

BUDGET ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETING

(Finance Cte. / Board of Selectmen)

Wednesday March 30, 2022 – 3:00 PM – Hybrid

PRESENT: Neal Pilson, Chair Board of Selectmen; Alan Hanson, Selectman; Roger Manzolini, Selectman; Danielle Fillio, Town Administrator; Bob Gniadek, Chair Finance Cte.; Bob Youdelman, Finance Cte.; Pat Callahan, Finance Cte.; Steve Patterson, Finance Cte.; Angela Garrity, Accountant; Peter Beckwith, Superintendent of Highways; Steve Traver, W. Stockbridge/Richmond Fire Chief; Austin White, Fire Dept./EMT

[This opening portion of the meeting was accidentally not recorded but has been recovered through notes taken at the meeting] The meeting was opened with a discussion of the building bidding process: Bids to be opened April 27th and information should be assembled by May 4th.. Given the very tight window to get everything necessary done by the Town Meeting on May 18th, it was decided that the Select Board would meet on the morning of May 4th to consider the bids. Any requests from the Town which would require a Special Town Meeting would then be able to be posted the required two weeks before the Town Meeting. Other relevant meeting schedules were discussed to be sure they line up for proper posting deadlines, etc.

Discussion of the use of ARPA funds: Discussion of Free Cash available. An Article for \$167,000 of Free Cash to go back to Stabilization: If left with a \$300,000 balance at the time of the Special Town Meeting, it would be possible to approach the Town for additional monies for the new building, if necessary. Danielle advised that the bids cannot be accepted unless the Town can prove that it can fund the entire project. There was a discussion of ways to be able to access additional funds if needed to provide the flexibility needed to avoid cancelling the project.

Review Highway Budget – Peter Beckwith reviewed the line items:

Machinery Maintenance – level funded.

Road Construction - \$125,000 for normal years

Road Maintenance - \$30,000

Town Garage – Level Funded

Winter Roads – Level Funded with \$40,000 in reserve

Gravel - \$50,000

Salaries – A 3% increase across the board and 24 cents increase in salary brings Richmond’s pay scale closer to the level of other towns. There are now four full-time staff members with the addition of the recent two new hire and an amount budgeted for one additional hire for the summer.

Neal said more money should be spent year-round for road maintenance. Danielle advised him that the extraordinarily bad weather recently created problems that caused the original plan for paving to be set aside for the time being. Pete noted that a joint grant with West Stockbridge is being sought for storm water assessment and designs for improvement. Roger said he had no problem with the budget as written.

In response to a question whether it will become necessary in the future to replace more culverts with bridges such as the one on Dublin Road, Pete said that it is likely in the future and he is working on a grant for one on Sleepy Hollow. Grants, however, are few and they carry strict restrictions.

Fire Department Budget: Steve explained the articles in his budget. He noted that there has been an increase in fuel costs and that Engine #1 must be replaced. If ordered now, it will be delivered in two years. It is expected that the price will go up by \$100,000 or \$200,000 to \$600,000 or \$700,000. The plan is to apply for a grant with the help of a professional grant-writer, depending on how high his fee is.

Paul suggested that money could be put into a firetruck stabilization account and Roger suggested that it be started now.

Steve will create a spreadsheet like the one Peter provided for the Highway Dept. so that future planning could be based on real information and projections.

Austin White, EMS Director of the Fire Department, discussed adding two full-time personnel so that the Ambulance and the Fire Department can be staffed Monday through Friday, 8:00 AM to 4:00 PM in conjunction with West Stockbridge, who will pay half of the costs. There is an extreme shortage of EMS and it is hard to keep them. He is asking for \$45,000 from Free Cash. There is potential for a SAFER grant from FEMA that would provide three years of coverage of the salaries and benefits for the two additional hires providing that the Town commits to provide an additional three years at the end of the grant. There is a very strong possibility that this grant will be awarded, and we will know possibly by May 31st but no later than September.

Roger reported that the Richmond Board of Selectmen met with the Board of Selectmen of West Stockbridge and determined that both boards will support the concept. The additional three-year commitment of the Towns will likely be covered by the income from the ambulance service.

There was some discussion of details concerning the payment process for ambulance service, housing of the EMT's and the response time now, which is 20 to 40 minutes that could be reduced to 10 to 20 minutes, which would make a critical difference.

Paul raised the issue of an additional, unbudgeted cost – concerning the assessment from the Berkshire County Retirement System which will be increased with the inclusion of Group 4 level employees as opposed to the current Group 1 level assessment.

Roger noted that if the grant is awarded, the Fire Dept. will not need the additional \$30,000, only the \$50,000 that is normally budgeted. There was a discussion of possible additional costs not anticipated in the line item. It was agreed that the numbers currently in the budget would stand but that forecasting of expenses would be done for the future.

Conservation Budget: Ron Veillette said that the current balance is \$251,859.10. He is requesting an increase to \$28,000. He listed three items:

1. The Agent is asking for a raise in salary.
2. Operating Expenses – Level Funded.
3. Conservation Fund - \$9,500 per year (current year and two reduced funding years) to add to Fund for land acquisition investment. The Fund looks at the purchase of land to protect resources such as the Berkshire Farm Property. They are currently looking at a property along Richmond Shores which the Board of Selectmen turned over to the Con. Com. They are trying to clarify the boundaries through a survey the Con. Com. will pay for. They will need some money to remove some invasive species, unwanted signage, etc. once the deed is fixed, the Con.Com. wants to put the property into permanent protection via an Article 97 Permanent Deed Restriction.
They are considering putting nature trails in the property behind the school and looking at protecting water sheds to prevent flooding.

Bob G. remarked that money could be used to prevent potential 500-year flooding issues. Perhaps by doing appropriate work in those areas now, the Town could avoid having to invest millions of dollars to build bridges in the future. That's an investment that could pay for itself if it works. The Con. Com. needs to evaluate and act.

Al raised the issue of the Sleepy Hollow culverts, which are undersized and unable to handle the flood water from heavy rain. There was talk of closing the road, getting rid of the culverts and saving that money. Chief Traver was concerned about the loss of access for fire trucks and ambulances. Neal suggested that the question of Sleepy Hollow be called. Bob Youdelman suggested adding \$10,000 to the Con.Com. Article this year. There was general agreement among the members of the BAC.

Discussion and Vote of Overall Town Budget and Articles:

Expenditures – Line 5: Four employees will be eligible for a longevity bonus. There was a discussion of how it works and why the amount shown is so high. It was explained that provision was also made for the vacation buy-back option in that Article. It was decided that another meeting would be held at which Danielle, Town Administrator, could answer these questions.

Line 11: Town Clerk Expenses increased by 23%. Angela explained that Claudia Ryan, Town Clerk Assistant, goes to training a few times a year. This is not a salary line and if not used would revert to Free Cash.

Treasurer/Tax Collector Salary: Roger noted that Paul had proposed a reduction of his salary and his working hours. He currently works thirty-four hours per week at a salary of \$72,737. He is proposing a twenty-seven-hour week at a salary of \$68,000. A contract to that effect has been signed by the Board of Selectmen.

There was considerable discussion of how the contract negotiation worked out and that there is provision for new negotiations after the one-year period has elapsed. Roger asked if the job could be done at those reduced hours. He recalled Paul saying that he can, but that if an occasion arises where he would have to stay longer to complete the work, he would do that.

There was a line item for a Treasurer's Assistant at \$6,500. And questions about what expenses the Treasurer encounters that need to be paid for. Explanations will be asked for lines 11, 12, 13.

Line 16 – Administrative Assistant increase in salary. This was due to an increase in her responsibilities.

Line 17 – Increase in legal fees. That was understood as necessary.

Elections and Voter Registration Expenses Increase – This year there will be a Primary Election and a State Election, which will incur additional expenses.

Protection – Bob G. said that he sees a clear need for a full-time EMT and Fire Dept. He also asked how long the Town can get away with a Police Chief at a \$2,000 per year salary. There is a potential replacement in one of the new constables and an opportunity for a sharing agreement with West Stockbridge. In the meantime, the Town can continue using the services of the State Police until there is a need for change.

Health Contracted Services – increased fee to BMC, offset by a decreased fee in the next line

Recreation – There will be a pickleball court at the Town Tennis Court.

Line 56 – Tree Warden – Level Funded. Discussion, whether more money in the budget could get the dying ash trees attended to before they fall.

Line 89 – Group Insurance: Danielle reported that she anticipates adding another person to the Town's Health, Dental, Life insurance policies, (custodian for the new building) but it will not happen this year.

Articles:

\$10,000 to Con. Com.

\$13,00 decrease in Free Cash

Highway Dept. Truck – Article #5 – Decrease of \$145,000

Town Hall Bond - \$340,000 unspent in FY22 budget, divided by 30-year bond - \$11,000 per year could fund in increase in debt service as interest rates will go up before issuance.

Ambulance Expenses - \$45,000 to cover half of the salaries and benefits for the extra two employees.

Conservation Land Trust – Additional \$10,000.

Sewer Enterprise Fund Shortfall – It is generally believed that there will not be a shortfall and there is no need, therefore, to fund it. In order to remove it from the budget and stop paying off the mistakenly anticipated shortfall, the Town will need a letter from an authoritative source. Angela will request such a letter from Tom Scanlan, Auditor for the Town.

Transfer to Free Cash and Stabilization - the school turned \$167,708 back to the Town after the loss of the SPED student expenses that had come out of Stabilization. Any extra money in Free Cash that is transferred to Stabilization becomes available to spend.

Line 18 – Question – leave the amount at \$167,708 or make it more? Discussion resulted in the decision to go with \$225,000 from Free Cash.

Neal noted that no additional money above that which was initially approved for the new building should be committed without the approval of the Town. Pat said that was the reason for a Special Town Meeting before the Annual Town Meeting and why the bid opening was set before the Town Meeting.

Discussion – Unanticipated extra expenses could be paid out of Free Cash or Stabilization with voter approval without increasing taxes.

Discussion of Residential Exemption: Moved to the next meeting, which was set for Monday, April 4, 2022 at 10:00 AM.

There being no further business before the Committee, Roger moved to adjourn at 6:23. The motion was seconded by Bob G. and passed by unanimous vote.