

Amherst Finance Committee Meeting Agenda
September 29, 2016, 7:00pm
First Floor Meeting Room, Town Hall

In attendance: Steve Braun (Vice-Chair), Bernie Kubiak, Tim Neale, Janice Ratner, Anurag Sharma, Mary Lou Theilman (Chair). Absent: Joseph Jayne
Others present: Paul Bockelman, Town Manager, Sonia Aldrich, Co-Finance Director, and Amherst Media

Meeting called to order at 7:01 PM

Agenda Topics:

1. Review and Vote Op-ed New School article for newspaper

Mike Morris and Sean Mangano have the op-ed piece to confirm accuracy. The Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) approved funding based on these values. Theilman distributed a rewrite based on last night's event with the League of Women Voters (LWV). Neale suggests using calendar dates rather than fiscal years, changes agreed to. Theilman questions if we include the need to do another study, which would cause the town to incur additional costs. Ratner notes that the term "modest" was removed from the first version.

Neale is more interested in a 30 year bond rather than a 25 year bond, as a 30 year bond softens the impact more on current taxpayers. Bockelman says 25 year bond was chosen as a middle ground. Debt exclusion doesn't specify either a term or interest rate. Sharma prefers a 20 year bond as it costs less and forces a financial discipline, gives the town more flexibility going forward. Discussion regarding a 25 year bond occurred with a consensus to remain with that duration.

Neale proposes adding wording to the effect that the town is looking to soften the tax impact. Bockelman feels that we did convey this concept at the five boards meeting and finds the proposed language acceptable. Sharma asks what "rigorously" means, should delete that and use a term like offset.

Following further discussion on the wording, Braun will attempt to fold the suggested language into the piece. SB suggests striking some of the proposed language, shortening a sentence. The purpose of the piece is to provide information, not advocate for or against the proposal. Braun will complete the final product and submit it for publication and distribution.

2. Review and Discuss Project Summaries of Schools, Library, Department of Public Works (DPW) and Fire.

Summaries have been shared with the respective department heads and committees, for review as to accuracy. Summaries will be placed on the town meeting website.

School: needs updating since the proposal was submitted; numbers are from Morris's slides.

Sharma wonders if the newspaper can publish these as well, and whether they could also be put on the town's website. Discussion about bonding information, add "assuming" after total cost and before bonding information.

Library: Neale says that we will be going for a 25 year bond; reader may assume that there will be an override for funding this. Ratner suggests an introductory paragraph that explains that decisions have not been made on funding, purpose is to give voters information. Bockelman says there's a place on the website and Kubiak suggests if published there should be a disclaimer explaining that this is what's known at the moment.

DPW: Kubiak notes awkward language in the third paragraph. Sharma raises question about population size -- college populations do distort the numbers because people living on campus are not directly served by the DPW. Bockelman notes they do receive services from the town, at least water and sewer (the university is the biggest customer). Discussion regarding per person costs, being distorted by the student

population. Ratner notes that per capita numbers are used when describing the property tax as well. Question: is “per capita” the appropriate metric to use for Amherst?

Ratner feels the second to last paragraph needs some clarification if the chart can be included when published, will have to see if the newspaper will agree.

Fire station: simply use “required by code” rather than initials of agencies.

3. Review and Discuss Budget Calendar as information for Town Meeting

No significant changes suggested to the draft calendar. Need to add in when the warrant closes.

Add a date to when the document is produced, so one knows it’s current.

4. Review Five Board Meeting of September 14

Sharma discusses the capital spending proposal at the five boards meeting: notes that it is contingent on increasing the capital budget to 10% of the tax levy by ½% per year. Need to implement operational efficiencies and other changes as described at the five board meeting. Building capacity over time – still using Pooler’s suggestions that we increase capital budget, two capital overrides, increase stabilization funds. Neale notes that no decision has been made about the library being the next debt override. Have to be careful so we don’t give the impression that the decision’s been made. Kubiak agrees with Neale, how the library is funded depends on timing, costs.

Braun moves into the “big picture” discussion as to how much we might be able to afford, is there a way as we as a Finance Committee can try to set some parameters as to what is affordable. Bockelman: the habit of the town is to say what’s your need, then engage in an iterative process to set the parameters. Not typically how committees were set up. Braun voices a need to communicate that there are limits. Kubiak notes that there is a process how projects get designed, based on determination of need, then modified as costs come into play.

5. Communication between FC and other Committees (Ideas)

The Committee may wish to talk to Planning Department and Planning Board to go over what the Committee’s guidelines are for zoning articles.

6. Member reports – Liaisons and Committees

Theilman sent out a report from Jayne on DPW/Fire Station committee meeting. The committee is exploring several sites for fire station.

At the LWV event, presentation was as neutral as possible as to what the Finance Committee agreed on followed by a debate between pro and con groups with approximately 100 people there. Good discussion overall.

7. News affecting budget

Aldrich: no news, probably next week.

8. Minutes of previous meetings (Sept. 7, 2016 and Sept. 14, 2016)

Neale moved, Sharma seconded to approve September 7 minutes. Voted 5 yes, 0 no, one abstain, one absent.

Neale moved, Sharma seconded to approve 9/14 minutes. 6 yes, no 0, 1 absent.

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

None

10. Next meeting and agenda suggestions

Next meeting October 13th, 7:00, Town Room

On October 27, draft guidelines will be discussed, 7:00 PM.

Hold open October 6th, 20th for potential meetings.

11. Suggested items and topics for future meetings

Theilman asks the committee to think about topics for future meetings: metrics, per capita, guidelines for new buildings.

Sharma moved to adjourn at 9:10 PM, seconded by Braun, unanimous vote to adjourn.

Respectfully submitted,
Bernie Kubiak, Clerk Pro Tem

Documents referred to:

Finance Committee draft op-ed on the school funding vote

Finance Committee draft summaries of capital projects

Draft budget calendar