

Members Present: Chairman J. J. Malone, Rich Gottlieb, Polly Howard, Jo Lown, Judy Lucas, Ronn Moody, Carolyn Spring, Cliff Watts

Member Absent: Ian Johnson

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

Open Forum

There were no requests to address the committee.

Discussion of FY2007 Police budget

Police Chief Al Gordon presented and explained the proposed budget: Salary/Wages \$2,320,923 and Expenses \$94,409 for a total of \$2,415,332. It was noted that the Salary/Wages account increase was larger than usual because of the retroactive provisions in the contract settlement with the Superior Officers union. In a separate article the Police Department also has is requesting \$54,996 for two new cruisers.

Discussion of FY2007 Country Club budget

Mr. Dexter Blois presented and explained the proposed budget: Salary/Wages \$6,450 and Expenses \$423,840 for a total of \$430,290. Mr. Blois was accompanied by Country Club Operating Committee member Ms. Barbara Potaski. In a separate article the CCOC is requesting \$94,125 for equipment and general course maintenance. It was noted that the Country Club Enterprise Account is solvent and that the operation of the Country Club will not require any expenditure from the Town's General Fund.

Comments on the role of the Finance Committee

Mr. Malone presented four points having to do with the role of the Finance Committee. A statement based on those remarks is attached to these minutes. It was agreed that Mr. Malone's comments – especially point 3 – would be discussed at a future meeting.

Approval of minutes

Mr. Watts moved approval of the minutes of Meeting No. 10, February 6, 2006. The vote to approve the minutes was unanimous.

Two changes were made to the draft minutes for Meeting No. 11, February 14, 2006. Mr. Moody moved to approve the minutes as amended. The vote to approve the minutes was 7 in favor with 1 abstention (Ms. Lown).

Comments and concerns of Committee members

Ms. Howard updated the Committee on scheduling changes for upcoming meetings.

Adjournment

At 8:18 p.m. Mr. Watts moved to adjourn the meeting. The vote to adjourn was unanimous.

A statement based on remarks made by J. J. Malone at the Finance Committee Meeting on 2-23-06

I have four points I wish to raise tonight.

1. The Town Charter, in Section 3-2(b), states “The executive powers of the Town shall be vested in the Board of Selectmen.” In Section 3-3(d) the charter provides for the appointment of the Advisory Finance Committee, but the charter does not address the duties of the Finance Committee. Article 3 of the Town Bylaws deals with the Advisory Finance Committee and Sections 4 and 5 of that article discuss the duties of the Finance Committee.

Section 4. To this Committee shall be referred all articles in any warrant for a Town Meeting, and said Committee shall report thereon to the Town Meeting and make such recommendations as it deems best for the interests of the Town and its citizens. This Committee shall also consider all matters relating to the appropriation, borrowing and expenditure of money by the Town, its indebtedness, methods of administration of its various departments and other municipal affairs. ...

Section 5. In the discharge of its duty, said Committee shall have free access to all books of record and accounts of any office or department of the Town.

While it is undisputed that the Board of Selectmen has the authority to direct departments as to what to do, it is also clear that the Advisory Finance Committee has the authority to ask departments what they are doing and how they are spending the town’s money. The statement saying “This Committee shall also consider all matters relating to ... methods of administration of its various departments ...” is a very powerful charge. Logically it must follow that the Finance Committee has power of inquiry necessary to fulfill this charge. Moreover, the role assigned to the Finance Committee makes FinCom part of a system of “checks and balances” in town government.

2. Since our budget memo went to department heads, these comments have been raised: Why start doing things differently? Everything has been going along OK.

A quick response is that it is good business practice to put procedures in writing. But there is another reason pertinent to Westborough here and now. Some managers have mentioned to me that they will retire in the not-too-distant future, and I have been told that some others have made similar statements. When these experienced managers leave we will lose a great deal of expertise. It is true that “things” are currently going along in good fashion. Much of this is due to the fact that the town has many long-time managers used to working with one another; but this will be changing. Not just the Finance Committee, but also the town needs to put more procedures in the form of a manual – for the sake of the future.

If department heads feel we are asking them the obvious or if they ask if we are implying that they do not know their jobs, I would answer by saying that procedures that we set up now – and perfect now by using input based on their expertise – will let future managers better know our operational procedures.

3. As the Finance Committee goes through the budgets, it usually sees the opportunity to save a \$100 here, maybe a \$1,000 there. Even if we manage to cut as much as \$100,000, this saves (based on valuations we currently have from the assessors) about 2.8¢ on the tax rate. This would mean a savings of \$14 in taxes on a house assessed at \$500,000. This, although useful, strikes me as not being a major impact on the finances of the town. So, I ask the Finance Committee: What should we be doing, what should be our points of focus?

This is something we should discuss in the near future.

4. I would guess that some of answers to the question just raised will lead to areas that have to be approached cooperatively with the Selectmen. This may turn out to be especially true in areas of long-range planning.

In the realm of cooperation of the Selectmen and the Finance Committee, a good start would be a better exchange of information. As I did at the Joint Meeting held as part of the February 14 Board of Selectmen meeting, I invite and urge the Selectmen to share with us their view of budgetary goals. I also again invite them to contact me if they have questions about any aspect of the operation of the Finance Committee. To begin to increase the flow of information to the Selectmen, I will start including them in the distribution list for Finance Committee agenda and minutes.

At the Joint Meeting Selectman Abladian hit the proverbial nail on the head when she said that the real issue is transparency in the budgeting process – keeping the budgeting process in the open so citizens can see and understand what is happening and be able to make informed decisions. Cooperative discussion between Selectmen and FinCom – even if there is not always agreement – will promote this transparency.

J. J. Malone
February 25, 2006