

## **FINANCE COMMITTEE MINUTES- DRAFT**

Meeting Date: 15 March, 2007

### CALL TO ORDER

The Meeting was called to order at 7:00 P.M. in the Town Room, Town Hall

### COMMITTEE MEMBERS IN ATTENDANCE

Alice Carlozzi (chair), Paul Bobrowski, Kay Moran, Douglas Slaughter, Andrew Steinberg

### OTHERS PRESENT

Ron Bohonowicz (Director of Facilities), Elaine Brighty (School Committee), Jere Hochman (Superintendent of Schools) John Musante (Finance Director/Treasurer), Jonathan Tucker (Planning Director), Bonita Weeks (Building Commissioner), Walter Wolnik, David Ziomek (Conservation Services Director)

### COMMITTEE AGENDA

1. Minutes of March 8, 2007 meeting.
2. Budget reviews:
  - Conservation
  - Planning
  - Inspection Services
  - Facility Maintenance/Police Facility
  - Regional Schools
3. Override(s), continued: additional report to Select Board?
4. Report to Town Meeting: writing assignments
5. Member reports
6. Miscellaneous

### COMMITTEE ACTION

No action was taken.

### DISCUSSION

The committee postponed action on the minutes of March 8, 2007 until a subsequent meeting.

Tucker made the first presentation regarding the budgets presented for Planning, Conservation and Inspections. Carlozzi reminded the committee that Tucker is her son-in-law and that she expects no material gain from the committee's consideration of this budget.

Tucker explained the staffing changes for the department that will result if the proposed budget is adopted, which include the correction of a technical error in the classification of one employee. The staff changes result in a net saving of \$8758. Additional savings will be achieved by reducing staff support for the committees that work with the department, staff training, dues and subscriptions, travel reimbursements, and supplies. The supply budget can be reduced without affecting productivity because the department has shifted from film to digital photography. The total budget is \$290,162, slightly less than shown in the Town Managers' proposed budget from January.

Bobrowski asked why there was a reduction in inquiries to the department in 2006. Tucker explained that more inquiries and responses come by e-mail, which are not counted in the same manner as other inquiries. Tucker added that there were fewer special permit requests which create inquiries because they are frequently complex and contentious. Bobrowski asked about the effect of the Comprehensive Plan process on the department. Tucker talked about the need for an additional professional planner.

Ziomek began the presentation of the budget for the Conservation Department by talking about the overall objectives of the entire functional area of planning, conservation and inspections, and how they work together. Conservation provides support for farmers through the Agricultural Commission, is involved in the permitting process, and has been spending significant time working with the public shade tree Commission as it inventories the trees. They are working with the planning process in updating the open space and recreation plan. For example, they are considering how natural resources can be used to enhance tourism. To meet the budget guidelines, the Conservation Department will need to eliminate seasonal employees who worked at Puffer's Pond and on trail maintenance projects and rely on volunteers. Conservation will look to the Friends of Puffers Pond and the Kestrel Trust through an aggressive grant strategy.

Steinberg asked whether there has been further consideration of charging for parking at Puffers Pond. Ziomek explained that the parking facilities may not be of a sufficient standard to address liability issues if the Town charges for use. Steinberg also asked whether the loss of seasonal staff will affect efforts to protect the trees at the pond from beavers. Ziomek responded that the problem is now more significant upstream from the pond and in areas where water backup from beaver structures is affecting homes. Carlozzi asked Tucker and Ziomek whether staff changes are affecting their ability to meet legal deadlines. Tucker said that the priority is to meet those deadlines, over other demands on their time.

Weeks described the activities of the Inspections Department and the proposed budget. In 2006, 1054 building permits were issued, which is the largest number ever. The electrical inspector was also busy because of the large number of complex projects at the University. In addition, they have been scanning and indexing records. Bobrowski asked Weeks about the nature and relative complexity of the inspections. She said that they are becoming more complex. He then followed up by asking about the effect of staff reductions if the economic development goals of a comprehensive plan are successful. Weeks said that she often has to work substantial additional hours and needed to use additional part-time help in August. Tucker explained that as more building activity occurs in areas that have been previously built, the issues for planning and inspections are more complex and possibly more contentious. Improvements in technology will help but will not solve the staffing problem.

Bohonowicz presented the budget for the maintenance of facilities. While it is one of the newest buildings, the public safety facility is at an age when things are beginning to fail. A device that controls water flow, the back-flow preventer failed and required \$1500 to fix. The generator is essential because the building includes the emergency dispatch center. It has not been under a service contract for many years. That needs to be addressed. They want to install a computerized control system for the heat and ventilation, which will save on energy costs. Heating and electricity are the cost items with the greatest increase for his department. Bohonowicz explained

the challenges to maintenance staffing, which he is trying to address with better sharing across buildings and better use of staff time on shifts when the buildings are not in full use. The public safety building provides a challenge because they rely on one person for whom there is no backup. Because of specialized training and security concerns, they cannot assign anyone to that building who has not been previously screened and cannot use temporary employees. He is concerned about emergency contingencies and the stress on one person. Salary expense for the department is reduced in the proposed budget due to changes in staff and scheduling.

Hochman presented the budget for the regional schools. He distributed revised data packets from the budget planning meetings, the current proposed budget, and a summary that shows assessments to the four towns at different budget levels and sets forth proposed cuts to achieve a 1% growth budget and what would be added if budgets can increase by 3%. Hochman acknowledged the benefit of having early knowledge about the budget parameters. They began the process by increasing fixed and known costs. The budget would then increase by 6.9%. As a result, the staff and the school committee had to propose substantial additional cuts in order to develop a budget with a 1% increase from the current year. Hochman reviewed in detail a list of additions and proposed cuts. The most significant change was to reduce the number of classes offered and to require that high school students enroll in two study halls. If the budget can increase by 3%, they will be able to add 3.6 F.T.E. teachers which will add 15 core classes and enable the high school to return to a single study hall.

Because they have been asked many questions about special education expenses compared to other districts, Hochman provided significant information about how that cost is calculated by the state. The Amherst Regional Schools have reduced costs by offering more special education programs within the district, reducing the substantial expense of paying tuition for other placements. Because tuitions are not included in the state calculation, a district that does more with its own staff is determined to have a higher cost per special education student.

The committee discussed that the Select Board intended to consider whether to add a second override question to the ballot for May 1, in addition to the \$2.5 million override recommended by the finance committee, which it adopted at its March 12, 2007 meeting. The committee considered whether it had anything to add by a supplemental report that would assist the Select Board to make that decision. The members agreed that there was no new information to provide. Carozzi and Slaughter will attend the Select Board meeting, along with any other members who wish to do so.

Finance Committee members present volunteered to write sections of the committee report to Town Meeting. Members reported briefly about their meetings with other committees.

#### ADJOURNMENT

The meeting adjourned at 10:15 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Andrew Steinberg  
Acting Clerk