

**MINUTES  
FINANCE COMMITTEE  
TOWN HALL  
334 MAIN STREET  
GREAT BARRINGTON MA 01230  
APRIL 26, 2016  
6:30 PM**

The chair called the meeting to order at 6:31. Present: chair Michael Wise and members Walter Atwood and Thomas Blauvelt. Absent: Will Curletti and Leigh Davis. Also participating in the meeting was town manager Jennifer Tabakin.

Minutes of the meeting of the joint meeting with the Selectboard on March 28, 2016 were not yet available to be approved; that will be done at the next meeting.

**REPORTS & STATEMENTS:** Blauvelt reported that the Community Preservation Committee is holding an event Saturday at the Truman-Wheeler House about the projects that will be presented to the town meeting. The chair reported on the meetings of the school district's Regional Agreement Amendment Committee, observing that progress has slowed now that the committee has started to deal with financial issues. The town manager reported that the new treasurer has gotten into the flow of the office, and she will come to the next meeting to meet the committee. Several systems improvements are in place or in the works, coordinated by consultant Eddie Sporn: timekeeping for all departments through a single-entry database system, a new module in the MUNIS software, a system for automated bank account resolution, a system for handling stand-alone small bills more efficiently, and perhaps a system for posting transactions automatically. She said that a day spent recently working on archiving, in order to use space more efficiently as well as to sort out ancient records, was difficult but successful. And she reported that the meeting to plan the annual town meeting had taken place shortly before this meeting.

**TOWN MEETING PREPARATION:** The chair observed that members of the committee would be making the motions for the first eleven warrant articles; the members agreed that the chair would assign those to members before the town meeting. Article 14 about the senior exemption might call for some description or comment from the committee; the chair said he would be ready to field that if necessary. On items for which the committee has not been formally involved, the members will speak from the microphones on the floor rather than the dais.

**AUDITOR POLICY:** The chair said that he had discussed with some members of the Selectboard whether the town should make it a policy to change auditors periodically, and they had asked for a recommendation on the subject from the Finance Committee. The committee discussed the benefits of bringing in fresh eyes and perspective and of doing this pursuant to a policy set in advance rather than in reaction to a particular situation. The current auditor, which the town has used for many years, is in the middle of a three-year contract that extends through the audit for FY2017. The town manager observed that retaining an auditor is not bound by procurement requirements to accept the lowest bid. She also asked the committee to examine and advise about the scope of audit work that the town needs and about what other towns are getting and paying for auditor support.

On motion by Blauvelt, seconded by Atwood, the committee voted unanimously to recommend to the Selectboard that, to implement a policy of rotating auditors periodically, the town should request proposals for audit work from other providers after the current contract expires.

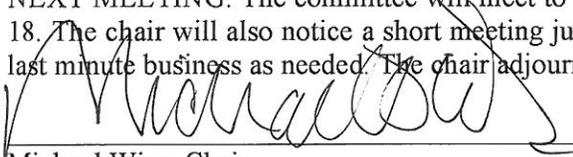
QUARTERLY REVIEW OF SPENDING VS. BUDGET: The regular spending reports through the third quarter were distributed to the members in early April. The members noted that major items are generally in line with the budget, with about 75 percent of the budget spent, and some contracts that had been flagged during the committee's spending review in the fall were now in process.

SPENDING COMPARISONS WITH OTHER TOWNS: The chair presented some spreadsheet research he had done early in the budget season about how Great Barrington's fiscal situation compares with other towns in the state. He explained how he had identified about 50 towns that were roughly the same size as Great Barrington, and then reduced that to a peer group of about 15 that were in the same economic situation, measured by per capita and household income. One motivation was to find other "hub" towns; however, these other towns turn out not to be hubs, but instead they are adjacent to or even surrounded by cities or other larger towns. Great Barrington stands out in a few other respects too: it is the largest (in area) and least densely populated, with an unusually extensive road network. It has the lowest personal income (and the other two Berkshire County towns in the group are also at the bottom of the income ranking). Great Barrington tends to spend more on police, public works, education, culture and general government, but less on fire protection, and it has relatively strong financial reserves (combining free cash and stabilization funds). He said his research tended to confirm what we already know about the factors affecting our spending decisions.

PROMOTING SHARED SERVICES: The chair observed that comparing our spending and services with those of our neighbor towns might help identify opportunities for sharing services. The town manager had noted that improving Great Barrington's financial operations could lead to sharing services, as other towns also move beyond antiquated paper-based systems. She said the issue of sharing is coming up frequently, about health and building inspections and other areas. Atwood noted that long-standing resistance to cooperation among public safety departments may be falling, too. The chair said that possibilities for sharing services could also be identified by following through on his proposal from last summer for "zero-based-budget" reviews of major functions and departments, outside the annual budget cycle. He cited the example of the consultant's study of the policy department ten years ago, which led to major improvements (even though it has not been fully implemented). He suggested examining the fire department, libraries, and regulation and licensing. Atwood noted that the board of health had been carved out of the town manager's jurisdiction when the charter was changed in the early 1990s, and that should be corrected now. The chair observed that it would be good to get together with the town manager and the Selectboard about this after the town meeting and election.

CITIZENS SPEAK TIME: Eileen Mooney asked the town manager whether the town meeting was likely to complete its business in one session.

NEXT MEETING: The committee will meet to reorganize after the election on Wednesday, May 18. The chair will also notice a short meeting just before the annual town meeting to take care of last minute business as needed. The chair adjourned the meeting, without objection, at 7:30 PM.

  
Michael Wise, Chair