

**TOWN OF GREAT BARRINGTON
MASSACHUSETTS**

**FINANCE COMMITTEE MEETING
MINUTES**

**TUESDAY, JULY 21, 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 verified that present at the meeting: A. O' Dwyer, M. Loubert, T. Blauvelt, and M. O'Connor (W. Curletti not present).

Also in attendance: Town Manager, M. Pruhenski; Finance Director, S. Carmel; Selectboard Chair, S. Bannon; Police Chief, W. Walsh, Police Sergeants P. Storti and A. Carlotto.

3. **Welcome and Congratulations to Newly Elected FC member: Election of Chair and Vice Chair.**

A. O'Dwyer was re-elected the Finance Committee. She thanked those who had voted for her, and recognized that the coming year will be challenging. T. Blauvelt led the re-election portion of the meeting. M. Loubert nominated A. O'Dwyer as Chair of the committee; M. O'Connor seconded. Roll call vote: all in favor (4 - 0). M. Loubert then nominated A. O'Dwyer asked for nominations for Vice Chair. M. Loubert nominated T. Blauvelt, A. O'Dwyer second. Roll call vote: all in favor (4 - 0). A. O'Dwyer thanked M. Loubert for her work as Vice Chair this past year.

4. **Approval of Minutes**

Minutes of June 16, 2020 FC meeting. M. Loubert made the motion to approve the minutes, T. Blauvelt seconded. Roll call vote: all in favor (4 - 0).

5. **Finance Committee member committee reports:**

Community Preservation Committee. T. Blauvelt shared that the CPC met earlier on the same day (July 21); T. Blauvelt was re-elected to Chair and Karen Smith will serve as vice-chair. There are some key dates: Sept 8 5:00 PM will be the CPC's public hearing on CPC planning. He said he will be sending the FC members copies of the plan and asked them to review at the next FC meeting. The CPC will still use a 2-step application process; Step 1 applications will be due Fri Oct 2nd at 4:00 PM. After CPC review, recommendations will be made for those considered for Step 2 will be due on Fri Nov 6 at 4:00 PM. T. Blauvelt ask that committee members think of their own committees and projects that might be considered for CPC funding.

Economic Development Committee. M. O'Connor reported that EDC met the week prior had discussed that the EDC was still looking for guidance from the Selectboard on specific tasks and projects; there was also a report given on promoting future train service in the region. S. Bannon confirmed that the Selectboard has a goal-setting meeting scheduled for August 3rd, which may be relevant to the EDC projects.

6. Update from Town Manager & Finance Director. A. O'Dwyer recognized that S. Carmel's office is still in the midst of closing out FY 2020; however, S. Carmel reported that she did have some very recent updates on revenues:

- Property taxes: (compared with the prior four FY's)
 - i. Real-estate taxes: at 95% (consistent with all prior years);
 - ii. Personal property: down 3% (which is approx. \$20,000)
- Motor vehicle excise: level with last year. She noted that typically this is up about 15% each year, but also noted that we have now outsourced the billing, so there is a slight (approx. 3-week) lag due to that transition, so she expects that once all the billing is complete, we will see a comparable increase this year.
- Building permits: up \$51,000 compared to prior year;
- State Local Option Taxes: (Mar-May)
 - i. Hotel/Motel – down for 4th quarter (compared to prior year 4th quarter) by 7.4%; however for all of FY 2020 up 30% for the entire year;
 - ii. Meals Tax – down 38% (as anticipated with Covid 19 restrictions); also however for all of FY 2020 is level;

A. O'Dwyer noted that the minutes of the current meeting would summarize these data for the coming meeting. S. Carmel pointed out that these specific numbers are still very preliminary and should be recognized as such.

Regarding Year-End re: accounts payable, she reminded the committee that July 16th is the absolute end-of-year date to make payments. She noted that this is her third year doing this and that the PO system put in place has really helped the process.

She also shared that the Taconic Vocational Tuition & Transportation fee for FY 2020 that was voted at the recent Annual Town Meeting, had been estimated at \$100,000, and the actual cost came in at \$78,000 (with \$22,000 going back into free cash). This difference was due school department was able negotiate a Covid-related reduction in fees for the past year.

Regarding the current year (FY 2021), departmental PO's are already set up, and more departments are coming on board with the PO system.

M. Pruhenski reminded the committee that the Special Town Meeting date has been set for **Tuesday September 15th at 6:00.** The focus of the meeting will be primarily zoning articles and citizen's permissions. Congratulated S. Carmel on the Town's recent AAA bond rating, noting that this is something the Town should be proud of in these challenging financial times.

A. O'Dwyer asked for an update on furloughs. M. Pruhenski reported that 2 more full-time library staff have been brought back (off furlough) due to the popularity of the Town's Library curb-side pick-up programs. All part-time library employees are still on furlough and that this would likely

continue until the libraries open in-person. The 2 DPW furloughed employees were also brought back, and there are still 2 openings that have not yet been filled (only 1 has been advertised). He noted that the Town is bringing back employees slowly. T. Blauvelt asked if the three police academy trainees had completed their trainings; Chief Walsh reported that one of the trainees is now fully on the schedule; and 2 are completing in-house training, and will soon be fully on the schedule.

7. Finance Committee Business

Trust Policy and Policing Committee. A. O'Dwyer shared with the committee that at a recent SB meeting, a proclamation was presented and it was voted on to create a working group to look at the Town's spending in various departments and its relation to these policies and the recent proclamation. She suggested that since the group/committee would be looking at town budgets and spending, the FC should be represented. M. Pruhenski noted that as the committee gets formed a call for members will be posted.

September FC meeting. The September FC meeting was set to be September 22nd.

8. Finance Committee Members Comments.

A. O'Dwyer continues to work on the SBAS finances. She hopes to have more updates for the committee at the August meeting.

Police Dept Therapy Dog Vehicle. M. O'Connor raised questions and concerns about the recent SB presentation (June 23, 2020) and vote for a therapy dog program, which involved the Police Dept repurposing of a vehicle scheduled for trade-in to be used as a specialized vehicle to support this program. She said she had reviewed the February 18, 2020 joint SB/FC budget meeting at which the PD had requested an earlier than scheduled replacement of the existing canine vehicle, and then the May request to keep one of the end-of-use vehicles for this new canine program. Her question focused on if the out-of-service-life canine vehicle was being kept and reused rather than replaced. Sgts Carlotto clarified that the canine vehicle replacement requested in February was to replace the 2015 canine patrol vehicle, which transports a patrol dog (needs to be reliable and "police grade"). The therapy/comfort dog program simply requires a cruiser – does not need to be as reliable a vehicle as in the regular force (the cruiser being considered is a 2018 dept vehicle that is now considered out-of-life for usage for regular police usage).

M. O'Connor asked if this is adding another vehicle to the police dept fleet vehicles and if this was in the planning when the request was made to the FC/SB in February to get a second new vehicle—wondering why this new program was not presented at the same time as the vehicle replacement request. Sgt Storti acknowledged that he had started working on this therapy dog program about a year ago, although Sgt Carlotto noted that he did not get the request for a vehicle for the program until just recently. St. Storti shared that he didn't want to present the program until he had a more informed proposal prepared. Only recently did he approach Sgt Carlotto to see if there was a vehicle that could be repurposed. The SB meeting at which this was presented for approval was just after the Town Meeting.

M. Loubert raised two concerns: First, is accurate to describe the program as no expense to the Town. If the vehicle will not be available for trade-in, this is an expense to the Town (the range of trade-in values is \$2,500 - \$4,700). And, then will the Police Dept now add this vehicle to its vehicle replacement moving forward. Also, if the program is funded primarily by donations, if the donations

fall short, will the Town be expected to cover the costs. Sgt. Carlotto said since it is a pilot program, it is not certain what the future replacement cycle would be – as the program may not be continued. Sgt. Storti said that if the finances do not allow for the program to be continued, then the program will stop. He anticipates no financial burden to the tax-payers now or in the future. A. O'Dwyer asked for clarification if this means that in the future there will be a new vehicle allocated to the Police Dept's fleet. S. Carlotto indicated that if the Town elects to continue this program, then the vehicle would need to be replaced.

M. Loubert indicated that it is clear that in the future, given donations expectations and the vehicle replacement anticipation if this program continues. She noted that at this time that Towns are tightening budgets, this program being added does not come without expenses. Chief Walsh indicated that the program could be discontinued if the Program is not continued; M. Loubert noted that it is more difficult to discontinue programs once they have been established. T. Blauvelt asked for clarification of how we might assess the success of the program. Sgt. Storti suggested looking at feedback the Town and the PD receives re: the program and that he is getting guidance from others on how to quantify and share the feedback; he indicated his excitement that Great Barrington is the first town in the region to have such a program. A. O'Dwyer asked when the program will start. Sgt. Storti indicated it would start—with a soft opening—in late August, and then a more community-introduction three or so months later. Chief Walsh indicated that he did not agree that there had been a lack of transparency in the PD budgeting, but acknowledged that there was some confusion. M. O'Connor shared that she was still having some confusion, but appreciated the opportunity to discuss it at this meeting.

9. **Finance Committee Member Comments.** A. O'Dwyer shared that the Town continues to follow up regarding the Vocational Transportation. A. O'Dwyer also continues to work on reviewing the Southern Berkshire Ambulance Squad financials. T. Blauvelt asked if there is a plan to have a minute-taker available in the future; M. Pruhenski shared that it has been very difficult to find a minute-taker—the position is advertised, but the Town gets few qualified applicants. M. Loubert asked about the pay rate (which is \$18/hr—which is up from \$15/hr in past years), and if we might review the job description, as the responsibilities in this role are considerable). M. Loubert asked about if the Town could consider having dedicated emails for Town Committee/Board members—to clarify how residents could reach committees/boards if they have questions or concerns and for public records. M. Pruhenski to look into this and report back at the next meeting.

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

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

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

Respectfully submitted by

Anne O'Dwyer

Approved on August 18, 2020