

Finance Committee

Meeting minutes - March 26, 2009

Present: **Committee Members:** Diane Gaspar (Chair), Burke Bero (Vice-Chair), Stephanie Cronin, Chris DeSimone, Chris Johnson, Jeanne LeBlanc, George Zacharakis
Also present: Town Accountant Theresa Walsh, Jeff Sauer

Ms. Gaspar called the meeting to order at 7:01pm.

Approval of Minutes from February 12, March 5, and March 12, 2009: On a motion from Ms. Cronin, seconded by Mr. Bero, the minutes from the February 12 meeting were approved by a vote of 5-1, with Mr. Zacharakis abstaining. On a motion from Ms. Cronin, seconded by Ms. LeBlanc, the minutes from the March 5 meeting were approved by a vote of 5-1, with Mr. Zacharakis abstaining. On a motion from Ms. Cronin, seconded by Ms. LeBlanc, the minutes from the March 12 meeting were approved unanimously..

Old Business: Ms. Gaspar summarized the joint public meeting with the Selectmen at the Senior Center on Monday, March 23, citing the advocacy by individual department heads for their own particular services, as well as general comments from citizens in attendance. Discussion followed about impressions from the meeting, with several comments about how overt service cuts are likely to be. Mr. DeSimone noted one of the final speakers of the evening – a citizen who stated that private sector employees are being consistently level funded or cut and that public sector personnel should share in that burden – and suggested that is the overall mood of the Town.

Appointments: Board of Health members, Scott Butcher, John Marriner, and Virginia Malouin, joined the meeting. Chair Scott Butcher discussed the pending Town Meeting proposal to join the Nashoba Boards of Health and presented the Board's request for a budget with preliminary funding for 30 hours of administration time if joining Nashoba is approved by Town Meeting. This number of hours represents an increase from the 15 hours of administrative time recommended at the October 2008 Special Town meeting when the Board of Health first considered joining Nashoba and, thus, a decrease of the possible savings to the Town from the Finance Committee's anticipated roughly \$33,300 to roughly \$18,300. Mr. Butcher argued that the Board felt that sufficient administrative support would be important during the transition period and could be re-evaluated for 2011. Mr. Butcher said that joining Nashoba would save the Town money, but would likely also decrease the services that Pepperell has had with a local Health Agent, local Housing Inspector, and local Public Nurse. Discussion followed about the current levels of service. Ms. Gaspar noted the current lack of a permanent Health Agent and use of contracted hourly services, saying that it seemed as though service would only improve. Mr. Butcher cited legal threats due to lack of current services and referenced a specific example. Several Finance Committee members questioned the continuing lack of documentation about the services currently offered by the Public Health Nurse.

Mr. DeSimone asked the Board of Health members their respective individual positions on joining the Nashoba Boards of Health. Ms. Malouin stated her support for joining the Nashoba Boards of Health given the current fiscal climate. Mr. Marriner stated that he opposed it, citing shortcomings in the level of personal service and flexibility that he is privy to in other Nashoba member towns. Mr. Marriner argued that joining Nashoba might save the Town money up front, but that it would cost citizens more in the long run in fees and inflexibility. Mr. Butcher observed that most member towns have been with Nashoba for several years and could have left at any time if there had been serious service or legal problems. Moreover, he said that in a jam Nashoba could likely offer better 24-hour a day emergency service than even a local Board. Nonetheless, he believes overall citizens will experience less timeliness in service. Ms. Gaspar suggested that the Town will experience lesser services across the board from all departments given the budget shortfall, with fewer Police officers, fewer DPW personnel, cuts in Council on Aging services, etc. and that the reduced services in question are worth the savings to the Town.

Mr. DeSimone again questioned Mr. Butcher about his personal position on joining Nashoba. Mr. Butcher

responded that he is on the fence about joining Nashoba and is trying to remain objective. He added that, overall, the Board of Health did not intend to go forward with Nashoba, given the result of the last Special Town Meeting, but that the Selectmen had encouraged the Warrant Article. The Board plans to request a higher budget amount that does not reflect joining the Nashoba Boards of Health, but will also put forth the motion to join Nashoba Warrant Article objectively and let the voters decide.

Mr. Johnson asked about the status of the job search for Health Agent. Mr. Butcher explained that the Town did, in the past, have two potential hires, but that the money the Town was able to offer was insufficient to both. He noted that the current economic climate might make it easier to find someone. Ms. Walsh asked if hiring a Health Agent might afford a reduction in secretarial hours? Mr. Butcher suggested it might. Mr. Gaspar said that a higher budget number would have to be attached to an override.

A discussion followed about the logistics of presenting two differing Board of Health positions and the possible outcomes at Town Meeting.

Review of Town Budget: The Committee resumed a department by department assessment of the Town's budget in an effort to close a more than \$300,000 shortfall.

The discussion began with a reference to following the process used at the last meeting of reducing all bylaw salaries and wages by 10%. However, there was concern that at the end of the last meeting the Assessors budget had inadvertently been cut twice.

On a motion by Mr. DeSimone, seconded by Ms. LeBlanc, the Committee voted unanimously to reconsider *Assessors* budget.

A discussion followed as to what had been voted and it was agreed that the previous Assessors budget vote would have resulted in a double hit to the department.

On a motion by Mr. DeSimone, seconded by Ms. LeBlanc, the previous vote on Assessors budget was rescinded unanimously due to the misunderstanding.

Returning to the *Treasurer-Collector* budget, it was agreed that cuts of 10% off all bylaw salaries and wages would be necessary to close the budget shortfall.

On a motion by Mr. DeSimone, seconded by Ms. LeBlanc, a \$14,714 reduction to the Treasurer-Collector budget was approved by a vote of 6-1.

On a motion by Mr. DeSimone, seconded by Ms. LeBlanc, a \$700 reduction to the *Personal Board* budget was approved unanimously.

At this point, Ms. Cronin left the meeting.

On a motion by Mr. DeSimone, seconded by Ms. LeBlanc, a \$5,998 reduction to the *IST Committee* budget was approved by a vote of 5-1.

The Committee concluded that the Tax Title budget was fixed and could not be reduced.

On a motion by Mr. DeSimone, seconded by Ms. LeBlanc, a \$9,944 reduction to the *Town Clerk* budget was approved by a vote of 4-2.

It was agreed that the *Elections* budget could not be changed.

It was noted that the *Registration* budget already was cut by 10%.

On a motion by Mr. DeSimone, seconded by Ms. LeBlanc, a \$3,762 reduction to the *Conservation Commission* budget was approved by a vote of 4-2.

On a motion by Mr. DeSimone, seconded by Ms. LeBlanc, a \$3,905 reduction to the *Planning Board* budget was approved by a vote of 4-2.

On a motion by Mr. DeSimone, seconded by Ms. LeBlanc, a \$1,000 reduction to the **Zoning Board of Appeals** budget was approved by a vote of 5-1.

The **Town Hall** budget includes a salary for the Town Hall custodian, although Ms. Walsh noted that while the custodian works 20 hours at Town Hall and 20 hours at the Public Safety Complex, the salary is paid exclusively out of the Town Hall budget. Ms. LeBlanc questioned whether this was equitable, suggesting that half should be moved to the Police Department budget. Ultimately, the Board agreed that this was moot since it wouldn't amount to overall budget savings.

Mr. Johnson asked if there was a planned purchase of office equipment? Ms. Walsh noted that office equipment like the copier was on a lease contract.

On a motion by Mr. DeSimone, seconded by Ms. LeBlanc, a \$4,472 reduction to the Town Hall budget was approved by a vote of 4-2.

Ms. Gaspar noted that the **Police Department** budget was already reduced by \$14,500, thereby eliminating one officer from the department. Ms. Gaspar suggested passing over the Police budget at this time due to previous cuts.

Ms. Gaspar noted that the **Fire Department** has already eliminated the Chief's step increase and reduced deputy stipends by 10%. There was a discussion about the number of call firefighters, the pay they receive, and whether that could be reduced. Ms. Walsh suggested that it really could not be.

On a motion by Mr. DeSimone, seconded by Ms. LeBlanc, a \$7,822 reduction to the Fire Department budget reflecting a 10% salary reduction for the Chief and a 10% reduction to the Fire Department portion of the Firefighter/EMT full-time employee was approved by a vote of 4-2.

Ms. Gaspar asked if the Committee was in favor of revisiting a reduction to **longevity**, as was suggested by a citizen at the Monday evening meeting. After discussion, the consensus was to not reduce bylaw personnel anymore, before taking another look at union personnel.

On a motion by Mr. DeSimone, seconded by Ms. LeBlanc, a \$6,553 reduction to the **Building and Zoning** budget was approved by a vote of 4-2.

Following a discussion of the **Communications Department**, the Committee agreed to cut 10% of salaries, but not wages-hourly due to the need for coverage.

On a motion by Mr. DeSimone, seconded by Ms. LeBlanc, a \$6,023 reduction to the Communications Department budget was approved by a vote of 4-2

The Committee noted that there was no salary listed for the **Emergency Management** budget. Ms. Walsh noted that George Ux offers his services to the Town gratis. The Committee noted the \$2,800 line item for uniforms and discussed how often those funds were used. After discussion, Ms Gaspar suggested cutting that amount in half.

On a motion by Mr. DeSimone, seconded by Mr. Zacharakis, a \$1,400 reduction to the Emergency budget by \$1,400 was approved unanimously.

Ms. Walsh noted that the **Animal Control Officer** salary has already been reduced. A discussion of further cuts was tabled.

At this point, Ms. LeBlanc left the meeting.

Ms. Walsh reported that the **Town Engineer** budget already has eliminated any increase and move approximately 15% more of his salary to the Enterprise funds..

On a motion by Mr. DeSimone, seconded by Mr. Zacharakis, a \$4,850 reduction to the Town Engineer's budget was approved by a vote of 3-2.

The **Highway Department** budget was already reduced by more than one person's salary. Ms. Gaspar asked about the line item for appointed positions. Ms. Walsh noted that some of the Highway Division appointed positions do come from the enterprise funds budgets.

On a motion by Mr. DeSimone, seconded by Mr. Zacharakis, a \$6,797 reduction to the Highway Division budget was approved by a vote of 4-1.

Cemetery salary and wages

On a motion by Mr. DeSimone, seconded by Mr. Johnson, a \$3,299 reduction to the *Cemetery Division* budget was defeated by a vote of 2-3.

For the *Board of Health*, Ms. Gaspar cited the Committee's earlier decision to support a move to join the Nashoba Boards of Health, but noted that the Committee had not voted on a specific line item amount. Further discussion was tabled pending receipt of a specific dollar amount.

On a motion by Mr. DeSimone, seconded by Mr. Johnson, the elimination of the *Mental Health Services* budget, currently at \$5,000 was approved by a vote of 4-0, Mr. Zacharakis abstaining.

Ms. Walsh confirmed that the *Council on Aging* budget was already reduced by \$17,000.

Ms. Gaspar noted that the *Veteran's Services* budget was a case based budget and not able to be cut.

Ms. Gaspar commented that the cuts made at this meeting totaled approximately \$107,000, yet that still leaves a \$200,000 shortfall.

Ms. Gaspar suggested that the current *Community Center* budget is \$30,276 and that eliminating that would offer a large savings. Discussion followed about the number of community organizations that use the center and whether fees might be charged. Ms. Gaspar said that fees from mostly non-profit organizations could never cover the expenses of operating the building. Ms Walsh suggested the Community Center could be tied to an override. Ms. Gaspar insisted that the Committee needs to come up with a balanced budget. Then the voters can decide about overrides.

On a motion by Mr. DeSimone, seconded by Mr. Johnson, to leave only \$5,000 in Community Center budget for the sole purpose of maintaining the shuttered building was approved by a vote of 4-1.

Discussion of the **Recreation Commission** Budget tabled.

The Committee left the Ambulance budget as is, noting that there is no way to reduce or stop emergency calls from happening.

Other Boards/Commission Meetings: Public Forum – Saturday, April 25, 2009 at the Senior Center, time *TBA*

Upcoming Meetings: April 2, 2009 – Finalize budgets
April 6, 2009 – Meeting with Selectmen (7:30pm)
April 9, 2009 – address any reconsiderations/Review Warrant Articles
April 16, 2009 – Finalize any remaining issues
April 17, 2009 – last date to post the ATM/STM Warrant
April 25, 2009 – Public forum at the Senior Center, time *TBA*

Adjournment: The meeting was adjourned at 9:57 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Jeff Sauer