

**TOWN OF GREAT BARRINGTON
MASSACHUSETTS**

**FINANCE COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES**

**TUESDAY, MAY 18, 2021
6:30 PM**

LOCATION: REMOTE MEETING

Conducted via Zoom Meeting

1. **Meeting was called to order** by Chairperson A. O'Dwyer, at 6:30 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 limitation on the number of people that may gather in one place.
2. **Attendance roll call** was called by Chairman A. O'Dwyer. A roll call verified that present at the meeting: M. Loubert, P. Orenstein, and A. O' Dwyer were all in attendance. T. Blauvelt and M. O'Connor were absent.

Also in attendance: Town Manager, M. Pruhenski; Finance Director, S. Carmel; and Selectboard Chair, S. Bannon; Selectboard members E. Abrahams and E. Gabriel; Amy Pulver, Office Administrator & IT Coordinator; and Ross Vivori, Principal Assessor.

3. **Welcome New Members & Committee Reorganization.** The first order of business was to welcome newly-elected member Philip Orenstein, and re-elected member Michelle Loubert. M. Loubert made a motion to appoint A. O'Dwyer as chair for the coming year; P. Orenstein seconded; Role call vote: all approved. P. Orenstein then nominated M. Loubert as vice-chair on the committee; A. O'Dwyer seconded; role call vote: all approved.
4. **Approval of Minutes.** Review of April 27 minutes was postponed to next meeting.
5. **Finance Committee member committee reports.** There were no committee reports.
6. **Update from Town Manager & Finance Director.**
 - Upcoming Annual Town Meeting. Town Manager, M. Pruhenski reminded the committee re: dates and planned promotion of the upcoming Annual Town Meeting. He also reported that the position of Treasurer/Collector has been filled—the new hire will start on June 7th. Ms. Doolan comes from Sheffield, having served in a similar position in Sheffield for the past three years. He thanked S. Carmel and Ellyn Dupont for their help in keeping up with the work in that office. P. Orenstein asked about the salary of the new hire – is it different than the amount currently budgeted for? M. Pruhenski indicated that the new salary is actually below the budgeted salary, and that she was aware of the planned salary survey, and that her salary would be revisited once the survey is completed.
 - Update on SBAS Payments. P. Orenstein asked to follow up on the Southern Berkshire Ambulance Squad request for funds (as of the last meeting, SBAS had not requested any of the fund [\$42,000 is allocated in the Town's FY 2021 budget]. S. Carmel noted that they have mailed in the invoice for the first six months (\$21,000) which has been paid, and the next quarter's invoice has been received, and another \$10,500 will be paid in a week or so.
 - April 2021 Operating Budget & Wastewater Budget Reports. A. O'Dwyer observed that the town is at approximately 75% of budgets expended, noting that interest payments come due toward the end of the FY (and most of these payments are made in April – June). These are summarized below:

- i. Possible fund transfer requests: S. Carmel further highlighted two departments that may have year-end transfer of funds requests between salary and non-salary budget lines at the end-of-year to cover expenses (noting the Police Dept & Clerk's Office as possible places this might be needed). However, she noted that while the Police Dept's Police Chief salary line (01210-51117) is at 87% expended; she noted that Chief Walsh's retirement payout came out of that line, so that line will likely require funds transferred from other PD budget line(s) to get through the rest of the year. Will be brought to the Finance Committee and Selectboard for approval (at a June joint meeting). M. Pruhenski also pointed out that the new PD Chief Sorti's salary will likely also require addition funds transferred to the Chief Salary line (noting that Chief Sorti's salary is still in negotiation).
- ii. S. Carmel also pointed out in the Highway Dept budget line (01422-57700)—snow and ice removal—while the line currently indicates an approximately \$13,000 deficit, the Town was recently able to close out some purchase orders and there is now a surplus in that budget line—which will be reflected in the May budget report. S. Carmel noted that while the price of salt had gone up, the expenditure was not as high as had been anticipated.
- iii. S. Carmel also highlighted the Veterans Affairs benefits (01543-57700) budget line is under-budget, and she anticipates this line coming in \$30,000 under budget.
- iv. M. Loubert asked about funding for the Town Hall steps repair. S. Carmel noted that these expenses were in the Capital budget.
- v. P. Orenstein also asked about why the health insurance budget line is 01945-51740 is so far underbudget (at 61%). S. Carmel pointed out that this is how the Town has budgeted for quite some time (over-estimating health insurance costs, with the anticipation of coming in under-budget). S. Bannon shared that the Town has used this practice—of over-budgeting health insurance for many, many years (longer than any at the meeting had been involved in Town government)—as any excess funds go to Free Cash. He noted that the DOR approves this practice, and it helps to ensure there are funds available for Free Cash. S. Carmel noted that this budget line has not increased considerably in many years; A. O'Dwyer recalled a conversation many years ago on the committee regarding concerns at a time about volatility in health insurance costs, although these cost are usually known before the annual Town Meeting.
- vi. P. Orenstein asked for clarification on the question of funding for the Housatonic School repairs—if the funds were not requested because of the timeline for the work or because of some unavailability of funds. S. Carmel confirmed that Sean VanDeusen, DPW Superintendent, had originally planned to request \$25,000 in funds at the April FC meeting, but because he could not get the work contract completed before July 1st for Reserve Funds to be used for the work. M. Pruhenski then reminded the committee that since it is no longer an unanticipated expense, it cannot come out of the FC Reserve Fund, and that the funds ought not to be expended without the recommendation of the Housatonic Improvement Committee. E. Gabriel, indicated that the Committee is not yet in a place to make a recommendation at this time, but he—as a resident of Housatonic — could speak to the need for the repairs.

7. Finance Committee business

- Update re: December 2020 Reserve Fund Transfer Request for Technology. A. Pulver reminded the committee that at the December 2020 FC meeting, the committee had approved the request for the transfer of \$15,000 from the Reserve Fund to the Technology—Repairs & Maintenance budget (01136-52400) for the purpose of purchasing new equipment for remote work by staff.

She noted that these funds were used to purchase an initial round of equipment, but the department found that remote work (from home) also required a more reliable and robust phone service, and thus as the Town transitioned to a new and more robust (TPX VoIP) phone system

provide to accommodate these additional needs. Thus, A. Pulver indicated that she was coming to the committee to ask if the remainder of the transferred reserve funds could have a change in to covering the unexpectedly high cost of the phone service upgrade. She is anticipating this will require an additional \$7,000 - \$8,000 more than was originally budgeted.

A. O'Dwyer asked if this change in use of funds would result in Town Hall staff would find their work laptops not adequate for use at home. A. Pulver noted that as the Town is opening up, the staff is finding that there is less need for new laptops than anticipated, and that the older computers that are being replaced are finding uses in the Town Hall. P. Orenstein and M. Loubert both asked for further clarification on where the \$7,000-\$8,000 in unanticipated phone expenses is coming from. A. Pulver noted that the conversion to the new phone system took far more time than anticipated (perhaps due in part to Covid restrictions), and thus the more expensive (and less robust) old system was in place for far longer than expected. However, the new system is in place, and the new—reduced—monthly phone bill is already included in the coming year's proposed budget.

M. Loubert made a motion to approve the revised use of the December 2020 Reserve Transfer request funds. P. Orenstein seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

- Senior Tax Deferral Program – Presentation, Discussion & Vote. Ross Vivori, Principal Assessor, began by reminding the committee that he had written an executive summary re: his recommendations re: this proposal, which was made available on the Town's website. He further noted that the proposed program (41A) is a deferral program, not an exemption program. He noted that in his summary, he recommended that the program needed to be reviewed and explored in the context of other tax relief programs, before any decision is made on the program.

A. O'Dwyer asked R. Vivori for clarification on how implementing this program impacted the general tax rate. He noted that some tax relief programs are reimbursed to towns by the State. Discussion ensued in which it was clear that members of the committee remain concerned about how the deferred tax revenues are managed. M. Loubert noted that the concept of the program is positive, and she thanked Vivian Orlowski for her research into the program, but feels that more research is still needed, and would recommend the formation of a committee to do more research and if needed, having a Special Town Meeting--rather than making a hasty and uninformed decision too soon. Committee members agreed that the financial implications of the program are still in need of greater research so that the Town can make an informed decision. R. Vivori also indicated that he wanted more information about how the Town's lien operates in relation to other potential liens on a relevant property (M. Loubert wondered about federal or state liens in relation to the town's potential lien) and P. Orenstein asked about the impact of the length and terms of these loan.

A. O'Dwyer asked about the State guidelines regarding the program, and R. Vivori confirmed that the program has been in existence for quite some time over 30 years, and P. Orenstein noted that the debates at the State level are about 100% reimbursement, but that is not currently the State policy.

Vivian Orlowski spoke from the audience and asked for clarification re: the upcoming Town Meeting—M. Pruhenski confirmed that this cannot be on the warrant for the June 2021 Town Meeting, but would be for the 2022 annual town meeting. V. Orlowski suggested that Sudbury, MA has a report that indicates that Sudbury manages the program as a “reserve fund”—as part of Free Cash, likening these to other investments of the Town's reserve funds, suggesting that this does not affect other town members' taxes. Only in a highly unusual circumstances, she suggested, would this program result in budget deficits or increased taxes for residents. She suggested the program is better viewed as an “investment” program vs. a “deferral” program for tax relief. She also noted that her recommendation is a Pilot program with a “sunset” date

(piloting with limiting eligibility and with an interest rate which results in greatest financial certainty for the town), to assess the level of demand for the program.

The committee ended the discussion with the plan to carry the discussion forward and with the general agreement that there is the need for more information and data before making a recommendation to the Town voters. A. O'Dwyer said she would draw up a list of questions from the meeting, and work toward putting together an ad hoc group or committee to investigate the program further.

8. Finance Committee Member Comments.

June FC Meeting Date: A. O'Dwyer confirmed with committee members that the next FC meeting is scheduled for June 15, and that at the next meeting to discuss the option to have in-person meetings. Michelle Loubert also asked the Town to consider the possibility of Saturday day-time meetings vs. weekday evening meetings (noting the duration of meetings—especially Annual Town Meetings). She asks the Town to consider if there might be the option to have weekend afternoon Town Meetings vs. weekday evenings?

9. Citizen Speak Time/Media Speak Time.

10. Adjournment.

Respectfully submitted,

Anne O'Dwyer

Accepted at July 27, 2021 meeting.