

**TOWN OF GREAT BARRINGTON
SELECTBOARD AND FINANCE COMMITTEE
JOINT MEETING MINUTES
FIRE STATION, 37 STATE ROAD
February 11, 2015**

PRESENT:

SELECTBOARD

DEBORAH PHILLIPS
SEAN STANTON
STEPHEN C. BANNON
DANIEL BAILLY
ED ABRAHAMS

TOWN MANAGER JENNIFER TABAKIN

FINANCE COMMITTEE

SHARON GREGORY
MICHAEL WISE
LEIGH DAVIS
WALTER F. ATWOOD III
THOMAS BLAUVET absent

1. CALL TO ORDER:

Ms. Phillips called the meeting to order at 6 p.m.

2. RESERVE FUND

Town Manager Tabakin said the heavy snowfall has eaten into the town's snow removal and salt accounts. DPW Superintendent Joe Sokul said salt prices are up 40 percent. Ms. Tabakin said a specific dollar amount is not requested; only the permission of the Finance Committee to overspend the accounts as needed.

Mr. Atwood moved to approve, Mr. Wise seconded and the Finance Committee vote was 4-0.

3. FY16 BUDGET OVERVIEW

Ms. Tabakin outlined the six-budget-meeting process before a public hearing March 24 and Selectboard and Finance Committee vote on the FY16 budget. She said proposed is a \$26.4 million budget, \$10.9 million operations, \$2.7 million capital, \$237,000 state charges and overlay and an assumed \$12.6 million level Berkshire Hills Regional School District budget. She said the town's operating budget is up \$5,700. A budget handbook offered charts showing various breakdowns. The tax levy, she said, will be \$18,752,826, compared with \$18,803,248 in FY15. The town's levy limit is \$19,754,122. The estimated tax rate is \$13.68, down four cents. Other anticipated revenues include state aid, \$989,784; rooms and meals, \$478,000; local receipts \$1,055,000; free cash etc. \$2,540,141.

The Town Manager said the budget reflects resolution of three labor contracts, retroactive one year. So FY16's budget reflects the second year of the contracts. Some spending increases are in the areas of increased staff training and collaboration, evaluation of management changes and looking to staff needs in 2020. There's a priority in improving

digital technology. There's an emphasis in implementing the master plan. There's an evaluation planned of revolving funds.

While capital spending of \$2.7 million is up, debt service is down \$73,595. Anticipated borrowing is \$1.086 million. She briefly outlined anticipated building, vehicle and road improvements.

Ms. Gregory pointed out the budgeted local receipts amount is for \$1.5 million; while actual last year was \$2.4 million. Town Accountant Lauren Sartori said this (and overestimating insurance costs) is the only ways the Massachusetts Department of Revenue allows towns to amass a free cash reserve. Ms. Tabakin said the Selectboard wanted to keep with the usual way of presenting the budget, but will provide the Finance Committee with a several-year history. An attempt will be made to explain this in a budget footnote. Ms. Sartori said 80 percent of free cash goes to reduce the tax rate the following year.

In answer to a question from Mr. Wise, Ms. Tabakin said the labor contracts offer a 2 percent increase the first year and 2.5 percent the second and third years. Management gets the same. Ms. Phillips later suggested the boards need to consider a raise amount for the Town Manager.

Ms. Gregory asked that budget amounts in the cents column not be shown. She also asked for charts to show more subtotal information, but Ms. Tabakin said there was no unanimity, when the matter came up previously, to make a change. However, the information has been prepared and will be handed out at the end of the meeting.

Eileen Mooney from the audience asked if the Lake Mansfield preliminary design work is for one- or two-way traffic. Ms. Tabakin said that is to be determined, but it won't effect the amount of the consultancy.

4. GENERAL GOVERNMENT BUDGET

Discussing the budgets for the Town Manager's/Selectboard and other Town Hall offices, Ms. Tabakin said figures reflect only salaries; benefits are separate (and represent about 27 percent of the salary figures). She said she was aware the Finance Committee wanted to see a breakdown of plans by major department, but the Selectboard did not direct that to be included in the budget. Sharon Gregory reminded the Board that the Finance Committee had spent a year reviewing the way the budget figures are presented and sent a motion to the Select Board at the beginning of the fiscal year requesting that this analysis be included with the FY 2016 budget. Eileen Mooney interjected that the Finance Committee is a separately elected body and the Select Board cannot overrule the Finance Committee on budget matters. Sharon Gregory asked that the analysis of 'Costs by Major Service' be discussed at a later time and that this was important for the public to understand where our tax dollars are being spent. She reminded the boards that the Town manager chart shown at Town Meeting represents the cost of Public Safety; Libraries etc. but do not include nearly 2/3rds of our municipal costs such as health insurance, capital and debt costs. Therefore these costs are understated and misleading. The numbers have been assembled, however, and will be provided to the Finance Committee. It will be public information.

For the Town Manager's/Selectboard office, budget increases reflect rising costs of advertising and memberships.

The town accountant's budget is relatively unchanged.

The technology director account is higher because of maintenance, programming, etc. work for the police and fire departments, building inspector's office and libraries, also licensing fees. The town has 123 computers and tablets and six servers.

The assessor's account includes a request for about \$5,000 to continue required cyclical field reinspections every nine years. Christopher Lamarre said his office contracts with Mayflower Evaluations. Mr. Lamarre pointed out Great Barrington was the first town last year to get its tax rate certified. He said work continues on digital tax maps and thanks to the work of an intern, is 80 percent completed. Mr. Stanton pointed out the \$600

stipend is low for the other two assessors. Mr. Lamarre said anyone becoming an assessor has to, on their own time; take a week-long course at UMass. The other two members do no field work, but review abatements. If the town considers a split tax rate or residential exemption, he noted that at least one town he knows of had to hire an additional 20-hour-a-week professional to handle the verification work.

The treasurer/collector budget reflects \$6,000 for a new postage meter, as the old one can no longer be serviced, Sandra Larkin said. Ms. Tabakin said the town is gradually adding electronic means of making payments to its web page, but bills still need to be snail mailed. The building inspector has an online payment capability, Ms. Sartori said.

On a related note, Ms. Tabakin noted the town netted \$41,000 from the auction of 10 tax title properties, most of them abandoned, several of them small lots, none with a building. There was a 6 percent surcharge as the auctioneer's fee. With a relationship now with a knowledgeable attorney and a reputable auctioneer, the town can become more aggressive in recouping outstanding property taxes. She said the town's collection rate is 98.9 percent. People, who are in tax title now, Ms. Sartori said, may be urged to work out payment schedules. Ms. Larkin said her office can initiate foreclosure within six months of a tax taking, with permission of Land Court. Ms. Sartori and Ms. Tabakin said it would be beneficial to create a revolving fund, with about \$10,000 in it, to use as seed money for costs of future takings and auctions.

The town clerk's budget includes money to print town codes and do webpage redesign. Clerk Marie Ryan and Ms. Tabakin said work needs to be done on archiving the records stored in the attic and basement. Ms. Tabakin said it may be possible to reconfigure office space to bring back one of the offices that is in the old fire house. Dump sticker, tag sale and some other fee collection duties will shift to the clerk's office.

The town planner's budget includes money to print copies of the Master Plan, \$3,000. Ms. Gregory asked if it could be available on CD. Mr. Stanton asked if she wanted it on vinyl? He joked that CDs have become outmoded. Planner Chris Rembold seriously observed the Master Plan already may be downloaded from the town's website.

There was little said of several other, mostly level-funded accounts such as Planning Board, Zoning Board of Appeals, Historic District Commission, etc. The question was raised and dropped as to why Housatonic Community Center has its own line item and answers to the town manager, rather than to the Parks Department. "It's one of the traditions of Great Barrington," Mr. Atwood said.

In answer to a question from Ms. Gregory, Ms. Tabakin said she's yet to get a handle on how to anticipate town retirements and staff replacement, but it does need to be worked into budget considerations.

5. ADJOURNMENT:

The meeting adjourned at 8 p.m.



Bernard A. Drew
Recording Secretary