

Williamstown Finance Committee

March 9, 2022

Minutes

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

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

Elaine motioned to accept the minutes from February 23, 2022, Fred seconded. All agreed via roll call.

Dan requested a review of Charlie Blanchard's recommendations and experience in regards to Town funding of non-profit organizations. Although Charlie may not have agreed with funding some of these organizations in the absence of precedent, he does present the requests to the Town for funding. The opinion letter from Town Counsel, Attorney Joel Bard in regards to the use of Town funds for the non-profit organizations, had no issue and stated that funding these requests are indeed an appropriate use of Town funds. A discussion followed.

Susan Briggs presented the Williamstown Chamber of Commerce non-profit budget and outlined the focus of the chamber for the locals, the tourists and the businesses. For the tourists, the Chamber is the marketing arm for the Town. The Town has had much marketing exposure for the cultural attractions, but during Covid, it came to light that the rural lands, open spaces, golf and hiking trails did not. The Chamber applied for and received a grant from Massachusetts Office of Travel and Tourism (MOTT) to market open spaces. This allowed for TV and digital advertising in addition to the usual print and web presence, as well as partnering with area businesses to augment this marketing segment. Destination Williamstown has disbanded its board and has been absorbed by the Chamber. In addition, the Chamber now has a part time editor that will help to facilitate a substantial revamping of its web presence. This will be an additional \$20,000 expense. The Tourist booth continues to be a presence at the end of Spring Street.

For the locals, they strive to keep the locals engaged with the 4th of July and the Holiday Walk. (38th annual) For the businesses, throughout Covid particularly, they offered many free training sessions via zoom to the community. Training sessions will continue to be held, but hopefully in a hybrid fashion going forward. The Chamber also facilitated connections with various business segments to become resources for each other as well as competitors. The Chamber continues to apply for grants and is hopeful that they will be successful. They also partnered with Williamstown Cultural District to host Summer Sundays and Art Week Berkshires in September.

A discussion ensued with questions in regards to feedback for tracking the success of various marketing strategies. Very difficult to track. Last year (due to Covid) was the first year in recent memory that the funding for the Chamber deviated from the 10% of hotel/motel tax apportionment that had been approved years ago at Town meeting. Membership in 2020 stood at 164 and 2021 at 152 and hopeful for a similar or slightly higher membership in 2022. Michael requested an audit. The Chamber is in conversation with Smith Watson to have an audit completed late spring.

Geraldine Shen, interim executive director, presented the Sand Springs request for funds and accompanying budget as well as a brief overview of the services that Sand Springs provides. More than 10,000 individuals use the pool annually with discounted rates for Williamstown residents. Scholarships are available as well. She mentioned in response to Fred's inquiry that they are seeking a small business association loan (\$250,000 with a balance owed of \$140,000) and plan on doing additional fund raising to help smooth out the next 5-7 years of operating budget. The request of the Town is approximately 15% of their total operating budget. Dan asked if Sand Springs has requested funding from other organizations. Dan suggested that they reach out to more funding sources (diversity of grants) stating that the more organizations that they do get support from, the easier it will be to get support from other entities. Melissa requested the balance sheet to add to the documentation already submitted.

Nathaniel Anderson, Treasurer, presented the Williamstown Community Preschool (WCP) budget. Sixty children currently utilize the preschool with 60% being Town residents and the majority of the balance of children have a parent(s) working in Town. WCP is celebrating their 50th anniversary. He listed the challenges that are faced by the Preschool. Deferred maintenance, shifting to adding capacity for younger children, and with state emergency assistance ending July 1st all contribute to major headwinds for the Preschool. Additional pressure on the budget is the need to increase the salaries of childcare providers to be more competitive. Fred asked about the comparison of fees to other providers in the area. WCP fees are average to the lower end of the spectrum. Michael commented that every one dollar spent on early childhood education now will save about ten dollars by the school district on remedial help later. Dan asked what the future holds for ongoing asks for the Town. Nathaniel would like to have the Town continue to be able to fund so that the Preschool will have the ability to provide a sliding scale and/or scholarships as well as to provide a living wage for the teachers. Melissa commented that a plan should be developed for the long term capital improvements.

Michael Williams, Williamstown Youth Center (WYC) Executive Director then presented their budget via zoom. The Youth Center has sliding fees and scholarships. Michael Williams also noted that all of the fees for the Youth Center are artificially low so that every family that wants to participate at the Youth Center is able. The Youth Center provides after school services for \$800 for the entire year whereas the closest equivalent program (YMCA) charges \$3800 per year. WYC provides programs for children when the school is closed. (Snow days, school vacations, summer and most recently all day programs during Covid) Payroll has increased due to having smaller groups for activities. (due to Covid) There is also a focus on DEI to be cognizant of the needs of all of our community. Fred suggested that an increase in fees may be helpful. Fees are expected to increase minimally in the next school year. Fred also asked for explanation of the \$1 million dollars in unrestricted cash. These funds are for maintenance, not for day to day operations.

Mike Ziembra followed with the Public Safety Budget. Charlie Blanchard began with an overview of the staffing. Currently the Force is down at least two positions (14 officers in FY 2020, 12 in FY 2021, FY 2022 and back to 13 FY 2023). Due to Police Reform, the part time academy has been done away with before a new one has been instituted. Currently, the Department cannot hire part time police officers and that has made staffing difficult. Currently one part time officer is in academy (in Reading) and another expected to attend in June (hopefully in Springfield) and will ultimately be full time. Reading was the only training facility that had openings that would allow the officer to continue to work after June 30th. An additional cost was incurred for housing. Additionally internal changes due to Police Reform will impact the budget.

Union negotiations will occur for the new contracts beginning July 1st and COLA increases are not reflected in this budget as of yet, but funds have been set aside. There will be one extra holiday in FY 23 (June tenth) as well. Gas prices will also put added pressure on the Police Budget. Additional state mandated trainings are also required. Each officer will need 56 hours annually of training mostly with emphasis on de-escalation and communication. Other topics include, implicit bias, ethics, legal updates, mental health issues and defensive tactics. Melissa and Paula furthered the discussion to include the broader community and the DIRE committee to advocate for participation in any trainings that would be impactful to other Town Departments.

Charles motioned and Fred seconded to adjourn. Via roll call, all agreed. Adjourned at 9:08.

Minutes respectfully submitted by Doris Karampatsos