

Amherst Finance Committee
February 10, 2011 7 P.M.
1st Floor Meeting Room, Town Hall

The meeting was called to order at 7:07 P.M.

ATTENDANCE:

Kay Moran (Vice-Chair), Bob Saul, Douglas Slaughter, Andrew Steinberg (Chair), and Marylou Theilman

OTHERS PRESENT:

John Musante, Town Manager/Finance Director; Guilford Mooring, Superintendant of the Department of Public Works, Amy Lane, Assistant Superintendant for Operations; Fire Chief Walter Nelson, Assistant Fire Chief Lindsay Stromgren, Acting Assistant Fire Chief Donald McKay; Police Chief Scott Livingstone.

1. The Chairman began the meeting by asking if anyone recalled the Town Manager's comments about COLA's as they affected the budget projections for FY 2012. Moran consulted her notes and discovered that Musante had stated at the Four Town meeting on January 31st, that Mr. Musante indicated they had been accounted for in all the budgets but the COLA percentages have obviously been kept confidential since negotiations with the unions are currently underway.
2. News affecting budget
Musante reported that there was no substantive news affecting the budget since the last meeting although he expressed an uncharacteristic level of excitement when describing the appointment of a new Finance Director who will begin the job in March. Mr. Steinberg cautioned that the Governor's proposed budget, and the lower cuts to State Aid, are still subject to change as the budget process wears on, and they should not be relied upon as solid projections.
3. Public Works
Mr. Mooring noted that the overall Public Works budget has been reduced by 2.4%. He stated that he has employed a lot of small budget cuts. Some savings resulted from moving one position to a lower pay grade. The highway crew has four employees whose salary expense will be charged to project work which comes from project specific funding. Although employee numbers are unchanged in the highway department budget, this will be a tough year to finance these four project dependent positions since the stimulus money is disappearing and, in general, the budget is under stress. The Snow and Ice removal budget is also under stress but it still has capacity for one more big storm before it moves into a deficit situation. The street light budget is another troubled child. This budget pays for everything associated with traffic and street lights, but there is no specific expense allocation for the labor to service these lights. DPW could ideally use a person dedicated exclusively to light service to make it more efficient, but that is a stretch in this year's budget circumstance. In the Equipment maintenance group, the Foreman is about to retire. The group, in general, is working more efficiently since the implementation of the "in house" vehicle inspections. Ms.Moran asked if all vehicle inspections were charged to the DPW budget and Mr. Mooring answered that all

departments are charged for their vehicles accordingly. Steinberg asked if the decline in fuel use was due to more fuel efficient vehicles, and Mooring indicated that certain efficiencies in employee and vehicle scheduling have created the reduction in fuel use. The Tree and Ground Maintenance budget is a new budget category, and it creates savings, some of it immediate, because the foreman of the group is retiring. The structuring of this group is still a work in process, but it will eliminate a foreman and ultimately cut costs. Mr. Mooring is asking for an extra \$11,000 to combine the departments in a single operating unit. Mr. Musante added that consolidating the two crews, tree and ground maintenance, will allow the division to operate more cohesively. With one extra laborer and a lower pay scale foreman, it will free up the division director to deal with planning issues on tree maintenance and keep a full director position out of the labor pool. Slaughter asked if there were opportunities to hire seasonal helpers. Mooring said the seasonal help situation has improved, and Hopkins Academy has become a good source as a labor pool. Theilman asked about the longer days in the summer schedule, 4 day, 10 hour shifts, and Mooring said workers love it but they have to limit its availability due to employee coverage issues. Mooring emphasized that the new Assistant Superintendent has worked out very well. Another improvement has been the addition of an Environmental Engineer. Musante seconded this sentiment. More than 30 projects will need to be completed by Thanksgiving, about \$6 million in total, and this could not be done without the coordination provided by the Assistant Superintendent Position..

4. Enterprise Funds, Water, Water billing rates will stay flat and one FTE will be added to the budget. All the automated systems make the system dependent upon two electricians, and the budget incorporates a new halftime position for water and a half time position for sewer to create a backup electrician which should make the system more reliable. The Centennial water treatment system needs some upgrading. The improvements on Centennial will be funded with a \$4 million bond issue which replaces the retiring Atkins debt with new debt that will likely reduce overall debt service even after the new bonds have been issued. There is some uncertainty over water use, especially with changing water use at UMass, so there is a plug for \$244,000 in the budget coming from the water fund reserve fund should UMass's water use drop dramatically.
5. Sewer, Sewer rates are up slightly due to a new system at UMass which uses waste water for cooling of the electric plant. This is cost effective for the University in any event. The Sewer Supervisor is retiring and this might lead to some short term cost savings. Mr. Steinberg noted again that the use of reserves to plug the budget gap is an aggressive assumption, and Mr. Musante pointed out that the projections for revenues, in general, are conservative and reserves are likely not to be necessary to fill the gap in this or other budgets.
6. Solid Waste is the problem child of the DPW budget. The solar project has the potential to bring money back to the fund to finance the ongoing maintenance of the landfills. An infusion of cash from the Atkins Corner redevelopment project from soil dumping on the landfill will also provide additional revenues to the solid waste budget. Mr. Mooring noted the need to create a sustainable funding source for Solid Waste and a long term policy solution to solve the problem created as landfills around the region close. Mr. Musante called the soil dumping approach very entrepreneurial. Slaughter asked if the soil input would increase the monitoring costs on the landfill, but Mooring said the monitoring requirements have been recently fixed and monitoring costs may disappear in a few years. Mr. Slaughter asked if there was room to add more soil onto the landfill caps, and the answer was no. Mr. Steinberg expressed gratitude for all the diverse initiatives and great work to address specific long term problems. Ms. Moran added that she was impressed with the technique used to clean the streets during the recent Ice Age.

7. Mr. Mooring closed by warning that all four division directors will retire in the next two years. This creates a very stressful situation, and he put in a pitch for non union employees to receive a raise. Mr. Musante said he thought the issue of equity should not be discussed in this forum. Everybody has taken some pain. Mr. Steinberg agreed but thought the issue of retention of employees was an issue to be discussed. Mr. Mooring just wanted to raise the point.
8. Public Safety, Police, Animal Welfare, Communications Center, Regional Lockup Assessment. Chief Livingstone has completed staff appointments and new promotions so the overall staffing levels are in good shape. Although the total officer numbers still stand at 43, the same number as last year, all the new recruits need to complete their education processes to get the staff back to full strength. One member of the force is in Afghanistan and due back in June. The redistricting plan for officers to be consistently assigned to the same district to get to know folks better in “their” neighborhood has been implemented and has created much more continuity. The force has also continued to work with the University to coordinate staffing during high stress periods. Call volume remains nearly flat year over year, but the Chief and the officers are noticing that interaction with the college aged students is much more tension filled with more assaults that often escalate the interaction between police and students to the next level. He hopes the police can do a better job explaining to students why they are responding to complaints. In general, the budget is in good shape but some cuts will have to be made, especially to overtime hours, to meet the constraints of level funding. Theilman asked about the effects of increasing the amount of nuisance fines. The Chief said that issuing a fine instead of making an arrest, increased the time officers can stay on the street because it takes less time to issue a fine than it does to book someone down at the Police Station. Ms. Theilman asked about repercussions at the University for students who break the law, and the Chief said that the police are now in the process of trying to get the university to realign the University penalties to fit the crime especially for violent offenses by students. Ms. Moran asked about the services provided to other departments by the Police Department. The Chief said that services to other departments included mostly training for school safety. Also, the Police backup safety services to smaller departments, and share a staff person with the IT department. Most of new regional dispatch training would be covered by grant funding for regionalization. Theilman asked about the drop in traffic ticket revenue, and the Chief pointed out that the drop is predictable since, with budget cuts, there is now no officer exclusively dedicated to traffic enforcement. Mr. Musante added that staff turnover has cut costs, but that overtime cuts reduce staffing flexibility. Dispatch is a status quo budget that does not include costs or savings of transition to regionalization, but, it should be noted that the regional dispatch planning initiative and the \$735K grant from the State is in the works and regionalization planning is underway. Ms. Moran also asked if our dispatchers were EMD trained and the answer was yes. Ms. Theilman asked if there was a minimum number of communities necessary for regionalization, and Mr. Musante said he is aiming for a minimum of four communities. Mr. Steinberg asked about narrow band radio frequency requirements, and Ms. Moran answered that this upgrade is in the capital requests for FY 12 to reach compliance by 2013. Animal Welfare Officer Carol Hepburn will be exploring the possibility of some kind of regionalization for animal officers. The Police Station facility has had some HVAC upgrades and they need to add some additional staffing for maintenance and janitorial requirements. Otherwise no major changes imbedded in the FY2012 budget.
9. Fire/EMS- Chief Tim Nelson said that call volume has dropped slightly but EMS calls rose slightly, 3.7%, and the EMS calls are the more time consuming calls. Assistant Chief McKay noted that the Fire Department receives 4000 calls a year, and they dispatch 5 ambulances. The Department is working on a system that will reduce time to treatment,

and they are also looking at a better data analysis system. The Fire Department is a stressed entity just at the edge. They took on seven new members in FY 2011 and trained them internally. One is already at the Massachusetts fire academy and the others will be attending in due course. Additionally, there have been some facility upgrades to the communication system. There has also been more interaction with other towns through mutual aid, etc. Ms. Theilman asked about the diminished inspections numbers. This is mostly accounted for by a new system which reduces the amount of repeat visits for projects at UMass, etc. so more inspections can occur in a single visit. Ms. Moran asked about the minimum on-duty staffing of 7 in the Fire Department which in turn is stressed by the increases in EMS calls. The Chief talked about increased pressure from the aging population, and described how EMS is often the primary access point for the healthcare system for many citizens. Some calls on alcohol or drugs now get a ride to hospital whereas before they would either go to the jail or go home. Mr. Steinberg asked about ambulance overload, and the Chiefs said that they often have mutual aid coverage, and the calls cut across the spectrum. Ms. Theilman asked about the age breakdown of callers requesting ambulance services, but the Chiefs said that but they don't do this kind of analysis, though they could, because it would not be useful. Mr. Steinberg drew the discussion to a close and indicated that he wants to have a discussion about how the town can meet the increasing demand for EMS services long term. The Chiefs said they are on the case, and trying to do EMS call prevention training. Ms. Moran asked about services provided by the Fire Department to other departments and the Chief mentioned mutual aid to other towns and visa versa as well as help with inspection services, the DPW and the schools.

10. Member Reports. Ms Theilman noted that the municipal members of the Regional School district could send a member to the union negotiating team as noted in the meeting from January 31st. Mr. Slaughter noted that the Budget Coordinating Group at their last meeting talked about "essential needs" for the capital budget, but they have slowed the time line of their decisions to coordinate with the information pending on State Aid.
11. Minutes of February 3rd. Ms. Theilman motioned approval and Mr. Slaughter seconded. Ms. Moran made the motion to approve the January 31st minutes as amended. Mr. Slaughter seconded. Each set of minutes was approved 5-0 with one member absent.
12. Next Meeting was set for February 17th.
13. The meeting adjourned at 9:52 pm