

Amherst Finance Committee Meeting
Thursday, March 12, 2015
First Floor Meeting Room, Town Hall

The meeting was called to order at 7:03 p.m.

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

Others Attending: Sandy Pooler, Amherst Finance Director; Steven Connor, Director of Veterans' Services; Dave Ziomek, Assistant Town Manager; Jonathan Tucker, Planning Director; Amherst Media

FY16 Departmental Budget Presentations

Veterans' Services

The FY16 Veterans' benefits appropriation equals \$248,800, of which roughly 75% will eventually be reimbursed by the state. Mr. Connor said his budget is essentially "level services" with only cost-of-living increases for staff. He described his staff and department and the many ways they help veterans, such as by helping them deal with sudden stopping of opioid pain medications due to changes in Federal policy regarding those medications.

His district includes 10 nearby towns and may increase in size. The 5-hour part-time position in his department is to help coordinate care with other staff and organizations, hence even though it is a small number of weekly hours, it is important.

He says it takes at least a year to get 75% reimbursement from the state because state funding is inadequate. He and other veterans' services district staff are actually employees of Northampton. Amherst's costs are payments of \$84,692 (latest estimate for FY16) into the district. The remainder of Amherst's FY16 veterans' services budget of \$330,769 is for benefits to veterans.

Conservation and Development

Mr. Ziomek provided an overview of this department, which consists of three inter-related groups: conservation, planning, and inspection services. These groups were

formerly separate and physically isolated—combining them has led to greater efficiencies.

Mr. Ziomek reviewed what he called a “breakthrough year” for the department: addition of affordable housing units such as Olympia Oaks and Rolling Green; Atkins Corner Village Center planning and rezoning; completion of a housing market study; the Safe and Healthy Neighborhood initiative; 100% compliance in the Residential permit program; and increased town/gown collaboration.

A “Grants and Milestones” document was handed out. As of this month, \$4.5 million in grants have been awarded to the department since 2012, with another \$835,000 pending.

Mr. Ziomek explained that a couple of MassWorks grants were not funded because they were tied to zoning changes that Town Meeting voted down. In addition, those grants didn’t have a related private sector development project, which is a key component. New developments in North Amherst may change the picture, he said.

Conservation

Proposed FY16 Conservation department budget is \$323,610, a 4.6% increase from FY15.

In response to question about the mix of preserved land vs. housing needs in town, Mr. Ziomek said the town is very selective in which parcels to preserve, either by outright purchase or through various forms of deed restrictions. He said that major land acquisition is behind us, with the remaining task being to “fill in the puzzle”—to protect parcels inside, or adjacent to, existing protected areas.

He noted that the master plan calls for more housing in town centers and on bus routes, rather than the more spread-out, single-family-housing kinds of developments that have been built in the past and which require significant expansions of town infrastructure (i.e., roads, utilities).

Planning

Proposed FY16 Planning department budget is \$320,673, a 2.2% decrease from FY 15, which reflects the fact that Amherst had its mini entitlement status from the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program reinstated, which will allow half of the salary of one of the planners to be paid for by that program.

Mr. Tucker noted the advantages of having planning in the same area as inspection services and conservation. He said new development of housing projects downtown is consistent with the Master Plan and will bring in much-needed tax revenue. He noted that Amherst is unique in the number of committees and boards with which he and other staff have to interact.

Inspection services

Proposed FY16 Inspection Services department budget is \$666,914, a 27.2% increase from FY 15. This large increase reflects the reorganization of the Inspections Department to move the Health Inspector from the Bangs Center to the Inspection Department in Town Hall and to re-organize oversight, with the Health Director taking on new responsibilities. The department will now be a “one stop shop” with approximately 80% of inspection and permits now under one roof.

Because of the recent rise in new construction, revenue from new growth was high in FY15 (~\$700,000). Mr. Pooler explained that permit fee revenue is variable and any excess above budget estimates becomes part of free cash and that he is estimating conservatively in terms of new growth for FY16.

Reports from Board and Committee Liaisons:

JCPC. Mr. Slaughter reported that, presently, there is a \$125,000 gap between what the committee would like to fund and amount of money available. May be able to close the gap by using close-out positive balances from previous projects. Expects to finish prioritizing at the next meeting. Long range goal is to slowly raise the percentage for capital expenditures of the overall budget from 7.5% to 10%.

School Committee. Ms. Theilman reported that the Regional school budget was approved and she will bring final numbers to the next meeting. Waiting on the Amherst elementary budget final numbers. Although there has been much discussion about the regionalization of regional elementary schools, the Regional School Committee has decided it will spend this year reviewing the RAWG proposal and seek input from the communities. The earliest any proposed Regional Agreement would be presented to the Towns is at their annual Spring 2016 Town Meetings.

Budget Coordinating Group. Ms. Moran reported from the BCG meeting of March 6:

Governor Baker’s FY16 State budget would provide Amherst with net aid, less offsets, that is \$319,778 less than assumed when the Town Manager’s budget was issued Jan. 15. However, much of that difference is due to an overestimation of the number of K-6 Amherst students at charter schools. When better estimates are used, the aid deficit is \$145,591. Since the Superintendent’s proposed elementary budget is \$100,000 less than the Finance Committee Guidelines, the potential impact of reduced state aid is reduced to approximately \$45,000, which could be absorbed in the proposed \$70 million overall Amherst budget.

These calculations suggest that the new position of economic development director can continue to be included in the FY16 budget.

In School budgets, the proposed reduction in the numbers of special education paraprofessionals is offset by the addition of teachers, leading to better education and somewhat lower long-term costs. Reduction in the number of teachers in the regional schools will not mean fewer classes.

The library budget decreases its reliance on its endowment to a sustainable 4% annual draw.

Unless there is an unforeseen event, there is no reason for the BCG to meet again this Spring.

Minutes of Previous Meetings:

Minutes of February 26: approved with minor edits, 6-0, 1 absent

Minutes of March 5: approved with no corrections, 6-0, 1 absent

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

None.

Handouts and Documents used at the Meeting:

Conservation & Development Project milestones and Funding Opportunities

[FY2012 – Present]

Draft report of the Amherst Budget Coordinating Group, Summary Points – March 6, 2015.

Town of Amherst Proposed Budget Fiscal Year 2016

Adjourned:

Meeting adjourned 10:03 p.m.

Submitted by:

Stephen Braun,
Secretary *pro tem*