

Approved 3/27/14

## **Amherst Finance Committee Minutes**

**March 6, 2014 7 PM**

**1<sup>st</sup> Floor Meeting Room, Town Hall**

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

**Attendance:** Andrew Steinberg (Chair), Kay Moran (Vice-Chair), Janice Ratner, Anarug Sharma, Douglas Slaughter, Sarah Swartz

**Others attending:** Julie Federman, Director of Public Health; Nancy Pagano, Director of Senior Center; Maura Plante and Barbara Bilz, LLSE/Development; Amherst Media

### **Agenda and Discussion:**

#### **Community Services**

##### ***Public Health***

Federman said that the Health Department has seen an increase in its budget as a result of how it now budgets shared services with Northampton. There have been no increases of staff or programs or program to the budget. Amherst had shared a health inspector and a public nurse with the City of Northampton. During this arrangement Amherst paid for the health inspector and Northampton paid for the nurse. With the shared arrangement each position worked for 20 hours a week for each separate town. This arrangement did not work as there were times when episodic events occurred or emergencies happened, resulting in too many nursing hours per week. In mid-FY 14 this arrangement changed. Amherst now employees the part time nurse, a benefited position. The FY15 budget reflects the full year cost of the nurse. Amherst continues to employ the health inspector and share his time with Northampton.

The Health Department also will be the monitoring and assessing the impact that Medical Marijuana Dispensaries, Hardship Licenses and legal home cultivation, will have on local communities. At this point, the impact is unknown. One problem already seen in other communities has been the growing marijuana inside homes, which has hazards associated with the use of grow lights and increased moisture generated by home growing systems.

The way that food is being brought to the local community has also changed recently. Farmer's market vendors, food trucks and requests to sell food are expanding and increasing their scope. There are many new people applying for these licenses, and some are new to the rules of food vending and processing. An increasing number have English as their second language. The Health Department has increased its educational programs and worked on simplifying informational documents.

The Department participated in The Safe and Healthy Neighborhoods Working Group to improve Amherst neighborhoods, which ended with the completion of the Rental Registration Program. The Department works closely with the Fire, Inspections, and Police staff to continue to prioritize code enforcement that has resulted in a decrease in upholstered furniture on porches, trash accumulation on properties and a 75% increase in housing inspections. A health inspector has moved his office to the Inspections Department in order to help facilitate communication between landlords and Town staff to expedite the Rental Registration process.

##### ***Senior Center***

Pagano referred the Finance Committee to the handout, "Demographics of Amherst Seniors."

Pagano explained that while the senior Center began as a mostly recreational facility, its social services have "grown off the charts" which as affected staffing. With the difficult and complex new needs of seniors, it has become a priority for them to increase the hours that the social worker is available. This has

been accomplished by having their part time social worker's hours raised from 15 to 19 hours per week and the hourly wage increased. This additional pay has been funded by EOE Grant funds and generous donations from the Friends of the Senior Center.

Although very pleased with the additional hours that were recently given to the social worker, they do not cover the many additional hours that she is needed. She stated that the Senior Center is talking with the Town Manager about the Town possibly helping to fund an additional 10 hours a week for the social worker, bringing her to 30, in collaboration with monies from the Friends of the Amherst Survival Center. This change is stated in the handout mentioned above. It is explained in *The Town of Amherst Proposed Budget Fiscal Year 2015* p. 103 in the section **SIGNIFICANT BUDGET CHANGES**.

For specific details of the FY13 Accomplishments see the Handout.

\*A part time social worker's hours raised from 15 to 20 hours per week and her hourly wage increased.

\*A seven passenger van was purchased by the Friends, insured by the Town, with maintenance and fuel paid for by the Friends and special help from the Senior Travel Club.

\*The Senior Parking Ticket Program was made permanent.

\*An At Risk Data Base started after the October Snowstorm of 2012 provides help or checking in on seniors during a storm or an emergency. The Senior Center Staff continues to work on this service and the list as needed. The Senior Center continues to distribute "Emergency Grab and Go Bags" to 300 elders who receive home delivered meals, as well as to others in the community who are at risk.

\*The Senior Convalescent Closet is now staffed by a retired Physical Therapist who can adjust needed equipment to the user.

\*A new Senior Center plan is being developed. Citing a rising elderly population in Amherst as well as a swell in poverty, Pagano stated the need for a new Senior Center. She explained that the COLA and Long Range Planning Sub Committee has developed information on the type of new Senior Center it would like to see built.

\*The Senior Center has been working closely with The Friends to raise money. Two large fundraisers this year are: The Amherst Follies (Sunday March 23) and a Dining for Dollars Fundraiser at Bertucci's of Amherst (Tuesday March 18).

\*The entire issue of food programs that are offered to elders in Amherst is a challenging one. A full list of available food programs can be seen in the handout titled, "Growth in Sr. Ctr. Food Programs." In addition, it shows the increase in elderly poverty by the swell in the number of people receiving The Food Box and Free Bread & Produce Giveaway Programs. Due to the state of the economy, elders have less money than before to spend on food, while food and available meal costs are rising. Also, Federal and State Grant-Funded Title III Nutrition Program that is offered by the Senior Center. Highland Valley Elderly Services provides a tough problem by allocating \$1.19 a meal (a price that has not changed in twenty years) while controlling who can receive the meal. HVC provides two meals a day. A \$.50/gas subsidy is available to drivers upon request. While meals are delivered by volunteers, the allocated amount for the meals, as well as the decline in recipients is putting a financial strain on the Senior Center. Pagano stated that one possible way to balance this budget would be to see if the Town of Amherst could put money towards it.

Pagano restated the need for a new senior Center and underscored the ever burgeoning numbers of elders in Amherst. She pointed to the handout, "Demographics of Amherst Seniors," that shows that as of *March 2014 there are 4666 Amherst residents aged 60+.* ***This number does not reflect the number of elders who did not send in their consensus forms. We know the numbers are even larger.*** By 2020 the Massachusetts Department of Elder Affairs projects (based on MISER 12/2002 projections) that the numbers of residents 60+ will grow by 79% (*Town of Amherst Proposed Budget Fiscal Year 2015, p.101*).

Problems at the current Senior Center are: no free parking, no gym and no place for elders who need support and care during the day. A particularly troubling problem is with homeless people who have emotional and social difficulties and have no other place but The Senior Center to stay during the day. The Center is unequipped to help them. Moran said that while she was sympathetic to the Senior Center, she had just sat in at a JCPC Meeting and heard pleas for the restructure of both Fort River and Wildwood Schools. The Finance Committee has listened to the Fire Department and Public Works patiently tell them for ten years that they need new facilities. Right now the Town is facing real budget constraints. Pagano replied that she understood and that The Senior Center simply asks to be put on the list. Steinberg acknowledged Pagano's request and stated that The Finance Committee understood the need of the Senior Center.

### *Leisure Services and Supplemental Education (LSSE)*

Bilz stated that LLSE did not have much of a change in their budget. The only real budget change was a slight decrease in their staff with new staff being hired at a lower level.

She then listed the accomplishments in the Department:

- \*Hired a new Sports Director, Nate Valance – bringing a new perspective to LLSE Programs.

- \*Continue to find new ways to improve service levels and to expand the scope of work that they do. Examples are: implemented a new youth education programs, restarted Field and Faculty meetings, partnered with Four Seasons Landscape Co. to sponsor and implement field improvements at six Town softball fields, and co-produced LSSE's Hot Summer Nights Music and Film Series with BID.

- \*Continue to find new ways to market programs including an Online LLSE Brochure with class sign ups and advanced program marketing. Customer feedback strategies have all helped to increase revenue and reach the community.

- \*Found additional ways to provide revenue through grants and an upcoming fundraiser. LLSE was awarded funding from 6 grants totaling \$11,330 to assist with fee subsidy assistance and arts enrichment for youth programs. A reception to celebrate the contribution that Nancy Paglia has made to the LLSE and the Amherst Community will be held this year. It will be, in part, a fundraiser for the LLSE.

Bilz went on to describe challenges that her Department faces.

- \*Acquiring Fee Subsidies, as the LLSE is out of funds to subsidize fees. Keeping a positive balance in this account has been a struggle for them. Bilz says she has been pleased with the help from the community, most notably, contributions from The Lions Club and another successful Winterfest.

- \*Reaching out to expand the way LSSE tries to connect with the community by increasing the number of surveys to the individuals using its services, both now and in the past, in order to better serve them.

One program that is both an accomplishment for the LLSE and a challenge is the Afterschool Program that LSSE runs in collaboration with the Amherst School Department. While this is an extraordinary successful program enrolling 225 participants and holding a waiting list, there is a lack of fee subsidies. The Amherst School Department, the LLSE, the Town Manager, the Select Board and the Finance Committee have become aware that there are low income families that wish to be included in this program, but the subsidies to enroll them are not available. Steinberg took note of a letter that was written by Mr. Brissett, as a private citizen, voicing his concern over this matter. Steinberg stated that Superintendent of Amherst Schools, Maria Geryk, had announced on March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014 at the Four Towns

Meeting of the Amherst-Pelham Regional School Committee that the Amherst School's would be putting \$20,000.00 into fee subsidies for The Afterschool Program.

The Municipal Pools Budget Revenue shows no significant change. Revenue is only showing a small increase at this time, rising to \$37,220.00 compared to last year's \$34,737.00. Bilz commented that Spring and Summer are when the LLSE brings in the bulk of its revenue. Expenses are down. The budget shows that current FY14YTD expenses are \$149,163.00 compared to \$157,065.00 for the same period in FY13. Outdoor pool expenses are projected to come in at, or under, the budgeted amount of \$189,885.00 for FY14.

Bilz spoke to three notable accomplishments for this Department this year. One was a survey done that revealed the need for a change in fee structure and operating hours. It was shown that Amherst's pool fees were high compared to other communities and that the current hours could be structured differently to encourage more patronage. Bilz noted that the LLSE planned on lowering the cost for pool memberships and day passes. Even though the fees are lower, she believes that it will be more cost friendly to go to the pool (i.e. for a family of four) and more people will use this facility. There will be major renovation of The Mill River Pool, which will receive much needed repairs to the filter room, water line, outside restrooms, changing rooms, new shade structures, and life guard chairs.

Steinberg noted that the numbers show a jump in pool passes sold. He believes that Amherst Town Meeting should be proud that they decided to re-open The War Memorial Pool. The numbers clearly show that the community needed that pool and are enthusiastically using it.

The Cherry Hill Golf Course generated a small surplus in FY13. Bilz reported that the revenues are down slightly for FY14 by \$3,000, but could rebound with a, "Good Spring." The Personal account has increased due to step increases and COLA's. Expenses are about the same as last year.

Accomplishments for the department include:

- \* Completed the installation of a well to improve irrigation.
- \* Increased recreation Programming. Programs such as Winterfest, Disk Golfing, hiking and bird watching which have been a successful way to engage non-golfers. Winterfest brought in \$2,000 that can be used for financial aid to fund tuition for children in need for this year's summer camp.
- \*Voted "Best Golf Course in Western Massachusetts" by the 2013 Valley advocate Reader Poll.

The biggest challenges facing Cherry Hill Golf Course are the need to increase revenue and to find ways to properly insulate and save energy in the clubhouse. Ways that have been explored to increase revenue are to increase daily play fees, increase programs that would attract college students, increase programs that would attract non-golfers and implement more winter programs.

It was noted that Amherst's daily fee rates are by far the lowest of any in the surrounding communities.

Bilz stated that the clubhouse is a large, old building that is expensive to heat as it uses electric heat. It is a priority of this Department to find a more cost effective way to heat this building. Bilz reiterated their idea to use winter events to defray the costs of heating. When the idea of creating Nordic Trails was mentioned, Slaughter noted that the additional costs in labor must be kept in mind.

## **Reports and Speaking Assignments**

Moran will assign report and speaking assignments at a later time and e-mail them to Finance Committee Members

### **Minutes of Previous Meetings**

The minutes of February 6, 2014 were approved as amended by a vote of 5-0- with 2 absent

The minutes of February 27, 2014 were approved as amended by a vote of 5-0- with 2 absent

### **Next Meeting**

Thursday March 13, 2014

### **Meeting adjourned at 9:25 PM**

**Sarah E. Swartz, acting clerk**

### **Documents used at the Meeting**

Demographics of Amherst Seniors (packet containing 10 pages)

Outdoor Pools Narrative Budget Summary- Fin. Com. Budget Hearing FY15

Cherry Hill Golf Course Narrative Budget Summary- Fin. Com. Budget Hearing FY15

Letter from Mr. Jim Brissett

Flyer for Amherst Senior Center Afternoon Forum for Select Board Candidates

Flyer for Amherst Follies

Flyer for Dining for Dollars Fundraiser