

Approved 3/12/2015

**Amherst Finance Committee Minutes  
Thursday, February 26, 2015  
First Floor Meeting Room, Town Hall**

**ATTENDANCE:** Kay Moran (Chair), Marylou Theilman (Vice-Chair), Steve Braun, Bernie Kubiak, Janice Ratner, Anurag Sharma, Douglas Slaughter.

**OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE:** Ronald Bohonowicz, David Burgess, Sonia Aldrich, Claire McGinnis, Deborah B. Radway

Meeting was called to order at 7:00 pm.

**General Government**

*Town Clerk*

Will hire a new person to replace a retiring employee who works on passport service. Passport service is in demand and a good source of revenue. Most revenue comes from providing certification of documents. The system for recording births was already electronic by last year; now they have been readying the electronic system for recording deaths. Together, these will reduce fees.

*Assessor*

The Assessor's office handles 1,400 non-commercial and 7,300 commercial assessments. Currently, they are re-evaluating new assessments; the filing season for abatement ended February 3. The office received 82 abatement appeals, 30 of those from one person. Typically, the office tries to keep assessments at about 95 percent of the market value. The Town of Pelham pays Amherst \$20,000 per year (since mid-2012) to handle their property assessments.

The town has one of the better geographic information systems (GIS) in the state, where people can go online to see 50 years of assessment history on properties. Online availability of such information helps raise efficiencies and improve service, especially by lowering the number of abatements.

*Accounting*

This office handles a wide range of services, including payroll for the town and elementary schools, billing and payments, purchasing, accounts payables, bond issuance, etc. General services also include risk assessment, insurance claims etc. This is the main department for the audit. The town recently received a clean FY14 draft audit, which the audit committee will review in March. The department has an ongoing practice of closing the books and reconciling within 25 days of the previous month. It is currently setting up vendor eCheck (ACH) payments. Paperless billing is getting traction: there are 7,000 water and sewer accounts, about the same as for property taxes. Also, 390 people have signed up for paperless billing. The numbers of people choosing the online payment system is increasing.

### *Comptroller*

Pays for annual audit, insurance, postage and central office supplies. Income from Property & Casualty insurance is driven by what the insurance company gets from investments. Printers and photocopy expenses are the same as previous years. Standard & Poor's recently raised the town's bond rating to AA+ (the second-highest possible) and the report notes that the town's Investment Policy, OPEB trust fund, process improvements, strong collections, and strong management – assessor, treasurer, comptroller – were key reasons for the upgrade.

### *Treasury*

S&P rates the town's bonds at AA+ (generally AA and AAA difference is about 30-50 basis points). The town's bond rating is affected by several factors, including that we have an investment policy. Also factored are rate of collections, process improvements, and the ways we use technology internally such as in billing and vendor invoicing. The town recently issued 2015 bonds at the average rate of 1.43 percent.

For on-line payments of taxes and other levies, the user absorbs fees associated with credit cards. The fees for electronic bill pay varies by the amount: it is \$2.50 for amounts less than or equal to \$100 and 2.5% for amounts greater than \$100. The fee for ACH payments is 25 cents, but the town absorbs that cost.

### *Facilities Management*

One of the main objectives of this department is to continually work on conservation of energy. For instance, the office changed from 32 watt bulbs to 28 watt bulbs, incurring a savings of 12 percent. Last year, the department had received a \$300,000 green community grant, and the town was declared a Green Community by the Commonwealth. The department continues to press on energy efficiency and ongoing maintenance and upkeep of the garages and buildings. They used their own staff to fix the bathroom at the Munson library and saved on costs vis-à-vis outside contractor. Also constantly getting free engineering studies from WMECO and state to find ways to save energy. Specific goal is to reduce overall energy consumption by 20 percent over five years from the baseline year.

The energy efficiency goal is affected by changes in prices of fuel oil and natural gas, so the department stays abreast of developments in those markets.

Of particular note this year was the police building, which was built in 1989 and has the original roof still on it. The building is open 24/7 with all parts in use, and it has very high energy consumption. Hence, a current project is to renovate the computer room and offer it as a data center for nearby towns in order to generate revenues.

In addition to maintaining buildings, security is also part of the department's responsibilities. To that end, there are security cameras around town plus the Bangs Center. There are challenges pertaining to building security early morning or late at night. As such, last year the department began the practice of opening buildings at 8 am instead of 6 am as in prior years.

### *Human Rights and Human Resources*

Provided services to an ongoing average of 260 benefited employees, 100 seasonal or non-benefited employees, and 250 retirees. In addition to the Director, this office has an additional half-time assistant plus another staff member who administers the Health Insurance Trust Fund.

The department continually upgrades the HR processes and procedures during the year, and this includes creating succession plans to help people move into more responsible roles. In addition, the department engages in negotiations for collective bargaining agreements.

Non-union employees are confidential and managerial employees who cannot belong to unions, make up 25 percent of headcount. Eighty percent of town budget is personnel services.

Last year, the Select Board adopted a compensation philosophy for the first time. Amherst aims to be an employer of choice in Western MA, compensating with salaries to 75<sup>th</sup> percentile in the region and 50<sup>th</sup> percentile region-wide.

One significant issue discussed this year is the Amherst Together initiative in part to bridge achievement gap in schools and in part to make Amherst become a collective impact community. Citizens are encouraged to take the survey at [amhersttogether.org](http://amhersttogether.org) website developed for this purpose.

### *Transportation*

PVTA has accepted financial responsibility for reconfiguring the "Outreach" routes, and they will absorb the associated costs that until now the town was incurring for these routes. The ridership for FY14 was 2,947,832, up 2,227 over FY13. In FY15, the fund added two part time staff in the field, invested in equipment for the parking staff, equipment for the police, and waste barrels at bus stops. For FY16, the fund anticipates expenditures on stairways to Boltwood garage and concrete blocks and, for the first time, contribute to OPEB.

### **Other Business**

Preliminary list of articles posted on website by TMCC but the Clerk's office has not yet certified the signatures.

Liaison Reports: Slaughter on JCPS; Theilman on Regional School Committee.

Minutes Approved: February 12-Theilman moves, Kubiak seconds, approved 6-0-1 (1 absent).

Adjourned 9:35

Acting Clerk  
Anurag Sharma

Documents: Manager's Budget