

**Amherst Finance Committee Minutes
Thursday, February 6, 2014 7 PM
First Floor Meeting Room, Town Hall**

ATTENDANCE:

Andrew Steinberg (Chair), Kay Moran (Vice-Chair), Janice Ratner, Anurag Sharma, Douglas Slaughter, Sarah Swartz, Marylou Theilman.

OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Sandy Pooler, Finance Director, Police Chief Scott Livingstone, Capt. Jennifer Gundersen, Fire Chief Tim Nelson, Assistant Chiefs Lindsay Stromgren and Donald McKay, Amherst Media

Meeting was called to order at 7:10 pm.

AGENDA AND DISCUSSION

1. Fiscal Year 2015 budget development

a. PUBLIC SAFETY

Fire/EMS - Chief Nelson spoke about Amherst being similar to a small city with its level of activity and problems and that the force of 42 firefighters actually serves a population of about 60,000 including the towns (Amherst, Hadley, Pelham, Leverett and Shutesbury) and the three institutions. In this budget, staffing has changed to a minimum of 8 per shift on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights during the school year. Activity has increased other times due to an aging society. The University of Massachusetts contributes funding, which is currently treated similar to police detail receipts and is used for overtime. It is not part of the department budget. If these contributions are sustainable, they should be part of the budget for transparency and clarity to the public. This should be noted in the Finance Committee report to Town Meeting.

Ambulance receipts are increased in anticipation of the Select Board approving a fee increase. The increase reflects the new staffing philosophy. Rates are negotiated with the towns serviced. There was a question about whether the amounts charged to the towns cover the expenses or if Amherst is subsidizing the other towns. Pooler will follow up with some financial information regarding the Ambulance Fund. There are 5 ambulances and one fire truck is outfitted for EMS but cannot transport.

The central Fire Station will be undergoing some improvements. Relocating vehicles will be more of a logistical challenge than a cost.

Firefighters/EMS work shifts of 24 hours on/off/on and 5 days off for a 48 hour workweek, which seems to work well. They cannot work more than 38 hours straight. People want to work here. There were 65 applicants for one position. There is not much turnover. Firefighters will need training to transition to new national standards.

Inspections are done with other town inspectors. A community emergency response team is being formed to help in the neighborhoods during emergencies like the power outage resulting from the October 2011 storm.

The Dispatch Center is one of two statewide hazmat dispatching centers and has received a \$10,000 grant to provide this service, which has been more than adequate.

Animal Welfare - Chief Livingstone spoke about the Animal Welfare Department, which is level funded. It consists of one employee who handles any situation involving animal welfare in town and some in the region, which is reimbursed or done as a volunteer. She investigates complaints, inspects farms, handles fines for unleashed dogs, and is in charge of the dog pound, located near the wastewater facility. Charging other entities fees to use the dog pound could be a source of revenue for the town. There has been an increase in issues involving dogs in the conservation areas

Communications Center - This Center is staffed by 12 people. An \$80,000 grant supports one full-time benefitted-position (~\$50,000) and overtime. A \$17,000 training grant supports emergency medical and hazmat training. The town is working with Pelham and Hadley to regionalize the dispatch center. (Hadley pays \$15,000 to Amherst now). There should be a cost savings to regionalize. At this point, the state is not providing incentives. GIS and GPS allow for effective response wherever the center is located.

Ambulance service payments from the entities using the service are:

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|-----------------------------|-----------|
| Hadley | \$125,000 |
| Leverett | \$28,000 |
| Pelham | \$24,000 |
| Shutesbury | \$27,000 |
| University of Massachusetts | \$363,000 |

Some of these funds flow through the Ambulance Fund to fire, dispatch and IT operating budgets. This department is technology intensive. Last year there was \$125,000 in the capital budget for the Communications Department. The portable radios will need to be replaced next year.

Police - The biggest challenge is manpower. Livingstone is pleased to see that the manager has included \$62,000 for a new police officer if there is additional revenue. The Department of Justice grant that supports one position is not being renewed. In addition, the state grant supporting the crime analyst position, which has been an extremely helpful position to the Department, is not being renewed. There is less grant money available and more competition.

The department is doing more with less. There is no traffic bureau or proactive drunk driving stops. It has not been determined if this has caused an increase in OUI accident rates. Detective work is good and the police are doing good work with the schools regarding security. Assaults on officers are increasing. Citizens can report online. Sector based policing has worked well. There is consistency and accountability. Drugs are prevalent and there have been 3 deaths caused by heroin overdoses. Citizens can go for ride alongs with police by contacting the department. The police will still handle domestic and sexual violence issues but will be unable to do as much follow up, which is critical, without the grant funded dedicated position.

The department is budgeted for 45 sworn officers and 2.5 civilian positions. The grant funded domestic violence position was the 46th officer. The two officers in grant funded positions will continue on the force due to expected retirements. Mutual patrols with the University police have stopped for now, due to a grievance filed by the UMass Patrolmen's Union. Finance Committee write ups should be clear regarding regular budgeted positions and grant funded positions.

Regional Lockup Assessment - This assessment for short term lockup is \$31,323. It is cost effective for towns and is population based.

b. GENERAL GOVERNMENT

Town Meeting/Finance Committee - This budget remains unchanged and includes \$100 for the Moderator and \$1,000 for stipends for Town Meeting members for dependent care.

Legal - This budget remains at \$110,000 for outside counsel fees (Kopelman and Paige). Expenses for litigation are additional and additional legal costs for labor counsel are found in the Human Resources budget.

2. New information affecting budget, review financial projections - The town was awarded two state grants totaling \$180,000 to host Information Technology (IT) servers for Northampton and West Springfield. Perhaps IT can be regionalized which could mean more resources for the town.

3. Member reports - liaisons, committees - Theilman reported that the Amherst School Budget was presented but not voted. It is \$100,000 less than the targeted 2.7% increase, looking at future sustainability. It also restores music, art and physical education teachers back to fulltime. The Regional Budget was also presented and will be discussed at their next meeting. Moran reported that the Joint Capital Planning Committee (JCPC) met and that the Library presented its case for \$25,000 for planning and design for library renovations. Moran also reported that the Regional Capital Planning Advisory Group met last Friday and have agreed on some broad concepts but have to work out details and legalities. They also supported the FC's motion to urge the Regional School 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. There seemed to be a move toward setting aside a certain percentage of the Regional operating budget annually for capital expenses. Debt service could be paid out of this fund. The annual amount to be set aside was not agreed upon but the amount should be affordable to the town, stay steady, and give the school committee a target to work toward. All four towns would have to agree to establish a stabilization fund and Town Meetings would have to vote. All agreed that the Region should spend on capital to keep up the buildings.

4. Minutes of previous meetings - The minutes of January 30, 2014 were approved by a vote of 7-0.

5. Next Meeting and Agenda - February 13 (Schools and Community Services).

6. Topics not reasonably anticipated by the chair 48 hours in advance of meeting - None..

The meeting adjourned at 10:02 pm.

Janice Ratner, acting clerk

Documents used:

Town of Amherst Proposed Budget, Fiscal Year 2015