

Amherst Finance Committee Minutes
Thursday, March 10, 2016
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: Sonia Aldrich, comptroller and acting co-finance director; David Ziomek, assistant Town Manager; Geoff Kravitz, director of economic development; Rob Morra, building commissioner; Christine Brestrup, interim Planning director; Eric Brody, Public Arts Commission.

Meeting was called to order at 7:00 PM

Dave Ziomek noted that this was a year of substantial change in the Town Manager's office as he returned to his role as Assistant Town Manager and the town now has an Interim Town Manager. He made several comments pertaining to the following:

Conservation: efforts are guided by the Master Plan, which encourages development of village centers so as to allow preservation of open spaces and overall quality of life for the residents.

UTAC: This UMass – Town collaborative has a steering committee and 3 subcommittees on economic development, housing, and cultural arts and living. The collaborative has representatives from both the town and the university, and draws a great deal of involvement from across town committees and boards.

Jeff Kravitz, the first Director of Economic Development, discussed ongoing initiatives: UTech, downtown parking working group, transportation plan and implementation, Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), affordable housing trust, and local historic districts. All such activities flow through conservation, inspection, planning, and zoning services. Level services in the FY17 budget will keep the projects moving.

Rob Morra, inspection services, noted completed projects on Presidential Apartments, Kendrick Place, and 417 West Street. Under construction: Olympia Place (expected May occupancy), Greenleaves, Mill Valley, and Rolling Green apartments, and a new Auto Zone, to name a few. The department also received a permanent building application for the new Science Center at Amherst College.

Several changes in the department: health, licensing, moved into inspections; a new inspector has been hired to fill a vacant position. Department to create a senior level building inspector position. Joint inspections and joint permitting and licensing now in the department. New 3-unit or more multifamily certificate inspection program. There are in all 150 rental properties; 20 percent done. Rental permitting going into the third year; notifications will go out to 1,306 properties in mid-April. Managers budget decreased 1 inspections position. Vacant building inspector position joined with health inspector to create one; terminated the shared health

inspector position with Northampton and made that a full Amherst position. \$11K reduction in budget but level of services will be unaffected.

Interest in investing in Amherst is very high, but the town has a stigma of being overly complex for developers to navigate; new combination of services, streamlined processes, and consistency across departments creates a positive vibe and invites interest. The services bring in fees that cover almost all the costs.

Christine Brestrup, Interim Planning Director, discussed her role and that outreach and communication was a priority. Everything ties into the Master Plan, viz., directing development into the downtown and village centers, and preserving the outlying areas. The department takes into account impacts of developments on neighborhoods and residents. There is increased communication and coordination among town departments. Department now working to remap flood prone areas in town; with committees and public dialogues to redesign intersections in town (Montague Road, Sunderland Road; Triangle Street); coordinating and improving permitting processes. Working with the Town Meeting Coordinating Committee (TMCC) on a zoning forum to educate people about what zoning is and how it works and to explain upcoming zoning articles.

Other Planning: Sustainability projects, Amherst College and Hampshire College. Hampshire College hoping to become carbon neutral. Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, bike share program, whether self-sustaining or tax supported depends on sponsorships and grants; request to UMass for help with operating budget; Capital budget requests as well.

Sustainability, led by Coordinator Stephanie Ciccarello: power purchase agreements with sun Edison; working to get funding for green communities. Dredging of Puffer's Pond remains on the agenda; mill street bridge is currently closed for safety and access issues.

Land Acquisition: The town is not quite finished with land acquisition. As growth continues in village centers, acquisition and conservation continue to be on agenda. Two land acquisition proposals in the works for this year. The town absorbs 10 percent of the cost of Agricultural Preservation, as 90 percent is picked up by the state.

ARTICLES

3. Percent for Art Bylaw Warrant Article:

Eric Brody: The purpose of the article is to enhance public spaces in town. This kind of funding mechanism would be new to Western Massachusetts. Precedents: Philadelphia in 1959, Cambridge in 1979. 90 municipalities in 26 states have chosen to do it this way. Massachusetts is the only state that does not have Percent for Art Program, he said. Governor vetoed legislature proposal last year.

Expected cost: One percent of every municipal project would be allocated to a Public Art fund. For a \$20 million project that would be \$200,000, costing average household an addition \$1.81 per year in property tax. Points: 1) Borrowed money means the art has to be at the site. 2) Any capital improvement project over \$100,000 incur 1 percent toward a fund, no upper limit. Major equipment acquisition excluded; applies to land, buildings, and construction only.

Why not private projects? Some towns require developers to contribute 1 percent of the project. That might discourage development. The Public Arts Commission is meeting with Archipelago group and they are very pro art; no commitments yet, but promising.

Discussion ensued about the need for precision in the article language about what is eligible and what is not. When would this come into effect? Such requests, if approved, would put a lot of pressure on town's finances. Perhaps 0.5 percent might be more palatable to the town meeting and to the town. Attorney General has to approve all new bylaws before they can take affect.

Moran noted: 1) no dedicated funding stream for public safety, for instance. Adding 1 percent to tax burden on residential property owners is difficult, 2) administering this bylaw would be a burden on the already stretched town staff.

No action taken by the Finance Committee on this article at this time.

So far, possibility of 44 articles on the warrant.

4. Non-Financial Petition Articles: Committee members discussed which ones might have financial impact on the Town. Where the conclusion was that they would not, the following votes were taken to make no recommendation.

Petition 1: West Bay Road Safe Crossings is advisory to the executive branch. Voted 7-0 to make no recommendation.

Petition 2: Indigenous Peoples Day resolution. Voted 7-0 to make no recommendation.

Petition 3: Medicaid reimbursement appropriation/bylaw. This does have financial impact; FC needs to weigh in.

Petition 4: Bylaw to prohibit single-use plastic bags. Voted 7-0 to make no recommendation. Vo

Petition 5: Request JCPC remove Kendrick Park from Capital Plan. Voted 7-0 to make no recommendation.

Petition 8: Resolution to endorse Amherst College divestment of fossil fuels. Voted 7-0 to make no recommendation.

Petition 11: Recommend to Jones Library Trustees the preservation of Kinsey Memorial Garden. Voted 7-0 to make no recommendation.

Petition 12: Resolution fo open government for Town Meeting. Await opinion of the town counsel.

5. Budget Process:

General discussion. Future FC meetings: March 17, 24, 31; April 7.

6. Member reports:

Theilman: Regional School Committee voted a budget of \$30,804,122 for FY17 and adopted guidelines for operating budget assessments. For FY17, assessments were Amherst \$15,196,144; Pelham \$1,125,782; Leverett \$1,522,460; Shutesbury \$1,700,340; Total from Assessments \$19,544,726

Braun: JCPC heard from public art petitioners 1 percent art; similar issues raises as raised here at FC. No votes were taken and the petitioners will revisit their petition and make changes. Aldrich noted the top line capital budget, including adjustments. Not a lot of pain needed to be inflicted on the departments to balance the capital budget. Also discussed was the fact of progressively increasing the amount of revenue to use for capital from 8 percent to 10 percent of the levy over four years.

Meeting Adjourned 10:00 p.m.

Acting Clerk
Anurag Sharma

DOCUMENTS USED AT THE MEETING

Town Manager's Budget for FY17
March 4, 2016, memo with attachments from the Public Arts Commission to the Joint Capital Planning Committee and the Finance Committee
