

Members Present: John E. Arnold, Chair, Brigitte Casemyr, Kevin Cronin, Bill Linnane, Ian Johnson, Jim Tepper, Ed Behn. Absent: Peter Allen, Jo Lown.

At 7:08 p.m. Mr. Arnold called the meeting to order in the Library Meeting Room.

Call to Order/Open Forum

There were no requests to address the Committee.

Training and Work Session re: Liaison Role and Budget Review Process

Liaison Role. Mr. Arnold reviewed a copy of a ‘Liaison Role’ document that had been written a number of years ago. After discussion, it was decided that it was more accurate to say the role including helping “guide the department through the AFC budget review process”. Mr. Arnold will update the document to reflect this change and distribute it to members.

Mr. Johnson noted that the liaison role has evolved over time and the best starting point is to introduce yourself and get to know the department’s purpose, the department head, and the relevant people.

Mr. Arnold then opened the floor to discuss and asked members who had been through the process to talk about their approach and what has or hasn’t worked for them. He invited newer members to ask questions as the discussion proceeded. Mr. Arnold made notes of key points and ideas for consideration on flipcharts as the discussion proceeded which are summarized here:

- Introduce yourself
- Learn about the department: who they are, what they do, what’s in their budget
- Be the conduit for questions (in both directions)
- Distribute ‘Budget Background Information Request’ document; ask when they’ll get that done
- Work on the ‘Liaison Information Worksheet’ as time allows and as you learn things
- Ask about/learn about any articles they will be sponsoring at the Town Meeting
- Try to anticipate AFC and Town Meeting (TM) questions
- It’s ok to say ‘I don’t know’: try to understand the question and follow up on it
- Budget: balancing the ‘nuts & bolts’ detail vs. the level of detail AFC and TM can be expected to understand
- Beware of tendency to appear to be micro-managing; focus on understanding/clarifying
- Remember that the budget book isn’t just for AFC use. It has detail for the financial team, the hiring/appointing authorities, the managers, etc.
- To some extent, it is more important that the AFC ‘understand and recommend the mix’ between the departmental budgets more than specific budgeted items. The allocation among line items (especially the Expenses line items) can and does vary as the situation changes during the year.
- Provide an ‘outsider’ voice to ask about services provided, how they’re provided, etc.
- Part of our process is to provide a ‘dry run’ and help the proponents prepare for the types of questions and information that are most likely to come up at the TM.

Budget Review Process. Mr. Arnold noted that, at the end of the Liaison Role discussion, the members had already started to blend in discussion of how to improve or better conduct the AFC budget review process. Again, Mr. Arnold made notes of key points and ideas for consideration on flipcharts as the discussion proceeded; these are summarized here:

- Review past ‘actuals’, not just past budgets.
- Try to understand trends including demographic trends, systemic/anticipated trends, and unexpected/unanticipated trends.
- Think about and ask about ‘what are the comparables?’
- Departmental comparables (ex. Comparing departments in Westborough vs. similar departments in which other towns?)
- Town comparables (ex. Comparing the overall Town budget against which other towns?)
- When doing this, need to be cognizant of ‘content comparables’ recognizing that other towns/departments may not be an exact fit. (Ex. Different DPW departments have different responsibilities). It is recognized that the comparables may not be an exact match but it can still be helpful if we can find an approximate fit and understand why it’s not a perfect fit.
- Can we review departments more quickly now that we should have more information prior to the meeting? The consensus seems to be ‘yes’ and that we can better manage the process with shorter introductions and wrap-ups.
- Consistency. Part of the goal of the ‘Budget Background Information Request’ document was to improve consistency in the process. What else can we do to improve consistency?
- Perhaps consider a 4-phase process where we don’t expect to answer all of the questions at the first meeting.

Phase 1. In 3 or 4 meetings, give each department that needs to meet with us an initial 15-minute (perhaps longer for the bigger departments) time slot. The only goal is to give us a quick understanding of the budget that focuses on our understanding the info on the Budget Background document and the size and impact of budget changes.

Phase 2. After doing this quick pass through the overall budget, we have a meeting only to deliberate on which departments we need more information from and to formulate the questions/ concerns so the liaison can pass them along to the department.

Phase 3. Invite the departments for which there is the need for more interaction back for meetings with the Committee. Perhaps 3-4 meetings.

Phase 4. Deliberate over the total budget and vote recommendations for all line items at the end of the process.

- Minimum threshold? Could we consider a minimum threshold in terms of overall budget amount where, if there is no significant change and all questions are answered in the Budget Background sheet, that we don’t need to have the department present their budget at one of our meetings? They would be invited to present if they wanted, perhaps, but we would tell them it was up to them.
- What is the Town’s financial strategy? If the Town has one (or develops one) and explains it, could we consider making recommendations with respect to that strategy?

- Our deliberations should be made with an understanding (and ability to explain) the impact of the property tax in terms of % of per capita income, home value, etc.
- Try to understand any demographic shifts in town and reflect those in our deliberations and recommendations.
- Since we are a volunteer body, we acknowledge that we rely quite a bit on the Town Manager, Town Accountant, and others to provide us with information and help us understand how the professionals perceive the town's finances
- Should try to develop a list of standard documents that we find helpful.
- As the AFC proceeds, the AFC needs to keep the Selectmen and Town Manager up-to-date on our plans, goals, etc.

Next Steps. At the conclusion of the two discussions, the members in attendance agreed by consensus that following through on some of these ideas to streamline our budget review process are worth trying. Therefore, the Committee agreed to continue its work with the following plans:

- Each member will contact the departments for which they are liaison by the end of January to begin the liaison work for this budget season (if they haven't done so already). The liaison will send along to the department head a copy of the 'Budget Background Information Request' document and request that it be completed and returned online, if possible, by February 11. (If necessary, the liaison can help a department head understand/fill out the document during a meeting with the department.)
- The Town Manager expects to present his proposed budget on Feb. 8. The Committee will meet shortly after that meeting to quickly review our progress with the liaison work and our initial impressions of the budget recommendations.
- The AFC will plan to begin the initial set of 'initial meetings' (like Phase 1 mentioned above) on February 17 and hope to complete these initial meetings by March 3. (This would mean that we are considering meetings on 2/17, 2/24 (school vacation week, we think), 2/28, and 3/3. These dates will be verified and discussed at a meeting after the liaison work is more fully underway and after the Town Manager's proposed budget has been presented.

Adjournment

Ms. Casemyr moved to adjourn the meeting at 8:50 p.m. Vote to adjourn was 7 in favor, with 7 being present.

Document List

2008-2009 Liaison Role document.