

**TOWN OF GREAT BARRINGTON
MASSACHUSETTS**

**FINANCE COMMITTEE MEETING
MINUTES**

**TUESDAY, APRIL 7, 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.

3. **Minutes from January 14, 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, W. Curletti seconded. Roll call vote: all in favor (5 - 0).
4. **Finance Committee member committee reports:**

Community Preservation Committee. T. Blauvelt reported that the Community Preservation Committee (CPC) last met in February 2020, and the business at that meeting was primarily housekeeping (e.g., setting conditions on applications if approved) and reviewing the past policies and procedures. A recent email (April 7) from Assistant Town Manager, Chris Rembold, that the Berkshire Natural Resource Council, who were going to do work on what is known as the Barbieri Trailhead, and they are running into some obstacles; they have another project to propose. Thus, the CPC may need to reconvene soon to entertain a change in their application, but nothing has been decided as of yet.

Economic Development Committee. A. O'Dwyer reported on the most recent Economic Development Committee (EDC) meeting in January 2020, as FC member, M. O'Connor, was not able to attend the meeting. She shared that the chair of the Committee was working to schedule a remote meeting to occur the coming weeks. A. O'Dwyer observed that the last meeting of the EDC was prior to the rise in Covid-19 restrictions and closures, and both she and M. O'Connor indicated that they fully expected that the focus of the EDC would be switching to how to support local businesses and residents economically, during this time.

Update from Town Manager. M. Pruhenski shared with the committee that the department heads had been instructed, via a memo that came out a few weeks ago, to limit expenditures to essential items. He cited the high level of uncertainty at the current moment, and that it seemed prudent to do this. M. Loubert requested a copy of the memo, which he agreed to forward. Pruhenski further reported that all positions that are open at this time are being evaluated on a case-by-case basis. He noted one DPW position that is open; and that will not be filled right now; however, there is a health agent position open, and the Town is proceeding with, as this a critical position at this moment. M. Loubert indicated that she, too, had been concerned for the Board of Health, which even under normal circumstances would be stressed, and is glad to hear that the Town is moving forward on the health agent position.

M. Loubert asked—noting that while it is still early in the adoption of these remote Covid-19 meeting technologies and processes—if there is a plan to eventually role out some consistency in how the meetings are conducted. M. Pruhenski reported that the Town Manager’s staff are working on obtaining a license for multiple users with Zoom and are test-running this platform at a staff meeting in the coming days. The staff will also be setting up accounts for the Chairs to access for meetings. The recent restrictions on non-essential meetings, he reported, was to give staff time to get up to speed on these new technologies in order to instruct others in their uses. M. Loubert thanked M. Pruhenski for this update, and raised a question regarding the hacking concerns on the Zoom platform. M. Pruhenski indicated that controls are now built into the platform. A. O’Dwyer reported that Zoom’s has new controls to prevent hacking. M. Pruhenski shared that Zoom also allowed meetings to be recorded for minutes and record-keeping.

5. **Update from Finance Director.** A. O’Dwyer thanked S. Carmel for providing the budget reports from December 2019 and January and February 2020. She asked if much has changed since the Feb 2020 budget report came out. S. Carmel agreed that much has changed in terms of the tracking of expenses, as she is setting up a separate tracking for Covid-19 expenses; however, for the regular budget reports, not much has changed. S. Carmel indicated that she will be providing March 2020 budget reports in later in the current week. M. Loubert requested clarification on one budget line with a deficit—the Fire Department Equipment Maintenance and Repairs--which had gone into the negative, starting in December and going into January and February. S. Carmel reported that she has been working closely with the Fire Department on that particular budget line item. These expenditures are running higher than expected, as they are hard to predict, but by lowering some PO’s (Purchase Orders) and making a line-item transfer for approximately \$5,000—which should appear in April—this should offset that deficit. M. Loubert thanked S. Carmel for this clarification.

A. O’Dwyer requested further clarification regarding tracking Covid-19 expenses. S. Carmel reported that one of the first directive the Town had received from the State Dept of Revenue was that if we are anticipating expenses in excess of appropriations, the Town must apply for approval from the State Director of Accounts. Requesting such approvals in advance protects the Town if it does have greater than anticipated expenses. The only way to do this is to put together a detailed list of expenses occurred and anticipated. She noted that the departments most affected—Fire, Police, DPW and Health Dept, and IT—did a great job of getting these data together and the Town submitted the DOR last week, and gave us approval within one day. There is now a separate account for tracking those expenses and we will be able to see these expenses on the upcoming budget

reports. M. Loubert thanked S. Carmel for this effort. A. O'Dwyer asked if we anticipated an overage in Communications and Emergency Management budgets; S. Carmel suggested we were not anticipating overages in these departments—most would be in the departments that provided data for the approval process. M. Carmel indicated that the Town is still trying to stay within budgets, as any overages will need to be accounted for, and could affect next year's tax rate.

6. Finance Committee business: Covid-19 Impacts & Concerns (Discussion).

A. O'Dwyer noted that a major purpose of this meeting was an opportunity for members of the Finance Committee to come together to share what we are hearing from town residents. She also reported that she and S. Bannon had been in conversation about scheduling a joint Finance Committee/Selectboard meeting to revisit the 2021 Budget. S. Bannon agreed that it made sense to schedule a joint meeting and then schedule the Public Hearing after that, so that we can ensure that what is presented at the Public Hearing is as accurate and complete as possible. M. Loubert expressed appreciation for this additional joint meeting, noting how much has changed since the last joint meeting in January. She noted that many other communities are going back and looking at their budgets.

M. Loubert also shared that she is concerned regarding the effectiveness of remote meetings. Recognizing that the Town and the Town Manager's office will do all they can to make it an effective meeting, the Budget Hearing is an important meeting. She shared that her last experience with a remote public hearing was not positive in relation to public participation. S. Bannon shared that he hoped we may be able to have some in-person attendance—not knowing what is going to be possible. M. Loubert request that we push the Public Hearing out as far as possible in relation to the Town Meeting. M. Pruhenski indicated he was working with his staff to come up with a timeline that would work once a Town Meeting date was set.

A. O'Dwyer shared that she had received the notification—from the Town—regarding the State's granting of permission for towns to delay the deadline for real-estate taxes and other fees, and asked if a vote to adopt these was planned for the upcoming Selectboard meeting. M. Pruhenski reported that it is—not only deferring property tax payments, but also waiving interest and penalties on excise and sewer payments, and looking at dates for the Town Meeting and elections. A. O'Dwyer shared that she has heard from residents concerns regarding paying bills during this time, in terms of waiving fines or other supports for those who need assistance – such as payment plans, etc. S. Bannon reported that the Town is talking with the state DOR to see what is possible within MA State laws to help those experiencing financial hardship. M. Loubert shared that as someone who has lost her job due to Covid-19, she has learned that both the unemployment office and the small business loans initiatives are experiencing significant delays—and that the Town can and should do all it can to help those who are struggling. S. Bannon agreed that the Town is looking to do all it can to help.

W. Curletti expressed that downtown businesses have taken a considerable hit to their business and to their wellbeing, and that everyone would greatly appreciate everything the boards can do to help businesses in Town to weather the storm that is Covid-19 and help keep them stay viable during this time. M. Pruhenski reported that he has met with his staff, and all agree that the goal will be to extend deadlines and waive penalties to the fullest extent allowable by this new act passed by the

State Senate and House. He shared that this is also possible because the Town is not facing any cash flow issues at this time. M. Loubert thanked all for the information and their efforts.

7. Finance Committee Member Comments

M. Loubert asked M. Pruhenski re: if there were any updates or additional information about the Southern Berkshire Ambulance Squad (SBAS) request for funds from the Town. She shared that she subscribes to a newsletter regarding ambulance squads. She received a notification just today that the CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security) Act also has information regarding supporting ambulance squads, and offered to forward it on to the Town Manager's Office. She observed that the SBAS was clearly under stress before Covid-19, and is certainly under even more stress now. M. Pruhenski reported that he had met with representative from SBAS and Fairview Hospital and that representatives will be present at the upcoming joint meeting to present more.

8. Media Time

- 9. Adjournment.** Motion was made by A. O'Dwyer at 6:40 PM to adjourn the meeting; M. Loubert second; vote 5-0 all in favor.

Respectfully submitted by

Anne O'Dwyer

Approved on April 30, 2020