

TOWN OF ASHBURNHAM
JOINT MEETING OF THE BOARD OF SELECTMEN
AND ADVISORY BOARD – MINUTES
THURSDAY, MARCH 19, 2009 – 7:00 PM
LOWER LEVEL MEETING ROOM – TOWN HALL
Amended 4/6/09

PRESENT: Chris Gagnon, Chair, Jonathan Dennehy, Member, Maggie Whitney, Clerk, Norm Thidemann, Interim Town Administrator and Sylvia Turcotte, Assistant to the Town Administrator. Advisory Board members in attendance were Dottie Munroe, Bill Johnson, Belden Divito, Leo Janssens II, Ron Reed and James Piedrafite.

Johnson stated that they would be reviewing the Police, Fire and Library budgets at this meeting.

Chief Barrett began by stating that the Police FY10 budget mirrors the FY09 budget and actually reflects an \$8k reduction in salary due to Kevin Ahearn going out on disability retirement probably in the next month or so. He noted that in FY10 he would be filling the void in overtime due to the fact that they are still short a patrol officer. He stated that currently they have 7 patrol officers but that they need 9 to cover with two officers on each shift.

Barrett also noted that Robbie Brennan may be retiring but is still reflected in the FY10 Budget and that if he does leave there will be shifts not covered.

Barrett distributed a memo which detailed overtime costs without Ahearn and added that with the economy the way it is crime has gone up. He stated that utilizing part-time people is cheaper so he used them as much as possible.

Barrett made the following comments: Some training is mandated so there are funds to cover this; he added more in the account for Reserve Officers; his repairs & maintenance account is the same as last year; Prof. & Tech. is the same as well; Communications account is the same and he noted that their cell phones were purchased thru the state bid and are issued for the sergeants, the detective and the chief. (Johnson noted that everyone should be purchasing their cell phones on the state bid.) Barrett stated that the Supplies account went up by \$1k due to the higher cost of ammunition since the war began. He noted that the Minor Equipment account was the same as FY09 and that everything issued to the officers is retained by the Department.

Barrett noted that the Vehicle Supplies account was lower than last year and that with their agreement gas at the pump for police vehicles is \$.17 lower than what is marked. He stated that each officer has a gas card and pin number and he keeps track of what is used. He also noted that maintenance is higher because the fleet is getting older.

A discussion followed on the animal control officer vehicle and its use and mileage saving on older vehicles.

Barrett noted that the Professional Development account had increased by \$500 due to the command staff and chief conferences and training classes. He also made note that there was no accreditation yet but that he was working on it.

Barrett noted that the Dispatch budget was the same throughout except for the salaries and wages account which had gone up a little due to the jump in steps. He discussed how he had met with the Town of Ashby about an interest in regionalizing with their dispatch department. He stated that a follow-up meeting had been scheduled for Tuesday at 1:00 p.m. on this with surrounding town chiefs to discuss this possibility further.

Barrett then went over the Animal Control Officer budget. He stated that they are all signed off with Westminster to regionalize this department. He noted that he was working with the Westminster Chief to finalize things and that the employee would be Ashburnham's and that the costs would be split with Westminster.

The Public Safety Building was discussed next and Barrett noted that the heating costs were close to what was predicted. There was some discussion on elevator, generator, HVAC and fire alarm system maintenance contracts. It was noted again by Piedrafite that these should be combined with the Town Hall and the VMS Building in order to save money.

Barrett then proceeded to explain the stimulus package grant for the hiring of two police officers that may be available to Ashburnham. He noted that at the end of the three year period of this grant, they would be required to maintain the officers or face a penalty of basically not being able to apply for another grant for 1 or 3 years. He noted that he would recommend applying for two officers although we might only get one.

Reed noted that this grant was a good one with no penalties. Barrett stated that any expenses incurred over and above the grant money could be covered with overtime funds and be absorbed. He added that the chances of getting this grant are good but that they didn't have to decide at this meeting. The consensus of both boards was that this was a good opportunity for the Town.

Barrett distributed his Strategic Plan for a Safer Future which provided his budget forecasting for the next five years.

The Library budget was next on the agenda and Cheryl Bradley, Melanie Gallo and Margaret Donovan were present for this discussion.

Johnson asked for an overview of the budget and also touched on the reduction in their staff. Bradley stated that they have two people on at all times, Monday thru Thursday from 10:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m., which is a 17.4% cut in expenses, especially in fuel.

Reed noted that the Library should look at regionalizing and Bradley stated that they would lose their state funding if they allowed residents from other towns to use this library.

Discussion followed on the budget and in particular the heating oil contract that they were working on with Montuori Oil. It was noted by Donovan that they would have a contract soon and would submit a copy to the Town Administrator's office once finalized.

Johnson noted appreciation for the cooperation of the Library during this difficult financial year and added that this was important to the Town. Gagnon added his unofficial thanks for the work they did to get the override vote passed.

The Fire Budget was next and Chief Zbikowski was present to discuss this. He stated that he was asked for a balanced budget but that his FY10 budget was a little more. He stated that he

applied for a grant and was awarded which resulted in this increase. The Chief noted that the Town would get \$117k from this grant and in year one the difference of \$12,960 would be covered by ambulance billing revenue. He explained how he reduced much of the budget in order to make this work. He added that they have trimmed and made sacrifices with the budget in order to someday have 24 hour coverage.

A discussion followed on the Safer Grant which would enable the Fire Department to hire three Firefighter/Paramedics. He stated that this was a five year grant and after that the Town owns it. He stated that he has discussed the possibility of regionalization with other town chiefs. He stated he would get portions of the revenue from this in order to offset money needed to cover the difference in grant funds.

Johnson inquired as to any penalties at the end of the five year period if the Town can't fund these three new employees. The Chief responded that it may be a possibility. He also stated that they would have to be new employees hired with this grant, not to replace any vacancies.

Chief Zbikowski did note that ambulance revenue is increasing every year and would help to fund what would be needed. He stated that in FY08 there was a 93.5% collection rate with Coastal Billing. Reed stated that it was a very good rate of return.

There was much discussion on the grant and the circumstances resulting if it is accepted. It was noted by the Chief that Town Meeting would have to ultimately decide. Dennehy noted that Zbikowski should give them more details on what penalties would be incurred so that there are no surprises and accreditation would be solidified.

The Chief noted that the permit and ambulance fees that they collect bring in a third of their budget. Dennehy stated that the primary purpose of the Fire Department was to provide public service and they can't only look at making a profit.

Both Gagnon and Whitney asked that the Chief put together a spreadsheet, similar to the Town of *Westminster*, which would show a running total of collections, in order to give them a better understanding. Zbikowski stated that he would do so.

Discussion followed on South Station and also on the fire alarm system damage from the ice storm and the status on the replacement.

Johnson noted that the Advisory Board would be meeting with the Selectmen at their meeting on Monday, March 23rd and their next budget meeting would be on Thursday March 26th with the DPW budget discussion.

At this time Thidemann noted that he met with the Financial Team on the FY09 Budget and that it looked like it should be in the black by the end of the year in expenses. He added that revenue would be close and that auto excise looks good right now. He stated that he felt confident that it would be in the black but there would be minimal free cash.

Thidemann stated that Snow & Ice was between \$50k and \$140k out of balance and that \$80k or \$90k was ice storm related. He noted that the ice storm borrowing would be spread out for two years and that when the free cash is certified in the fall it should cover the Snow & Ice deficit. He added that the borrowing would have to be approved by Town Meeting for the ice storm expense with a Special Town Meeting within the Annual Town Meeting.

Some discussion followed on the budget with Thidemann stating that his approach to the budget was different than the former administrator's. He noted that tax collections are close to normal, the auto excise commitment is higher, there was \$40k budgeted over in debt and interest, there were funds due to open positions in fire and police which all work together leading to his assumptions. He also noted that 70% of the School assessments have been paid to date.

Some discussion followed on the ConCom Agent position, of increasing the capacity of the Accountant and the Treasurer with clerical help and more hours. Thidemann also noted the Assessors office situation as vulnerable and a problem and suggested regionalizing this department as the answer. Gagnon noted that they should look into finding a firm that would do this and Thidemann stated that he would start the process.

Thidemann stated that once the Boards had a better handle on the warrant and the capital items, he would then begin looking at FY10. He added that his goal is to peel some funds out of the FY10 proposed budget and put these funds in the Reserve Fund. He stated that he would work on a revenue/expense forecast and budget and meet with the financial team and then go over the results with the Board of Selectmen. He also mentioned that the Boards need a work session.

With no further discussion the meeting adjourned at 10:25 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Sylvia Turcotte
Assistant to the Town Administrator