

**TOWN OF GREAT BARRINGTON
MASSACHUSETTS**

**FINANCE COMMITTEE MEETING
MINUTES**

**TUESDAY, AUGUST 18, 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, and M. O'Connor (T. Blauvelt was not in attendance at start of meeting, but communicated that he would join shortly); W. Curletti not present).

Also in attendance: Town Manager, M. Pruhenski; Finance Director, S. Carmel; Selectboard Chair, S. Bannon; Selectboard member, Ed Abrahams; Treasurer/Collector, Karen Fink; Principal Assessor, Shawn McHugh; and DPW Superintendent, Sean Van Deusen.

3. **Approval of Minutes**

Minutes of July 21, 2020 FC meeting. M. Loubert made the motion to approve the minutes, A. O'Dwyer seconded. Roll call vote: all in favor (3 - 0).

4. **Finance Committee member committee reports – Economic Development Committee:**

Economic Development Committee. M. O'Connor was not able to attend the most recent EDC meeting; A. O'Dwyer (member at large on the EDC) reported that the committee had received feedback from Selectboard regarding taking on various information-gathering projects, focusing on costs of various projects, who might benefit and what is need [for the project]. She noted that the EDC is still trying to understand its role as an advisory committee to the Selectboard. Projects discussed include the Berkshire Train project and other surveys that might be done.

5. **Update from Town Manager.** M. Pruhenski referenced a communication from the Mass Municipal Association from July 30th (already shared with FC members, and included in the meeting packet) reporting that the State would keep unrestricted general government state aid for FY 21 would be level funded, which was good news, at a time when cuts to funding were a concern.

T. Blauvelt joined the meeting at 6:07 PM.

M. Loubert commented that the links in the MMA report were difficult to access; she also noted that level funding is often noted as a cause for cutting services (not keeping services level), so this news

of level funding is not entirely positive. M. Pruhenski acknowledged that this observations was accurate even for the current FY, as the Town increased local aid in the FY 21 budget by just less than \$12,000, which S. Carmel observed was less than a 1% increase from previous years, and is only 4% of the total budget and we are conservative on estimating local aid in budgeting, so she is not so concerned with the level funding. M. Loubert noted that she is concerned. A. O'Dwyer agreed that the level funding does not take into account cost of living increases, but that she had been hearing that there may be cuts to local aid, so the news of level funding was better than she had anticipated.

M. Pruhenski also shared his follow up on the committee's requests for Town committee member email accounts. He noted that there are approximately 172 individual on town committees, and each email account comes with a \$75 set-up fee, so that would be cost of almost \$13,000 to the Town – to create an individual town email account for each committee member. In addition to the cost, in his conversations with Amy Pulver and others, they noted the concerns regarding security and time in managing so many new accounts and the constant turnover in committee members. Thus, his recommendation is to not proceed with creating email accounts for each member, but to create one email account for each board or committee, to be managed by the chair, which would be hyperlinked to the chair.

A. O'Dwyer noted that there would still be a cost (\$75 per committee), but M. Pruhenski indicated the town could likely absorb that cost, and asked if that would go to the Chair. T. Blauvelt agreed with this suggestion. Both A. O'Dwyer and M. Loubert expressed surprise at the cost per account – it was higher than expected (it is the same cost for employees as committee members).

M. Loubert also wondered at the cost, as in other municipal agencies, staff have their own accounts. She also asked if SB had their own emails; M. Pruhenski reported that these committee members do due their high volume of emails, and Town employees have email accounts. But, no other committee members have email accounts. S. Bannon also indicated that regarding lawsuits, it is easier for the Town SB members to have town accounts. M. Loubert also wondered if Planning Board and other boards should have the same, noting concerns for other committees/boards that don't have a Town email account. A. O'Dwyer noted that having a committee email would still make it easier for residents to reach committees; M. Loubert expressed concerns that this system will rely a lot on the responsiveness of the chair, recognizing that this can be further reviewed in the future. M. Pruhenski noted that A. Pulver, as the in-house IT staff person, receives a very small stipend (he estimated it to be around \$3,000) for managing the Town email accounts. Adding another 172 accounts would add considerable workload to this role—and unlike a school district, the Town does not have a dedicated IT office.

6. **Update from Finance Director.** A. O'Dwyer thanked S. Carmel for getting the end-of-year operating budget reports for FY 2020; she also apologized that there were some missing and out-of-order pages in the scanned pages on the budget reports in the meeting packet, although these were corrected in the posted addendum to the original packet, and she was able to display all pages via the Zoom screen share function. FC members indicated that they were okay moving forward with the discussion, despite the page issues.

S. Carmel shared a general summary of the FY 20 end-of-year budget reports. Overall, the turn-backs (unused budget amounts) was approximately \$1.1 million for the operating budgets and \$240,000 for the Wastewater budget. A. O'Dwyer commented that insurance expenditures came in below budgeted amounts; S. Carmel noted \$427,000 were turned back; she reminded the committee

that the town has a policy budgets this conservatively, and often sees turn-backs in this line (this year is slightly lower in turn-back amounts than last year).

7. Finance Committee Business

Town Warrant Items: The committee reviewed the two items on the Town Warrant for the upcoming Special Town Meeting (on September 15, 2020):

Quarterly Tax Billing Proposal. K. Fink and S. Carmel shared with the committee that their recommendation to the Town is to go to a quarterly billing system. A. O'Dwyer noted that it was her understanding that this can help with cash flow for the town and reducing the need to borrow. M. Loubert asked about the cost to the town to make this change; K. Fink indicated that while her department would be busier, she did not anticipate any greater cost. She noted that since the bills would still be mailed twice a year, there would be no additional printing or postage costs. She said that is what most towns do—have four billing periods, but only two mailings. M. Loubert indicated that she has seen towns send bills for each payment period. A. O'Dwyer asked how we remind residents that there are quarterly payments due. K. Fink indicated that the Town can do some postings and other low-cost communications to remind residents about the new billing system. All agreed local newspapers should cover this change. K. Fink noted that most people pay the full half, even when there are quarterly payments, although M. Loubert noted that these are different economic times. K. Fink said this was not an issue. She said that wmost people have their tax payments woven into the mortgage, and banks make this adjustment readily. She noted that the first quarterly preliminary tax bills would be mailed out on July 2021.

A. O'Dwyer said she understood that this switch a quarterly tax payment would enable the Town to set tax rates later in the year. A. O'Dwyer made the motion to move to a quarterly tax payment system; T. Blauvelt seconded. Roll call vote: Vote (3 – 1); M. Loubert voted against.

Wastewater Additional Budget Request. The Wastewater Treatment requested an additional \$50,000 above the budget approved at the recent June 2020 Town Meeting. [Bill Ingram, Wastewater Superintendent, had planned to be at the meeting, but was unable to attend.]

S. Van Deusen shared that the treatment plant's sludge hauling/removal agency's bid – a 13% increase (which they attributed to the environmental permitting costs associated with sludge removal); he also pointed out that they were the only bidder for this service contract. He also noted that the treatment plant had seen a 20% increase in the amount of septic waste the plant was seeing (the GB Wastewater Treatment plant processes waste from several surrounding towns, as well, which generates revenue [approx. \$300,000 in FY 20] for the plant). He reported that they are anticipating additional increases in sludge due to relocations to the region and the increase that people are staying at home. He indicated that these additional funds requested—summarized in a memo in the meeting packet—are in response to these anticipated increases. S. Carmel indicated that if the money is not spent, the funds go back into retained earnings, but doesn't change the next year's budget. M. Loubert said while she's worried about increasing budgets at this time, she realizes this needs to be done.

A. O'Dwyer made the motion to move to support the request; T. Blauvelt seconded. Roll call vote: All voted in favor (4 – 0).

Return to Finance Committee member committee reports Community Preservation Committee.

T. Blauvelt had asked at the prior meeting that the FC members review the CPC plan. A. O'Dwyer asked if the 1/3-1/3-1/3 division between affordable housing, historic preservation, and open-spaces, was intentional on the part of the committee. T. Blauvelt indicated that this was not by design, but is how it often worked out. M. Loubert asked if the Committee shifted the balance between the funding across the three areas, taking into account the concerns at the time (she noted the housing issues at this time in the region). M. Blauvelt indicated that the main priority is Town-sponsored projects, which are given first consideration; second bases for consideration is the quality of the organization regarding managing funds, etc. He also noted that he felt the committee members each brought their own advocacies to the debates on the committee.

8. **Finance Committee Member Comments.** < no comments or questions >

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

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

T. Blauvelt lost connection with the meeting at 6:53 PM.

11. **Adjournment.** Motion was made by A. O'Dwyer at 6:55 PM to adjourn the meeting; M. Loubert seconded; vote 3-0, all in favor.

Respectfully submitted by

Anne O'Dwyer

Approved December 15, 2020