

**Williamstown Finance Committee**  
**Wednesday, February 28, 2024**  
**7:00pm, Town Hall**

Members present: Melissa Cragg, Elaine Neely, Suzanne Stinson, Paula Consolini, Fred Puddester, Molly Magavern.

Staff: Robert Menicocci, Anna Osborne.

Library Trustees: Micah Manary, Bridget Spann, Alex Carlisle; and Library Acting Director Kirsten Rose.

Link to Meeting Recording: <https://reflect-willinet.cablecast.tv/store-3/11311-Finance-Committee-Meeting-2-28-24-v1/vod.mp4>

1. Call to Order @ 7:00pm - Melissa Cragg
  - a. Melissa reviews the agenda, explains new procedure of submitting questions in advance.
  - b. Minutes of February 21 moved by Fred, seconded by Suzanne, unanimously approved.
  
2. Milne Public Library Presentation- Trustee Board Chair Micah Manary
  - a. Only one substantial change in the budget- Wage increases recommended in the long-awaited wage study. \$50,000 was set aside last year. This budget now reflects those increases which bring wages up to reasonable rates. The library staff will still be on the bottom for compensation for town employees but at this point totally reasonable.
  - b. Budget also shows some shifting of amounts in line items to better reflect actual spending.
  - c. Highlight of the income sources- town (building maintenance, salaries, operations) vs. others (\$142,301.69 spent from other sources: Trustees, Friends, Gifts, Memorial Gifts, State Aid).
  - d. Net change for wages ~\$46,000
  - e. Questions raised-
    - MacFarland Fund? Anticipate wanting to do a lot of new things like a "Library of Things."
    - How about the building? They can't meet the town's climate goals with the current building. A study commissioned 18 months ago shows that the building needs a lot of work. Last year the town appropriated \$300,000 toward essential repairs (e.g. fire cladding, stairways, code upgrades). The longer-term horizon with aim of state funding in 8 years. They are expecting they need to hold the

building together for a few years while assessing what they need the building to be for the next 30 years. State grants provide 50-75% of the total cost of construction. The aim is to be ready to apply as soon as the grant application process opens, which they expect to happen in around 8 years. They aim to put themselves in a strong position for state support by being prepared as soon as the grant process opens. Manary's understanding is that state criteria are not based on need but value to state system (net lender, etc.). Alex Carlyle describes cycle, explains that state funding covers concept and everything else.

-How much do they have in cash reserves? Current total fund balance is \$462,804.24 which includes about \$300,000 in the Sarah McFarland Fund, \$100,000 in renovation funds not yet fully spent, about \$27,515.43 in the Trustees account and \$25,000 in an endowment account.

-Non-town funding will make more exciting work possible as they hire

-Building Maintenance budget? Budgeting less because they are using renovation funds to cover some of these costs.

-Randy Fippinger asks how Chapter Two funding helps? Director asks for help for specific needs (see one sheet). Last year they provided around \$42,000. Their aim is to make their process more transparent. They just got funding for a new patio (\$18,000). Chapter Two sometimes give more than they get in because they have some bequests with spinoffs. Alex Carlisle adds that the library is leveraging the money they have in the best way possible. They are applying for grants, reducing maintenance costs with no-mow lawns, low maintenance native plant flower gardens, etc.

-How have you been able to handle the increase the wages without a larger increase in the appropriated budget- Answer: By shifting spending to non-town sources for materials and special projects.

### 3. Detailed Budget Questions and Answers (Anna Osborn and Bob Menicocci)

Melissa states her goal of cutting \$200,000 without compromising services.

- a. Selectboard budget- The \$10,000 increase to \$20,000 for other contract services? The Board is aiming to build community via some special projects/events (e.g., contribute to fireworks, one additional large community event, etc.). Attempts to work more with the Chamber of Commerce; try to flesh out an annual calendar of special events. Turning their attention to constructive programming. There's an Economic

development logic, too, since community events help drive revenues; A lot of work honing the vision to improve sense of belonging done by the DIRE Committee now turning to community events. Melissa takes exception to the description of “deep cuts” to Selectboard budget. The large prior budget had been extra-large because of extraordinary issues relating to severance agreements. There was no “slashing”.

Melissa asked for confirmation that the increase from \$10,000 to \$20,000 for the Selectboard will fund all the needs of the DIRE committee for the year. Answer from Bob: Yes, the work will be done collaboratively with other entities and the projects to be done will be revised to fit within available funding.

- b. Town Manager (p.4)- Unused vacation buyout- Whether this can be covered by the Compensated Absences Reserve Fund. Anna explains that that fund can't be used for active employees; It's for departing employees. What this is- funding to cover a clause in Bob's contract that allows him to get compensated for vacation time if he doesn't use it. Bob notes that the amount is limited (hence the \$6000).
- c. **Legal Budget (p. 6)**. Why higher than 2023? Answer: because issues arise, and they also have to prepare for negotiating new labor contracts. Next year is the 3rd year of a 3-year contract. None are staggered. Who is the gatekeeper? The town manager. No one can contact legal directly; all requests must go through Bob. **Pin request from Fred**.
- d. **Insurance (p.8)**. Town gets a 2.5% discount for prepaying. 2024 Actual is showing the entire bill. The number so far doesn't reflect the MIAA participation credits the town will get. Anna expects it will drop to around \$175,000. But there may be increases in insurance for items like the new streetsweeper and the possibility of workmen's compensation rates going up. Hoping for just a 10% increase. Melissa is **putting a pin in this item**.
- e. Melissa notes that Anna is departing later this year for an opportunity in Lenox.
- f. Questions re: reorganization in town accounting (pp. 10-11). Anna: They have reorganized work responsibilities since the loss of the multi-talented Julie Snow, Assistant Town Accountant, who died in December. Julie's tasks are being shared by Claire, from Community Development, who is now an accounting clerk doing payroll. Claire is also shared by the Assessing Dept to help Chris. They also have Sara working as a clerk in the department now helping cover some of Julie's former tasks. Both Claire and Sara have been given a bit of a pay bump because of their added responsibilities. Bob adds that the best strategy for transition in this situation is to grow talent from within which is why they are adjusting the

two positions. He further describes their steps to develop a pathway for advancement. Hard to build a career ladder in a small office. Town accounting is a specialized area. Sarah is full-time in accounting. Claire is split. They are assuming they will find a new town accountant to replace Anna. These are all difficult positions to fill because of the uniqueness of the town accounting specialization.

- g. Question: Re: Assessor (p.12) What's the extra \$12,000? FY25 is a recertification year. Recertification needed (done every 5 years). Costs are incurred to do this. This involves hiring an outside firm to fulfill the state mandates.
- h. Question: IT, (p. 16-17). Re: Website - is this enough money to pay for website maintenance? Bob says Yes, for now. For the next 2 years we can bootstrap our way through with grant support and existing staff. Likely a request for FY27 for staff to take care of managing the site.
- i. **Question: Telephone p.16-** switched to Verizon from First Light. Tony is anticipating cost savings but is still not clear. Needs a year under his belt. Anticipating cost savings but have not yet sharpened the pencil on the savings. Melissa **put a pin in it.**
- j. Question: Town Clerk (p.18)- Nicole's maternity leave. Wouldn't FMLA cover it? The extra money is needed to pay for replacement staff to cover elections. The town doesn't participate in FMLA. We are self-insured. Town typically covers leaves by folks in other departments covering. Elections are too specialized for others to fill in.
- k. **Question: Employee benefits (p 21).** How to determine calculations for health and dental insurance? Anna takes a conservative approach- plans for worst case scenario. Assumes new employees are more likely than not to take a family plan. Could there be a smaller cushion? Led to a conversation about free cash and the stabilization fund. As free cash dwindles there's an effect on funding for capital projects. Bob suggests mapping out the strategy using comparison data. Bob explains how an extreme scenario will play out. Explains use of free cash and stabilization for extreme needs. Says our stabilization fund is relatively low compared to other communities. Question: do we want to build up free cash? Melissa describes potential benefits to cutting now. Others suggest **pinning the item.** Fred offers a philosophical point- Doesn't make sense to fund capital projects using the current approach of setting aside free cash for future use. Bob agrees in theory, wants to make sure a careful review is undertaken to develop a solid strategy. Question from Suzanne re: arithmetic from FY24 actual, annualized to FY25.

- l. Question: Conservation Committee p. 22- Question why budget going up \$5000 every year. Its funding a portion of Dan Gura's (Rural Lands) position. Initially paid out of a trust fund (Bullock Trust). Over time, town contribution going up \$5000 a year so that eventually we'll stop depleting the trust and pay for the work out of operations. The Trust is currently down to \$72,000. Fred: What happens if we don't fund the increase? Then Dan won't do the good work that's happening. Dan and Andrew's Idea: do a timber harvest to help replenish the fund Talking more with WRLF about enhancement of the property that will help with an expansion of their programming. On **Bob's pin list** to figure out the long-term plan that goes with this.
- m. Question: Health Dept p.30- From Dr. Sussman. **Not present so the question was tabled.**
- n. Question: Police B&G maintenance issue- Police Station project is 5 years old. Chief is asking for \$5000 to help with wear items: HVAC failures and other things wearing out.
- o. **Question- Electricity costs-** why not take down lower? Craig and Anna are trying to come up with a methodology. Because sharp utility cost increases are just beginning to come to an end- they have a new methodology. The uncertainty and high rates last year have made them cautious. Now locked into lower rate. **Anna will return to answer this question.**
- p. Question: DPW, p. 41, Lab analysis question- Are we doing it? This is for a DEP required monitoring of Wells #1 and #2. The amount needs to stay. Didn't do it last year. Not required to test annually but the DEP could come and say you must test every year. Keeping \$\$ in the budget in case DEP requires the testing.
- q. **Question: DPW, overall- (pp. 41, 43, 50)-** adding it all up- key areas: Director, Highway, Parks and Cemetery. Added together 1,789,000. Underspent in FY23 by 25% and on track to do the same in FY24. Do we continue to budget at the higher level? Or do we cut to keep the budget low. Answer: A few pieces to it- COVID and Fed Infrastructure projects in other places means we can't be very competitive- have not been able to get some of the work done yet. More work being done on the recruiting end to fill vacancies (currently we're short one position). Our projects are small, so we can't get them going as quickly as planned because of unavailable contractors. **Bob will come back with a sheet that explains the nature of the disconnect. And Craig will join the next meeting.**

- r. Question: Snow and Ice (p.48) Can we cut? Anna responds: If you cut the estimate, you can't spend more...We do not want to decrease this line item.
- s. Question: Recreation (p.55)- Shared Use Path. Craig is looking to contract the shared use path maintenance because it's too much for the DPW. He is negotiating with Countryside (estimated cost of \$25,000) for the work which includes grass cutting along the edge and fencing. It will cover a portion of the Spruces. The work feeds into other improvements. Recognition that the town needs to up its game. Need to improve Spruces path maintenance, more signage marking paths, etc.
- t. Question- HWQD- p. 62. Budget has been cut- down about \$100,000 from \$1.127 million to \$1.029 million. Anna will update online. Doesn't affect the operating budget. It affects the water and sewer rate so still important.
- u. Question- Mental Health Services (p.76). How will the \$60,000 for consultants (to be spent over 2 years) be used? The CARES Study recommended (among other things) the creation of a community safety review committee. Did this happen? Answer: the budget item is the tailings of the CAREs report. We didn't know where things were going to land in the earlier 2 years. Now we have a number of different things in mind as a result of the report. Some focused on some of the policing improvements. Regionally we have someone to help respond to police calls. Still in the process of analyzing the issues to determine the need for more support. Also plan to add training for staff. This year some \$\$ to be used for communications work for community wellbeing services. We have new use of a motel in town to address homeless temp housing needs. Seeing more calls for police at that location for help with mental health, substance abuse issues. 99% of calls to this location involve these issues. Question- Would we be able to use local services? Answer: there are limited services, however, these are generally not based in Williamstown. Social safety net is a state issue but there are local efforts by non-profits and governments, including local police departments, to fill in the gaps. The need is so great that there's an all hands-on deck approach.
- v. Question-Capital Plan (p.83). Carry forwards. Anna notes that they cleaned up a lot of the left-over funds. Carry forward balances- \$19,900 for Brook Road and \$13,900 for Front Street in FY 23; For FY24, since it's difficult to find vendors, hoping to carry forward street paving projects for 4 roads- (School Street, Meacham Street, Moorland Street and Park Street).
- w. Question- Debt Service (p. 85) -Debt Service Committee cleaned this up. See the amortization schedule in online materials. Debt service from 2023 forward: \$4.35 million bond will be paid off in FY25. All that will be left will

be the Police Station debt. Cable Mills will be paid off. All the numbers in the amortizations schedule.

- x. Question- list of reserves? Water/Sewer, HWQD, etc. Anna to give a list next time.
  - y. Review of pins (See above bolded items)
4. Public comment - Text of a taxpayer letter read aloud by Suzanne Stinson. (letter to be appended to these minutes) The issue raised will be added to the future Finance Committee agenda.
5. Adjournment - 9:00pm Fred moved; Suzanne seconded.

*Text of taxpayer letter (see #4 above):*

*I deeply appreciate the level of your current discussions for taxpayers....I listen online.*

*My concern is re Sweetwood zoning request and possible misunderstanding by voters*

*Care One desires a zoning change.*

*This issue has not yet been **defined adequately by Care One** for voters.*

*Sweetwood building is an asset to Town unless Owner neglect lowers property value and leaves it empty of residents.*

*Please advise best method to conserve this asset and current senior resident owners agreements.*

*Voters need information that Sweetwood owners have not provided.*

*Sincerely.*

*Oblong Road Resident*