

Amherst Finance Committee Minutes
October 20, 2016, 7:00 pm
First Floor Meeting Room, Town Hall

ATTENDANCE: Steve Braun (Vice Chair), Bernie Kubiak, Tim Neale, Janice Ratner, Anurag Sharma. Absent: Marylou Theilman (Chair), Joseph Jayne,

OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE: Sonia Aldrich (Co-Finance Director); Lynn Griesemer, Kay Moran, and Bill Mullin, Department of Public Works (DPW)/Fire Station Advisory Committee; Rob Crouner, Planning Board; Sandra Mullin; Amherst Media.

Meeting was called to order at 7:00 pm by Braun.

AGENDA AND DISCUSSION

1. Discuss and (possible) vote recommendations on Articles for Nov. 14 Special TM

Zoning Articles

Appropriation Articles.

ARTICLES 4 and 5. Capital Program - Buildings and Facilities. Griesemer, chair of the DPW/Fire Station Advisory Committee, presented information about the DPW and Fire Station building projects. This committee began in the spring, 2016. It is charged with looking at options for a new fire station and a new public works facility and with advising the Town Manager on these projects. (Also see documents from Advisory Committee).

The central fire station, built in 1929, would be replaced with a building located south of town for better response time to areas south and east of town. This building would serve as headquarters and station, would better fit vehicles and equipment, would provide a decontamination area for dangerous substances, and would provide better conditions for the employees and vehicles. A previous study (2006) recommended that the station should be located in the South Pleasant Street corridor, close to Mill Lane. A location using the South East Street corridor is not feasible because of the two railroad bridges. This committee is looking at a two station concept.

The preliminary cost estimate for this project is \$11-13 million, but that might be too low.

Article 4 is requesting \$75,000 for a feasibility and site selection study for a new fire station, A consultant would look at space requirements, current state and national standards, and suggest up to three possible sites.

A motion was made and seconded to recommend support for \$75,000 from the Overlay Surplus for a feasibility and site selection study for a fire station. **Voted to Recommend, 5-0 and 2 absent.**

The current DPW facility was a trolley barn built in 1915 and retrofitted in the 1940's. It is inadequate for staff and equipment. There should be a minimally heated garage to store vehicles and equipment. This would prolong their life span.

A feasibility study by consultant Weston & Sampson was completed in March 2016 at a cost of \$75,000. The study included assessment of current property and facilities, space needs, potential sites, basic building conceptual layouts and cost estimates. Of nine possible sites, three were recommended: town-owned Fort River School, and privately-owned sites on Ball Lane and Old Farm Road. More information is available in the document from the Advisory Committee.

Estimated cost of the facility is about \$37 million.

There was discussion about this estimate and project - How does it compare to other recent DPW buildings? Is this a "Cadillac" building? Has there been a forum for comments from the public? (No public meetings scheduled yet but the committee will be at precinct meetings before Town Meeting). What about competitive bidding to bring cost of study down?

Article 5 is requesting \$350,000 for site analysis, schematic design, and a detailed cost estimate for a new Department of Public Works (DPW) facility. This study will be site specific so a site will have to be chosen. A design should be ready for Town Meeting in Fall, 2017.

A motion was made and seconded to recommend support for \$350,000 from Free Cash to complete schematic design and final site selection for a Department of Public Works Facility. **Voted to Recommend, 5-0 and 2 absent.**

Article 6. Triennial Property Revaluation. Assessors have to reevaluate property every 3 years. Appropriating funding now will allow the Assessors to go out to bid and notify the public in advance of FY18 when revaluation will be started. They will not ask again for five years. This funding will come from the Overlay Surplus. (The Overlay Surplus Fund for FY16 has \$122,703.86. It is proposed to be used for the Feasibility Study in Article 4 as well as this article. What remains, will go to Free Cash).

A motion was made and seconded to recommend the use of \$40,000 from the Overlay Surplus to complete the triennial property revaluation. **Voted to Recommend, 5-0 and 2 absent.**

Articles 14-21. Zoning Articles. Crouner, Planning Board, discussed the Zoning Articles.

Article 14. Business Uses of Homes. This article expands the accessory business use out of a home, at the request of the Building Commissioner. There are four categories of home businesses: 1) No foot traffic, employees, or vehicles; 2) customary home office - minimal foot traffic, may have an employee, doesn't look like a business, e.g., architect; 3) small home based business e.g., contractor and 4) large home-based business. The latter may need to get a special permit or move elsewhere. This article also adds definitions and renumbers paragraphs as necessary. The purpose is to encourage responsible home business enterprises while preserving the character of existing neighborhoods. Staff time, currently used for permits or hearings, could be reduced.

Article 15. Site Plan Review Applicability. This would avoid a hearing process for certain minimal, trivial, inconsequential changes on site that would have no chance of objection e.g., a sign change, putting in an exhaust vent, moving playground equipment on a property. There would be administrative approval. There would be no change in site, use, or building that would change compliance. This could save administrative and committee time.

Article 16. Educational District Project Review. This article drops the waiting period (60 days) for colleges to obtain permits. No financial impact.

Article 17. Table 3 Footnotes. Drops 3 unnecessary footnotes already addressed elsewhere. No financial impact.

Article 18. Inclusionary Zoning. This article would expand inclusionary zoning for all residential development requiring a Special Permit for any aspect of a proposed use or development, including, but not limited to dimensional, modifications, and resulting in a net increase in dwelling units. Currently, only use is considered. Inclusionary zoning applies to developments with 10 or more units. A chart is included for number of affordable units required per number of total units. If a special permit allows additional units, inclusionary zoning is applied in proportion of those additional units to the whole. See Sections 15.10 and 15.11.

Financial impact appears to be minimal. There would be a small administrative cost to explain the calculation. Very few projects will probably require affordable units - perhaps 3 or 4 over 10 years. These would also then receive tax help from the Town.

There was some discussion about the availability of land for new development and about current development trends. It does not appear that there are many large lots available for building but lots can be combined as is happening with the proposed new office building where 2 adjacent lots will be used. (This building obtained a Special Permit for a 4th story but it will have no residential use.) The trend of converting single family homes to rentals seems to be slowing or in some cases, reversing.

The following Zoning Petition articles request a zoning change from Limited Business (B-L) to General Business (B-G) District. Limited Business has more restrictions on development including a height of 3 stories, 35% lot coverage, 20 foot setback and limitations on number of units. General Business allows a height of 5 stories, greater lot coverage, zero setback and as many units that fit. Residential use is not permitted in B-L but some such use is grandfathered currently. Apartment buildings (B-G) are limited to 24 units; there is no limit on mixed use building. B-G and some of B-L are in the Municipal Parking District.

Comments included: How big should downtown be? What about a buffer between downtown and residences?

Article 19. Zoning Petition - South Prospect Rezoning. This would apply to the east side of South Prospect Street, south of Amity Street. The Planning Board is supporting this change.

Article 20. Zoning Petition - Hallock Area Rezoning. This would apply to the west side of North Pleasant Street, from Cowls Lane north past McClellan Street. The Planning Board is supporting this change ONLY south of Hallock Street.

Article 21. Zoning Petition - Triangle Rezoning. This would apply to the north side of Triangle Street, from East Pleasant Street to Cottage Street. The Planning Board does not support this change. They think of it as more of a transition area.

The Finance Committee had not seen the Warrant before this presentation, nor heard from the petitioners, so opted to defer voting on these articles.

2. Assignments for writing Articles. Wait for next meeting.

3. Discussion of Preliminary Fiscal Year 2018 Guidelines. Some edits and corrections were discussed. Something about the four building projects should be included. Members should review text again and send edits to Aldrich before the next meeting.

Several items were discussed: explaining the percentage used for elementary schools (1.7% vs. 2.5%); applying the percentage for capital to the levy vs. the total operating budget; and, whether the operating budget increase could be less than 2.5%, perhaps 2%? Property taxes are high and with the proposed building projects may go higher. It would be difficult to reduce operating budgets. Budgets still need to have items such as Reserve Fund budgeted, even though it may not need to be used and it gets turned back. Salaries need to be included in the budgets even though vacancies may occur during the year resulting in savings. Departments seem to be conscious of spending. Budgets are tight. Municipal inflation is usually more than 2.5% annually, as opposed to the consumer price index.

4. News affecting FY17 budget - None.

5. Member reports – liaisons and representative reports - Aldrich reported on the Regional Assessment meeting of October 19. There was no agreement on an assessment method for FY18. Pelham wanted to use the compromise method used this year (5 year rolling average with 10%

ability to pay). Shutesbury favored a 5 year rolling average with 15% ability to pay. Leverett favored the 5 year rolling average. Amherst didn't express an opinion. This group will wait until after the Four Board Meeting in December before meeting again. Amherst's share of the Regional Assessment will increase by 2.5%.

6. Minutes of previous meetings - The minutes of the September 7, 2016 meeting were approved, 4-0, with 2 absent, 1 abstention.

The minutes of the October 13, 2016 meeting were approved, 4-0, with 2 absent, 1 abstention.

7. Next meeting and agenda

October 27 Community Room Police Station

Continued discussion and votes on Articles for TM

A meeting will also be posted for November 3, 2016.

8. Topics not reasonably anticipated by chair 48 hours in advance of meeting

The meeting adjourned at 10:13 pm.

Janice Ratner, acting clerk

Documents distributed/used:

Draft Town Warrant for November 14 Special Town Meeting
November 14, 2016 Fall Town Meeting Checklist (10/20/2016)
Preliminary Fiscal Year 2018 Budget Guidelines (10/20/2016)
Financial Projections - General Fund (10/12/2016)