

**Amherst Finance Committee Minutes
Thursday, February 4, 2016
First Floor Meeting Room, Town Hall**

ATTENDANCE:

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

OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Sonia Aldrich, Comptroller; Tim Nelson, Fire Chief; Donald McKay, Assistant Fire Chief, Lyndsay Stromgren, Assistant Fire Chief; Scott Livingstone, Police Chief; Amherst Media.

Meeting was called to order at 7 p.m.

1. News affecting budget

Ms. Aldrich reviewed a comparison of the state aid estimates in the manager's budget with current figures released by the Governor. There is a \$42,000 positive difference between governor's numbers and the manager's budget, resulting in a current estimated surplus of \$111,420. Mr. Kubiak notes that the House and Senate still have to weigh in so these numbers are likely to change.

2. Budget Presentations

Fire Department

Ms. Theilman notes, in the interests of transparency, that one of her sons is a member of the Fire Department, but that she has been told this is not a conflict of interest and that she may participate in the Fire Department budget discussions and votes.

Chief Nelson reviews challenges, such as unfunded mandates, having five ambulances but not enough staff to use all five simultaneously, and concerns about staff burnout. He notes that a consultant may be hired to review staffing issues. A new headquarters is "still on the radar," and he feels cautiously optimistic about progress in that regard.

Assistant chief Stromgren reviews data for call volume showing a steady increase in total calls (driven completely by increases in EMS calls) from about 2000 calls in 1976 to more than 6000 calls in 2015. Other pages in the document illustrate many aspects of the data such as where the calls originate (UMass and Hadley are both significant), and when calls come in (peaks between noon and midnight and on all days of the week, not just weekends).

Chief Nelson says he would like to increase baseline staffing levels to cover the department's needs. More than 200 times in 2015 they needed more staff than the on-duty staff and had to pull staff from either the off-duty permanent force, the call force, or the student force.

About 30 calls each year (of about 1500 fire calls made in 2015) are major fires requiring multiple engines. Most calls are for relatively minor fires or events (e.g., smoke detector alarms).

Although fire call volume has remained essentially flat over the past 40 years, EMS call volume has increased steadily. The reasons for the EMS rise involve an aging population, greater expectations by the public for emergency services, and increasing number of students in town (the highest demand for EMS services is by people between the ages of 18 and 30, followed by the age group of 65 and older).

Police budget

Chief Livingstone reviewed the regional lockup assessment, which covers the cost of using the Hampshire County jail. Use of the jail saves the town money because otherwise we would have to pay for staff to feed and supervise prisoners in the police station.

Not much change in the dispatch/communication center budget. Have 12 dispatchers, same as last year. The department currently has a contract with Hadley to provide them with emergency dispatchers that are trained to handle certain types of emergency calls that the Hadley dispatchers are not trained to do. Talks are ongoing with several local towns (e.g., Pelham, Ware, Hadley) to have Amherst provide all dispatch services for them.

No major adjustments or changes to the animal welfare budget and operations.

Police budget. Just finished the department's accreditation process, reviewed every three years by the state's Executive Office of Public Safety and Chief Livingstone notes that the department today passed with "flying colors." The department was given two extra officers last year (total now at 48). The officers have helped boost patrols by foot and bike in downtown between hours of 6 p.m. and 2 a.m. The department currently has one officer out on extended maternity leave and another on extended injury leave, hence those two extra positions have been very helpful, Livingstone notes. If the grant currently funding the neighborhood community liaison officer's salary and benefits is not renewed, and if additional revenue becomes available, he is requesting the addition of one officer in the FY17 general fund budget to keep the neighborhood liaison officer position.

Call volume has gone down, due, in part, to the department's efforts to better understand student perspectives and establish a more proactive approach to

communication with students. The police department is taking a more “discussion-related approach,” which has resulted in lower call volumes.

Mr. Kubiak notes that just because call volume is down doesn’t mean the department is doing less work or that it needs fewer staff—the call volume drop is, in fact, the result of considerable, and ongoing, police staff work.

General Government

Only three sections were discussed at this meeting: Select Board/Town Manager’s Office; Town Meeting/Finance Committee; and Legal Department.

The proposed increases in the Select Board stipend were discussed. Clarification is requested about the individual amounts and exactly how the stipends would be disbursed.

Rise in personnel services in the Town Manager’s office budget was caused by hiring the new Economic Development Director.

\$11,200 for “special activities” covers things like Select Board expenses and conference fees.

No other substantive questions or discussions.

3. Liaison and representative reports

Ms. Ratner reports from the library trustees and says the architect has been hired and design and planning has begun.

Mr. Kubiak reports from JCPC. He says the DPW facility study (by Weston & Sampson) is underway and may be finished within a month or so. Several sites have been explored but they have not been identified. Likelihood that current DPW location would be used as the site for a new fire station. Ms. Theilman suggested that the JCPC include in its discussions the possibility of selling the East Street School, Central Fire Station, and South Amherst School if they become vacant, and Fort River if it is not used for other purposes. Money from sales could be used toward reducing the cost to the Town of the four major capital projects.

4. Minutes of previous meetings

Minutes from the meeting of January 28 were approved, with minor corrections, 6-0-1 absent (1 member had to leave the meeting early).

Meeting was adjourned at 9:35 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Stephen Braun

Documents used:

1. State Aid Projections for Budget Purposes Manager compared to Governor.
2. Amherst Fire Department Call volume & activity summaries & trends, February 2016.
3. Town of Amherst Proposed Budget for Fiscal Year 2017.