

**TOWN OF GREAT BARRINGTON  
MASSACHUSETTS**

**FINANCE COMMITTEE MEETING  
MINUTES**

**THURSDAY, APRIL 30, 2020  
6:00 PM**

**LOCATION: REMOTE MEETING**

Conducted via Conference Call

1. **Meeting was called to order** by Chairperson A. O'Dwyer, at 6:00 pm. The meeting opened with a reading aloud of Remote Meeting Guidelines provided in response to Governor Baker's March 12 and 15, 2020 Orders Suspending Certain Provisions of the Open Meeting Law, G.L. c. 30A §18, in response to strict limitation on the number of people that may gather in one place.
2. **Attendance roll call** was called by Chairman A. O'Dwyer, at 6:00 pm. A roll call vote verified that present at the meeting: A. O' Dwyer, Chairperson, T. Blauvelt, W. Curletti, M. Loubert, and M. O'Connor.

Also in attendance: Town Manager, M. Pruhenski; Finance Director, Sue Carmel; Selectboard Chair, Steven Bannon; Ed Abrahams, Selectboard Member. Peter Dillon, Superintendent of Berkshire Hills Regional School District (BHRSD), and Sharon Harrison (BHRSD).

3. **Minutes from April 7, 2020 meeting.** M. Loubert noted several grammatical/spelling corrections. Motion was made to approve the minutes as amended to make the noted corrections, by T. Blauvelt, M. O'Connor seconded. Roll call vote: all in favor (5 - 0).
4. **Follow-up re: Vocational Transportation Special Article Request**

A. O'Dwyer shared with the committee her research regarding Vocational Transportation, and State regulations re: who covers this expense/cost—on what basis is tuition and transportation is the responsibility of the municipality sending the students to the out-of-district vocational program. She noted that this regulation—that the sending Municipality is responsible for covering the costs of out-of-district vocation tuition and transportation—is in Chapter 74, and that this regulation dates back to the 1950s. She noted that she found that some towns are receiving reimbursements for this expense, and that S. Harrison & P. Dillon have agreed to research this on behalf of the Town—How do we get the reimbursement? How much is it? Does it go to the district school, who then forwards it on to the Town?, etc. It is also the case that other small towns are struggling with this expense, and hopes the Town will work with other towns in petitioning the State re: help in covering these costs. She also hoped that the Town might explore other alternatives for providing transportation, as from her research, the amount the Town is being billed is much higher than she has found for other towns, and there might be less costly options [note: transportation for two students is projected for FY21 to be over \$84,000].

P. Dillon and S. Harrison (from BHRSD) presented a summary of the expenses. P. Dillon explained that the reason for this out-of-district education is that while there are several vocational programs at the BHRSD high school (e.g., horticulture, automotive, early-childhood, and technology), students may attend other vocational programs, if not offered in their district school. Other programs are usually too far away, and Taconic has the new program and new facilities. The breakdown is that tuition for FY20 [note: an expense which the Town is required to cover, as well] tuition is: \$17,065, and the projection is a 5% increase to \$18,630. Re: transportation – there are many regulations regarding safety, driver qualification, etc. There are two fees each day: one is the regular rate for the van, and an additional surcharge for going out of district, so the total per day \$457.49 (and this is supposed to go up by approximately 2.7%). So, the total for FY 21—with projected % increases from FY20 to FY21—is expected to be \$122,067. Sharon said the Town can put this up to a bid from other providers, but this is transportation on a “fixed route”, which sets more limitations on what is possible re: transportation.

Re: the tuition for out-of-district vocation tuitions, A. O’Dwyer asked on what the 5% estimated tuition increase is based. S. Harrison noted that this is what the district had indicated was their anticipated increase. Same question re: 2.7% transportation increase, and S. Harrison noted that this is the district’s contract with the transportation provider. S. Harrison also noted that the increase from FY20 to FY21 is more than % increases would calculate, as the BHRSD had budgeted for a portion of the tuition for FY20, and thus the Town has already paid that amount.

M. Loubert reminded attendees of the Southern Berkshires Educational Collaborative (in VocTech) in the past, and that there were minibuses in that program, some of which she recalls went to the schools/districts when the Collaborative dissolved. She asked why the District can’t use these types of mini-buses (owned by the District or School, with a certified driver) to transport these students to Pittsfield? S. Harrison reported that these vans are all now out of service. She also reported that finding a driver is not very easy, and the pay rate is higher than one might expect. M. Loubert wondered if this would be fiscally prudent to do, if we might see more students going to this vocational program, and if the Town/School owned the van, could it be used for other purposes. P. Dillon agreed that this option could/should be looked into. He also indicated that there may be students from other neighboring towns in other school districts (who are also out-of-district from Pittsfield), the Town could share the transportation costs with other nearby towns. M. Loubert indicated that she liked the idea of this as an opportunity to collaborate. A. O’Dwyer asked if we knew if there were other towns in this situation with Pittsfield vocational P. Dillon noted not W. Stockbridge, Stockbridge, or Richmond, but agreed to help look into that.

T. Blauvelt asked if there was a public-transportation option for transporting these students. P. Dillon suggested we’d need to research if this is allowed. S. Harrison indicated that this is not prohibited, but not sure if the BRTA routes would work for these students. M. Loubert indicated that she felt that the BRTA as an option should be explored. S. Carmel indicated that she had talked with the chair of the BRTA, who indicated that the public bus line did go to Taconic High School.

## 5. Finance Committee member committee reports:

Community Preservation Committee. T. Blauvelt reported that the Community Preservation Committee (CPC) last met on April 28 2020, and in consultation with Assistant Town Manager, Chris Rembold, regarding funding, made some significant cuts in anticipation of potential lower revenue to the Town in FY 21. Original recommended total spending of \$894,550, and cut \$66,050 from that recommendation. The new amended amounts will be taken to the Town Meeting. The CPC also discussed the acquisition of the Alden Property; Bill Cooke made an update. The Affordable Housing Committee (AHC) is looking for a July closing on the property, and Habitat for Humanity is expected to be involved in the project. T. Blauvelt reported that John Katz had contacted him, as a member of the CPC (Katz communicating on behalf of the AHC), that the committee has \$170K appropriated at a prior town meeting for mortgage down-payment assistance program, may come to Town Meeting to request to move \$100K from that fund into a rental assistance fund, noting that the need for rental assistance from Covid-19 has been high.

Economic Development Committee. M. O'Connor reported that the EDC met on April 14, 2020. The original chair, Steve Picheny, stepped down (he is out of town more often than he felt was reasonable, as chair of a town committee), and the committee voted Tim Newman as the new chair. She reported that the committee mainly focused on looking at new goals for this Covid-19 time in the town. Helping businesses, finding data regarding how businesses are managing during this time, how to support local non-profits. Data gathering was divided into different areas/groups/sub-committees: how to help local residents now, how to prepare for relocatees to the S. Berkshires. She reported—and A. O'Dwyer (also an EDC member) that the committee is still looking to find its role and purposes.

6. **Update from Town Manager.** M. Pruhenski shared two updates. The first is that the Town is doubling down on its commitment to limiting spending; he noted that earlier today (April 30), he and S. Carmel had met with department heads to further commit to and operationalize a lock-down on spending. He also shared with the committee that the Town furloughed 14 employees [this had been reported at the SelectBoard meeting earlier in the week]. Also, regarding open positions, 2 additional positions will not be filled at this time. He stressed that these are temporary furloughs, and the hope is to bring these employees back to work ASAP, but it was felt as the responsible thing to do when so many Town departments' doors (e.g., library) are closed. The furloughs are extended through May 18<sup>th</sup>. The savings are \$16K-\$50K—depending on how long the furloughs last (minimum if only until May 18<sup>th</sup>, but more if goes through June) (these estimates do not include the unfilled lines savings). M. Loubert asked if the furloughed employees would keep their health insurance benefits; M. Pruhenski said health insurance benefits are retained during a furlough; they are also eligible for unemployment, which M. Pruhenski indicated suggested would not reduce the savings significantly.

**T. Blauvelt asked about the 3 Police Dept academy trainees** – if this is still continuing. M. Pruhenski indicated that these trainings did go online, but are resuming in-person training in person. So, he expects they will complete their training and graduate to full-time police officer status on schedule, which will bring the PD up to full staffing. S. Carmel informed that committee that there was some savings in the move to online Police Academy training, as the Town no longer needed to pay for trainees' lodgings.

7. **Update from Finance Director.** S. Carmel reviewed with the committee the March 2020 budget reports. She noted that the budgets are still on target. Debt payments to-date are low, but this is not

surprising as dept payments are usually at the end of the FY. The deficit lines in the Police and Fire Depts (the latter had been discussed at the prior FC meeting) have been resolved, and these will appear in the April 2020 budget reports. S. Carmel did share that the good news that there will be a “premium holiday” for Health Insurance in the month of May (which will appear in June premiums), which means the Town will save some money on those payments). Re: Wastewater budget, S. Carmel reported that the deficit in the Gasoline budget line, but this is because all the gas expenses are for other departments, but have erroneously been budgeted to Wastewater; this correction will be made shortly.

A. O’Dwyer asked if there were any Covid-19-specific expenses in March; S. Carmel indicated that none in March. She noted that the first request (health, PD, FD) was on April 2nd for \$177,000 – anticipated expenses related to Covid-19; a second request (technology & wastewater) went in for approximately \$20,000. These requests do not get us new funds, but allow us to spend above the original budget, as long as the overages are due to Covid-19 expenses. These expenses, she noted, will be in the April 2020 budget.

S. Carmel also reported to the FC regarding Tax and revenue Collections. She noted that tax collections are coming in steady (as most mortgage payments are in escrow with banks, who are making their payments fully and on time). M. Loubert asked if there are any projections of whether we might see banks have difficulty paying mortgage; S. Carmel indicated that there are still no definitive projections to September as to what might happen.

S. Carmel also reminded the FC that there will likely still need to hold a joint SB/FC meeting regarding end-of-year budget line transfer requests.

**8. Letter to Finance Committee:** Letter received from GB Republican Committee asking that the Marijuana funds collected be used to fund the police dept. The letter was acknowledged.

## **9. Report on Report on Association of Town Finance Committees**

A. O’Dwyer reminded attendees that she and M. Loubert had attended the April 29<sup>th</sup> Webinar by the State Association of Town Finance Committees via the Mass Municipal Association (MMA). She noted that at the meeting there were more than 45 people on the call, which provided a good opportunity for the GB Finance Committee to feel in partnership with other towns’ Finance Committees. Some points from the meeting:

- The ATFC recommends being cautious with spending in the remainder of 2020;
- Towns will not fully begin to feel the financial effects of Covid-19 until 2021 (mortgage payments, decreased revenues, especially in areas that rely on tourism);
- There is concern that the State may pull back on its ability to provide fiscal help to MA towns (may run out of funds);
- Recommended that FC in towns develop a range of scenarios for budgeting for the town—if shut down is lifted soon (best case); shut down goes into 2022 (worst case); most likely case: shut down continues into early 2021.

M. Loubert indicated that what stood out to her from the meeting was that the ATFC suggested that Fin Committees and towns prepare for “very hard” times. She thanked M. Pruhenski and S. Carmel for their efforts already (re: limiting spending of town departments, meeting with department heads,

furloughing done strategically). She described that towns may not really know the economic impact until November, and the pros and cons of going into 1/12 budgets. The webinar recording will be made available to all FC members. The ATFC also reported on—and M. Loubert researched following the meeting as well—Mass Taxpayers Association’s prediction that MA may suffer more from Covid-19’s economic effects than other parts of the nation, due to our reliance on tourism and related industries. She noted that this meeting underscores the weight that must be on the town administrators these days, and thanked the administrative staff for their efforts already.

S. Carmel shared that she, too, has been on many calls and webinars—e.g., with Deputy Commission of Dept of Revenue—close to 400 people on the call/meeting. She shared it was also quite complex and straight-forward that there are many, many unknowns as we move forward in this time of Covid-19, and that FY 21 is when/where the impact will be for most municipalities. S. Carmel indicated that she is already beginning to run through various scenarios in looking ahead to FY 21.

A. O’Dwyer indicated that the MA legislature is looking at a way for Town’s to have more flexibility in planning operating budgets (e.g., revising the way an interim budget may be applied), and the ATFC recommended having a fall meeting to review budgets and examine if any changes need to be made. She wondered if the 2<sup>nd</sup> night of the Town Meeting (now scheduled for June 25) might be postponed to later – in the fall. M. Loubert also suggested that there be a fall meeting, as we get closer to November. S. Carmel reminded FC members that GB town budgets can only be revised until the tax rate (in some towns they have a quarterly tax rate system—GB has an annual system). S. Bannon reminded the FC that the SB had already voted on the June 22 and 25 dates and suggested that a fall meeting would better as a “special town meeting”, although M. Loubert raised the concern of cost of a special town meeting (M. Pruhenski suggested an estimate of \$4,200).

**10. Summer Meeting Schedule.** It was agreed to continue to meet in the summer, and possibly to meet more often, given the potentially significant negative economic and financial effects of Covid-19. It was agreed to keep the original monthly meeting schedule (all meetings at 6:00):

- May 19, 2020. [minute-taker update: this was subsequently rescheduled to May 20]
- June 16, 2020
- July 21, 2020

Any additional meetings, it was agreed, would be scheduled as needed and/or recommended.

## **11. Finance Committee Member Comments**

T. Blauvelt reminded the committee that he is unable to attend the June 22<sup>nd</sup> Annual Town Meeting. He can attend the second meeting day (zoning) on June 25<sup>th</sup>.

M. Loubert reminded the committee that the BHRSD finance committee is meeting on May 12 regarding budgets and budget planning in relation to Covid-19.

< FC member Will Curletti informed the chair remotely that he had been disconnected from the online meeting at 7:42 and was not able to rejoin the meeting before it ended >

She indicated that she would like to see the FC post a packet of information/documents prior to meetings – as the GB Selectboard and Planning Committee does. She also continues to have concerns regarding the Zoom Webinar format of prior public hearings, and requested to consider the format that most enables citizens to participate. A. O'Dwyer agreed that the Zoom Meeting format would be preferred. M. Pruhenski indicated that the Webinar format protected more against inappropriate comments, etc. However, it was noted that attendees can't see how many people are attending. Following a discussion of the pros and cons of each format, it was agreed to use the Meeting format.

**12. Media Time** < no comments or questions >

**13. Citizen Speak** < no comments or questions >

**14. Adjournment.** Motion was made by M. Loubert at 7:45 PM to adjourn the meeting; T. Blauvelt second; vote 4-0, all in favor.

Respectfully submitted by

Anne O'Dwyer

*Approved at May 20, 2020 FC Meeting.*