

Town of Great Barrington, MA Finance Committee Meeting via Zoom

Minutes

Tuesday September 19th, 2023

1. **Call to Order and roll call vote** - P. Orenstein opened the meeting via Zoom at 6:00pm with a roll call: Milena Cerna, "aye," Madonna Meagher, "aye," Anne O'Dwyer, "aye," Philip Orenstein, "aye." Absent: Richard Geiler.
Also in attendance: Town Manager Mark Pruhenski, Financial Coordinator Allison Crespo
2. **Committee Member announcements or statements**
 - a. P. Orenstein stated he now receives Finance Committee email on his phone so it is easier to respond.
3. **Approval of Minutes** (April, May & June 2023)
 - A. O'Dwyer made a motion to approve the April 4, 2023 minutes; M. Meagher seconded. P. Orenstein asked for any discussion – there was none. Roll call vote: M. Cerna, "aye," M. Meagher, "aye," A. O'Dwyer, "aye," P. Orenstein, "aye." All in favor: 4-0.
 - A. O'Dwyer made a motion to approve the May 25, 2023 minutes; M. Meagher seconded. P. Orenstein asked for any discussion – M. Meagher stated there is a typo and Chief Storti should be added. A. O'Dwyer stated she would make the correction. Roll call vote: M. Cerna, "aye," M. Meagher, "aye," A. O'Dwyer, "aye," P. Orenstein, "aye." All in favor: 4-0.
 - A. O'Dwyer made a motion to approve the June 21, 2023 minutes; M. Meagher seconded. P. Orenstein asked for any discussion – there was none. Roll call vote: M. Cerna, "aye," M. Meagher, "aye," A. O'Dwyer, "aye," P. Orenstein, "aye." All in favor: 4-0.
4. **Town Manager/Accountant Update**
 - a. A. Crespo stated Carmen Morales is now working with her as the Town's new full-time Assistant Accountant and that they are streamlining process, policy, procedures and systems to make work more efficient and useful.
 - i. P. Orenstein asked that budget reports be provided for each meeting – A. Crespo replied when the FY is closed out she will send June, July and August reports and hopefully will be back on track for regular reporting.
5. **Cannabis tax revenue update**
 - a. P. Orenstein stated for the FY ending in June, year-end tax revenue data for the 3% local option tax has decreased 36% from the prior year. He noted that the local option tax funds go into free cash and clarified these funds will be reflected in Town finances for FY25 - that and the lag is due to the state having to confirm the numbers and authorize the use of the funds by the Town. He added these funds have peaked and are declining.
6. **Discussion of proposed property transfer fee and possible vote on a recommendation**
 - a. P. Orenstein reported that the Selectboard at its last meeting identified several avenues to take on the transfer fee and voted not to include it on the warrant for the October Special Town Meeting. He added it was not determined if it would be recommended for the annual Town Meeting in May. He stated since it will not be considered at the October Town meeting, there is no urgency to discuss it now.
 - b. It was discussed that the Finance Committee would normally be asked for its review/ recommendation on financial articles before a Selectboard discussion and vote – though it is the Selectboard's prerogative whether to solicit Finance Committee input – it is only required for the annual budget. It was stated that if the transfer fee moves forward to Town Meeting, the Finance Committee would like to provide a recommendation.

- c. P. Orenstein stated he expressed his personal views about the transfer fee at a public session and in a letter to the Berkshire Edge.

7. Discussion of proposed school district merger and possible vote on a recommendation

- a. P. Orenstein stated regarding a Finance Committee recommendation to residents for the vote at the Special Town Meeting, the Committee can begin discussion tonight, but the School District Merger Board is meeting on September 26 where the goal is to agree on/finalize the proposal and proposed School District arrangement. He added that the Finance Committee October 17 meeting would be the opportunity to discuss/vote on its recommendation. It was confirmed the Committee would be expressing an opinion only on the financial aspects of the merger for Great Barrington.
- b. A. O'Dwyer stated she did not see a negative financial impact on the Town and noted fewer students would be "choicing" in and out due to new vocational options and there would be some economies of scale and savings on the new school. She added she does not see added costs per student beyond regular annual increases and that the merger would not be a major contributor to increased taxes.
- c. M. Cerna cautioned there are a number of assumptions/variables in the proposal such as student enrollment and "choicing" in/out - and perhaps the recommendation should state that. She agreed that the financial piece is positive for GB.
- d. P. Orenstein stated the financial modeling was done well, but agreed on concerns about using assumptions as they are subject to change - and it is difficult to communicate assumptions vs actual outcomes. He noted current student enrollment numbers are being disputed and real numbers will be released on October 1. He emphasized it should be made clear in all communications that the merger will not reduce real estate taxes and may only modestly reduce the rate of increase in the school assessment. He added that depending on future decision-making, there might be savings over time. He also clarified regarding the new school piece, the October Town Meeting vote is only on the merger and if passed, there would be a second meeting/vote on financing the new school. He noted ultimate approval for the merger is conditioned on a vote on the new school. He added pricing for a new school vs a renovation is also being worked on.
- e. It was confirmed that Finance Committee member questions should be directed to P. Orenstein and the school consultants can be contacted. It was agreed that at the next meeting the Committee would vote on its recommendation.
- f. A. O'Dwyer stated Southern Berkshire uses a rolling average for the school assessment which reduces volatility and she asked for the Finance Committee to have a discussion on that topic.
- g. M. Pruhenski confirmed Sheffield and GB are holding their Town Meetings on October 23, but was not sure about the other towns.

8. Community Preservation Committee update – (Richard Geiler) – No update was provided.

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

10. Media Time – No members of the media asked to speak.

11. Adjournment – A. O'Dwyer made a motion to adjourn; M. Meager seconded. Roll call vote: M. Cerna, "aye," M. Meagher, "aye," A. O'Dwyer, "aye," P. Orenstein, "aye." All in favor: 4-0. The meeting was adjourned by unanimous consent at 6:47pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Stacy Ostrow, Recording Clerk