

Sturbridge Finance Committee
Meeting Minutes
March 1, 2013 ~ Town Hall
8:30am

Call to Order:

The chairman called the meeting to order at 8:35am with the following finance committee members present: Mike Serio (MS), Larry Morrison (LM), Kathy Neal (KN), Joni Light (JL), Arnold Wilson (AW), Bob Jepson (BJ), Prescott (Scott) Arndt (SA), Alex Athans (AA), and Kevin Smith, Chairman (KS) The BOS was present: Priscilla Gimas (PG), Mary Blanchard (MB), Mary Dowling (MD), Mary Redetzke (MR).

Other town officials: Shaun Suhoski (SS), Barbara Barry (BB), David Zinther (DZ), Greg Morse (GM), Tom Ford (TF), Becky Plimpton (BP)

Review of Fire Department FY15 Budget – Chief David Zinther:

DZ introduced his budget needs to both committees and identified key areas that he feels requires financial support. The bulk of the increase over FY14 comes from the mandatory issues that need to be addressed as a result of the “Horn Study”. His salary requests include a buffer to cover call-outs and non-budgeted emergencies, and an additional firefighter-paramedic to ensure adequate coverage of shifts.

MD mentioned the absence of the funding for the ambulance stabilization in last year’s budget and was curious to hear the chief’s opinion, who indicated he’d like to seek making up that “lost” money.

PG asked why the TA reduced ambulance/fleet maintenance. SS answered that such unanticipated needs could be met with reserve fund transfer requests, even with the anticipated structured maintenance plan of the fleet that the chief plans to implement. SS added that the initial increase to fleet maintenance was approximately 20% higher over last year, which was substantial.

SS was looking to bolster the department’s need for fully trained personnel rather than recent graduates. Job postings will be made for experienced firefighters. MD mentioned that this was not a new issue to the town and, in fact, had been recognized by the former chief in years past.

Review of DPW FY15 Budget – Greg Morse:

GM presented a budget that he felt was consistent with last year, and he’d like to have the town review salary and wages for three personnel within his department. Additional needs he’d like to see is consideration for the “third crew” that he has requested funding for in years past, and perhaps a review of how the town manages the deficit spending for the Snow & Ice accounts. DPW vehicles are getting on in years and GM would like consideration for replacement of pick-up trucks and a dump truck in the future.

BB agreed to take a look at the Snow & Ice deficit spending practice.

KS asked about the wastewater treatment process and how it was working for the town by taking in sludge from surrounding communities. GM indicated that there is revenue coming in and he'll continue to pursue other opportunities to increase this revenue.

SS shared that it is possible for the DPW staffing requests to be made and presented to the personnel committee before budget review ends.

AW cited that it could be a logical move for the landfill budget to fall within the DPW at some point.

Review of Police FY15 Budget – Chief Tom Ford:

SS cited the 3.5% increase in the police budget over last year and felt that many of the chief's requests have been met with what is presented, including his request for one additional part-time dispatcher.

TF would like to see consideration to his manpower request which is outlined in more detail in the FY15 budget book.

MB noted that the training increase significantly. TF indicated that it was due mostly to mandatory training no longer being funded out of the state level budget, and how the funding burden was driven down to the individual communities. TF is also seeking for management training for newly promoted lieutenants.

KS asked about the reinstated K9 program, needs for a K9 officer in town, and funding thereof. TF noted that with increased traffic stops a drug sniffing dog would be beneficial and will also cut down on incidents of alleged perpetrators fleeing.

AW asked why the OT budget does not appear to be reduced with added personnel and wondered how it was calculated. TF noted that his practice was not to assume a lower OT rate.

MR was surprised that the K9 request was not brought forth to the town or to the BOS to be heard and has many questions. Specifically her questions were around when the dog will be in use, potential liability issues to the town, costs for the dog, amongst other questions. TF explained the Stanton Grant and assured that the costs are covered for three years, including extensive training for both officers, and that there is no impact to the liability to the town.

KS showed concern for the contract negotiations and if they would be ratified by end of budget. SS indicated that it would be.

Review of Library FY15 Budget – Becky Plimpton:

SS cited that the budget includes the request for additional hours for the children's room in the library, which is the main request for FY15.

BP reviewed the operations and how the renovations could be part of the reason for increased usage of the library; up 22% from last year. BP felt with more people using the library and their public restroom facilities there is an increased need for enhanced security.

BP signified a need for additional hours specifically for the children's room, but that if the children's room was not in use there would always be a need for the extra help elsewhere. As for the building, the skylights are leaking and will need to be addressed. SS confirmed that a design bid came in and will be presented to the capital planning committee. It includes skylights and gutter repairs.

Review of Overall FY15 Budget – Town Administrator, Shaun Suhoski:

Full details are in the budget book. However, SS confirmed candidates are being pursued to replace the principle assessor, and could have a candidate in place by March 17.

Lease considerations are underway for 8 Brookfield Road. SS indicated that there are discussions on whether to lease, to sell; more discussions but it will not be resolved in this fiscal year.

A discussion on road maintenance was entertained. SS said he would circulate the most recent road review and categorization at the request of KS. A potential increase to Chapter 90 funds may be forthcoming. There is currently \$1.3M available.

COLA adjustments, which total approximately \$47,840 annually, was requested by SS and his rationale is included in detail in the budget book. SS would like to review about ten key positions and "un-freeze" their step progressions. That would total approximately \$4,443.71 annually. KS felt this was key since many contracts are in negotiations and some position salaries could be higher than others and appear disparate.

In closing KS was seeking to understand the BOS goals and what they were hoping to accomplish with this budget, and was it in line with their expectations for the town. MB cited that residents want and deserve a certain level of service and just compensation. MD felt it to be premature as the BOS has not had adequate time to review the entire budget in detail. That said, MD went on to say that she believes in COLA to increase economic growth; would like to see growth in the area of recreation for more town activities; recommends a change to the STA structure which she did not see included in this budget. MR agreed in full with MD.

Lastly, BB shared her reasoning with her recommendation to fund Mountainbrook betterment through funds from free cash. When the town borrows the money, residents have an option to repay the assessment with 30 days or in installments over 20 years. Betterments generally have an interest rate of 6.5% which the town is still obligated to pay over 20 years even when residents pay off their assessments early. Residents will generally do a "re-fi" to pay off the betterment, so BB feels it's better for the town to pay off the betterment from free cash so the high interest is not carried, and it will not go back to the taxpayers to pay.

Meeting was adjourned at 1:20pm.

/jml

