

Williamstown Finance Committee

March 2, 2022

Minutes

Members present: Doris Karampatsos, Michael Sussman, Charles Fox, Paula Consolini, Melissa Cragg, Dan Caplinger, Fred Puddester and Elaine Neely. Absent: Beth Goodman.

Meeting called to order by Chair Melissa Cragg at 7:00.

Michael motioned to accept the minutes from September 22, 2021, Paula seconded. All agreed with Doris and Fred abstaining. When Board members are attending via zoom, it was noted that a roll call vote should have occurred for all votes at the last Committee meeting. Motion to accept all items voted on last meeting was requested by Paula and seconded by Charlie. All agreed.

James Brosnan, superintendent of Northern Berkshire Vocational Regional School District, presented the McCann School Budget with Dave Westall, School Committee member in attendance. The Chapter 70 contribution to the school increased by nearly one million dollars. This is due to a change in the aid calculation. This change encompasses an increase in the number of students included under the poverty level, the underrepresentation of health insurance costs, and the increasing cost of vocational education. Also, reflected in this higher aid number, is an increase in the student population (23 additional students). More State monies allowed the District to decrease substantially the local aid calculation to all the member Towns. Additionally, grant funds (ESSER, CARES and ARPA) are still being utilized.

The Town has about a \$31,000 increase due to an additional three students. The Town participates in the reduction in the local assessment, but it is more than offset by the increase in the municipal minimum assessment. The student population is close or at capacity. Last year three teachers were added. In this budget an additional special education teacher will be added. The school is working with other state agencies to meet the demand of employers to train the workforce. Many vocational schools in the state have waitlisted students. Population percentage and valuation percentage divided by two equals the Town's proportionate share (24.61%) for capital costs incurred by the school.

Items of note in the 3.5% increase in budget totals for expenses include: New England Review costs (held every 10 years), 2% pay raises across the board, inflation impact on vocational supplies, transportation increase (1st year of a 5 year contract), a small natural gas increase due to installation of about 50 ERVs, and a modest net increase in health insurance due to the one month premium holiday.

Andrew Groff and Anna Osborn tag teamed on the presentation of the Community Development Budgets. Cost of living salary increases will be 3% (across the board for all departments presented tonight as well). Items of note contained in these budgets are: Increase in budget amount for trail maintenance and an increase in advertising budgets due to an increase in placing items in the local paper. Cost of gasoline is estimated at \$3.16 per gallon. Many praised the guidance of Health Inspector, Jeff Kennedy, throughout the pandemic and commented on what a great resource he is to the Town.

Anna presented the Executive and Finance Departments. The settlement that had been previously mentioned is shown in the Select Board Budget. Dan questioned the special projects line item. The investigation of the police department and associated legal fees is housed here (\$186,000 net of insurance recovery of \$75,000) and \$13,000 for the search for Town manager in the 2022 actual. In this line item going forward has additional funding for the Town Manager search and expectations of the funds needed for DIRE. Charlie Fox requested that this line-item description be more reflective and transparent in regard to items contained therein. Dan asked Charlie how he arrived at the \$45,000 in the proposed budget and a spirited discussion ensued.

The proposed salary for the new Town Manager is increased (by \$30,000) based on the recommendation of the consultant to more closely align with salaries for similar Town Manager positions. A relocation amount of \$10,000 is also included. A discussion was had around the legal counsel line item. There are still a number of public records requests and after some discussion about the appropriate amount, it remained at \$40,000. Insurance costs are projected to increase by at least 10% in property, liability, and worker's compensation through MIIA (Massachusetts Interlocal Insurance Association) over 2022 actual. The question was asked as to why the 2022 actual is so much higher than the 2022 budgeted. Anna will get back to the Board with this information.

The Finance Committee Reserve Fund is proposed to be reduced to \$50,000 due to the removal of Ice and Snow. Melissa requested that it be increased to \$75,000. A new printer is also needed. An IT position was added to alleviate the burden that the accounting department has shouldered since Jason left. Dan wondered if Paragus would be eliminated with the addition of an IT position. No immediate savings are expected. A dedicated IT person may find issues that may need to be addressed to enhance security and training. ARPA funds may be able to be used to make these needed adjustments.

Chris Lamarre, Assessor, gave a presentation outlining how the Town determines the value of New Growth in answer to Fred's query. New Growth is previously untaxed value created by: new construction, additions, substantial renovation, creation of condos, lot splits or subdivisions, new personal property assets, new non-domiciled property owners (second home owners, taxed on personal property calculated on 2% of the assessed value of the home minus \$10,000), and previously tax exempt property returned to the tax rolls. Three-year average of new growth has been \$316,000.

Michael gave Rachel and the whole department kudos on the smooth transition that occurred with the recent retirement. Town Clerk, Nicole, explained the need for an assistant. Mail in ballots, vacation coverage, and election coverage on election days made an assistant necessary. Employee benefits was the final topic covered. Health insurance premiums will be increased by 8% with a one-month premium vacation, in essence flat. Charlie mentioned that the Town's health insurance provider has a solid reserve, but anticipates further health insurance increases next year. In light of future expected increases, the full 8% increase will remain in the budget to provide a bit of a cushion.

Arlene Kirsch amplified Dan's special project budget line comments. It is important to have a clear explanation of what is included in each line item.

Dan motioned to adjourn, Paula seconded. All agreed. Adjourned at 9:05.

Minutes respectfully submitted by Doris Karampatsos