

Amherst Finance Committee Minutes

February 25, 2010, 7:02 p.m.

First Floor Meeting Room, Town Hall

Finance Committee Members in Attendance: Marilyn Blaustein, Kay Moran (vice-chair), Andy Steinberg (chair), Phil Jackson, Bob Saul, Douglas Slaughter, Marylou Theilman.

Staff in Attendance: John Musante, Assistant Town Manager/Finance Director; Scott Livingstone, Police Chief, Lindsay Stromgren, Interim Fire Chief, Mike Zlogar, Assistant Fire Chief; Holyoke Deputy Fire Chief Tim Nelson, who will become Amherst Fire Chief; Nancy Pagano, Senior Center Director; Maura Plante, Senior Center Program Director; Linda Chalfant, LSSE Director; Barbara Bilz, Assistant LSSE Director and Cherry Hill Golf Course General Manager.

Steinberg called the meeting to order at 7:02 p.m. and began by describing this year's challenge for the Finance Committee; preparing two budget scenarios, 1) with an override in place, and 2) without an override in place.

1. Public Safety

1. **Police:** The collective bargaining contract has saved approximately \$107,000 for the FY 11 Police budget, and it has allowed the department budget to increase by less than 1% year over year. Steinberg explained that the original budget projections included a 10% State Aid cut, but now, best guess is a reduction of less than 5%. Moran prepared some questions as the Finance Committee member who will present the Public Safety budget to Town Meeting. Her first question concerned cooperative efforts with UMass and any savings accrued. The Chief described cooperative efforts with UMass police with patrol alternations. Cost savings were negligible. Beginning immediately, there are 10 specific weekends with saturation patrols using both Town and UMass police. There are also mutual trainings co-ops between the two forces, and those have resulted in some cost savings in both training budgets. Chief noted that the UMass police budget is also not in good shape, and that they may be laying off 3 or 4 officers. The cooperation is not proposed as a cost savings measure; more to provide better service, better policing, and they have created a significant improvement in efficiency. Saturation patrols have helped decrease noise complaints etc. Some assistance from State police but limited to crisis weekends. The Chief noted there is a general misconception about State trooper resources. Locally there are not many officers, most come from overtime officers closer to Boston. Jackson asked the Chief to address the call volume and severity of incidents. The Chief said they are seeing more assaults and sex crimes and these take more time to investigate. Moran asked about the new

patrol districts and their realignment. The Chief described that cost savings have yet to be seen. Call districts are now broken up by call volume, and the department is also assigning cops to a single district so they can connect with community. There is also a new community precinct outreach initiative, but it is time consuming. Chief described the receipt of various grants, grants pending, and grants denied including grants for the reinstatement of three officers, which Amherst did not get. Most of these grants went to urban areas. Blaustein asked about the efficiency of on line reports, and Chief said it is becoming more popular among the officers.

2. **Animal Welfare:** Moran asked about exploring regionalization for animal welfare, but the Chief stated that the difficulty is that the smaller hill towns have very limited resources so there is no one to regionalize with. If the animal welfare position is cut to half time, the viability of the pound facility will have to be re-examined.
3. **Communications Center:** Moran asked about staffing currently at 11. The Chief stated that 12 is the ideal number, but the current staffing at 11, leads to increases in overtime. The Fire Chief agreed with the assessment. Moran asked about what the loss of one position means. The Police Chief stated that there will be stress on the system. During peak times, it is a four person call center, but now there are three per shift. Cracks are forming in the entire system during peak times and there is a chance that some calls will not be answered in a timely manner. The current staffing is still vulnerable. One position is contingent upon override, and another is already a cut effectively since it will be funded by a State grant. Moran asked about the funding for the grant, and Musante described the grant as a recurring source of funding that was relatively secure. Regionalization of the dispatch is still a couple of years out, and Steinberg asked if there was an interim problem in the transition to regionalization; if the infrastructure is there to support dispatch in the interim.
4. **Fire:** Interim Fire Chief Lindsay Stromgren presented the Fire Department budget. Theilman recused herself from the discussion (her son is an “up and coming fire captain”). Moran asked about ISO rating report which determines rates of fire insurance. Report gives town a rating that incorporates equipment, systems, and compares town to other towns nationwide. Town is in the upper half of the ratings systems. Raising the number would be expensive. Low staffing and lower training were the Department weaknesses which are all linked to lower levels of staffing. Ratings occur every ten to fifteen years so the Town’s new ISO rating will be in place for some time. Ambulance service was recently picked for Tufts University field study; an honor that recognizes its recent electronic system upgrade. This study will look specifically at stroke patients, and the advanced information transfer to the hospital from the EMT’s. Amherst has been very active in the development of this program, and Tufts will use the data to

study the program. The program is totally grant funded. Slaughter asked about the expansion of services to University Drive by Cooley Dickenson. This might become an issue for the ambulance service since the fast track clinic can generate more ambulance trips. Jackson asked about energy efficiency and the Chief's indicated that they were working with the Town on improvements. The Chief noted that there are five staff who were hired with a federal grant that supports a decreasing percentage of their salaries each year, and there is stimulus money currently funding overtime. The grants will be exhausted in the coming year, and costs to the Town will go up. Moran made it clear that Town Meeting knew the hires were based upon these grants. Minimum staffing per shift is seven, and if the staffing falls below seven, overtime labor is required. Higher staffing levels actually leads to cost savings because overtime is avoided. Stimulus money is staffing high activity weekends to stay with up to nine firefighters. It takes a minimum of two fire fighters to send an ambulance out the door, and three fire fighters to send a truck out the door. Moran asked about ambulance training, and the Acting Chief said training is under the levels where it should be. Musante stated that police and fire services are the Town's highest priority. New contract negotiations have reduced COLA and reduced the override size by \$85,000. Altogether, this represents 60% of the municipal workforce that have voluntarily reduced COLA's to stretch the Amherst tax dollars as far as they can.

2. Community Services

1) **Senior Center:** Declining personnel costs are proportional to the decline in Town Funds for the Senior Center. Most funds already come from internal fund raising efforts. Thin staffing often leaves one person left running the Senior Center. The number of elders in the regional population is going up dramatically. Jackson asked about the service levels and whether they were a function of funding. The Director said that services are not only shrinking, but also shifting. There are free food programs that are now in high demand, and people want more help with health and financial consulting services. One negative byproduct of the slower economy is that there is a lower rate of volunteerism as people work more. Blaustein asked about overlap between the Senior Center services with the survival center. The Director stated that the elders rarely access the Survival Center without Senior Center help. There appears to be little chance for regionalization since Amherst is giving, not taking when it comes to the surrounding towns. Steinberg asked about the loss of the volunteer coordinator, and the Director described a situation where this leads to fewer student volunteers because there is no one to coordinate them.. Musante added that the SC is operated on a shoestring, and we are getting to a point where the Senior Center will disappear.

2) **Pools and Golf Course.** In the coming year, the wading pools and Mill River pool will remain open. The aquatics director will be reduced to half time leaving current staff to pick up the slack. The pools are looking for alternative revenue sources. Fewer families serviced conveniently due to closure of the War Memorial pool. Jackson asked about privatizing, but the Director stated that it is hard to make a profit in New England with a seasonal operation. Steinberg bemoaned the loss of the town's capacity to teach kids to swim.

3) **Cherry Hill Golf Course.** The budget will need to be cut by \$7600 if the override does not pass. This will ultimately hurt revenues by hurting course conditions. The course did well in spite of rainy summer, and this year, they are planning a \$1 fee increase, a couples league, an outreach to local businesses, and competitive tournaments to increase revenue by \$16,000 or more. The Cherry Hill traffic is already up 9.7% compared to negative golf course growth nationally. Musante emphasized that Cherry Hill is self sufficient and cash positive.

4) **LSSE.** The department is moving from a tax supported budget to a fee supported budget with town support 80% lower than it was two years ago. This is the second year using RecTrak, a software tool, to monitor each program for its return on effort and resources. This year, without an override, there will be an additional \$19,000 reduction in Town support which will result in reductions in staff, supplies, and activities support. This year, there was a mid year cut of a 32 hour position. In FY 11, LSSE will eliminate the outdoor challenge camp. The department is also looking for sponsorship revenue and other fund raisers while also trying to get creative with the limited marketing budget. As they look at benefits and salary allocation, some programs start to look expensive. Jackson asked about a centralized volunteer coordination person for the Town. Musante stated that this is similar to a grant centralization function in the Planning Department. All agreed this was a good idea. LSSE now generates about \$1.8 million in program revenue and with the Town providing only \$250,000 of that. Chalfant stated that further reductions will limit the departments ability to generate this revenue.

2. News affecting budget. No news to report.
3. Override Proposal for March 23rd ballot. Theilman suggested a public relations piece in the Bulletin. A discussion ensued about how the Finance Committee advocates for the override. Slaughter pointed out that we can advocate as individuals, but we cannot use Town resources to provide advocacy. Moran pointed out that we can provide information. It has been done in the past. Theilman and Jackson both agreed that we still need to find a way to tell the story. The question is how to tell the story and whether to take a position.

Moran made a motion to support the proposed override. Slaughter seconded. Discussion followed about the political ramifications of a Finance Committee vote of support. Generally, the members agreed that it was important to make a statement explaining reasons for their support. Steinberg suggested a subcommittee to draft the statement and Slaughter and Saul volunteered. The motion to support the override proposed by the BCG and approved by the Select Board passed unanimously.

4. There were no member reports.
5. The meeting was adjourned at 10:55 p.m.

Bob Saul, Acting Clerk