

Amherst Finance Committee Minutes
Thursday, January 30, 2014
First Floor Meeting Room, Town Hall

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

Attendance: Janice Ratner, Kay Moran (vice chair), Anurag Sharma, Douglas Slaughter, Andy Steinberg (Chair), Sarah Swartz, Marylou Theilman

Others attending: Sandy Pooler, Finance Director; Sharon Sharry, Jones Library Director; Robert Pam, Jones Library Trustee; David Ziomek, Assistant Town Manager/Director of Conservation and Development; Jonathan Tucker, Planning Director; Rob Morra, Building Commissioner; Guilford Mooring, Superintendent of Public Works.

Fiscal Year 2015 budget development

a. Library Services

Sharry referred to p. 10 of the Library budget, showing the FY 15 budget summary. There is a 3% increase in personnel services. Circulating materials budget goes up 3.11% to meet state requirements. The total proposed operating budget is \$2,369,592, up 2.37% (\$54,835) from FY 14. The library is requesting a Town contribution of \$1,788,533, up 2.7 % (\$47,021) from FY 14, meeting Finance Committee guidelines. Other sources of funds include state aid to libraries, budgeted at \$40,000, the same as in FY 14. The Library is actually expecting \$66,274 in FY 15 state aid to libraries, leaving a little cushion in case other sources of funds do not meet estimates. The present reserve is approximately \$100,000. Endowment funds to be used are \$329,656, down \$43,123 from FY 14 due to the goal of decreasing the draw on the endowment eventually to 4%. (For FY 15, 4.5% will be used.)

Much of the \$54,835 increase in the budget is expected to come from increased fundraising efforts. Halfway through FY 14, \$58,000 has already been raised, surpassing what was raised in all of FY 13, Sharry said. The Friends of the Jones Library are also rejuvenating fundraising efforts, hoping to contribute an additional \$18,000+ this year.

The Library will ask for \$25,000 from the Town's FY 15 capital budget as the Town match for a \$50,000 Planning and Design grant that is being sought to plan for renovation of the Jones. (If the Planning and Design grant were not awarded, the \$25,000 would not be used.) This request will go first to the Joint Capital Planning Committee. Sharry is putting off other capital improvement requests, hoping to be able to roll them eventually into a larger grant for the renovation. Both the Planning and Design and the library renovation grants are competitive.

b. Conservation and Development

Ziomek distributed two documents: Conservation & Development Project Milestones and Funding Opportunities (October 2008-present), dated January 2014; and a summary of grant funding October 2008-January 2014. He said efforts continue to merge functions, increase efficiency, and improve responsiveness. He is proud of the Safe and Healthy Neighborhood initiative. Department members are working with a committee of University of Massachusetts and Town representatives to issue a Request For Proposals for a consultant to assist with a joint study of shared and distinct issues. A hundred or so residents and business representatives are at this moment meeting elsewhere in this building to learn more about the Solarize Amherst project that would provide assistance with new photovoltaic installations. “We’re aggressively seeking grants” for many purposes, he said. For instance, by Feb. 14 they will submit the Town’s applications for both a competitive block grant and a Community Preservation Act (CPA) appropriation to help preserve low-income housing at Rolling Green and Echo Village, without owning the property. The Town will hear whether we get the block grant probably in July.

Conservation

Ziomek said he is proud of the field staff of 1½ who manage 2,100 acres of conservation property plus watershed land. The department will refocus on problems with Puffer’s Pond area and expect to get a \$36,000 federal grant. Amherst has already received a \$105,000 state grant to assist with acquiring the Saul property off Belchertown Road, and in light of that, Conservation will ask the CPA Committee to consider recommending a Town match of \$41,000 in CPA funds for the acquisition. Conservation cooperated with the Department of Public Works to borrow a large specialized mower to do some conservation area and highway sides. Theilman asked whether Town departments such as the DPW and Conservation could share Town mowing equipment or contract for mowing services. Ziomek said they have explored those options and found the way they are doing it now is least expensive. Sharma noted that town priorities for affordable housing and open space are sometimes in conflict.

Planning and Community Development

The large increase of 13.8% in this budget is due to the transfer to Town funding of salaries previously financed by a mini-entitlement Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) for which the Town is no longer eligible. In FY 14 that CDBG and other grants supported nearly \$114,000 of the salaries of staff in the entire functional area (See Page 90 of the Town’s proposed FY 15 budget). The number of employees in the Planning Department is the same as last year. Tucker distributed documents listing the Boards/Committees/Groups staffed by the Conservation & Development Dept. in FY15, and the department’s Conservation & Development Community Development Responsibilities. Planning is working on several zoning and other development initiatives to present to Town Meeting, in addition to supporting on-going projects. Fees for

permits will probably increase; however, the amount for Department Receipts in the sources of funds for FY 15 (p. 90 of the Town budget) does not include any increases to fees the Planning Board or Zoning Board may approve in the coming months.

Sharma asked what metrics are used to measure a department's efficiency and effectiveness. Pooler pointed to p. 92 and other similar pages elsewhere in the Town's proposed FY 15 budget document that give service levels. Ziomek said he also listens to feedback from builders and the community, which has been positive. Steinberg said it is hard to use identical metrics for departments with very different functions, or to compare Amherst departments with those in other communities that may not be similar.

Inspections

Morra said the Department has recently hired a permit administrator and an administrative assistant for the new Residential Rental Permit program. The Inspection Services FY 15 budget increases by 13.2% because it includes a full year's expense for those positions; their FY 14 salaries are for only the second half of the year. New rental registration fees should pay for the cost of those two positions. Already, 750 permits have been applied for, covering 1,570 residences, and there is a new web site to help applicants. The Department received 60-65% of rental registration applications on line. Several large building projects are expected to start this summer. On Feb. 27 the Select Board approved an improved inspection fee schedule, which could actually reduce fees in some cases. For instance, before the change, some businesses had to apply for separate certificates for several different facilities within the same building, such as one certificate each for a banquet room, another for a restaurant, and a third for a pool hall, which are all under the same ownership in the same building. The new schedule consolidates some of those, so restaurants, for instance, will not have to apply for so many certificates. This will reduce income from fees, but it is fairer, Morra said.

Moran noted the large number of codes and frequent changes to those that Inspection Services has to deal with.

c. Public Works – General Fund

Mooring said FY 15 will be "pretty much a status quo year". The FY 15 budget includes an additional \$10,000 to fund salaries for more crew members, formerly paid out of project work, who can work on maintenance like filling potholes. The Department of Public Works (DPW) is using liquid and salt on the roads this winter instead of a sand/salt mixture, meaning street sweeping will go faster in the Spring. Slaughter asked how the costs compare. Mooring said sand costs less, but less salt is needed, so they are using far less material per storm than with sand. To use the salt/liquid system most effectively, they do have to start treating roads before a storm starts. Slaughter asked about the impact on runoff. Mooring said he thinks they are using less salt than before with the salt/sand mix. The DPW will track and measure the effect on wetlands. Steinberg asked about the timetable for completing Pine Street work. Mooring said utility work will

probably be done by the end of 2014, and the road will get a temporary surface. The Public Works Committee is still mulling the design for complete reconstruction. It is a complicated project. Steinberg asked how the Middle School tennis court work done by the DPW was paid for. Mooring said funding came out of the Regional School capital budget, aided by a tennis association grant. Sharma asked about potholes. Mooring said a new computerized system is organizing the pothole-filling schedule, based in part on resident requests. He said the DPW may have to rethink whether to maintain a pile of sand at DPW headquarters for residents to use, because some contractors, even some from out of town, are taking it for their own private work.

Mooring said he supervises 63 full-time employees paid out of the General Fund and the Water, Sewer and Solid Waste Enterprise Funds.

d. Enterprise Funds

Water

Mooring said the long-serving director has retired, leaving big shoes to fill. The budget decreases by 0.02%. The water rate will increase by \$0.05 for FY 15 to help maintain an adequate surplus for future years. As now required by the State, the Water Department is looking harder at back flow and cross connection issues, and hiring a new employee to inspect and enforce the new regulations, to be paid for by fees. Asked how General Fund costs are allocated to the Enterprise Funds, Pooler referred to Page 129 of the FY 15 proposed budget. He said this process is closely monitored and audited to assure that the percentage of each department's time used on Water Fund business is accurate. This budget includes a contribution for Water Fund employees to the Other Post Employment Benefit Trust Fund (OPEB).

Sewer

Mooring said this long-serving director will retire in June, also leaving big shoes to fill. The budget increases by 1.0%. They will promote internally and bringing in new employees at lower levels. The estimated revenue increase of 4.2% is largely due to new customers tying into sewer extension projects. There will be a rate increase of \$0.10. The Town's Wastewater Treatment Plant has been upgraded to Grade 7, requiring that operators be licensed to higher standards. The budget does not use any of the Sewer Fund Surplus or Water Fund Surplus. This budget includes a contribution for Sewer Fund employees to the OPEB Trust Fund.

Solid Waste

The budget decreases by 8.4%, due to the recently reduced tonnage of waste dropped off at the transfer station. This enterprise fund does not pay its General Fund costs, and money-saving efforts continue. The Refuse and Recycling Committee initiated the ban of expanded polystyrene to reduce waste. That committee is aiming for zero waste in town. The Town is seeking a grant to

fund a position to enforce recycling requirements. The annual sticker fee for using the Recycling Center will increase. One company is very interested in erecting a cell phone tower on the old landfill, which could add revenue. The Sewer Fund already gets \$15,000 a year from a cell phone tower on other Sewer Fund property.

New information affecting budget; review financial projections – None.

Member reports – liaisons and committees

Theilman said the school committees are working on budgets. Steinberg says the next Four-Towns meeting is likely to be March 1.

Regional capital assessments process

Theilman moved, and Ratner seconded, a motion: “That the Regional Schools capital advisory committee will urge the Regional Committee to adopt a policy that the School Committee’s vote on capital projects be prior to, but no more than 60 days prior to, any of the towns’ annual Town Meetings.” VOTED 6-0, 1 absent.

Pooler and Moran are Amherst’s representatives to that ad-hoc advisory committee. The intention is that, whatever “smoothing” policy is adopted to ease the impact on annual budgets, the Regional School Committee should time votes on large capital projects so that any objections to them could be voted on at Annual Town Meetings, rather than having to call Special Town Meetings for the purpose.

Minutes of previous meetings

The minutes of Jan. 23, 2014, were approved as amended by a vote of 7-0.

Next meeting and agenda

Feb. 8.

Topics not reasonably anticipated by the Chair 48 hours in advance of the meeting

None

The meeting adjourned at 10:10 p.m.

Kay J. Moran, acting clerk

DOCUMENTS USED AT THE MEETING

Proposed Fiscal Year 2015 Town Library Budget, 12/3/13
Town of Amherst Proposed Budget, Fiscal Year 2015
Conservation & Development Project Milestones and Funding Opportunities
(October 2008-present), dated January 2014
Summary of grant funding October 2008-January 2014
Boards/Committees/Groups staffed by Conservation & Development Dept. FY 15
Conservation & Development Community Development Responsibilities