

**FINANCE COMMITTEE
MONDAY, FEBRUARY 5, 2024
REGULAR MEETING: TOWN HALL
MEETING MINUTES**

Members Present: Bernie Porada (BP), Sue Kaczinski (SK), Tony Matteo (TM), David McCarthy (DM), Gail Weiss (GW)

Members Absent: Dan Campbell

Others in Attendance: Town Administrator Andrea Llamas, Assessor Beth Walker, Energy Committee Co-Chair Judith Wagner, Energy Committee member Seth Hansell, Board of Sewer Commissioners Chair Karen Boudreau, Wastewater Treatment Plant Chief Operator Isaac Golding.

I. CALL TO ORDER

Because Chair Dan Campbell is absent from tonight's meeting, Finance Committee Vice Chair BP is conducting this meeting.

BP called the meeting to order at an unspecified time.

II. DEPARTMENT BUDGET MEETINGS

a. Assessor's Office

BP announced that because he is in a dispute with the Assessor's Office over a property evaluation, he will recuse himself from the discussion due to a potential conflict of interest.

GW chaired the meeting from this point onward.

Assessor Beth Walker presented her proposed Fiscal Year 2025 (FY25) budget. Highlights included:

- The cost of Assessor's mapping has increased by \$50 over last year, for a budgeted amount of \$3,500.
- The cost of office supplies are increasing, so Ms. Walker increased this line item by \$500.
- Assessor's dues have gone up by \$30.
- Ms. Walker has added a new line item to her budget: Technical and Legal. This is to cover the costs for technical and consulting needs, including legal fees, for disputes such as when a property owner brings their case before the Appellate Tax Board.
 - The request for FY25 is \$35,000, but the amount will likely be different every year.
 - Although Ms. Walker uses Town Counsel, these fees come out of the Assessor's budget.
 - This is a somewhat regular occurrence.
 - Currently, Ms. Walker has to request the town hold a Special Town Meeting to approve these costs.
 - Ms. Walker explained the Appellate Tax Board and when it is engaged.
 - Town Administrator Andrea Llamas explained this is a proactive move, and is in response to a consistent need.

GW ceased chairing the meeting. BP resumed chairing the meeting.

III. REVIEW AND APPROVE MINUTES

The minutes for the December 18, 2023; January 22, 2024; and January 29, 2024 meetings were reviewed.

MOTION BY TM THAT THE FINANCE COMMITTEE APPROVE THE MINUTES FOR THE FINANCE COMMITTEE MEETING THAT TOOK PLACE ON MONDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2023, AS WRITTEN. GW SECONDED.

ROLL CALL VOTE:

TM YEA
DM YEA
BP YEA
GW YEA
SK YEA

MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY.

MOTION BY DM THAT THE FINANCE COMMITTEE ACCEPT THE MINUTES FOR THE FINANCE COMMITTEE MEETING THAT TOOK PLACE ON MONDAY, JANUARY 22, 2024, AS WRITTEN. TM SECONDED.

ROLL CALL VOTE:

TM YEA
DM YEA
BP YEA
GW YEA
SK YEA

MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY.

MOTION BY DM THAT THE FINANCE COMMITTEE ACCEPT THE MINUTES FOR THE FINANCE COMMITTEE MEETING THAT TOOK PLACE ON MONDAY, JANUARY 29, 2024, AS WRITTEN. SK SECONDED.

ROLL CALL VOTE:

TM YEA
DM YEA
BP YEA
GW YEA
SK YEA

MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY.

announcing Annual Town Meeting and other events. The last mailing cost \$250. BP supported this initiative, as it increases public outreach.

- The Building Maintenance line item has gone up because of the associated costs for alarms and for maintaining the town's two elevators (one at Town Hall and one at the library).
- The Building Inspector line item has gone up because of the added cost to join the Franklin Regional Council of Government (FRCOG) inspection program.
- The cost of Town Reports has gone up because the reports have been completely redone and improved to include more information of use to residents.
- The Town Clock's budget has slightly increased because of the increased cost of electricity.
- The line items Health Insurance have increased by 8%, and Other Insurance has increased by 4%.
- Ms. Llamas noted the town's former Grants Director had requested a warrant article for grant match-funds, which is required for some grants. She noted the former Grants Director had brought in \$1 million in grants last year. This fund will support many town departments and functions.

VIII. NEXT MEETING

The next meeting is Monday, February 12, 2023, at 6pm, and PVRS will present their budget.

IX. ADJOURN

MOTION BY DM TO ADJOURN. GW SECONDED.

ROLL CALL VOTE:

TM YEA

DM YEA

BP YEA

GW YEA

SK YEA

MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY.

The meeting was adjourned at an unspecified time.

Documents presented at this meeting:

- FY2025 Finance Committee Budget Department Meeting Schedule
- Town Departments' Expense Report as of Jan. 30, 2024
- Assessor's Budget FY2025
- FY25 Article Request: Energy Committee
- A List of Energy Committee Grants Secured, and Estimates for Energy Savings for Town-Owned Buildings
- Sewer Department's Budget FY2025
- FY2025 Budget Workbook as of Feb. 4, 2024
- Selectboard's Budget FY2025
- Administrator's Budget FY2025
- Technology Budget FY2025

Isaac Golding presented their proposed FY25 budgets. Highlights included:

- A reminder that this commission is presenting two budgets: one for operations, and one for the capital plan to fulfill the Department of Environmental Protection's (DEP) consent order.
- The consent order guides much of this proposed budget.
- As per the consent order, staffing at the Wastewater Treatment Plant must increase, and so must training for the plant's staff. This is reflected in this budget.
- The consent order also requires an annual inspection of the 10% of the sewer system to conduct preventative maintenance; thus, this is a 10-year project. The way this inspection will be conducted is by hiring an outside company to send closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras into the system to film its condition. Wastewater Treatment Plant staff will view the films to assess the need for repairs and maintenance, and they will prioritize filming according to where problems have shown up in the system. The cost for this year's CCTV filming is \$10,000.
- The engineers recommended \$68,000 for easement and cleaning, but Ms. Boudreau thinks that it too much. She has requested \$15,000 for this in the budget. Mr. Golding noted he and his staff are conducting research and reviewing surveys to try to avoid easements, which is less expensive than going directly to a lawyer.
- Excessive rainstorms this year have stressed the wastewater system, including its staff. This has increased costs.
- A discussion ensued on subscribers' overdue fees and how collections for this are conducted. Ms. Boudreau and Mr. Golding will continue addressing the collection of overdue fees.
- Ms. Boudreau and Mr. Golding have stabilized this budget, and they continue to investigate additional ways to continue this stabilization.
- BP asked about the figures associated with upgrading the Wastewater Treatment Plant. Ms. Boudreau responded: these figures came from the engineers.
- Ms. Boudreau explained details and requirements of the consent order, and work the Sewer Commissioners have done with the DEP to incrementally implement improvements rather than do it all at once.
- BP asked that since this is an enterprise fund issue, how will this affect the taxpayers in the entire town, some of whom are not connected to this sewer system. Ms. Boudreau responded: there are other options for covering these costs.
- Ms. Boudreau noted the consent order was not issued to the Wastewater Treatment Plant or the sewer district; it was issued to the entire town, because it is a town department.
- Ms. Boudreau reiterated the seriousness of the consent order, the possibility of higher fines if the conditions of the order are not met, and the grave repercussions of ignoring the consent order and drawing all of the fines from the enterprise fund.

d. Town Hall General

Ms. Llamas reviewed the proposed FY25 budget for the Town Hall. Highlights included:

- Many items are level-funded or show minor increases, such as the Town Administrator, Technology, and Animal Control.
- The only significant increase for the Selectboard's budget is for the Board Clerk's wages. Ms. Llamas has added three additional committees to those for which Board Clerk Wendy M. Levy takes minutes, in addition to the two committees for which she was hired to take minutes. So, Ms. Levy's hours have expanded.
- The small Technology increase covers the small increase in costs for improving and expanding the program.
- Postage costs have gone up, and usage is increasing due to mailings to all households

II. DEPARTMENT BUDGET MEETINGS (continued)

b. Energy Committee

Energy Committee Co-Chair Judith Wagner and Energy Committee member Seth Hansell presented their proposed FY25 budget. Highlights included:

- This is the first time the committee has appeared before the Finance Committee.
- In the Energy Committee's work, a need has arisen for increased technical assistance, especially in seeking grants to help the town maintain its status as a "Green Community."
- These funds are to hire energy/engineering consultants.
- There is a program at UMASS Amherst, and those involved in it can help with these projects, but sometimes they are too busy. Sometimes they are even too busy to notify the Energy Committee of their availability in a timely fashion.
- Northfield's status as a Green Community helps the town secure grants, but the applications indicate an assumption that the town has an on-staff engineer.
- This committee has secured grants totaling \$730,000; most of that was used in improving town-owned buildings.
- Ms. Wagner and Mr. Hansell shared a document: A List of Energy Committee Grants Secured, and Estimates for Energy Savings for Town-Owned Buildings.
- The Northfield Elementary School is in dire need of energy upgrades, and these projects are complicated and expensive. The Energy Committee needs technical help with this, and to aid in a possible future grant opportunity to upgrade the school's HVAC system.

VI. CORRESPONDENCE RECEIVED BY THE COMMITTEE

BP announced the Northfield Fire Chief, Skip Dunnell, has submitted documents with information on used fire trucks, as per the Finance Committee's request. The Finance Committee will schedule Mr. Dunnell to appear before a future meeting to discuss his findings.

IV. ITEMS NOT REASONABLY ANTICIPATED IN 48 HOURS IN ADVANCE OF THIS MEETING

There were none.

VII. BRIEFINGS ON MEETINGS ATTENDED BY COMMITTEE MEMBERS

BP reported he attended two meetings as an observer only:

1. A School Budget Sub-Committee hearing. The draft budget was presented.
2. The Pioneer Valley Regional School (PVRs) Regional Agreement Sub-Committee meeting. They are drafting a replacement of the current agreement.

TM reported the Community Preservation Committee (CPC) met with representatives of four of the five projects for which the CPC has received applications. The CPC will meet with the fifth project's representative, and deliberate on the award amounts, on February 6.

c. Sewer Commission

Board of Sewer Commissioners Chair Karen Boudreau and Wastewater Treatment Plant Chief Operator

- Town Building Budget FY2025
- Inspection Budget FY2025
- Miscellaneous Town Accounts FY2025
- FRCOG (Franklin Regional Council of Governments) FY2025 Budget Report as of Jan. 16, 2024

Respectfully submitted by Wendy M. Levy from minutes taken by Wendy M. Levy.