

TOWN OF GREAT BARRINGTON
FINANCE COMMITTEE
GREAT BARRINGTON TOWN HALL
334 MAIN STREET, GREAT BARRINGTON, MA
MINUTES
NOVEMBER 18, 2014
7:00 P.M.

PRESENT:

SHARON GREGORY, CHAIR

WALTER ATWOOD –Not Present

MICHAEL WISE

LEIGH DAVIS

THOMAS BLAUVELT

CALL TO ORDER:

1. APPROVAL OF MINUTES:

A. Minutes of September 22, 2014/JOINT MEETING WITH SELECTBOARD/AMEN

MOTION: Tom Blauvelt

SECOND: Leigh Davis

VOTE: 5-0

A. Minutes of October 9, 2014

MOTION: Tom Blauvelt

SECOND: Leigh Davis

VOTE: 4-0 – Buddy Atwood was absent.

2. COMMITTEE UPDATES:

Tom Blauvelt reported on the CPA. He noted that 48.34% or \$190,000 will come from the . They are meeting to evaluate 21 applications that were submitted. Step 2 Applications are due to the Town Planner by December 1 and we will convene on the 9th and have recommendations on funding and have them ready to go to Town Meeting. Sharon noted she would like funding available for the Housatonic School in terms that it could be brought up to a point that would make it easier to sell.

3. NEW BUSINESS:

A. Reflections on Financial School Issues – Ron Banks and Karen Christensen – Karen Christensen presented a petition and noted that she is a passionate advocate of public education. She said she is concerned about the sense of community and preserving it. When the proposal to renovate Monument Mountain was defeated the second time on November 4, 2014 the result was that people got together and started to talk about what it would take to make a sustainable course of action and that could be acted on immediately. She noted she has consolidated ideas about what the Berkshire Hills Regional School Committee and Select Board can do. She and Ron presented a Petition Background and Explanation and noted that they have begun taking signatures. They advised they are asking the Finance Committee to support the petition. Karen Christensen read the Petition Background and Explanation aloud. (A copy is attached to these minutes). Ron and Karen noted they would like the Finance Committee to vote on the petition.

and send it to the Select Board and the School Committee to incorporate as many of these into their plans

that people can vote yes on next time.

MOTION: Tom Blauvelt to support the petition and forward it to the Select Board and School Committee.

SECOND: Buddy Atwood

MOTION AMENDED: Michael to endorse paragraphs 1, 3, and 5 without reservation and amend paragraph 2 but stopping after regional high school and amend item 4 -delete the first six words and add by simply creating three town district wide finance committee.

SECOND TO AMENDED MOTION:

VOTE: 2-3 – MOTION FAILED

Leigh noted she would like more time and was not ready to vote on it. Michael noted it would be very sound for the school committee to engage in a community wide master plan process similar to the Town's master plan. Sharon said she would like to have a more formal meeting with a chairperson of each of the towns. Buddy noted it is a starting point and that is why he supports it. Michael said he could support items 1 and 5. He noted he had concerns about 2, 3, and 4. Michael amended the motion to support items 1 and 5.

Steve Bannon noted they are not prepared to comment on this as they received the information very late. He noted that the committee has requested to be invited to meetings early. This was sent out on Friday.

MOTION: Leigh Davis to give this more time and to give the school committee a chance to look this over and maybe at the next meeting to discuss it.

SECOND: Michael Wise

VOTE: 2-3

Sharon opened the subject to the floor:

Ron said they are asking the Finance Committee to support this and forward it to the Select Board and send it to the School Committee.

Sharon said she attended the Association of Town Finance Meetings about a month ago and a number of towns said that they bypassed the MSBA because they didn't allow certain things. They put out a layer of administrative work and time requirements and coding requirements beyond what the town felt they needed.

Steven Donaldson – We need to send a petition to the state capital and demand that there is a change in the tuition and choice in policy.

Karen Smith – In reference to the issue about choice and the cost there are 13 districts in the county that have the same influx problem. We need to send a letter to the superintendent and select board in reference to capital projects that we as a group should have a hub district prep and if we are a hub district we should get an increased percentage for capital projects because of the imbalance in the choice. The choice stipend is \$5,300 or 75% of the cost of educating a child, whichever is less. Karen noted that she has been saying that people in Berkshire County need to stand up and make it known about increasing the choice amount.

Vivian Orłowski – she is concerned we are getting into the actual discussion of what is in the petition and it was her understanding that it was to bring the petition to the Select Board and school committee for them to discuss.

Patrick Fennell, he noted we need to contact our state senator and representative and forward to them.

MOTION: Tom Blauvelt to recommend supporting the petition as presented by Karen Christensen and Ron Banks.

SECOND: Buddy Atwood

VOTE: 3-2

B. School Finance Budget and Analysis Requests – Sharon Gregory – Sharon said when we had our joint budget policy meeting with the select board she suggested that we have some formats from the school committee budgets that would match with our municipal budgets so we can consolidate them easier. She noted she had ideas about metrics that would help us to look at the school budget. Sharon said she is putting it on the agenda so the Finance Committee can look at the budget as submitted; discuss the requests for information so when we get the school budget we will have the information that would help us analyze what we have. We need to study it between now and the December meeting. Sharon said she told Stephen Bannon that she would love to have anyone from the school committee attend but wanted to get it out front early because the budget season is upon us and rather than ask in February we could state what is needed now. We individually ask for the enrollment numbers and we get them but here there are numbers and everywhere and it should be part of the operating budget each year. Karen Smith noted that the cherry sheet is in the 417 page book. Buddy said it is not there, you have to ask Sharon Harris and she has to ask Peter and then they ask Stephen Bannon before it gets e-mailed to you. We had agreed that we would try for a regular meeting on the 3rd Tuesday of each month which would be December 15th and January 20th would be the next meeting. Bill Fields asked when the board was going to get the cherry sheet. He said when he was on the Finance Committee we had to have the cherry sheet which is a major aspect. He said as a tax payer he is concerned about two different things. He noted the board is talking about the school budget and you don't have an idea of what your budget is yet and yet you are already doing the school budget. He said his thing is what are the Board's priorities and how do you set priorities if you don't have the cherry sheet to know what the town is going to be getting? Sharon said she is not talking about setting priorities; she is talking about formats and summarization of figures that would help us once presented with the school budgets; I ask for the same thing in the municipal budgets as well. I spend a considerable amount of time wading through things that are hidden in page back in 209 and happen to be a computer printout of how much is spent on books in a particular grade. It doesn't lend itself to easy analysis and we want and I understand other committees want more citizen participation makes it very difficult for people to understand the year to year budget. Bill Fields said as a tax payer he understands what you are trying to do but when he was on the Finance Committee we were aware of a district budget and our budget and we were told legally that this is an advisory board and it seems to him that your advisory is going well beyond the advisory nature and are actually trying to set policy. Bill Fields said as a tax payer he is wondering where you draw the line between establishing some type of policy and recommending to the town even though the policy refers to the school district. Tom Blauvelt said his understanding of the Finance Committee role as outlined by the Massachusetts Municipal Association is that we are the official fiscal watch dogs for the town. Bill Fields said legally you are advisory. Sharon said we present the budget. Bill said you recommend to the town meeting and the town meeting is the final say of the budget. Tom said for us to present the budget we have to have a better understanding of what the numbers are. Bill Fields said as a principal said to him when he was

on the facility advisory board; he looked at me and said “Mr. Fields, you are advisory”. Sharon said advisory is different for the Finance Committee as it is an elected body to represent people.

Michael Wise said if advice is good, people will follow and the advice would be better if we have better information and I concur that the school budget is sometimes difficult because educators are not bean counters and sometime when it comes to beans they hide them in the budget because it isn't as important to them. He observed in one place where there was a mathematical typographical error which made the column of figures nonsense. It sort of came out to the right place but it would be good to clear up that kind of thing so that it is based on and we can recommend a sound budget and vote on it because we have taken account of A,B,C and E. Questions come up in our budget as to why hasn't the school committee thought about X and we can say they have thought about X then it would help to get it by. Sharon said representing the figures in a summary way is what she is suggesting.

C. Pension Benefits Liabilities: Town and School

Sharon said it has become a major issue state wide. She said she would like to focus on it at the next meeting and have the Finance committee dig through the figures and formulate the questions so we can have a good discussion next time. Sharon said she put the pension benefits separate – for the town and reading all the annual reports it looks like it is uncontrolled. Sharon said she is not aware of any available school figures. Since it is more than half of our budget she wants to know if there are unfunded liabilities that we need to be aware of. Michael said the state is requiring us to move toward funding so the issue is how are they reporting their progress. Tom said that he thinks the Town Accountant would like us to move toward funding for the OPEB. Sharon said there are two parts, pension and the post-employment benefits and we are going to get to that in the old business.

D. Town Sharing Personnel and Equipment (Health Board Vacancy) Sharon Gregory.

When there is a vacancy that we continue to look at the possibility of the town sharing personnel and equipment where appropriate. I'm not telling anyone what to do, just a concept.

OLD BUSINESS:

A. School District Allocations from State – Sharon Gregory – the town manager had noted that we had an adjustment in the school budget allocations that came after the end of the fiscal year. Sharon said she put together a suggestion as follows: A costly situation arose where Great Barrington was over-allocated \$200K in the prior fiscal year but has no real means by which it is able to collect these funds through the current district agreement.

In light of the fact that the State does not release critical data within the fiscal year that is needed to affix the appropriate School District allocations amongst the three towns in the BHRSD, an adjustment process needs to be put in place in the District agreement.

The Finance Committee recommends that the Great Barrington Select Board propose a change as follows:

“The District Agreement is amended so that each town will be able to adjust for the correct allocation from the prior fiscal year by making a compensating adjustment between the towns in the following fiscal year.”

In the spirit of good faith, the Finance Committee requests that the District make the adjustment for Great Barrington's last year over-allocation in the upcoming budget cycle. Michael asked

Sharon is suggesting that we ask them to show good faith in giving us our money back? Ka Smith said she didn't think it was a bad thing under the regional agreement/Select Board. A month look back is fair with the whole reporting system with the state. She thinks it is admirable that you would ask them to give back some money. She said going forward there be some format that may give us a way to correct that situation. Stephen Bannon said it worked once because the other towns didn't realize they were not legally obligated. The department of early and secondary education has a bulletin that came out that said that you are not obligated. The regional agreement would supersede state law. Michael Wise said if the district set up a balancing fund that would do it. Eileen Mooney asked if the Finance Committee with or without the Select Board ask the other two towns to reimburse by appropriating the money at an annual town meeting? Eileen noted it was not a request on the annual town meeting warrant. Are you going to sponsor a petition to ask Stockbridge and West Stockbridge to reimburse the money that is owed to Great Barrington? Sharon said she felt it was a Select Board issue. This is simply a recommendation and one way that we may have a legal recourse.

MOTION: Michael Wise (The italicized part that Sharon read)

SECOND: Thomas Blauvelt

VOTE: 5-0

B. Other Employment Benefits Analysis and Committee – Vivian Orłowski – Sharon said we created a task force and she gave Vivian the opportunity to report. Vivian was the only person who volunteered to help. Michael Wise thought it was to deal with health care in general and not post-employment benefits. Vivian said it was to reduce expenses in health care costs including what Pittsfield did to reduce health care costs. Vivian said she learned a lot since then and one thing for example is that the Town of Andover which has close to 9,000 people formed a six member committee to define its strategies for dealing with a vexing long term problem with the steady rise in retirees health insurance. Andover has been an active community in dealing with this challenge with over time threatened municipal bond rating as unfunded liabilities increased. The Towns Other Postemployment benefits committee consists of two members each from the Select Board, Finance Committee and the School Committee. She said when we started talking about this at the last Finance Committee Meeting; it was in general – the health care issue then covered both employees and retirees. Andover put the elected officials on that committee. The idea of the task force was basically to form a research function to come up with options and to be a decision making body. When she talked to people who might be interested in contributing to that she got some information from public health and the hospital and they are willing to share information. She noted she would like to return to the Finance Committee and suggest that you keep the task force that you established previously in reserve for perhaps a time when we are ready to put together a type of committee Andover has of elected officials which is more ready to make decisions on and then myself and the people I have spoken to and other people who might be interested in this can just get together as independent citizens where we do things on line, etc. and don't have to deal with another meeting schedule. Vivian said since she is the one, who raised this issue originally, she would be glad to be the one to update the Finance Committee on the research that is done. If you look at the history of increases, it is the most rapid increase in costs for all our budgets. She noted she would like to keep the task force in reserve and be open to input from citizens and when you have obtained enough information then convene a decision making body that would have all three relevant groups affecting major town employees and school employees which is also a major cost for the schools. Stephen

Bannon noted that the benefits are negotiated in the contract. He noted if there is a task force even an informal one, and the Finance Committee is taking advice from them, they still have to follow the open meeting law. Sharon said we would set aside the task force idea for now and when there is enough information and if you think there is something more formal we will want all the committees to participate.

C. Economic Development Proposal – Leigh David and Sharon Gregory – Leigh said that she and Sharon had talked about the desire to look more closely into economic development in the town.

MOTION: Leigh Davis - The Finance Committee proposes that the Select Board create an Economic Development Committee be formed to develop, consolidate and channel proposals for the purpose of promoting commerce in Great Barrington, especially to increase the tax base. The Committee could present proposals prior the annual budget cycle.

For imminent opportunities, these could be included in the upcoming May Annual Town Meeting when financial proposals and warrants are considered.

Among other things, this new Committee would focus on such areas as:

1. Tourism including marketing programs
2. Small business needs (ensuring we have adequate support services available at need times such as, UPS, FedEx, etc., technology services, transportation, etc.)
3. Manufacturing & Distribution sectors (ensuring we understand and can market to those sectors services such as Town water, sewage, skilled labor, etc.)
4. New services (identifying potential areas of opportunities such as technology incubation; joint ventures with existing organizations, etc.)

We recommend creating a small budget to support the use of consulting services. Similarly a small budget for marketing the assets of the Town might be considered. If the Committee is formed in time, they could submit proposals for budget consideration.

We suggest the Select Board solicit volunteers amongst Town Committees to determine interest and then to reach out to potential members of the community-at-large to determine a workable mix of people to spearhead this effort.

The Finance Committee offers two volunteers for this effort: Leigh Davis and Sharon Gregory. Leigh said she works as a marketing director at the Mahaiwe and she said she uses Berkshire Visitors Bureau but what she was reading in I Berkshires recently on October 30th and how Lenox is using money from the town to increase their marketing efforts.

SECOND: Tom Blauvelt

VOTE: 5-0

Michael said it sounds like we are suggesting we hire the Collins Center. He said he has been unimpressed with them and he wouldn't mind leaving out the Collins Center.

D. Requested Report on Outstanding Taxes – Tom Blauvelt –

MOTION: That the Town Manager provide to the Finance Committee a quarterly report showing the unpaid property taxes by name, year, amount and interest along with a brief narrative describing what actions are being taken to collect the overdue balances. The fiscal year-end report should be the most complete.

The Finance Committee would appreciate starting this process with the annual report for the fiscal year ended June 30, 2014.

SECOND: Buddy Atwood

VOTE: 5-0

The next meeting is scheduled for December 16, 2014 at 7:00 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,



Carolyn Wichmann

Secretary