

Amherst Finance Committee Minutes  
Thursday, October 8, 2015  
First Floor Meeting Room, Town Hall

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

OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE: Sandy Pooler, Finance Director; Mary Streeter, Chair of the Community Preservation Act Committee (CPAC); Rabekah Demling, JoAnn Smith, Faye Brady, Amherst Schools, Crocker Farm Playground CPA Petitioners; MandiJo Hanneke of the Town Meeting Electronic Voting Committee; Guilford Mooring, Superintendent of Public Works and Amherst Media.

Meeting was called to order at 7:00 pm.

**Community Preservation Act (CPA) Crocker Farm, ADA Preschool Playground Funding**

Pertaining to the Crocker Farm playground, Smith noted that it had a downward slope and drop off to a cement patio, which made it unsafe and access issue for disability. The overall cost for ADA accessible ground cover would be about \$150K. A large cost of project is to enlarge the space, physical layout compliance, and new fence that cannot be climbed, and a second gate. Smith noted that current playground is good for a community, being available when school is not in session, as all school grounds are. Braun asked if the money has already been appropriated. Response was that JCPC had been asked for \$25K for basic ADA compliance but not for full renovation. Streeter indicated that CPAC recommended the project unanimously. The Joint Capital Planning Committee (JCPC) met today but did not talk about this. Also applying for other grants (Rotary, Lowe's, another private grant) to lessen the amount. Kubiak asked if \$240K would be enough to complete the project? The response was that it would be. This will be a place for families to go for socialization outside of school hours. The plan is that if the money is available, this will be done by next summer.

**Motion: FC recommends the Article 10B, Crocker Farm, ADA Preschool Playground Funding.**

**Vote: 7-0 to support as appropriate use of CPA funds.**

Mary Streeter indicated that North Common needs work worth about \$400K; the town asks CPA for \$190K plus. Two-year design build, hiring engineer the first year. This project qualifies as historical preservation and recreation, whereas the school playground project is purely recreational.

In applying for the grant, the town must come up with a conceptual plan 25 percent complete. Several meetings were planned for public comment.

Neale wanted to know if the Farmer's market would continue operating during construction period? Streeter said she did not know. Braun asked how much would be left in the CPA budget if both playground and Common projects were approved. Streeter did not give a figure but indicated that more installments will be coming in October/November to replenish CPA funds. Kubiak indicated that State CPA match is down to about 18 percent. Streeter noted that 18 percent goes to everybody but State gives more if the town's contribution is at 3 percent, which is the case with Amherst.

To a question how the CPA was balancing future housing needs versus current needs. Streeter indicated they had commitments \$1.2 mm approximately...about \$360,000 remaining in the account..

**Motion: FC supports Article 10A, North Common, as appropriate use of CPA monies.**

**Vote: 7-0. Unanimous in favor.**

### **Article 5: Electronic Voting**

MandiJo Hanneke represented the Town Meeting Electronic Voting Committee.

Article 5 proposal is to amend town bylaws to allow electronic versions of standing and tally votes. Main reasons are that electronic voting: 1) increases accountability, 2) is fast, therefore time efficient, and allows more information to go on record, 3) improves/expedites vote counting, allowing moderator to improve the proceedings, and 4) prevents unauthorized voting.

Instituted via handset, 260 handsets. Not a high failure rate unless the battery dies. Comes with software to customize for information to/of voters. FC raised several issues such as: Who else is using it? What is the cost of purchasing and using the system? What training is required for members and staff?

If Article 5 passes, Article 6 is to appropriate \$26,000 for this.

Neale wanted to know how technically challenged voters would use the handsets. Hanneke noted that it's a pretty easy system to use, remote control with numbers. 0-1-2. System tested at the beginning of each town meeting. Pooler said that the committee went to Brookline to see how they were doing it, they have had the system for two years, this being the third year. Hanneke added that the biggest problems they (Brookline TM members) had was hitting the wrong button. Battery running out is usually not an issue. Neale asked, what if I press the wrong button? Hanneke: The last button pressed during the voting time is what is recorded. Another question: How will the handsets be distributed? Response: Similar to how the tally cards are distributed...but drop off at the end of night and then pick up again the next meeting night.

More questions: Theilman asked, How do you know who voted how? Hanneke: Data will show up in Excel spreadsheet or on the town website the next morning. Neale asked, with a really close vote, one vote might make a big difference. Any loopholes in the system? How to police it? Hanneke noted that the bylaw says no proxy voting is allowed. Members must police themselves.

Ratner asked how many members did Brookline TM have? Hanneke replied they had 240 members, then she added that 6-7 TMs have adopted electronic voting, some open TMs also have. Braun wanted to know if the system was limited to binary questions? How about more complex questions? Hanneke advised that the town may be able to do software set up, depending on what the issue is. Moran asked who would be the custodian of the handsets? Hanneke: IT department, as they will also be managing the software.

Article asks for \$26k to purchase the electronic system for Amherst TM. Hanneke explained that this was for a fully functional system. Replacement cost is approx. \$100 per set. Expect 8-year life, although the vendor generally recommends a 5 year lifespan. Brookline is thinking of upgrading their handsets.

Neale wanted to know what would happen to this investment if Amherst no longer had a town meeting. Hanneke said if the Charter change were to go through, it would be another 2 or 3 years, by which time the system would have been used during 4 TMs.

**Motion: FC recommend Articles 5 & 6.**

**Vote: 7-0. Unanimous in favor**

#### **Article 7: Amity Parking Lot**

Amity Parking lot: \$200k asking in fall because want to start construction in May. If the appropriation were put off until the 2016 Annual Town Meeting, construction could not start until July beginning of next Fiscal Year. Total rebuild new lights, smooth pavement, handicap ramp in front of the library. Will get 1 more space (Handicap). To be paid out of the transportation fund. This project not within the purview of JCPC.

Braun wanted to know if transportation funds had been used like this before? Mooring indicated that these funds have been used for the parking garage, and also Spring street, Town Hall, Pray Street.

**Motion: FC recommends Article 7**

**Vote: 7-0. Unanimous in favor**

#### **Article 15: Romer woods property acquisition**

Mooring noted that the town would apply for a state Department of Environmental protection (DEP) grant to help purchase 141 acres in Zone A of the town reservoir watershed. No grant, no spending. The lot has the possibility of 3-4 building lots. Money comes from Water Enterprise Fund (140K + change), if DEP grant were to come through. The granting process requires declaration of uniqueness and arms-length transaction.

**Motion: FC recommends Article 15**

**Vote: 7-0. Unanimous**

#### **Update on FY 15 Budget results**

Pooler announced that Free Cash was certified earlier this afternoon! \$4,322,441 – higher than initially expected because state had been slow in processing certain payments this year (real estate exemptions we typically get reimbursed for).

Pooler then discussed several charts pertaining to free cash and stabilization fund (or reserves), reserves as percent of General Fund Revenue (GFR). With the certification, the reserves are now 13.9 percent of GFR. Another chart showed reserves 12.1 percent of town budget, including all enterprise funds. Also, Enterprise Fund balances, historically (last 5 years). Noted healthy amount of money in sewer fund. Solid Waste Fund, with very low reserves, is out “special child.”

#### **Article 3: Appropriation of free cash for OPEB.**

Every year the town receives reimbursement from Medicare: \$185,973 this year. This will flow into the Town General Fund, but it is reimbursement for Medicaid Part D payments for employees of the Town of

Pelham and the Amherst-Pelham Regional Schools, as well as the Town of Amherst. As is done every year, Article 3 proposes allocating the reimbursement: 1) \$96,345 to the town of Amherst's Other Post-Employment Benefit (OPEB) fund; 2) \$7,097 to the Town of Pelham; and 3) \$82,549 to the regional school district.

**Motion: FC recommend article 3**

**Vote: 7-0. Unanimous**

**Article 4 A & B: Stabilization Fund**

Part A would establish a Capital Stabilization Fund and transfer into it \$650,702 from Free Cash. The committee engaged in discussion about pros and cons of establishing a capital stabilization fund; this could be used for debt service at points but must be used for capital projects. According to Pooler, capital stabilization and regular stabilization funds are not interchangeable. In addition, Standard & Poor's rating agency would view these funds as one big pool of money. S&P also counts free cash as reserves. A concern was expressed that, in capital stabilization fund, the town may be creating another savings account. A counterpoint expressed was that having a capital stabilization fund is a fiscally responsible thing for the town to do as the savings will help reduce future borrowing.

Feasibility studies have started on the following big capital projects:

1. Wildwood, \$30-\$60 million
2. Library, \$10-\$20 million
3. DPW, \$20
4. Fire, \$20 million (\$12 million already in capital plan for it)
5. Parking Garage, dimly visible on the horizon.

Pooler indicated that for every \$10 million override, annual tax bill for house appraised at \$330K increases by \$90, on average.

**Motion:** Recommend 4A, establishing a Capital Stabilization Fund and transfer into it \$650,702 from Free Cash.

**Vote: 6 for, 0 against, 1 abstain.**

**Motion:** If 4A does not pass, recommend 4B, transferring \$650,702 from free cash into the existing Stabilization Fund. If 4A does pass, move to dismiss part 4B.

**Vote: 7-0. Unanimous in favor.**

**Articles 11, 12, 13: Solar**

Article 11: Allows Town Manager to negotiate net metering credit contracts – contract with owner of the solar panels. The contract is for more than 3 years. This is a blanket authorization to allow the Manager to enter into long-term contracts. Town Meeting has already authorized this for the old landfill and now are seeking authorization for the new landfill.

Article 12: To be able to lease the land we own. Part 1- make sure that the SB has control over the landfill; Part 2-authorize the Town Manager to enter into the lease.

Article 13: To authorize the Town Manger to enter into PILOT agreements to smooth out the tax payments.

Discussions on the above articles: Old Landfill, neighbors still have concerns about safety. New Landfill, already has a fence around it. Unanimity of support for new and mixed for the old one. Information about these projects is on the town website and community outreach. Town needs about 4.2 megawatts; a project on the new landfill will yield about 3.7 megawatts; Elementary schools need 1 megawatt—Crocker roof not good enough, Wildwood maybe. Regional Schools have a 2 megawatt need; they are discussing getting solar from Deerfield. Old Landfill: Community solar: if you cannot put it on your own roof, you can buy a share of...Sun Edison thinks up to 300 homes could participate.

A question was raised about PILOT pertaining to Hampshire College solar project, because the property in question is owned by a third party and that makes it taxable. Pooler explained that PILOT payments (Hampshire College) would be about \$22K per year. For new landfill, PILOT payments about \$40k per year; savings on electricity, to the order of \$70K per year.

**Motion: Recommend Article 11**

**Vote: 7-0. Unanimous**

**Motion: Recommend Article 12**

**Vote: 7-0. Unanimous**

**Motion: Recommend Article 13**

**Vote: 7-0. Unanimous**

**Article 2, payment of unpaid bills from previous years : Recommend dismissal if no bills come in before town meeting.**

**Vote: 7-0. Unanimous**

Adjourned 10:05p.m.

Acting Clerk  
Anurag Sharma

DOCUMENTS USED AT THE MEETING  
Warrant for Nov. 4, 2015, Special Town Meeting