

AMHERST FINANCE COMMITTEE MINUTES

Meeting of February 9, 2012 at 7:05pm
First Floor Meeting Room of Town Hall

Attendance:

Kay Moran (Vice-Chair), Janice Ratner, Bob Saul, Anurag Sharma (7:30pm), Doug Slaughter, Andrew Steinberg (Chair), Marylou Theilman

Others Present:

Sandy Pooler, Town Finance Director; Scott Livingstone, Police Chief; Jennifer Gundersen, Police Captain; W. Tim Nelson, Fire Chief; Donald McKay, Assist. Fire Chief; Lindsay Stromgren, Assist. Fire Chief; Maria Geryk, Superintendent of Schools; Rob Detweiler, Finance Director of Schools; and Amherst Media

Agenda:

1. Public Safety departments budget review
 - Police
 - Animal Welfare
 - Communications Center
 - Regional Lockup Assessment
 - Fire / EMS
2. Schools – Elementary and Region budget introduction and overview
3. New information affecting budget, review financial projections
4. Fiscal Year 2013 budget development
5. FY 12 Second Quarter Revenue and Expense Report, municipal budget
6. Member reports – liaisons and committees
7. Minutes of previous meetings
8. Next Meeting and Agenda
9. Topics not reasonably anticipated by the Chair 48 hours in advance of the meeting

Public Safety (Information from the Town of Amherst Proposed Budget Fiscal Year 2013)

Police (Pages 49-55)

Livingstone presented the police budget and stated that he had rewritten the mission statement to reflect his view of where he wants to go with the department and to state its basic functions as it applies to the work of police officers. Under his command, over the last two years, officers have been assigned to specific districts in town ranging for a period of time from 6 to 12 months.

Quality of life issues affecting neighborhoods have been a priority. As rental properties increase, the need to continue ongoing communication between the University administration and its police is necessary in addressing student disturbances and especially serious crimes committed by a very small percentage of students. In addition, the department is working on rental inspections with the fire and health inspectors of the town.

Officers spend a lot of time on computers preparing reports. Using interns, as entry personnel, to handle the paper work is being considered. Because of the lack of time by officers, citations have been down 30% this year and 30% in the previous year. The question arose as to whether a traffic regulation division could pay for itself. There are

communities where an officer in charge of violations can generate revenue to pay for the position. However, this is not the intent of creating such a position, but merely the result of the number of violations and the money it generates.

The schedule change to district assignments is not the reason for the cost increase in the budget. Over the last 2 years there have been only 40 officers, rather than 45, which requires overtime of personnel to fill out shifts. In addition, some overtime is mandated to cover weekends. Their weekend begins on Wednesday and goes through Sunday. New hires have been added but can take up to a year to get on the beat, as they have to attend the Police Academy and then do in house training which takes additional time. To speed up time in training, hiring officers who have attended the Academy has been tried. The hiring process is topnotch.

In 2010 there was a rash of break-ins. The department moved an investigator to the detective bureau to focus on break-ins which were a region wide problem. Initially it was thought to be a group traveling from town to town, but instead were individuals of which 20 have been arrested.

The present radio equipment dates to 1978. New equipment will not require any additional training for police officers.

This year's budget is in good shape. There is a possibility of a small surplus at the end of the year due to decreased personnel. So far overtime is in good shape and is used to replace vacation and sick time. Training is placed at a premium. Officers work many hours as calls are up 60% compared to 5 years ago. As first responders, officers are responding to more calls. There are more requests to patrol including the Senior Center and Library, which could be done in the past when more officers were available. Officers check the Homeless Shelter every night. The department helps the school department with some computer record keeping. The department also assists inspection services with properties in town.

Assaults on officers have gone way up this year by a small percentage of students who intend to assault them. Officers are trained to handle these assaults.

Overtime now is the same as when there were 51 officers in the department. Federal guidelines and statistics indicate that the town the size of Amherst should have 66 officers. Livingstone said that he would be happy with 51 and comfortable with 55. He will keep requesting. There are some additional personnel on the Manager's priority list.

Communications Center (Pages 49 and 60-62)

Livingstone stated that the communications center handles all calls for police, fire and EMS. It is information in and out. In addition to Amherst, the center services Belchertown Fire. All Amherst dispatch have Emergency Medical Dispatch (EMD) certification. Funding is provided for 12 persons and presently there are 11. The budget is underfunded. Personnel services budget is up due to negotiated salaries.

The town continues to look at where it is going with dispatch in terms of a regional center. Only Belchertown, Pelham and South Hadley Fire District 2 have agreed to participate. Discussions are ongoing for the Town of Hadley to join, too.

Amherst is one of two hazmat dispatch centers in the state which has responsibility for dispatch of the Mass. Hazardous Materials Response System. There are 275 hazmat techs in the state. A regional dispatch center would have 3 or 4 dispatch persons for hazmat.

is a three tiered approach with the state paying for everything above tier one.

Animal Welfare (Pages 49 and 64-65)

Livingstone stated that the budget is level funded. The animal welfare officer handles all animals and takes care of the pound. The officer now has the additional responsibility regarding dogs in the Amethyst Brook Conservation area. The Police Department is extremely happy with the officer's work.

Regional Lockup

Regional lockup is elsewhere in the budget and is not part of the public safety budget.

Fire / EMS (Pages 49 and 56-59)

Nelson stated that the mission remains the same, but as now written, better explains what the department does and the services it performs. He has settled in and he has consistency in his staff of 2 assistant chiefs and 8 captains. He sees a lot of talent in the department. The union contract has been settled and with it came the position of fire inspector without the loss of a line fire fighter. The inspector position had been on an ad hoc basis, although the need was always there. The fire inspector now meets every two weeks with the town health and building inspectors.

The department services UMass, and for EMS Shutesbury, Leverett, Pelham and Hadley. Call volume is up 8.7% in EMS. Nelson would like to see the total strength of the department brought up to 12 firefighters/EMT's per shift, as there is an increasing amount of "call back" to the station for coverage which is getting harder to achieve. There were 428 "call backs" last year.

The federal SAFER grant provides support for recruiting and training Call and Volunteer firefighters. Permanent staff serve as trainers. Nelson also sees the interaction among the groups as an opportunity to build relationships.

Presently there are 7 firefighters out on long term status: 3 are in Afghanistan, 2 were injured on duty, 1 long term and 1 at the Fire Academy. The Fire Academy, as the Police Academy, takes approximately a year, including wait time. This year overtime is pressed to the limit.

Some vehicle maintenance is done in house. Mileage is up 14% or 21,000 miles. The department has developed its own data base to keep track of vehicles and assess the entire fleet.

Next year's budget reflects the negotiated salary increases. It maintains a minimum of 7 firefighters on a shift.

Saul questioned whether the department could establish a stand-alone business for EMS. McKay explained why that would be impractical due to money, distance, time, and state regulations. However, the department is exploring the possibility of setting up a transfer service for medical offices, nursing homes, etc.

Schools

Region (Handout: Amherst Pelham Regional School District, FY2013 Proposed Budget, Presented to Amherst Finance Committee, February 9th, 2012)

Detweiler presented the budget and briefly explained the format. He then pointed out that enrollments continue to decline. Some reasons include students attending vocational schools, participating in School Choice and Charter Schools. Tuition expenditures have increased in those areas. In addition, there are expenditures for homeless students which require the district to provide transportation one way (to or from school) while the other district is responsible the other way. This permits homeless students to remain in their school of origin, despite their residential instability. However, significant savings were achieved as a result of fewer out-of-district placements for special education students.

Information on district staffing trends, staffing profile and staffing history is found on pages 32R-34R of the Proposed Budget.

The proposed FY13 budget of \$28,640,460 reflects the 2.80% increase guideline recommended by the Amherst Finance Committee in November. It was anticipated that Chapter 70 would be 2% higher for FY13, but in the Governor's budget it is level funded. The Superintendent is recommending that \$633,000 be used from its E&D fund as a one-time expenditure. In addition, the Superintendent is recommending a variety of increases and decreases to meet the instructional and other goals of the district while staying within the budget guidelines. Budget information is found on pages 37R, 39R, 43R, 44R, and 47R.

E&D, Excess and Deficiency funds are the Region's reserve fund, similar to the town, and can only be accessed by votes of the towns in accordance with the Regional Agreement. The Region tries to maintain E&D at \$1,000,000. Although the recommendation is to use \$633,000 in the FY13 budget, it is anticipated that there will be some unspent money at the end of the year which will be turned back to E&D, such as special education which is expected to be reduced due to some readjustments in service delivery. While School Choice will bring in additional revenues, that money will be used in FY14. There also is a line item labeled E&D contingency which is budgeted at \$280,000 for FY13 and is part of the budget to be appropriated at town meetings. It is used to cover emergency expenditures without having to receive approval of the towns. E&D information is on page 51R.

There is no line item for OPEB in the budget. Presently benefits are "pay as you go". Other Operation Services under Expense Accounts includes money for pensions as required by the state.

Grant and Revolving Funds are included on pages 54R-59R.

In 2010 the Regional School committee adopted a policy for developing a formal capital needs planning process. It applies to any tangible asset or project with an estimated useful life of five years or more and a cost of \$5,000 or more. The cost for Capital Expenditures proposed for FY13 is \$937,200.

Elementary (Handout: Amherst Public Schools, FY2013 Proposed Budget, Presented to Amherst Finance Committee, February 9th, 2012)

The format of the Elementary budget is similar to that of Region. Also enrollments in elementary continue to decline with School Choice and Charter as part of the reason. Costs have gone up in these areas, as well as out-of-district placements for special education students. Presently there are 459 children or 39% who are on free/reduced lunch. Redistricting has helped to balance the schools in this area.

Information on district staffing trends, staffing profile and staffing history is found on pages 24 -26 of the Proposed Budget.

The FY13 initial level services budget of \$21,863,735 reflects a 5.3% increase and is not within the 2.8% guideline recommended by the Amherst Finance Committee in November. It exceeds the guideline by \$523,896 as seen on pages 29 and 31. Loss of some grant funding, Ed Jobs, and support from the operating budget for preschool staff, as revenues are down, are some reasons why the budget has exceeded the guideline.

In order to control costs, the APRS Union contract was negotiated at 1.5% with step increases for those eligible. There have been energy efficiencies, partnerships and a vote by the school committee to allow School Choice in the elementary schools. The revenue from School Choice is estimated at \$200,000 and would be used in FY14. Choice students would be used to round out classrooms.

The school administration has reduced its budget by \$305,696, leaving a \$218,200 gap above the budget support of a 2.8% increase from FY12. On February 14, the Amherst School Committee will be presented with the additions and reductions needed to reach the \$305,696 reduction.

A Finance Committee policy considers a one time use of reserves to supplement a budget to bridge a gap, if the request produces a savings in subsequent years. Expenses related to the closing of Marks Meadow School are one example. To provide more information to the Finance Committee, it was requested that the Superintendent provide the Committee with the final budget figures submitted to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) for the year before Marks Meadow was closed and all the following years up until June 2011. This information would allow the Committee to know the actual savings generated by the closing.

New information affecting budget, review financial projections

Pooler stated that there was a \$309,000 deficit in next year's projected budget. The MMA is lobbying to have a projected \$65,000,000 state surplus distributed to cities and towns to be part of the base budget. He reviewed the information listed under "BCG FY13 Budget Options—draft for discussion purposes – February 9, 2012" as ways to close the gap. He reminded everyone that the Legislature could make different budget recommendations.

FY 12 Second Quarter Revenue and Expense Report, municipal budget

Pooler distributed the quarterly report and asked that any questions be sent to him or Steinberg.

Member Reports – Liaisons and Committees:

Steinberg stated that he would reaffirm the Finance Committee's budget guidelines at the Four Town Meeting. Any other position is premature until more information is received from the state.

Moran stated that a capital needs request for Central Station was submitted for a new roof at a cost of \$103,000 and repairs to the apparatus floor for \$60,000. It is questionable whether the station would be considered an historic building to qualify for preservation funds.

Next Meeting:

The next meeting of the Finance Committee will be February 16 at which time the Committee will discuss the following:

Community Services
Health
Senior Center
Veterans Services / Town Commemorations
LSSE
LSSE – Municipal Pools
LSSE – Cherry Hill Golf Course
General Government
Select Board/Town Manager
Town Meeting/Finance Committee
Legal

Adjourned:

The meeting adjourned at 10:20 pm.

Submitted by:

Marylou Theilman, Acting Clerk

Information used for Public Safety

Town of Amherst Proposed Budget Fiscal Year 2013 on line at www.amherstma.gov

Handouts Distributed at the Meeting:

Amherst Pelham Regional School District, FY2013 Proposed Budget,

Presented to Amherst Finance Committee, February 9th, 2012

Amherst Public Schools, FY2013 Proposed Budget,

Presented to Amherst Finance Committee, February 9th, 2012

FY12 Municipal Budget/Actual Reports for Quarter Ending December 31, 2011

Amherst Budget Coordinating Group (BCG) – Summary Points – February 9, 2012

Town of Amherst Financial Projections – General Fund – draft for discussion purposes –

February 9, 2012, PY13 Town Manager’s Forecasted Budget

BCG FY13 Budget Options—draft for discussion purposes – February 9, 2012