

Approved 2/28/08

AMHERST FINANCE COMMITTEE MINUTES

Meeting of February 14, 2008

CALL TO ORDER

Morton called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m. in the First Floor Meeting Room of Town Hall.

FINANCE COMMITTEE MEMBERS IN ATTENDANCE

Marilyn Blaustein, Alice Carlozzi, Kay Moran (Vice-Chair), Brian Morton (Chair), Douglas Slaughter and Andrew Steinberg

STAFF AND OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE

John Musante, Assistant Town Manager/Finance Director; Kathleen Pollard, Veterans Agent; Epi Bodhi, Health Director; Ellen Bokina, Sanitarian/Coordinator; Kathryn Drake, Health Dept. Office Administrator; David Ziomek, Conservation and Development Director; Jonathan Tucker, Planning Director; and Bonita Weeks, Building Commissioner.

AGENDA

1. Budget Review
 - a. Veteran's Services
 - b. Health
 - c. Planning Conservation and Inspections
2. BCG Public Forum - Discussion and Reaction
3. Member Reports
4. Minutes
5. Next Meeting and Agenda
6. Miscellaneous

COMMITTEE ACTIONS

VOTED 6-0 to amend and approve the minutes of the February 7, 2007 meeting.

DISCUSSION

1.a. Budget Review, Veterans' Services. Musante pointed out the \$20,000 increase for veterans' benefits, which reflects an increasing caseload and the need to bring this appropriation closer to reality. Pollard noted that the budgeted amount for FY 09, \$100,000, is still below the actual cost in the current year. She is working to see that claims to the state for reimbursement are submitted timely. State authorization must be acquired within six months of service. State reimbursements are paid quarterly, and equal 75% of eligible claims submitted. Currently there are 20 cases. Often, cases are short-term (about a month), but some are much longer lasting. State law makes it unlikely that regionalization of this service will be possible. Steinberg asked if a full-time position makes sense. She responded that it is a full-time job. Beyond helping veterans submit applications for benefits of various kinds, the Veterans Agent must also

investigate, advise and manage each case. She would also like to have time to do more outreach. Morton asked if she foresees an increasing caseload. She replied yes, based on information supplied by the Veterans Administration. She noted that getting veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan back in their jobs, which is a legal right, is becoming an issue.

1.b. Health. Bodhi spoke of an energized department with more focus on causes of public health issues, some movement toward regionalization, and valuable new staff. Work on environmental health is expanding. She noted that elimination of a part-time position for FY 09 was an error that the Town Manager plans to fix. A former part-time administrative position is to become an additional part-time environmental health inspector. The Board of Health has added new responsibilities for the department, including well inspections related to the Board's new regulations. Emergency situations have contributed to a backlog of inspections. Bodhi said the department would like to be more proactive and, at some point, begin a program of reminding septic tank owners to have them pumped. Staff time is a limiting factor.

Bokina noted that the recent chlorine problem at the Middle School pool consumed about 30 hours. There are many housing complaints related to mold. Mold regulations are difficult to establish and enforce, because there are no standards on which to base them. There will be 30 or so camps to inspect this summer, with some checking required for each individual session of camp. The department also has responsibilities for events held on the common, for making sure businesses' Workmen's Compensation plans are in order, and for tattoo and piercing inspections. Of the 56 inspections scheduled for January this year, only 23 were done because of lack of time. Converting to MUNIS should be helpful in the long run, but it will be labor intensive for a while. At some point, new state regulations for out-door wood boilers will arrive.

1.c. Planning, Conservation and Inspections. Ziomek outlined four parts of the departmental reorganization of this functional area: 1) physically moving Inspections staff to the second floor of Town Hall where the Planning and Conservation Departments are located; 2) migration to MUNIS by all Town permitting bodies to improve efficiency, information sharing and service to the public; 3) bringing administrative staff together for cross training and providing a central counter; and 4) providing web-based application forms and other paper work to the extent possible. There are no significant changes to the Conservation budget for FY 09. The Planning Department has two vacancies--a Senior Planner and an Associate Planner. The Assistant Building Commissioner position is also vacant. There is a pilot effort underway to use contractors rather than Town employees for electrical inspections. The many committees these departments serve also affect the workload of the departments. For example, the once dormant Farm Committee has become a very active Agricultural Commission. There is considerable overlap in committee staffing by Planning and Inspections because of the different responsibilities of the two departments.

Tucker explained the need for full staff in the Planning Department. The workload is not decreasing even though fewer permit applications are being processed, because the

permits have become more complex and often contentious as building takes place at more difficult sites. The Senior Planner position is currently being advertised, but the Associate position won't be worked on until June for lack of time to do it. The three departments are gatekeepers for economic development projects and therefore essential for encouraging it. The final drafts of the master plan will be available soon. Implementing the plan will require a major overhaul of the zoning code. Asked if increased use of contractors might cut costs, Tucker said contractors are appropriate for some specialized uses, but the institutional memory of long-term staff is needed for general planning and larger projects. Also, volunteer committees of busy citizens need to have staff on hand to assist them.

Ziomek said that staff is needed for implementation of the master plan. Tucker noted that there is now no remaining capacity for grant writing. Statutory requirements take up almost all of their time.

Weeks said that more and more building projects don't fit into existing zoning categories. She expressed concern that the Assistant Building Commissioner position is vacant and that use of contractors for electrical inspections could become problematic during the coming busy season. Tucker noted that sometimes people start projects without applying for permits, because they don't want to be slowed down by the paper work. So far, this has mostly involved Design Review Board permits, but it could easily spread to issues involving health and safety.

The staff members responded to several questions asked by Committee members: The zoning amendment process is very time consuming, and the Planning Board generally has to respond to proposals by citizens. Legal requirements for the permit process are difficult to meet because of short staff. They focus on major issues and potentially dangerous situations. Migrating to MUNIS will require a great deal of staff training that will have to occur at the same time the normal work is done. Weeks would rather give up the clerical position than go without additional inspector time. Ziomek said the Assistant Building Commissioner position has to be filled in FY 09. Cross training of staff will allow some backup capability that doesn't exist now, for example, for filling in for absent staff. Getting laptops in the field will also improve efficiency. The assertion by some people that no new development is going on is not correct. UMass and Amherst College projects are proceeding, as are the Meridian project and downtown projects involving infill and conversions, which are complicated.

Morton noted that the Inspections Department pays for itself, including employee benefits, with fee income. Moran asked about money for part-time help at Puffer's Pond. Ziomek said support for the current year came from Friends of Puffer's Pond and The Kestrel Trust plus other unexpended funds. The \$12,500 eliminated from the FY 08 budget was for the Pond plus trails and other work, not just the Pond. He hopes to use private funds again in FY 09; Puffer's Pond must be staffed.

2. BCG Public Forum - Discussion and Reaction. Moran said attendance was larger than she had expected, but she did not get any real help for managing the FY 09 budget.

Morton noted that many people were passionate about particular programs. Musante said notes taken at the event were being transcribed and reviewed. He characterized the meeting as a start that indicated priorities, leaving more to be done on getting opinions on how to pay for what is wanted. Blaustein noted that many people didn't really understand the problem, and there was not time to correct misunderstandings. Steinberg said that BCG had decided not to respond to all comments, making the event an opportunity for attendees to express their opinions. The Finance Committee's report to town meeting will have to respond to misunderstandings and unanswered issues. Also, there was no opportunity at the meeting to rank priorities. Morton was disappointed that there was not a measurement of preferences. Slaughter wondered if there could be ballot questions at the April 1 town election dealing with citizen preferences. This does not appear possible, given the small amount of time available. Blaustein mentioned that the comprehensive planning process sought to force statements of preferences. So far there has not been any ranking of preferences on budget issues. There was general agreement among the members that our report needs to do a great deal of explaining.

3. Member reports. JCPC: Slaughter, Moran and Musante commented on the non-meeting for which there was no quorum. JCPC is hearing about building needs in preparation for ranking needs. The next big project on buildings is the Bangs Center roof. The Town is making real progress on buildings, with significant help from Facilities Director Ron Bohoniwicz and with full awareness of energy efficiency issues. JCPC has not yet developed a recommendation on the percent of the levy to use for capital spending in FY 09. Jones Library Trustees: Moran reported that the Trustees will discuss fine retention policy at their next meeting. Amherst School Committee: Steinberg reported that this week's meeting was snowed out and postponed until February 26 when it will be held together with a Regional School Committee meeting. He will not be available to attend at that time, so Carozzi will cover it.

4. Minutes. The Committee made clarifying amendments and then voted to approve the minutes of the February 7, 2008 meeting.

5. Next Meeting and Agenda. The February 21, 2008, meeting will include review of the General Government budget. Steinberg asked about the economic development position on the Town Manager's priority list, how that position would relate to the Conservation, Planning and Inspections Departments and how they would support each other. Musante said the Committee needs to be discussing a framework for recommendations, including options for closing the budget gap. Now that the House budget plan is available, we have a fairly firm sense of the minimum of state funds to expect.

6. Miscellaneous. Steinberg asked if giving a grant to an umbrella agency that could then give sub-grants to agencies that we now support could solve the Human Services funding/CBDG one-year funding delay problem.

ADJOURNMENT

The meeting adjourned at 9:32 p.m.

Submitted by Alice Carlozzi, Acting Clerk