

Great Barrington Finance Committee

Packet for October 16, 2023

*****REVISED 10-13-23*****

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

TITLE: Shared Human Resources (HR) Director- Request for Reserve Fund Transfer

BACKGROUND: Back in fiscal year 2022, recognizing a growing need for professional human resources assistance for our communities, we applied for an “Efficiency and Regionalization Grant” through the Massachusetts Department of Revenue (DOR) with our neighboring and partner towns of Monterey, New Marlborough, Sheffield, and West Stockbridge. We were awarded \$75,000 to cover the full first year salary and benefits expenses of a Shared HR Director.

After developing and approving an Inter-Municipal Agreement with our partner towns, we advertised, interviewed, and hired our first HR Director to be shared by the 5 communities in the following manner:

Great Barrington- 15 hours per week/43%

Sheffield- 6 hours per week/17%

Monterey- 6 hours per week/17%

New Marlborough- 6 hours per week/17%

West Stockbridge- 2 hours per week/6%

For fiscal year 2023, (year 1) the program budget totaled \$79,555.29. The additional \$4,555.29 was divided up among the towns by the percentages noted above.

Sheffield opted out of the program for FY24 and the additional 6 hours/week were divided up between the towns of Great Barrington (4/week) and Monterey (2/week).

On June 29, 2023 I sent the attached letter to DOR certifying completion of the grant and each of the remaining four towns proceeded to budget for a full year of expenses in FY24.

In late September of this year, I was asked to consider transitioning this position to full-time by our current HR Director due to the volume of work and demands of the job here in town. Since it was my intention to request funding for a full-time dedicated HR Director in the FY25 budget, I agreed to present this request to the Finance Committee for consideration.

RECOMMENDATION: I recommend the Finance Committee approve the funding necessary to transition our HR Director to full-time (35 hours) effective November 1st. Not only do I see a clear need for more dedicated HR time, but expanding the hours will reduce billable legal hours for our personnel attorney and reduce risk from liability when personnel matters are not addressed promptly. Recruitment and retention are becoming more challenging every year, especially in this climate, and more time and attention can be spent on filling vacancies and managing all the day-to-day tasks that come with being a modern and significantly sized employer with roughly 135 employees. A copy of the current HR Director responsibilities and anticipated full-time responsibilities is attached.

FISCAL IMPACT: \$25,000 for the balance of FY24.

PREPARED AND APPROVED BY:



Mark Pruhenski/Town Manager

DATE:

10/12/2023

Mark Pruhenski
Town Manager

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TOWN OF GREAT BARRINGTON MASSACHUSETTS

OFFICE OF THE TOWN MANAGER

June 29, 2023

Mr. Sean Cronin
Senior Deputy Commissioner of Local Services
Division of Local Services
PO Box 7095
Boston, MA 02204-7095

RE: Southern Berkshire Shared HR Efficiency and Regionalization Grant

Dear Mr. Cronin

Please find attached copies of all relevant information for the Southern Berkshire Shared HR grant. The total cost for this position in FY23 was \$79,555.29 with the additional balance not covered under the grant being divided among the five towns in accordance with our inter-municipal agreement.

I'm thrilled to report that the new position was a great success despite a later than anticipated start. On behalf of the towns of Great Barrington, Monterey, Sheffield, New Marlborough, and West Stockbridge, we thank you for providing the seed money needed to fund this initiative. Four of the five towns have committed to continuing the program in FY24.

This letter certifies completion of the project. Please let me know if you need anything further.

Respectfully,

Mark. A. Pruhenski, ICMA-CM
Town Manager

Current HR Director Responsibilities:

Employee Management and Relations:

- Field and address employee and retiree inquiries, spanning from benefit-related queries to conflict resolution matters.
- Serve as the primary point of contact for new hires in the absence of their department heads.
- Initiate and coordinate the comprehensive onboarding process for new employees, ensuring a thorough understanding of the municipality's benefits, facilitating MUNIS account setup with the Treasurer, and verifying legal work eligibility.
- Exercise oversight and facilitate off boarding procedures, encompassing seamless benefit changes and COBRA administration.

Recruitment:

- Organize the end-to-end recruitment process, commencing with in-depth discussions with department heads and culminating in well-informed hiring decisions.
- Craft articulate job postings, engage and analyze candidates, arrange and structure interviews, and draft conditional appointments.
- Execute thorough candidate pre-employment screenings, involving physical and drug assessments, CORI background checks, and comprehensive driving history evaluations.
- Manage the final appointment process, expertly guiding and onboarding new employees, including facilitating a comprehensive enrollment in benefit programs when applicable and education on Town Policies.

Benefits and Compliance:

- Exercise oversight of unemployment claims, collaboratively working with the Treasurer to verify employee information.
- Coordination of the pivotal annual open enrollment period, ensuring accurate processing of benefit changes, while concurrently providing invaluable education to employees on the array of available options.
- Carefully verify and audit benefit bills for precision.
- Undertake essential end-of-year compliance responsibilities, including the pivotal aspects of ADA compliance and mandatory in-house postings.
- Take the lead in the diligent review and revision of policies, including the annual updating of the employee handbook.
- Maintain meticulously organized and accurate employee files and critical legal employment documents.

- Manage employee leave requests, spanning from FMLA requests to extended paid or unpaid sick leave, meticulously overseeing effective communication with the municipality and securing physician clearance.
- Act as the designated point person for worker compensation and Life Insurance claims, ensuring accuracy and timely resolutions.
- Manage the intricacies of employee address changes, and maintain up-to-date employee profiles within the MUNIS system and all benefit providers.
- Diligently process warrants and money transfers.
- Engage in extensive collaboration with a network of more than seven providers, each with unique enrollment processes and requirements.
- Manage contacts for various benefits providers, meticulously ensuring the accurate submission of vital information and paperwork.

Drug and Alcohol Screenings:

- Coordinating employee drug and alcohol screenings, encompassing both DOT and non-DOT requirements, ensuring unwavering compliance and meticulous completion.
- Manage the intricate compliance requirements for micro-transit employees through oversight of DISA accounts and random screening components.
- Educate management on post-accident and responsible suspicion drug screenings process.

Conflict Management and Legal Affairs:

- Function as a trusted sounding board and mentor for department heads and supervisors, addressing matters of conflict management and help with facilitating smooth departmental transitions.
- Conduct comprehensive investigations and diligently resolve complaints and potential liabilities that includes conducting interviews, drafting meticulous investigation reports, and collaboratively determining corrective actions.
- Working relationships with labor counsel for guidance and support in navigating complex and sensitive HR situations.
- Administer and formulate action plans for conflict management situations, inclusive of but not limited to terminations, disciplinary actions, and performance improvement plans.

Communication Management:

- Fulfill public records requests
- Field a substantial volume of emails, adeptly managing an influx of over 200 emails per week, serving as a cornerstone for HR-related matters in Great Barrington.

- Responsively address numerous incoming calls from employees and residents, demonstrating a commitment to effective and professional communication.

In addition to dedicating more time to the above responsibilities, the HR Director would also add the following:

- Standardize, implement, and enhance official orientation, onboarding, and off boarding processes.
- Provide increased hands-on recruitment support for department heads, ensuring faster timelines and greater ownership of the process and logistics.
- Enhance employee engagement through events and expanded training opportunities.
- Implement improved in-house HR processes, both for HR functions and for assisting departments in developing their own.
- Maximize the utilization of our Human Resources Information System (MUNIS) and the HR functions we've invested in but have not fully utilized. Explore, understand, educate, and promote the utilization of other memberships that we are currently underutilizing.
- Personalize the HR function to offer more attentive support to GB employees.
- Offer additional support to TM in handling conflict management, union relations, and other confidential matters.
- Ensure sustainable email management and faster response times, both for general inquiries and time-sensitive requests.
- Allocate a more reasonable amount of time to stay updated on regular office management tasks and maintain accurate physical and electronic files.

Mark Pruhenski
Town Manager

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TOWN OF GREAT BARRINGTON MASSACHUSETTS

OFFICE OF THE TOWN MANAGER

RESERVE FUND TRANSFER REQUEST

October 12, 2023

TO: Finance Committee
FROM: Mark Pruhenski, Town Manager
RE: Reserve Fund Transfer Request

I respectfully request a reserve fund transfer for \$25,000. An executive summary and supporting documents were included in the packet.

	ACCOUNT NAME	ORG	OBJ	AMOUNT
From:	Reserve Fund	01131	57800	\$25,000.00
To:	Human Resources	01152	51106	\$25,000.00

Town Accountant:

Date:

10/13/22

Town Manager:

Date:

10-13-23

Finance Committee:

DRAFT of October 7, 2023

We, the members of the Great Barrington Finance Committee, believe it is appropriate for the Committee to express its views regarding the potential financial impact of the proposed eight-town regional school district, to be known as the Southern Berkshire Hills Regional School District.

First of all, we want to thank the consulting team led by Jake Eberwin and Lucy Prashker and the volunteers from all of the 8 participating towns for all of their dedication and hard work over the past 3.5 years – it has been a hugely complex and challenging project. We also want to thank our Town representatives during this process – Peter Taylor, Deb Phillips, and Steve Bannon.

Based solely on our review of the financial ramifications of the proposed merger, we vote to support the consultants consulting team's recommendation (report available [here](#) and at the link below) to proceed with the merger, especially in light of what the team noted: the "fiscal challenges of declining enrollment, rising operating costs, relatively flat state aid, and the increasing needs of our students."

Our opinion is based on what we see as the financial and budgetary implications of the proposed merger for Great Barrington only. It also does not address the long list of non-financial impacts of the proposal, such as expanded educational choice, the difficulty of this transition, differing educational philosophies, and potential transportation-related issues – these matters are better addressed by others, including those involved in this process.

Each year during our budget process, this Committee is reminded of the magnitude of our Town's investment in education. For FY24 our school budget assessment was just under \$20 million and more than half of the Town's total budget. This budget is separately determined by the current Berkshire Hill School District and not subject to a line-by-line review by the GB Finance Committee.

We want to be clear that GB taxpayers should not expect either the Town's school budget assessment or property tax rates to decline as a result of this merger. Our hope and expectation is that the merger will cause our assessment to increase at a lower annual rate relative to what would occur without the merger. The ability to actually achieve these cost savings is subject to many factors, some of which can be controlled locally and others out of our control. In particular, we will be relying on the new district-wide school committee to make tough decisions in future years on how to pool resources and realize economies of scale and cost efficiencies. In addition, if the future enrollments differ dramatically from projections, the various town assessments will be affected.

While the proposed new or renovated High School project is *not* being voted upon at this special town meeting, it is important to note that updated projected costs and interest rates will have an effect on our budget.

The consulting team's recommendation is found here:

[https://static1.squarespace.com/static/60ae8cae6eb37435913becba/t/651cab39d010a1285271575/1696377795669/FinalReport ToBoard Sept262023.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/60ae8cae6eb37435913becba/t/651cab39d010a1285271575/1696377795669/FinalReport+ToBoard+Sept262023.pdf)

DRAFT

Selectboard and Finance Committee Joint FY24 Budget Meeting #5 Via Zoom and
in person At 334 Main Street Great Barrington MA
Tuesday, March 14, 2023

1. Call to Order – - Chairman Bannon opened the meeting at 6:00pm with a Selectboard roll call: Ed Abrahams, “aye,” Steve Bannon, “aye,” Leigh Davis, “aye,” Eric Gabriel, “aye,” Garfield Reed, “aye.” Phil Orenstein conducted a Finance Committee roll call: Milena Cerna, “aye,” Richard Geiler, “aye,” Madonna Meagher, “aye,” Anne O’Dwyer, “aye,” Philip Orenstein, “aye.”
Also present: Town Manager Mark Pruhenski, Assistant Town Manager Chris Rembold, Financial Coordinator Allison Crespo.

2. Review and Discussion

S. Bannon stated the meeting will cover Town administration’s recommended reductions and follow up on outstanding items/questions.

- a. M. Pruhenski stated at the last meeting staff was tasked with returning reductions to the FY24 budget of \$150,000-\$200,000 – he proposed reductions totaling \$167,224 and proceeded to share details/rationale. He stated two of the new positions were eliminated – IT Director and DPW Assistant Superintendent – and he noted eight other lines were impacted. He stated his reasoning is that public safety is a priority, so police officer and firefighter positions remain as well as the finance position due to the system upgrade. He asked for questions on the reductions. He noted there are some increases - the IT Coordinator position was restored and the HR Manager’s 4 additional hours were added - and Wastewater was increased due to offsets from staffing being proposed. He noted health and life insurance was reduced due to the two positions being eliminated. M. Pruhenski also clarified that the laborer/operator was budgeted for in two different lines and one was backed out – and there is a new line for the Landscaper. A. O’Dwyer asked if the increased workload for the system upgrade was a short-term need – A. Crespo replied it is more than that due to Town growth and additional projects/warrants. She also clarified that current staffing is two quarter time positions so the full-time position is only increasing by a half plus benefits. M. Pruhenski added the Accountant’s Office is the only remaining one-person office. M. Pruhenski further clarified that the IT Director and DPW Assistant positions would be budgeted for in FY25. P. Orenstein noted cannabis funds will be down next year – S. Bannon replied that will be considered next year, and the situation may change.
- b. M. Pruhenski covered the impact summary - noting \$325,000 removed from Special Articles increases free cash to reduce the tax levy; town operation budget increase reduced to 4.9% from 6.1%; Wastewater Enterprise Fund increase reduced to 3.7% from 4%; and the tax rate reduction to \$14.55 from \$14.99. He also noted he talked to Town Counsel, David Doneski, and he recommended additional research into what percentage of Co-responder calls/cases were the result of substance abuse. M. Pruhenski stated there is no information on the nature of the cases and he suggested keeping \$5,000 in the budget if/when we hire a Co-responder as a shared resource or via another program, that information can be tracked. It was raised that the person worked for the Brien Center so perhaps that is why it was not shared with the Police Department – and there could be privacy issues with collecting/sharing that information. E. Gabriel stated the Co-responder program is important for the Town. Various levels and approaches to funding the Co-responder role via the operating budget or adding funds to Community Impact were discussed and weighed against the objective of reducing the budget. S. Bannon stated there are two items to consider – accepting the \$167,224 and deciding on \$5,000 or \$25,000 for the Co-responder role. R. Geiler suggested funding Chief Sorti’s original budget request of \$12,000 and working with other communities to get buy in.

R. Geiler made a motion to budget \$12,000 as Chief Sorti's original request for the Co-responder; P. Orenstein seconded. P. Orenstein asked for any discussion – A. O'Dwyer stated Chief Sorti did not push back on the \$5,000 - M. Pruhenski replied he made the decision to cut the amount when it was unclear if the program would happen, but he is supportive now. Roll call vote: : Milena Cerna, "aye," Richard Geiler, "aye," Madonna Meagher, "aye," Anne O'Dwyer, "aye," Philip Orenstein, "aye." All in favor: 5-0.

E. Abrahams made a motion to budget \$12,000 as Chief Sorti's original request for the Co-responder; L. Davis seconded. S. Bannon asked for any discussion – there were none. Roll call vote: Ed Abrahams, "aye," Steve Bannon, "aye," Leigh Davis, "aye," Eric Gabriel, "aye," Garfield Reed, "aye." All in favor: 5-0.

c. The \$150,000 for Housatonic Water Works relief was discussed – considering the likelihood of approval by the Senate and weighing the risks/procedure if it remains as a Special Article or is taken out – and there was some consensus to leave it in until it is approved by the Senate.

d. M. Pruhenski shared a comparison of the impact of adding the original 4.5 positions vs adding 2.5 positions with the cost for both for FY24 partial and full year salaries, increase in the tax rate, and increase in the median tax bill per year. He highlighted that adding 2.5 positions reduces the operating budget by 78,500; reduces the tax rate by six cents and reduces the tax bill by \$25.53. He also shared the percent change for FY23 tax rate – reducing the Town budget from 6.1% to 4.9%; reducing the Enterprise Fund/wastewater to 3.7% down from 4%; and increasing free cash to \$4.33m from \$4.1m. He also noted the tax ratio impact went from \$14.99 to \$14.55 which he noted is a conservative estimate. It was noted that assessed value has a significant impact.

e. Regarding budget reductions, R. Geiler expressed concerns about the impact of eliminating the new DPW position. E. Abrahams pointed out adding in another position amounts to a minimal increase and it may be worth it to taxpayers. P. Orenstein asked if the new finance position could help DPW with project planning/ contractor payments – A. Crespo replied they have been working with DPW on capital projects with C. Rembold and noted the roles do not align exactly. A. O'Dwyer stated her support for anything that can be done to minimize the increase to taxpayers. It was agreed that M. Pruhenski's judgement/assessment is to be trusted.

L. Davis made a motion to accept the Town Manager's recommendation of a reduction of \$167,224 from the FY24 budget; E. Abrahams seconded. S. Bannon asked for any discussion – A. Crespo stated it is a reduction of \$160,224 because \$7,000 was added in for the Co-responder.

L. Davis amended the motion to accept the Town Manager's recommended reduction of \$160,224; E. Abrahams seconded. S. Bannon asked if any discussion – E. Abrahams stated it is a mistake to make nickel and dime decisions. Roll call vote: Ed Abrahams, "no," Steve Bannon, "aye," Leigh Davis, "aye," Eric Gabriel, "aye," Garfield Reed, "aye." Motion passed: 4-1.

f. S. Bannon clarified we are voting on the Town operating budget , but not touching the Special Articles – and noted nothing is set in stone until the public hearing. P. Orenstein confirmed the budget increase is now 5% due to the \$7,000 added in and noted the number reflects the Town not funding the additional \$150,000 for HWW – we are just putting it back as a temporary measure.

A. O'Dwyer made a motion to accept the Town Manager's recommended FY24 budget reduction of \$160,224; R. Geiler seconded. P. Orenstein asked if any discussion – there was none. Roll call vote: Milena Cerna, "aye," Richard Geiler, "aye," Madonna Meagher, "aye," Anne O'Dwyer, "aye," Philip Orenstein, "aye." All in favor: 5-0.

g. P. Orenstein asked for clarification on capital items non-borrowing relative to the general fund number – A. Crespo replied it is likely due to other plans for paying other than borrowing, but would confirm.

h. M. Cerna confirmed updated budget numbers would be sent prior to the public hearing.

3. Citizen Speak Time – No citizens asked to speak.

4. Media Time – No media comments/questions.

5. Adjournment - Chairman Bannon adjourned the meeting by unanimous consent at 6:59pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Stacy Ostrow, Recording Clerk

Selectboard and Finance Committee Joint FY24 Budget Meeting #4 Via Zoom and
in person At 334 Main Street Great Barrington MA
Wednesday, March 8, 2023

1. Call to Order - Chairman Bannon opened the meeting at 6:00pm with a Selectboard roll call: Ed Abrahams, "aye," Steve Bannon, "aye," Leigh Davis, "aye," Eric Gabriel, "aye," Garfield Reed, "aye." Phil Orenstein conducted a Finance Committee roll call: Milena Cerna, "aye," Richard Geiler, "aye," Madonna Meagher, "aye," Anne O'Dwyer, "aye," Philip Orenstein, "aye." Also present: Town Manager Mark Pruhenski, Assistant Town Manager Chris Rembold, Financial Coordinator Allison Crespo and other department heads as noted below.

S. Bannon stated the process will be to go through each department, capital, Berkshire Hills Regional School District and Special Articles and noted this is not the final vote, it is in preparation for the public hearing and questions or changes/motions should be raised. He noted there is a need to make budget cuts. M. Pruhenski stated as follow up to last night's meeting, he sent an email regarding the 1986 warrant article, FY23 nonprofit awards – noting he is comfortable making some cuts as there are other funding opportunities for the nonprofits and veterans benefits and state aid.

2. Review and Discussion

- a. Budget by Department

- i. Selectboard/Town Manager – There were no comments.
 - ii. Finance Committee – it was confirmed the Contingency Fund should be moved under the Selectboard.
 - iii. Town Accountant - S. Bannon stated this is the first of five new positions being proposed here - he noted all the positions are important, but he voiced concerns about funding them all at once and ongoing. A. O'Dwyer noted there is a 7.1% increase in the tax levy – M. Pruhenski replied the school assessment includes capital and the number is subject to change, but it will be confirmed by the March 23 public hearing. She continued to state the salary increases this year plus new staff positions in a lot all at once – she noted the priority is to retain current staff. She continued to state there are changes in GB now, but they may not last. S. Bannon suggested deciding on the number of positions that are approved for funding and leave it to M. Pruhenski to decide. There was agreement on phasing in new staff over 2-3 years. For the finance position, it was confirmed that the plan is to combine the new position with the two quarter time roles and eliminate those in FY25. E. Gabriel stated the priority is public safety and expressed support for police, fire and DPW additional staffing. M. Pruhenski asked what positions the Selectboard and Finance Committee are comfortable with so a proposal can be made at the public hearing – S. Bannon stated we can post that before the public hearing. M. Pruhenski stated the total impact of all positions on the average tax bill is an increase of \$41.00 in FY24 and the total cost of the positions is \$194,739 which is 1.3% of the total budget. He was asked to calculate the total liability for a full/future year(s). A. Crespo made a case for the new position due to her years of municipal experience and the Town's significant/increasing workload. S. Bannon suggested continuing to review the budget and perhaps there will be some cuts that may free up budget for staffing - and asked that M. Pruhenski come back with a recommendation prior to the public hearing.
 - iv. Technology – There were no comments.

- v. Assessor's Office – P. Orenstein asked if the budget for contracted services is enough to accommodate additional research on matters that may come up - it was noted that any additional work would need a majority vote to move forward. Ross Vivori stated the amount budgeted is good for the work that is planned, but additional funds would be needed for other requests. It was noted that committees requesting research should be informed it may incur additional costs.
- vi. Collector/Treasurer - P. Orenstein asked about the \$10,000-25,000 budgeted for tax title litigation and asked if we need to budget for it or can we use a contingent source – S. Bannon replied it does not impact the bottom line as it goes to free cash if it is not used. Alicia Dulin stated we know \$10,000 will have to be paid to Land Court for Stonegate and other cases may come up. M. Pruhenski clarified the reserve is for unanticipated expenses.
- vii. Human Resources - M. Pruhenski asked if there is interest in adding hours which would bring us to 19 hours - it was agreed the hours would be added.
- viii. Town Clerk - It was confirmed that clickers for Town Meeting was put off to next year.
- ix. Conservation – There were no comments.
- x. Planning Board - L. Davis asked about a potential new housing position - C. Rembold replied it did come up with the Selectboard and Planning Board, but details were not discussed. He clarified the position would fall under Planning and Development and noted the idea of adding \$20,000 to the \$30,000 we are already paying for a planner through Berkshire Regional Planning. L. Davis suggested adding funds under the Affordable Housing Trust Fund Special Article – C. Rembold clarified it is the Trust's decision.
- xi. Zoning Board of Appeals – There were no comments.
- xii. Planning/Community Development - L. Davis asked if new staff to cover housing could be utilized now – C. Rembold replied there is not a plan for services/projects/priorities. S. Bannon stated there are funds elsewhere in the budget for housing needs and asked if \$20,000 would make a difference. L. Davis asked about the status of the two Housing Sub-Committee recommendations – C. Rembold replied it has not been discussed. S. Bannon suggested Community Preservation and the Housing Trust may support additional work.
- xiii. Buildings and Grounds
A. O'Dwyer confirmed the Assistant DPW Superintendent position is split between two budgets totaling \$82,000 with hiring planned for January – M. Pruhenski clarified it is posted internally now. The group discussed the Landscaper position that was approved last year and the high cost of supplies required for landscaping work. It was clarified that contracted services is for building consulting work and it is part of the street maintenance budget. It was noted there is nothing in the Town Meeting vote line for the landscaper - M. Pruhenski stated he would look into it as it was funded last year.
- xiv. Police Department - P. Orenstein asked about using Community Impact Funding to support police department programs. He referred to Town Counsel's advice that the funds can be used for policing, substance abuse and youth programs to offset costs related to the cannabis business – such as on substance use intervention, training, etc. – and that is consistent with what we are doing. A. O'Dwyer pointed to the community outreach and the Co-responder programs and any high school initiatives. E. Abrahams cautioned that towns are being challenged on the use of these funds – if the Co-responder is dealing with marijuana use related issues that might be acceptable, but there is a view that police are less taxed because they are not enforcing marijuana laws. M. Pruhenski stated he would discuss this with Town Counsel. S. Bannon stated there is a plan for using those funds and if we spend aggressively, it will end sooner and we will have to absorb more costs in the budget or programs may end. He added that we may be called on to justify the use of

those funds with documentation and could end up in court. It was confirmed by Chief Sorti that case details cannot be tracked, but he stated the importance of the role for deescalating situations, finding long-term care programs/options, supporting first-responder mental health and student/in-school programs. E. Abrahams stated, thinking ahead, if we want a co-responder 24/7 would that be useful or is on-call enough. E. Gabriel stated this is a very important issue and a vital role for which we should budget as needed. Chief Sorti suggested GB hire a full-time co-responder and offer those services to other towns. Chief Sorti stated two towns will not support the program and the others are still in the budget process. S. Bannon suggested a part-time position with the Brien Center and Berkshire Health Systems being asked to support/partner with us and the other towns.

P. Orenstein made a motion to allocate \$25,000 to this line item provided it comes from Community Impact funds; A. O'Dwyer seconded. P. Orenstein asked for any discussion – S. Bannon stated he would rather budget for this as a part-time position regardless of whether Community Impact funds can be used – and ask for Brien/BHS/other town support. It was debated how to budget/position funding for this program and it was determined that M. Pruhenski would ask Town Counsel about using Community Impact funding for this position and if it is allowed, to add it to the Community Impact Special Article for an increased request of \$525,000 with \$25,000 earmarked for the program. Chief Sorti confirmed the \$25,000 would work in partnership with Brien/BHS. S. Bannon stated another meeting will need to be scheduled before the public hearing. There was no vote.

- xv. Fire Department – There were no comments
- xvi. Emergency Management – There were no comments.
- xvii. Building Inspector - P. Orenstein asked about updating the fee schedule to reflect real costs – M. Pruhenski replied multiple departments are reviewing their fee schedules and they will be presented all at once rather than piecemeal.
- xviii. Animal Control Officer – There were no comments.

S. Bannon stated there are 10 panelists and 11 attendees at the meeting

- xix. DPW - Highway - P. Orenstein asked about the budget for gas/diesel which is much higher than the year-to-date spend – it was explained that actuals are only through December and there is \$2,931 remaining in the budget.
- xx. Health Department - G. Reed asked about the nature of the contracted services – R. Jurczyk replied it is the Public Health Nursing Program, lake/river water testing, sharps disposal and other small items.
- xxi. Community Services – There were no comments
- xxii. Council on Aging - M. Pruhenski confirmed Polly Mann is retiring in May and the position will be posted. He confirmed her replacement will have the same salary, but there could be flexibility in the contingency line.
- xxiii. Veterans' Affairs - M. Pruhenski verified the veterans district is our assessment and likely covering our portion of the director's salary and office rent. P. Orenstein asked about veterans' benefits being low compared to what was approved – M. Pruhenski replied the excess goes to free cash and state aid will reflect that.
- xxiv. Libraries - A. O'Dwyer asked about the full and part -time positions – S. Klein replied full and part -time positions were broken out this year – there are five full and six part time employees and salary is \$17-\$18/hour. G. Reed asked that a local vendor for supplies be considered.
- xxv. Parks and Recreation - P. Orenstein confirmed the Town cannot charge fees for use of the lake because we use federal funds.
- xxvi. Boards and Commissions – There were no comments.

- xxviii. Celebrations and Events – E. Gabriel clarified the request for veterans flags for Housatonic village along the parade route and on phone polls.
- xxviii. Debt Service – M. Cerna confirmed the interest rate on the new issuance is 4.5% on short-term and 5% on long-term.
- xxix. Retirement – There were no comments.
- xxx. Insurance – P. Orenstein noted the retiree medical fund expenses decrease of 25% in FY22 and asked if the unspent funds move into the reserve - S. Bannon replied the reserve would go up and then to free cash. M. Meagher asked about relabeling health and life insurance – P. Orenstein replied A. Dulin will provide a schedule of the three components of the line item for the last 3-5 years and we can see what to do from there.
- xxxi. Wastewater – There were no comments

b. Berkshire Hills Regional School District – It was noted there is a final vote of the School Board tomorrow, but it is anticipated not much will change.

c. Capital

- i. Police – G. Reed confirmed the \$78,000 is a contract for repairs and parts.
- ii. Fire – Chief Burger stated some lights are always on at the station due to OSHA or other regulations – he confirmed there are no on/off switches for those lights.
- iii. G. Reed asked about the riding leaf blower – J. Aberdale replied there is one now, but it cannot keep up with the need.
- iv. Buildings and Grounds – There were no comments.
- v. Streets and Bridges – P. Orenstein asked about \$350,000 for sidewalk/path work not covered by grants – how important is it – C. Rembold replied he would find out.
- vi. Parks – A. O'Dwyer asked about improvements and was directed to the packet. P. Orenstein asked about the adding a parking lot at McAllister Park – J. Aberdale replied he proposed three options to the Conservation Commission and is awaiting response.
- vii. Sidewalks – C. Rembold stated the \$100,000 budgeted is for sidewalks anywhere in Town and there is a new sidewalk inventory. He also noted a portion is for Lake Mansfield, but there may be grant money for that, and if so, the Town will not borrow.
A. O'Dwyer asked if there is a way to know how \$6m in borrowing will increase our debt – it is 25% of the total budget increase and will hit next year's budget. S. Bannon stated if we delay, the work gets more expensive.
- viii. Technology – P. Orenstein asked about the next step after make-ready work – C. Rembold replied an RFP to providers to use the trunk line extended into Housatonic village. He confirmed the budgeted amount is from National Grid and Verizon for the preparation of poles for fiber optic. He added costs for the placement of fiber depends on the number of subscribers – and there have been initial conversations about it. E. Gabriel stated it is a good investment as it may promote business/use of the mill buildings and boost cell service.
- ix. Wastewater – There were no comments.

d. Special Articles

- i. Community Impact Funding – It was discussed that \$25,000 would be added here if eligible. M. Pruhenski clarified that the funding was requested by the Committee and this is the fourth year - in prior years funding was \$185,000 and \$350,000 for two years.
- ii. Vocational Tuition and Transportation – There were no comments.
- iii. Stabilization and Capital Stabilization – It was agreed this is an important item.

iv. Other Post Employment Benefits (OPEB)

M. Pruhenski stated the process at Town Meeting is to vote on establishing the Trust and then vote to create an OPEB Trust using the \$820,000 – and it would be renamed OPEB Trust.

P. Orenstein made a motion to modify Special Article number 5 to eliminate the allocation of \$176,500 to the OPEB Trust to be created with the \$820,000; R. Geiler seconded. P. Orenstein asked for any discussion – there was none. Roll call vote: Milena Cerna, “aye,” Richard Geiler, “aye,” Madonna Meagher, “aye,” Anne O’Dwyer, “aye,” Philip Orenstein, “aye.” All in favor: 5-0

L. Davis made a motion to repeat the motion as presented by P. Orenstein; E. Gabriel seconded. S. Bannon asked if any discussion – E. Abrahams stated the \$176, 500 should go into the Trust as we have been wanting to fund this for a long time. E. Gabriel stated moving these funds can help fund staff positions. Roll call vote: Ed Abrahams, “no,” Steve Bannon, “aye,” Leigh Davis, “aye,” Eric Gabriel, “aye,” Garfield Reed, “aye.” Motion passed 4-1.

v. Emergency Medical Services – A. O’Dwyer stated she is inclined to support this, but asked for financial information behind the request to understand how they got to the dollar amount. Chief Burger stated he was on the board and the organization is better managed and there are solid controls in place now. He added they have good historical data on revenue/expenses and are likely to provide the information requested. He expressed support for their funding request. L. Davis asked if funding will go up annually – Chief Burger replied the other towns will not back out as they have no other options for these services - and increases will be in line with cost of living.

vi. Housatonic Water Works Relief – S. Bannon stated it is likely the \$150,000 will get approved by the Senate so options are to remove this Special Article now, leave it in until the next meeting in hopes of getting state approval or leave it in and fund it at \$400,000. He noted \$250,000 was the goal. M. Pruhenski confirmed it will be April before we receive the funds and some options have been identified on allocation. S. Bannon stated if we hear from the state before the public hearing, we will take it out. If we keep it in, we can vote to pass over it at Town Meeting. It was agreed that it should not be taken out until the additional funds are confirmed by the state.

It was agreed the next meeting would be on March 14 at 6:00pm.

S. Bannon stated by 9-1 vote there is \$176,500 available and may have an additional \$150,000 – he asked how much more should we ask M. Pruhenski to remove and come back with a recommendation on allocating those funds. P. Orenstein stated budgeting for new staff is \$200,000 based on partial years - and asked for projected cost of new staff for a full year – it was confirmed he will provide that at the next meeting. He stated the intention is to determine what level of staffing increase would keep the budget level for FY24 and FY25. A. O’Dwyer stated the new positions for a full year total \$350,000 with benefits budgeted for elsewhere at 30% of salary. E. Gabriel stated he agreed with finding savings to support additional staffing. It was agreed the main concern is the impact on the tax levy. The landscaper position approved last year was discussed and determined it should be confirmed where it is budgeted. P. Orenstein requested that M. Pruhenski come back with \$150,000-\$200,000 in budget cuts. M. Pruhenski clarified the ask of staff is to reduce the proposed budget by \$325,000 from the two Articles plus another \$150,000-\$200,000 and determine how that would impact the tax rate – there was agreement on this approach. It was stated there may be additional funds from the HCAs. It was stressed that use of the \$4.5m must be justified. It was discussed that residents are not clear on how the cannabis money received by the Town is used. S. Bannon stated their question is about using the 3% - we used \$4.1m to reduce the tax levy. M. Pruhenski clarified it is lower this year - the Town is mindful of keeping Community Impact funding portion of free cash separate last year there was a question what portion of free cash should be reserved for Community Impact funding. It was agreed the public should be aware.

R. Geiler asked for the Accounting position if the role could become full time instead of having a new position – M. Pruhenski stated once it gets to 19 hours the Town must offer benefits – under that threshold it is hard to find someone.

G. Reed announced it is International Women's Day and recognized L. Davis for helping a neighbor in need.

3. Citizen Speak Time – No citizens asked to speak.

4. Media Time – There were no media comments/questions.

5. Adjournment - Chairman Bannon adjourned the meeting by unanimous consent at 8:42pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Stacy Ostrow, Recording Clerk

Selectboard and Finance Committee Joint FY24 Budget Meeting Via Zoom and
in person at 334 Main Street Great Barrington MA
Wednesday, March 1, 2023

1. Call to Order - Chairman Bannon opened the meeting at 6:00pm with a Selectboard roll call: Ed Abrahams, "aye," Steve Bannon, "aye," Eric Gabriel, "aye," Garfield Reed, "aye." Absent: Leigh Davis
Phil Orenstein conducted a Finance Committee roll call: Milena Cerna, "aye," Richard Geiler, "aye," Madonna Meagher, "aye," Anne O'Dwyer, "aye," Philip Orenstein, "aye."
Also present: Town Manager Mark Pruhenski, Assistant Town Manager Chris Rembold, Financial Coordinator Allison Crespo and other department heads as noted below.

M. Pruhenski stated he had follow up information from the last meeting on three items:

- Health insurance numbers – Information was provided by Alicia Dulin via email which was shared at the meeting. P. Orenstein stated the numbers received are different than the retiree medical report and numbers included in the OPEB memo. A. Dulin replied it is just broken down in a different way – some retirees are on active plans if they are not yet 65 and the Town is paying active cost – she noted the retiree plan is a lower cost. P. Orenstein stated for example, for 2021 it is \$205,000, but the actuarial report shows \$474,000 – A. Dulin replied they are counting retirees on active plans. She offered to break it down similarly to the report – and stated she took her numbers from the most recent bill – which includes new employees. P. Orenstein stated he would connect with A. Dulin to discuss.
- Berkshire Hills salary numbers – M. Pruhenski reported the district has two IT support techs with salaries of \$51,000 and \$60,000 and a director making \$104,000 with 4-8 years of service – he noted the Town is low on salary if the plan is to hire at the director level.
- Residential growth – C. Rembold shared residential growth information stating numbers have been collected over time on new multi-unit housing production and population estimates for completed, committed and planned housing. He stated through 2028 there will be over 400 new units (not including single-family homes) with an estimated population of over 1,000 people. He added that if trends continue, for 2020-2030 the Town will grow by 13%. He also shared public safety information noting an example – a significant number of new Police and Fire for one multi-unit development over a one-year period – showing an increased demand for services. C. Rembold also shared economic data showing the importance of GB to the region's economy and the number of employees at GB businesses based on monthly average employment as a percentage of population GB is the highest compared to Williamstown and Pittsfield. G. Reed stated the number of public safety calls is not especially large – M. Pruhenski replied that is just calls, it does not include emails, inquiries, complaints, etc. It was noted an increase in demand for services correlates with the increase in the number of housing units.

2. Departmental Budgets

- a. Conservation Commission – C. Rembold presented stating the budget proposes an hourly rate increase from \$15.30 to \$25.88 for a 32 hour work week based on the vast expertise/experience of the Agent, Shep Evans, and complex job responsibilities to conserve/protect the Town's significant land and water resources. C. Rembold added a salary survey nine years ago found the average salary for the position to be \$43,000 and this year's request is to raise it to that level. He also noted a new line item for Conservation Commissioner training. P. Orenstein asked if homeowners requiring assistance are charged for services – S. Evans replied if there is a proposed project there is an application fee/permitting costs, but no charge for the Agent's time/services. It was noted the Town collects filing fees that can be used for implementing wetlands protection and potentially to fund these increases. M. Cerna asked if residents are knowledgeable enough about regulations/permitting – S. Evans replied part of his role is to educate/guide people, but most local professionals such as contractors and engineers have a good understanding – and, he added, overall, people are much more aware of environmental concerns.

b. Planning Board

C. Rembold stated the budget is status quo. There were no questions.

c. Zoning Board of Appeals

C. Rembold stated the board meets as needed with some years being busier than others – he added the budget is an accurate projection. There were no questions.

d. Planning/Community Development

C. Rembold presented stating the department facilitates and implements the Town's Master Plan and works with committees such as zoning, community preservation, Selectboard and others in support of large housing/economic development projects such as those under the Affordable Housing Trust, i.e., the Habitat for Humanity housing. He noted there has been discussion with multiple Town boards about an interest in hiring staff to work on housing initiatives. He noted on the economic development line, contracted services of a shared planner through Berkshire Regional Planning for \$30,000 annually to support the Downtown Cultural District and housing related items. He noted if the Town took the \$30,000 already being spent for the contractor and added \$20,000 – it might cover a staff person depending on the scope of services.. S. Bannon stated we should consider whether we want to wait a year or fund this now as C. Rembold's role/ responsibilities is a significant amount of work. P. Orenstein asked if GB can get more of the planner's time – C. Rembold stated that is being looked at, but added it would not be difficult to find a full-time person.

e. Buildings and Grounds

Joe Aberdale presented stating the budget reflects staff increases due to collective bargaining and a request to add a new position of DPW Assistant Superintendent with the salary split between building/grounds and highway budgets. He noted the significant number of active projects and contracts processed amounting to millions of dollars. He noted there is a total of 26 DPW staff and six consultant engineers. A. O'Dwyer asked about the landscaper position to start in January - M. Pruhenski replied it is posted internally, but no hire yet. J. Aberdale continued to explain the broad reach of DPW structures - 7 cemeteries, 17 parks, 12 buildings, etc. It was discussed that there should be an improved process for residents to use the transfer station. S. Bannon stated there is a lot of work to plan/execute and large expenses associated with DPW projects - and more help is needed. G. Reed confirmed DPW is working on the public bathroom project.

J. Aberdale continued to state there are increased expenses for supplies for landscaping and noted there may be a part-time person to fill in with planning and planting since timing is close. There was discussion about the proliferation of weeds and the removal/replanting of trees. P. Orenstein asked about the increase in water/sewer – J. Aberdale replied it is because the expense was dispersed under various departments and is now consolidated.

f. Highway

J. Aberdale stated the half salary for a new Assistant Superintendent is reflected here as is expenses for trees, safety supplies, etc. P. Orenstein asked if energy costs/gas/diesel was carried over from last year – J. Aberdale replied increases are not as significant and group purchasing is being looked at. It was clarified if the funds are not used it can be applied for another project within the department. J. Aberdale also noted a substantial saving in electric costs even though services increased and the use of LEDs. C. Rembold noted National Grid will pay the Town to switch streetlights to LEDs which will begin soon. It was confirmed that a police detail was moved into the budget and was increased. He also confirmed mattress and bulky item disposal is being worked on.

g. Council on Aging

Polly Mann presented stating the main increase is \$2.00 per hour for drivers to get to the going rate. There were no questions.

h. Libraries

Samara Klein presented stating there are some budget increases/decreases reflecting shifts in usage and real costs, but baseline is the same except for personnel where increases are due to union negotiation to make salaries market rate. E. Abrahams stated he is the uncompensated president of Friends of the Library and asked about the cut to books/nonprint and shift to subscriptions – S. Klein replied nonprint such as audio books on tape, DVDs, etc. are in use, but at a diminishing rate. M. Cerna asked about future plans/trends for growth – S. Klein replied e-audio/e-books usage is increasing. Staffing was discussed and S. Klein stated there are a total of 14 library employees and noted on the budget library clerk is broken out by part and full time. P. Orenstein asked about staffing of Mason and Ramsdell – S. Klein replied it is a consistent schedule and Ramsdell hours are appropriate. It was also confirmed that the state funds library programming.

Pat Hollenbeck expressed support for library staff wage increases and commented when a holiday falls on a Sunday/Monday Ramsdell is closed for an extended period. S. Bannon replied that is part of collective bargaining – M. Pruhenski added that applies to all Town employees.

i. Parks and Recreation

J. Aberdale stated the budget is unchanged except for some small increases for youth programming and lake management funds most of which is for managing weeds/sand at Lake Mansfield.

Mechanical, biological and other means of managing weeds at the Lake were discussed. P. Orenstein suggested perhaps youth programming could be funded with Community Impact Funds – and it would be looked into.

j. Wastewater

J. Aberdale presented stating the most significant increase is in chemicals to treat wastewater. M. Cerna asked about the amount for maturing debt A. Crespo explained it is principal and interest payment for MA Water Trust low interest loans through the state revolving fund. P. Orenstein asked about the General Fund allocation – A. Crespo replied it is the offset that was recalculated to include indirect costs for Wastewater Enterprise Fund – previous calculations did not include benefits. She continued to explain the General Fund pays for items that have to be accounted for in the Enterprise Fund including employee and retiree salaries and benefits as a percentage of fringe benefits and includes a percentage of Selectboard salary as Sewer Commissioners.

k. Capital

S. Bannon stated department requests do not always mean borrowing—it could be tax levy CPA, etc.

- Police Department – Chief Sorti presented his request for 20 new tasers and accessories that are compatible with the current body cameras and recording platform – he noted the quote is old so might increase slightly. He added tasers are replaced every 7-10 years. He described an additional request for new side arms – which are currently over 10 years old; over the normal replacement life. The request is for an upgrade and the quote includes holsters, sights and lighting. He outlined another request for a new police cruiser which are on a six-year replacement cycle - he noted there is a one year delay on receiving cars.
- Fire Department - Chief Burger presented a request for a utility terrain vehicle and trailer as currently, the Town relies on mutual aid for calls for situations such as mountain rescues.
- DPW – J. Aberdale presented requests for a leaf blower, three trucks, a loader and excavator. It was noted there is no date for receiving this equipment, but there will be a delay. The replacement cycle for equipment was discussed and J. Aberdale noted by FY25 there will be a five-year plan looking at how equipment is being used and cycles for replacement.
- Buildings and Grounds – J. Aberdale presented stating there is no asset management and staffing plan for buildings which need ongoing/periodic maintenance, but one is being developed to plan, monitor, prioritize and maintain/repair buildings proactively on an ongoing basis before there are issues. He noted some repair expenses will be funded through CPA and other grants.

Projects include a leaking roof at the GB Fire Station; Housatonic Fire House water/mold; Town Hall windows; Mahaiwe Cemetery mausoleum; Courthouse water issues; DPW highway garage and transfer station buildings; Mason Library portico; Ramsdell Library access ramp and Police Station HVAC system. S. Bannon stated the work will happen over a few years and will impact taxes over time. He emphasized the need to address these problems so they do not worsen – but there will be a plan in place so work is not put off again and is done in smaller increments. It was highlighted that staffing, resources and the massive number of active projects impact the ability to keep up with maintenance/repairs – though it was agreed a go forward plan would help. There was overall concern about these expenses and discussion especially about the high cost of building the Fire Station, potential subpar construction, unheeded warnings about leaks/issues and the need to set standards for contractors to ensure expertise/craftmanship. P. Orenstein suggested stating how resources are allocated to buildings by age.

- Streets and Bridges – J. Aberdale presented stating the main focus is on the substantial street work repair and engineering - and he noted there is a plan in place to manage it – and some grant funding for the work. C. Rembold noted there are projections for coming years for larger projects such as Route 41 and Main Street South. J. Aberdale also stated there is a traffic study on Brookside to get ahead of planned work there.
- Parks – J. Aberdale presented describing improvements planned for Grove Street and Dewey Parks - and ongoing collaboration with the Parks Commission. He highlighted work at McAllister Park to install parking and a study of Old Maids Park to see what upgrades are possible. Olympia Meadows was discussed and how maintenance of Memorial Field is handled by teams that use it.
- Technology – C. Rembold presented stating efforts to bring broadband to Housatonic village have progressed – there is a study for the pole route including upgrades to string fiber – with an estimated cost of \$350,000 – and it can be put out to bid. He continued to state what is needed is a digital equity plan to determine who wants and can access the service – and to get a trunk line/backbone into Housatonic village. He noted this is a Selectboard priority item and he is looking into a potential state fiber optic grant.
- Wastewater – J. Aberdale presented stating a new mower is needed as well as facility maintenance and a plan for potential upgrades.

E. Abrahams stated there are three attendees from the public and the remainder are staff/media.

3. Citizen Speak – No citizens asked to speak

4. Media Time – No media spoke.

5. Adjournment - Chairman Bannon adjourned the meeting by unanimous consent at 8:41pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Stacy Ostrow, Recording Clerk