the Libraries operating budget. BCG reaffirmed its recommendation that, if revenues are greater or costs less than now projected, the Town should not tax to the levy limit authorized by a favorable override vote but stick to the recommended budgets, and the budget professionals agree not to seek restorations above recommended budgets. Library Trustees have so far taken no position on the override, and School Committee members are divided. The Select Board votes tomorrow morning.

Musante reported that both of the School Committees and the Library Trustees have agreed on their respective preliminary budgets. He also reported that the firefighters' union Local 1764 has ratified a contract with the Town. As a result of this contract, the Town Manager's original FY11 recommended budget is reduced by about \$85,000. Therefore, the total override amount to be voted on by the Select Board tomorrow will be \$1,680,441. Even if voters approve the override, there will still be \$2.6 million in cuts from level services for FY 11, on top of \$4+ million in cuts for FY 10, he said.

4. Member reports
None.

5. Next meeting and agenda

So far, we have no business to conduct Feb. 18; the meeting will be cancelled by Feb. 17 if none materializes by then. On Feb. 25 we'll take up the Public Safety and Community Services budgets.

6. Minutes of Feb. 4 and 6, if available
No action.

7. Miscellaneous
None.

ADJOURNMENT

The meeting adjourned at 9:43 p.m.

Submitted by Kay Moran, acting clerk