

FINANCE COMMITTEE MINUTES
Community Voices – Budget Choices Forum
Sponsored by the Budget Coordinating Group (BCG)

Meeting Date: February 11, 2007

CALL TO ORDER

The Meeting was called to order at 7:38 p.m. at the Amherst Middle School auditorium

COMMITTEE MEMBERS IN ATTENDANCE

Brian Morton (chair), Marilyn Blaustein, Alice Carlozzi, Kay Moran, Douglas Slaughter, Andrew Steinberg

OTHERS PRESENT

Larry Shaffer (Town Manager), John Musante (Assistant Town Manager/Finance Director), Gere Hochman (Superintendent of Schools), Bonnie Isman, (Library Director), Elaine Brighty & Andy Churchill (School Committee), Gerry Weiss, (Select Board), members of the public

AGENDA

1. Amherst “Key Directions”
2. Looking Ahead for the Town, Library, Schools and the Capital Plan
3. Looking at Ways to Support Long-Term and Short-Term Plans

DISCUSSION

Morton introduced members of the Budget Coordinating Group and described the role of the BCG and the evening’s agenda. G. Weiss noted that the BCG will compile comments from the forum and they would be posted on the Town’s website.

Musante presented the key directions for the town from the draft of the Comprehensive Plan. He emphasized the need for a sustainable fiscal plan that complemented the town’s master plan.

Shaffer commented on the FY09 Town Manager’s budget. It represents a 3.1% increase in expenditures from the prior year and requires a 2% increase from taxation because of new revenues. He announced that Amherst College had given the town an unrestricted gift of \$120,000 to be applied to the FY09 budget. He said that the FY09 general fund budget includes reorganization of LSSE and Inspection Services and cuts to Human Services and the War Memorial Pool.

Isman described the budget situation at the library and noted that the revenue stream is not increasing as quickly as expenditures. In addition to money from taxation, FY09 funding includes a 5.4% distribution from the endowment, fundraising and state funds from FY08 and FY09. State funding for libraries has not recovered from the downturn in FY03-04.

Hochman described the budget situation for the schools. He clarified the regional school surplus and said that it was largely due to external events and was one-time money. The regional schools are expected to come in on budget. The elementary schools are facing a funding gap of more than \$1 million which will be reduced to a gap of \$400,000-\$500,000.

Weiss asked for public input to help in developing a long-term plan for Amherst and posed two questions: 1) What are the priorities and values for the future of Amherst? 2) How do you propose to fund it?

Members of the public offered their suggestions, which were sometimes conflicting, and included the following. The BCG will post a comprehensive list of comments on the town's website:

- Need to maintain essential services like public safety and public works and eliminate programs that are not mandated
- Employ across the board cuts rather than cutting some programs disproportionately
- Need to live within our means
- Human services are integral to economic development and should not be cut
- Need to maintain senior services
- Examine staffing in the schools and whether funds for the schools are spent wisely
- Explore creative solutions in the schools e.g., use college students as resources
- Explore private funding of services that Amherst residents have become accustomed to (e.g., War Memorial Pool, human services funding)
- Explore energy efficiency and renewable energy
- Increase CPA tax from 1 ½ % to 3% to maximize matching funds from the state
- Increase the tax base by developing the town's commercial base
- Explore opportunities for economic development
- Need to seriously consider an override - Prop 2 ½ assumes that inflation will not exceed 2 ½% in a given year
- Explore local options such as meals tax as a source of revenue
- Look creatively at ways to increase the local revenue stream
- Increase contributions from Amherst College and UMass to the town
- Need for income tax reform from the state
- Need for a long-range plan for the town
- Town leaders should present budget priorities

ADJOURNMENT

The meeting adjourned at 9:35 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Marilyn Blaustein
Acting Clerk