

Amherst Finance Committee Minutes
February 23, 2017
First Floor Meeting Room, Town Hall

Finance Committee members: Marylou Theilman (chair), Steve Braun (vice chair), Joe Jayne, Tim Neale, Janice Ratner. Absent: Bernie Kubiak, Anurag Sharma. Sonia Aldrich, Co-Finance Director.

The meeting was called to order at 7:00 pm.

FY18 Budget hearings

Conservation and Development

David Ziomek, Assistant Town Manager and Director of Conservation & Development summarized the department's activities. He praised the competency and professionalism of the department, which he notes is now fully staffed. He said interest in Amherst (residential, commercial, and among the educational institutions) is high, which bodes well for the town's finances. He also noted that his staff generates many grants that augment the budget, such as the one currently being pursued to help pay for the Groff Park spray pool. He said a focus for next year will be Puffers Pond; improvements including dredging (probably not until 2019 or 2020). The reconstruction of the Mill St. bridge will require some associated improvements at Puffers, especially bathrooms and ADA-compliant walkways.

Christine Brestrup, Planning Director, reviewed some new hires that she said are bringing fresh perspectives and skills to the department. She echoed Ziomek's comments that Amherst town center is attracting considerable attention from developers. She noted the successful passage of 3 zoning amendments in 2016 Spring Town Meeting and 4 in 2016 Fall Town Meeting. She and her staff have been working with the Town Meeting Coordinating Committee to help members understand the zoning articles before them.

The development by Beacon Communities in North Amherst, recently approved by the Planning Board, is a significant mixed-use project being pursued under state Chapter 40B, which allows zoning-related modifications in return for providing affordable units. The project will be comprised of 130-units, 26 of which will be affordable, which she said the town badly needs.

She also noted, in response to a question, that the zoning bylaw was changed in the past year such that conversions of owner-occupied houses now must be approved by the Zoning Board of Appeals, which is quite strict in its review process. As a result, applications for such conversions have dropped.

Rob Morra, director of Inspections, noted that the Amherst College Science Center is very large and requires nearly daily engagement from his department. Many building projects in all stages of development are underway. He said the incorporation of the health inspector into his department is working out well.

Rental permitting program has been running successfully for 3 years. There are 1270 properties, on average, that participate in the program (which is mandatory), and the program has brought property owners to the awareness of town staff and the public, promotes education, and makes enforcement of complaints more transparent and efficient.

He's hoping to increase automation of permitting to reduce need for staff time. There is a request for more support of electrical inspections (to cover a part-time additional inspector). Current inspector is doing great work, but work load has increased significantly with large university and college projects underway or scheduled.

Aldrich summarized the budget changes for this area: the overall increase is 10.1%, which reflects continuing integration of staff (e.g., the health inspector), addition for electrical inspector, step salary increases, and miscellaneous small expenses.

Northampton Fee for Animal Shelter

Aldrich reported that Northampton pays the town a contract-negotiated \$1400/year for use of the animal shelter, with additional expenses charged for incidentals or overtime.

Review of Zoning Guidelines Draft

Braun circulated the version of the guidelines he drafted based on the previous discussion, which also incorporated edits suggested by Neale. Theilman had previously circulated a version that omits items 2 & 3 because she feels these two are hard to quantify and/or seldom actually pertain to decisions. Neale responded that he feels items 2 & 3 actually do have value as criteria. Members expressed various opinions about the value of the criteria and the broader issue of whether, or when, the Committee should make recommendations rather than remaining neutral on some issues and sticking to providing information about possible financial implications. After discussion, it was agreed to change the title to Finance Committee Zoning Bylaw Considerations (instead of "Recommendations").

Approved 4-1, 2 absent.

Member reports – liaisons and committees: Joint Capital Planning Committee did not meet this week, although there was discussion among the Finance Committee about how best to keep the FC informed of capital requests. After discussion, Braun agreed that he or Kubiak (the other FC representative on JCPC) will update the Committee after every meeting and/or share spreadsheets that are discussed by JCPC.

There was discussion of an article in the Springfield Republican about a report on the City of Northampton website that has comparisons of municipal costs and expenses across 10 communities, which may be helpful for the FC subcommittee looking at "cost drivers" for Amherst.

No other reports.

Minutes of previous meetings: Minutes of October 26, 2016 approved 3-0, 2 abstentions.

Next meetings and agenda: The next meeting will be Thursday, March 2, 2016 at 7:00 pm.

Topics not reasonably anticipated by chair 48 hours in advance of meeting: None

The meeting adjourned at approximately 8:57 pm.

Acting clerk, Steve Braun

Supporting documents:

- FY18 Town Manager's budget, posted on the town website at amherstma.gov/3321