

Selectboard and Finance Committee Joint FY24 Budget Meeting Via Zoom and  
in person At 334 Main Street Great Barrington MA  
Tuesday, March 7, 2023

1. Call to Order - Order - Chairman Bannon opened the meeting at 6:00pm with a Selectboard roll call: Ed Abrahams, “aye,” Steve Bannon, “aye,” Leigh Davis, “aye,” Eric Gabriel, “aye,” Garfield Reed, “aye.” Phil Orenstein conducted a Finance Committee roll call: Milena Cerna, “aye,” Richard Geiler, “aye,” Madonna Meagher, “aye,” Anne O’Dwyer, “aye,” Philip Orenstein, “aye.”  
Also present: Town Manager Mark Pruhenski, Financial Coordinator Allison Crespo and other department heads as noted below.

Emergency Medical Services – Jim Santos presented and was joined by Joe Krejci and other board members and staff of Southern Berkshire Ambulance. He provided a historical overview of the Ambulance’s operations and growth – highlighting the change from volunteer to paid staff and free services to now requiring financial support by the towns served. J. Santos noted two challenges – EMS financing and payments do not cover stand by and fixed costs and workforce issues such as a deficit of trained personnel and employee retention which has increased competition and salaries/benefits. It was clarified that ARPA funding was received last year to buy an ambulance, but this would be an annual fee assessed to the Town – and anticipated increases would likely be COLA-related. E. Abrahams pointed out this ask is based on assessed values in different towns not on the number of calls like in the past – which is a fairer and better approach. M. Meagher clarified the type and number of their vehicles and M. Cerna confirmed there are about 3,000 calls annually across the six towns. M. Pruhenski shared the cost breakdown for each town – for which, GB’s portion is \$151,294. The amount is derived from the \$350,000 budget deficit and is apportioned by property valuation. J. Santos stated the Ambulance’s total budget is \$2.1m and revenue is \$1.78m leaving an approximate \$350,000 deficit. L. Davis confirmed fundraising and grants are being pursued. S. Bannon stated he is comfortable with the management transition and level of board/staff commitment - and that the Town is now represented on the board. P. Orenstein stated as this is going to be an annual line item, additional financial details will be necessary. Additional staffing details were discussed including salary, education and training.

2. Departmental Budgets
  - a. Police Department

Chief Sorti presented stating his focus is on the future and recent trends. He described challenges – retaining part-time officers due to certification requirements, the growth of the Town and changes in the number, type and complexity of calls. He stated the budget changes focus on staffing including a request for an additional officer with travel/training - part of which would be funded by offsets due to the loss of a senior and part-time officers; an increase in parking control personnel to have a greater presence; and a mental health clinician for the Co-responder Program – for which the six towns are individually asking for \$5,000 in financial support. He noted the goal is to have a crisis unit out of Fairview Hospital - and the Brien Center has committed to collaborating. He added it is a tough position to fill as it combines crisis intervention, mental health and police work. He also stated his ambition for the future is to hire an officer to add to the command staff as an additional layer to handle oversight/management. M. Cerna asked about training costs – Chief Sorti replied that is an annual cost for required training and salary for training time -as well as additional academy fees. Chief Sorti clarified it is difficult to attract trained officers because they lose seniority. It was confirmed the Deputy Chief line is a placeholder for a future role. E. Gabriel asked if the shared co-responder works well – Chief Sorti replied the mutual reliance works well and there is crossover among the towns.

A. O'Dwyer asked about the cut in the funding request for the co-responder – Chief Sorti replied that was reduced to \$5,000 which is each town's portion. He noted officers appreciate the program and understand the value – and there should be a stronger presence at schools. S. Bannon asked Chief Sorti to connect with the other towns to understand how their budget conversations are progressing as that would impact our decision-making. P. Orenstein asked about using Community Impact fees for Police Department substance abuse services especially in schools and asked if that funding is being integrated as appropriate – M. Pruhenski replied he would discuss Community Impact funding for the Co-responder or school program with Chief Sorti and provide an update.

b. Fire Department

Chief Burger presented stating there are no changes in general expenses other than increases to keep up with inflation and increased costs. He highlighted two changes regarding personnel – an hourly increase for call firefighters and the addition of a fourth firefighter starting in July. He shared information/data to support the request showing a dramatic increase in fire and rescue calls and decrease in the number of call firefighters as well as several metrics regarding response and performance. L. Davis asked what is the salary for the new firefighter – Chief Burger replied \$53,000 plus overtime. P. Orenstein asked why EMS incidents are trending up and if firefighters assist the ambulance team – Chief Burger replied calls are triaged so the department only responds to 911 calls to non-healthcare facilities – and one staff firefighter is sent which is helpful to the ambulance service. M. Cerna asked about performance best practice standard – Chief Burger replied the NFPA standard is for firefighters to be on the scene in 10 minutes – which we cannot meet. A. O'Dwyer asked about hourly rates for call firefighters – Chief Burger replied \$18/hour is the base and \$30/hour is the top. He noted there is a one hour minimum and firefighters on call overnight also get a stipend. M. Meagher asked if there are more calls from any particular location – Chief Burger replied more densely populated areas and senior housing.

c. Emergency Management

M. Pruhenski stated this an additional responsibility of Chief Sorti's and this is a request to add a stipend to the budget this year. Chief Sorti explained this an on-call 24/7 role related to managing/addressing community hazards, vulnerabilities and disasters in order to plan and prepare - and have protocol/policy, relationships and infrastructure in place.

d. Animal Control

Chief Sorti presented stating this is level funded. There were no questions.

e. Community Services

M. Pruhenski presented stating there is a \$10,000 decrease in the budget due to pressure to scale back overall. He noted much of this work is being conducted by nonprofit organizations which get ARPA funding totaling \$1.5m – he added individual grants are in the \$1500-\$2,000 range. L. Davis asked for the list of allocations – M; Pruhenski replied he would send the list, and it is mostly a consistent list of grantees. It was noted that Community Impact funding might apply as well depending on the application.

f. Veterans' Affairs

Andy Moro thanked the Town for its ongoing support and funding to upgrade the facilities/building. He stated the increase in the American Legion lease budget line is for a more efficient heating system for the building. P. Orenstein asked how is the \$61,500 from the state being used – M. Pruhenski replied he would check into it. M. Cerna asked about the reduction in benefits - A. Moro replied the reduction is because a staff member is retiring and some veterans have passed away. A. Moro continued to describe the broad services/assistance provided to veterans in the area.

g. Boards and Commissions

M. Pruhenski presented stating most requests were fully funded this year except Transportation and DuBois Committees which were scaled back. He noted the increase in DuBois funding this year since no request was received last year. A. O'Dwyer noted the need for transportation improvements overall – M. Pruhenski replied the Town is launching a micro-transit program and clarified the request here is only for Committee expenses. Tate Coleman stated the additional \$500 is for advertising and surveys for transportation initiatives. It was noted the micro-transit program budget is \$180,000 and it was suggested the \$500 be paid out of that budget.

h. Celebrations & Events

M. Pruhenski presented stating there is an additional \$1500 in the budget for the replacement of the DuBois banners and to purchase flags for Housatonic village. He also noted the budget funds events such as the Band Program, fireworks and Berkshire Busk. G. Reed asked if there could be flags of young service people – M. Pruhenski replied he would look into it.

i. Berkshire Hills Regional School Assessment

Peter Dillon presented and was joined by Sharon Harrison – he stated the request is for support for the school district warrants for operating and capital budgets and a special assessment for vocational students. He stated the net assessment on school district member towns is tied to the number of students and the minimum local contribution which is relative wealth/assessed property value. He stated there are 918 students in the district and 686 are from GB. He noted the overall increase is \$6.4% - GB is up 7.32%. It was confirmed that the budget in the book is not current as it was prepared before the governor's budget and the school committee vote. P. Dillon shared an updated assessment sheet noting an increase in operating budget and decrease in capital budget due to retiring debt. M. Cerna asked about the students who choose to go to the vocational program at Taconic – P. Dillon explained school choice and costs associated with students coming into and leaving the district which are set by the state. He stated there are plans to expand vocational offerings in the new regional high school so those students will stay and others will come to the district for these programs. A. O' Dwyer noted GB pay for student transportation and tuition for the vocational program, but gets charged more than is received for school choice – P. Dillon replied it is a higher charge for vocational schools as they are considered to have highly specialized facilities and teaching materials - and school choice does not change in most districts as it is usually an equal number of students that come in and go out. L. Davis asked about working with the local private schools – P. Dillon replied that is mostly for sports programs - the issue around vocational is scheduling since large blocks of time are needed. In explaining the cost differential among the member towns, P. Dillon explained every community's assessed value increased, but GB's went up more plus it represents 74% of the student body. M. Cerna asked about future demographics – P. Dillon replied upcoming changes are larger numbers of young people in GB due to increased housing and an increase in English language learners. P. Orenstein asked how calculations are verified – S. Bannon stated the district is told by the state – the district does not do the calculation. E. Gabriel stated if Lenox has 40% choice what is ours - P. Dillon replied it is 200 out of 1200. P. Dillon stated the district has brought in \$4m in additional grants on top of the budget to establish/grow educational opportunities and programs. G. Reed asked about next steps for the consolidated district – P. Dillon replied once the enrollment letter is received, there will be a feasibility study and a design as well as significant public outreach. He stated breaking ground would be in 2-3 years. P. Orenstein asked about using community impact fees for the school district – M. Pruhenski replied over the last three years it has received a significant amount. P. Dillon added most recently it was used to supplement a prevention program and fund full-time health teachers. P. Orenstein confirmed those funds benefit the entire district – S. Bannon added GB is 74% of the student body.

j. Special Articles

M. Pruhenski presented this year's Special Articles:

- Community Impact Funding – He stated this request addresses various impacts of the cannabis industry on the community especially related to prevention efforts. He noted the Committee asked for additional funds up from \$350,000 last year to \$500,000 this year. S. Bannon stated the goal is to make these funds last as funding levels/revenue is unlikely to continue. M. Pruhenski stated \$4.5m is currently available.
- Berkshire Hills Regional School District Vocational Tuition and Transportation – M. Pruhenski stated last year funding was requested for four students, but only one enrolled/attended so leftover funds went to free cash. The request this year assumes two students, though it is too early to confirm the actual number. It was noted there might be more information before Town Meeting and the request could be adjusted – S. Bannon added there will be a second Town Meeting in September so it could be added.
- Stabilization and Capital Stabilization – M. Pruhenski stated the request is for a 50% increase and the fund balances are in the budget book.
- OPEB Trust – M. Pruhenski stated the plan is to take \$820,000 currently in a 1986 account - Unfunded Pension Liability Trust - and add \$176,500 this year to create the OPEB Trust with a \$1m starting balance. He continued to state David Doneski, Town Counsel, believes there is nothing out of line in repurposing the funds, but he will do additional research. M. Pruhenski stated he would send the 1986 warrant with articles to the Selectboard/Finance Committee.
- Emergency Medical Services Subsidy – M. Pruhenski stated this was covered earlier in the meeting.
- Housatonic Water Works Relief – M. Pruhenski stated the state Economic Development earmark of \$100,000 was amended to add \$150,000 previously allocated to the Wassaic shuttle for a total of \$250,000 for HWW relief. It was approved by the House and is now with the Senate. If it is approved, the Town can then drop the \$150,000 requested here or choose to add it in for a total of \$400,000. It was noted that the approval process is slow, but the Town submitted the request to repurpose the \$150,000 immediately following the Selectboard vote.
- Cemetery Study and Maintenance – M. Pruhenski stated this is not a request to appropriate funds, it is a transfer of money from the sale of cemetery lots account.
- Unemployment Trust Fund – A. Crespo stated this is an account to pay for unemployment fees - noting there were none in FY23 and part of FY22, but it has been earning interest. She stated there is currently a balance of \$2,876.34 and the request is to replenish/increase the reserve by \$20,000. M. Pruhenski clarified we are required to add funds.
- Affordable Housing Trust – M. Pruhenski stated the request is for \$175,000 to replenish the account and continue funding projects and new housing. Fred Clark stated the current balance is \$145,000, but \$90,000 of that will be spent between now and July/FY-end.
- Website Upgrade – M. Pruhenski stated this is a recent high priority project for the Selectboard. It has been positioned as a one-time expense - it can be moved to the operating budget, but it will skew the annual IT budget. He added that the annual hosting/maintenance costs are in the IT budget. He clarified the expense is for the current host, CivicPlus, which specializes in town and school websites, to redesign the website and transfer information as a 3-6 month project.

- Legal Fees/Cannabis HCA Renewals – M. Pruhenski clarified this is not only for HCA renewals, it includes other cannabis-related legal matters – and noted it is a transfer of money from free cash reserved for cannabis impacts. E. Abrahams asked to make it clear the funds

are coming from free cash – M. Pruhenski replied it would be clear in the warrant and motion. E. Abrahams also asked for an explanation of the total free cash number. M. Pruhenski stated there is a detailed breakdown of free cash with the cannabis impact funding portion broken out.

3. Citizen Speak Time – No citizens asked to speak

4. Media Time – There were no media comments/questions.

5. Adjournment - - Chairman Bannon adjourned the meeting by unanimous consent at 8:33pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Stacy Ostrow, Recording Clerk