

Amherst Finance Committee meeting minutes, Feb. 7, 2013

First floor meeting room, Town Hall

The meeting was called to order at 7:05 p.m.

ATTENDANCE

Andrew Steinberg (Chair), Kay Moran (Vice-Chair), Janice Ratner, Bob Saul, Douglas Slaughter, Marylou Theilman. Absent: Anurag Sharma.

OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE

Sandy Pooler, Finance Director; Scott Livingstone, Police Chief; Guilford Mooring, Superintendant of Public Works; Amherst Media

AGENDA AND DISCUSSION

1. Fiscal Year 2014 budget development
 - a. SCHOOLS – Elementary and Region Overview: postponed to a later date
 - b. PUBLIC SAFETY

- Police

This budget increases by only 2% from FY 13, with funding for the same authorized force of 45 officers. Livingstone said this isn't enough to handle the work, especially in fall and spring. He would like to have five more officers, which would improve morale. The department will be able to hire a 46th officer to be paid entirely by a two-year domestic violence prevention grant.

Livingstone attributes the declining number of burglaries, motor vehicle thefts and vandalism in part to sector-based policing, which allows officers to establish good relations with people living in the areas of town they're assigned to.

The state Attorney General's Office has still not approved the nuisance house bylaw amendment approved by Town Meeting last fall. Livingstone said he's prepared to estimate costs of answering nuisance house calls and to assess them, but he doesn't think it will produce much revenue.

The number of \$300 fines for violations of quality-of-life bylaws (noise, nuisance house, etc.) has increased. But people receiving these fines go to District Court magistrate hearings, and the magistrate often reduces the fines actually charged to the violators, Livingstone said.

Cooperation with UMass Police continues, and the two chiefs meet

twice a month. Livingstone would like to see UMass officers patrol streets surrounding the campus more on their own, without Amherst police support. In a few weeks Livingstone will get to talk with the UMass Chancellor, and he has been told Amherst police officers will be able to speak directly with incoming freshmen during summer orientation.

Livingstone noted that the number of homeless people in Amherst is growing, and police are often called to deal with and/or help out those people. The department has applied for a U.S. Department of Justice grant to develop a multifaceted approach to people who are homeless and/or have mental health issues.

The department has worked with the schools on emergency responses and training for more than seven years and continues to, including schools in small surrounding towns.

- Animal Welfare
No real changes in this one-woman department. She continues to go above and beyond its duties. She was working to regionalize animal welfare services, but recent changes in state regulations have stopped that. She hopes to develop a regional pound, like Franklin County's. UMass already brings its stray dogs to Amherst's pound, paying \$20 per day per dog.
- Communications Center
This budget increases by 1.7%, with 11 full-time dispatchers paid from the General Fund and one paid from a state grant. Livingstone said the process of regionalizing dispatch is moving slowly.
- Regional Lockup Assessment: Not discussed

c. PUBLIC WORKS DEPARTMENT – GENERAL FUND

Mooring said his FY 14 budget increases by only 1.2% from FY 13. The most significant change is that \$40,000 in expected energy cost savings from new LED street lights will be added to the highway department budget so that 1.5 of the four positions currently being funded by project money can be redirected to regular maintenance work. Several top-level foremen have retired or are retiring, meaning reorganization of several departments.

Public Works administration oversees 69 people, including staff employed by the Enterprise Funds. Administration staff time has been spent recently participating in the Department of Environmental Protection Sustainable Water Management Initiative Pilot studies, thus giving the town early information about proposed new water withdrawal regulations and requirements going into effect in 2017. Also, the department is working with DEP on the possibility of installing an anaerobic digester next to the Wastewater Treatment Plant, which could provide a less

expensive way of disposing of treatment plant sludge.

DPW foremen are starting to use iPads to track and update work orders, improving communication with the office and perhaps the public.

The jury is still out on a more energy-efficient method of resurfacing roads recently tried on sections of North Pleasant Street and University Drive, which have already started to crack. Sunderland Road was probably not appropriate for that sort of resurfacing and is already coming apart. The Town is in talks with the Chicago-area contractor about fixing these issues.

The DPW's three-person maintenance department maintains about 70 DPW and Water, Sewer and Solid Waste vehicles, as well as performing vehicle inspections for all other Town and School departments. Steinberg asked whether it would be possible for the DPW to maintain vehicles for other Town Departments. Mooring said the DPW has neither adequate building space nor staff to handle extra work.

d. ENTERPRISE FUNDS

- Water

Changes are being made in anticipation of DEP regulation changes, which will eventually limit the amount that can be withdrawn from Town wells in order to protect the environment; this will cut the Town's water surplus in half. Good progress is being made with exchanging old water meters for those that can be read remotely, speeding the process and making it easier for property owners. Water usage is expected to increase with the opening of Commonwealth College dormitories at UMass. There'll be no rate increase in FY 14.

- Sewer

Design work is underway for the Harkness Road and Amherst Woods sewer extensions, with construction expected to begin later this year. This necessitates a rate increase for FY 14 of 10 cents per 100 cubic feet, up 2.9% from FY 13. We will remain below regional and state average rates.

- Solid Waste

This enterprise fund continues to spend more than it takes in. FY 14's budget is balanced by using \$10,000 from a fund reserved for monitoring the landfill. With area landfills closing, solid waste disposal will become increasingly expensive. Mooring noted that the Town could cut disposal costs in half by shipping waste to Georgia, an option Amherst is not pursuing. The DPW and Recycling and Refuse Committee continue to look for ways to reduce the amount of waste needing disposal.

2. New information affecting budget, review financial projections: None

3. Member reports – liaisons and committees

Theilman reported on the Elementary Schools budget presented recently to the Amherst School Committee. Though Town financial support will increase by 2%, and school

populations are decreasing, expenses are increasing at a faster rate. The cost of providing the same services in FY 14 as in FY 13 exceeds the available funds by about \$650,000. The Superintendent would reduce that gap by cutting positions.

Steinberg said that there were errors in some of the numbers in the financial report from consultant delivered at the Feb. 2 meeting of the Regional School District Planning Committee. He will email us corrected versions when they are ready.

Moran and Slaughter reported that earlier today the Joint Capital Planning Committee heard about requests from the Police Department for three replacement cruisers and two replacement in-cruiser video systems.

4. Minutes of previous meetings: The committee VOTED 5-0, 1 abstaining, 1 absent, to APPROVE the minutes of Jan. 31, 2013.
5. Next meeting and agenda: At the Feb. 14 meeting the Leisure Services and Supplemental Education budget will be presented, and possibly a request from the Town Clerk.
6. Topics not reasonably anticipated by the Chair 48 hours in advance of the meeting: None

ADJOURNMENT: 10 p.m.

Kay Moran, acting clerk

DOCUMENTS USED AT THE MEETING:

Town of Amherst Proposed Budget Fiscal Year 2014