

Members Present: Ed Behn, Chair, Peter Allen, John E. Arnold, Lisa Blazejewski, Sharon Kaiser, J. J. Malone, Kathy Rosenblum Senie, Gary Wells. Absent: Jim Tepper.

At 7:00 p.m. Mr. Behn called the meeting to order in the Selectmen's Meeting Room.

Call to Order/Open Forum

There were no requests to address the Committee.

School Department FY14 Budget Discussion

Ilyse Levine-Kanji, School Committee Chair, Jody Hensley, School Committee member, and Marianne O'Connor, School Superintendent, were present to discuss the School Department budget. Mr. Behn explained the Finance Committee's reasons for having this discussion earlier in the process rather than later, hopefully allowing time to explore options in what was a significant portion of the town's overall budget.

Ms. Levine-Kanji noted that though the School Committee was not formally obligated to report to the Finance Committee or the Board of Selectmen, the invitation to collaborate and keep communications open was appreciated. She encouraged Finance Committee members to attend School Committee meetings. Ms. Levine-Kanji pointed out that while the AFC's role is to minimize taxes for residents, the School Committee is accountable to those who want quality services and are willing to pay for them. She felt that the School Department had managed its finances very tightly over the past five years, and that residents should consider how further belt-tightening affects the department's ability to provide a quality education.

Ms. Levine-Kanji explained that the School Department currently receives \$1.25 million less state and federal funding than it did five years ago, which has shifted more of the financial burden to town taxpayers. Last year alone the loss of \$675,000 in state and federal funding resulted in a 1.7% increase to the budget. She outlined some cost-saving measures the School Department had implemented in order to trim the budget, such as reducing staff and expenses. The unions have also cooperated by accepting a contract with a 0% base salary increase and no step increases, and health care concessions. She praised Ms. O'Connor for her efforts in balancing the remaining staff positions more effectively. The cost of mandated programs for ELL and Special Education students was also noted. Ms. Levine-Kanji added that the schools also bring in revenue for the town, such as the extra \$270,000 in Chapter 70 funds, activity fees, and Medicaid reimbursements.

Mr. Behn felt the AFC's goal was to recommend a budget that meets the needs of all the residents in a practical and prudent manner. Westborough has the 9th highest tax rate in the Commonwealth, a fairly high burden on residents compared with other towns. He felt it would be helpful for the School Department to provide comparables, such as MCAS scores, cost per student, etc. Ms. Hensley noted that Westborough's schools perform at a level comparable to schools in Duxbury and Wayland, and that residents are getting a bargain. There was some discussion of why Westborough receives so much less state aid than other towns.

Mr. Arnold felt work was needed at the state and federal level to try and make quality education more affordable, productive and effective. Ms. Rosenblum Senie commended the School Committee for its dedication to providing quality education, and its efforts to make cuts with the least impact on services.

Mr. Wells noted the town faced serious financial issues going forward, primarily due to ignored infrastructure projects, and that it would be a challenge to maintain the level of services not just in the schools but throughout the town, while trying to control tax rate growth. During the last six years household tax bills had increased 23%; he felt it was now up to town management, the Board of Selectmen, the Finance Committee, and all town departments (including the School Department) to find a solution to meeting town expectations within an acceptable tax rate burden. Mr. Allen mentioned a report by Town Manager Jim Malloy showing the impact on the tax rate broken out by department; the School Department's share was 77%. He noted that the AFC naturally looks at the larger budgets (school, police, fire, DPW) more carefully. On the other hand, a quality education contributes to a better economy, better jobs, and has an impact on home value as well. Ms. O'Connor pointed out that 98% of Westborough High School graduates went on to higher education, compared to 84% state-wide. Mr. Malone asked if the School Committee had given any direction to the School Superintendent regarding budget goals. He felt the School Committee should have a response ready for residents who value programs but can't afford to pay higher taxes.

Regarding the homeless transportation costs, Ms. Levine-Kanji noted that the exact amount of the reimbursement would not be known until January. She explained that regulations are still being formulated on this issue and wasn't sure how it would be handled going forward. Ms. O'Connor didn't know whether this would be a recurring or one-time expense. Ms. Levine-Kanji will notify the AFC of the School Committee's recommendation on this article.

Review of 2012 Fall STM Warrant

Article 2. Fire Station. Mr. Behn noted that the Board of Selectmen motion would be to use \$1.2 million of Free Cash, and a Borrow for the balance of \$10,008,000. Language had been added noting that demolition costs were included. There was some discussion of where the allocated Free Cash would be held until used on the project. Mr. Arnold felt the funds would be used to pay for the architect's drawings or other bills as the project gets under way, thereby postponing borrowing until further along in the process. Mr. Allen wanted to know why the \$1.2 million figure was chosen for Free Cash. Ms. Rosenblum Senie would like to know how this article and other articles using Free Cash would affect the whole Free Cash picture, and what percent of the operating budget the town now has in Free Cash. Mr. Behn gave the total Free Cash number as \$4,178,958. Mr. Malone would like to see the updated spreadsheet from Town Accountant Leah Talbot showing all balances. No vote taken.

Article 9. Homeless School Transportation. Mr. Behn noted that the School Committee would vote on October 3rd. No vote taken.

Articles 11 (Flanders Road Sewer) & 12 (Crownridge Area Sewer). Mr. Behn noted that the borrow amounts would be in the motions, to be available on Monday. No vote taken.

Article 14. Senior Center Parking Lot Lighting. Mr. Behn noted that Municipal Building Committee member George Barrette would be attending the AFC's October 4th meeting to provide further information. No vote taken.

Article 17. Non-Criminal Disposition. Mr. Behn noted that the words "if convicted" have been removed and clarification received on fines and violations. Mr. Wells moved to recommend the Town so vote. The vote to approve the article recommendation is unanimous, 8 in favor with 8 being present.

Article 19. Photovoltaic Installations. Mr. Behn noted the Board of Selectmen vote of 1-1-2, adding that Selectman Leigh Emery had recused herself from the vote due to conflict of interest (she owns 10 acres of farmland). He felt that Committee members should view the BOS discussion on this article before taking any vote. Mr. Arnold would like to know the Planning Board's views also. No vote taken.

Article 20. Veteran's Tax Work Off Program. Mr. Behn noted that the vote was merely to accept the article and that specific policy would be formulated later by the Board of Selectmen. Mr. Allen added that the latest Selectmen's meeting indicated their intent that residents could apply for both the Senior and Veteran's Tax Work Off Programs, but could only receive one benefit. Ms. Kaiser moved the Town so vote. The vote to approve the article recommendation is 7 in favor, 1 abstention (Malone), with 8 being present.

Article 21. Veterans' Freedom Park. Mr. Behn noted the two issues involved: one, whether it was even legal to amend the deed restriction; two, if it is legal, is it appropriate for Open Space property. Ms. Rosenblum Senie had spoken with Town Counsel Greg Franks, who gave the opinion that it was possible to amend the Open Space deed restriction by a vote at Town Meeting. She questioned whether the town should, or even legally could, alter the original intention for the use of this property, noting that the land was accepted by the town as part of a larger program to allow developers increased density in exchange for open space. Ms. Rosenblum Senie felt part of Westborough's distinctiveness was due to the value placed on natural beauty and its preservation, as expressed in the careful balance of land management: some for development, some for recreation, and some for open space. Ms. Blazejewski did not object to placing the exercise equipment in the park but questioned the legality of doing so. Mr. Wells agreed, noting the town could possibly be violating its own zoning laws. He felt input from the Planning Board would be helpful. Mr. Allen noted that the wording had been improved to clarify what would be allowed on the property. He questioned the need for a permanent structure in the park. Mr. Malone did not object to the fitness equipment provided the door was not opened to further development. Mr. Behn pointed out that the map showing "Proposed Improvements" to the park showed a playground and a second tennis court, in addition to the pavilion and exercise area. He felt this was a slippery slope and preferred to find another location for the equipment. Mr. Wells moved to recommend the Town vote to defeat this article. The vote to recommend defeat of the article is 7 in favor, 1 abstention (Malone), with 8 being present. Mr. Malone would like further information on the legality of this proposal. Mr. Arnold would like to hear from the Open Space Planning Committee.

Article 29. Explorer Post Lease. Mr. Behn noted that the Board of Selectmen will vote on this article October 9th, possibly making it moot. Mr. Arnold moved that the Committee make its recommendation on Town Meeting floor. The vote is unanimous, 8 in favor with 8 being present.

Chairman, Committee Liaison, and Department Liaison Reports

No reports.

Comments and Concerns of Committee Members

No comments.

Adjournment

Mr. Arnold moved to adjourn the meeting at 9:22 p.m. Vote to adjourn was 8 in favor, with 8 being present.

Document List

Appropriations Report September 2012.
Memo from Greg Franks, re: Veterans' Freedom Park.
STM Warrant, October 15, 2012.