

Finance Committee FY24 Budget Meeting and Selectboard/Finance Committee joint meeting
via Zoom and in person at 334 Main Street Great Barrington MA
Wednesday, March 22, 2023

1. Call to Order by Finance Committee – A. O'Dwyer called to order at 6:00pm the Finance Committee FY24 Budget Public Hearing with a roll call:

Finance Committee: Milena Cerna, "aye," Richard Geiler, "aye," Madonna Meagher, "aye," Anne O'Dwyer, "aye," Philip Orenstein, "aye."

Selectboard: Ed Abrahams, Leigh Davis, Eric Gabriel, Garfield Reed. Absent: Steve Bannon

Also present: Town Manager Mark Pruhenski, Financial Coordinator Allison Crespo.

A. O'Dwyer stated after the public hearing the budget and special articles will be discussed and voted on – and then will go to Town Meeting on May 1 at 6:00pm at the high school.

2. FY24 Public Hearing conducted by Finance Committee

A. O'Dwyer stated the public hearing is being conducted in compliance with the Great Barrington Town Bylaw Article 2, Section 74 that requires the Finance Committee to hold a public hearing on Town expenditures to hear public input on the proposed budget from the Finance Committee and Selectboard.

R. Geiler made a motion to open the public hearing. M. Meagher seconded. Roll call: Milena Cerna, "aye," Richard Geiler, "aye," Madonna Meagher, "aye," Anne O'Dwyer, "aye," Philip Orenstein, "aye." All in favor: 5-0.

M. Pruhenski stated updated budgets have been provided, and for each department, a line was added to reflect changes in each budget due to Selectboard/Finance Committee and Town Manager reductions. He stated that after adjustments the total budget is \$14,577,919 - and he detailed changes for the operations budget, special articles, free cash and the tax rate. He continued to state since the last meeting a list was compiled of unspent money totaling \$125,000 for completed capital projects which is being used to decrease the debt service in the current year. He noted the proposed FY24 operations budget increased 9.9% and the tax rate for FY24 decreased to \$14.68. It was clarified that for capital requests, free cash is being used in place of the tax levy and that \$254,000 in capital requests is being offset by the unspent capital funds.

A. O'Dwyer asked M. Pruhenski to highlight what is different in the budget and he detailed line items for a total reduction of \$167,985 – and added the final school assessment is \$20m. It was also clarified that the cost of short-term rental software is \$19,000 for FY24.

a. Public Input - A. O'Dwyer asked for public comment.

i. Michelle Loubert, 70 Division Street, asked about the increase in the HR Director line and expressed concern about the position being more of a burden on GB – M. Pruhenski replied it includes a 4% salary increase and 4 additional hours of the HR Director's time for GB.

A. O'Dwyer stated that all those present had opportunity to comment on the budget.

b. Close the Public Hearing

R. Geiler made a motion to close the public hearing on the FY24 budget; M. Meagher seconded. Roll call vote: Milena Cerna, "aye," Richard Geiler, "aye," Madonna Meagher, "aye," Anne O'Dwyer, "aye," Philip Orenstein, "aye." All in favor, 5-0.

3. Review and Discussion

a. FY24 Town Operating Budget

R. Geiler made a motion to recommend the proposed FY24 Town Operating Budget of \$14, 577,919 for approval at Town Meeting; M. Cerna seconded. A. O'Dwyer asked for any discussion – P. Orenstein asked about the Insurance line regarding ways to treat the reserve – M. Pruhenski stated the Town auditor will advise when the FY21-22 audit is presented which is expected on May 15. P. Orenstein expressed concern about approving the budget now without adding a schedule breaking out the components of the account. It was discussed that complete historical information is not currently available and there was discussion about the schedule being part of the budget. It was agreed that the information is important and should be discussed with the auditor - and that the budget should not be presented contingent on this information and the process should not be held up. It was noted the Finance Committee will have a meeting before Town Meeting and it was agreed this topic will be added to the agenda. Roll call vote: Milena Cerna, "aye," Richard Geiler, "aye," Madonna Meagher, "aye," Anne O'Dwyer, "aye," Philip Orenstein, "aye." All in favor, 5-0.

L. Davis made a motion to recommend the Town Operating Budget to Town Meeting; E. Abrahams seconded. L. Davis asked if any discussion – there was none. Roll call vote: E. Abrahams, "aye," L. Davis, "aye," E. Gabriel, "aye," G. Reed, "aye." All in favor, 4-0.

b. FY24 Berkshire Hills Regional School District School Assessment

R. Geiler made a motion to accept the FY24 BHRSD assessment of \$20,333,783 for Great Barrington; M. Meagher seconded. A. O'Dwyer asked if there was any discussion – M. Cerna asked what is included in the assessment – A. O'Dwyer replied it is up to the School Committee which does it's due diligence – she continued to state we do not control the assessment, it is just being forwarded to Town Meeting. Roll call vote: Milena Cerna, "abstain," Richard Geiler, "aye," Madonna Meagher, "aye," Anne O'Dwyer, "aye," Philip Orenstein, "aye." Motion passed 4-0 with one abstention.

L. Davis made a motion to accept the FY24 BHRSD school assessment for Great Barrington; E. Abrahams seconded. L. Davis asked if any discussion – there was none. Roll call vote: E. Abrahams, "aye," L. Davis, "aye," E. Gabriel, "aye," G. Reed, "aye." All in favor, 4-0.

c. FY24 Wastewater Budget

R. Geiler made a motion to accept the FY24 Wastewater budget; M. Meagher seconded. A. O'Dwyer asked if there was any discussion – It was confirmed this is a separate warrant article. Roll call vote: Milena Cerna, "aye," Richard Geiler, "aye," Madonna Meagher, "aye," Anne O'Dwyer, "aye," Philip Orenstein, "aye." All in favor: 5-0.

L. Davis made a motion to accept the FY24 Wastewater budget; E. Abrahams seconded. L. Davis asked if any discussion – there was none. Roll call vote: E. Abrahams, "aye," L. Davis, "aye," E. Gabriel, "aye," G. Reed, "aye." All in favor, 4-0.

d. FY24 Town Capital Budget

A. O'Dwyer confirmed the total Capital Budget has not changed. M. Pruhenski clarified the capital budget of \$8,773,500 is broken down into two articles.

R. Geiler made a motion to approve capital requests from the General Fund of \$8,159,000 for FY24; M. Cerna seconded. A. O'Dwyer asked if there was any discussion – there was none. Roll call vote: Milena Cerna, "aye," Richard Geiler, "aye," Madonna Meagher, "aye," Anne O'Dwyer, "aye," Philip Orenstein, "aye." All in favor: 5-0.

L. Davis made a motion to approve capital requests from the General Fund of \$8,159,000 for FY24; E. Abrahams seconded. L. Davis asked if any discussion – there was none. Roll call vote: E. Abrahams, "aye," L. Davis, "aye," E. Gabriel, "aye," G. Reed, "aye." All in favor, 4-0.

R. Geiler made a motion to approve the capital budget from the Enterprise Fund of \$614,400 for FY24; M. Cerna seconded. A. O'Dwyer asked if there was any discussion – there was none. Roll call vote: Milena

Cerna, “aye,” Richard Geiler, “aye,” Madonna Meagher, “aye,” Anne O’Dwyer, “aye,” Philip Orenstein, “aye.” All in favor: 5-0.

L. Davis made a motion to approve the capital budget from the Enterprise Fund of \$614,400 for FY24; E. Abrahams seconded. L. Davis asked if any discussion – there was none. Roll call vote: E. Abrahams, “aye,” L. Davis, “aye,” E. Gabriel, “aye,” G. Reed, “aye.” All in favor: 4-0.

e. FY24 Special Articles

It was confirmed that the only change is for \$150,000 for Housatonic Water Works customers, OPEB was taken out and the Cemetery is just a transfer of funds. M. Pruhenski stated special articles total \$1,481,894 which reflects a reduction of \$175,000. P. Orenstein asked what happens if the MA Senate approves the \$150,000 for HWW customers – M. Pruhenski replied there can be a motion at Town Meeting to pass over.

M. Meacher made a motion to approve Community Impact Funding of \$500,000 for FY24; R. Geiler seconded. A. O’Dwyer asked if there was any discussion – there was none. Roll call vote: Milena Cerna, “aye,” Richard Geiler, “aye,” Madonna Meagher, “aye,” Anne O’Dwyer, “aye,” Philip Orenstein, “aye.” All in favor: 5-0.

L. Davis made a motion to approve Community Impact Funding of \$500,000 for FY24; E. Abrahams seconded. L. Davis asked if any discussion – there was none. Roll call vote: E. Abrahams, “aye,” L. Davis, “aye,” E. Gabriel, “aye,” G. Reed, “aye.” All in favor: 4-0.

R. Geiler made a motion to approve BHRSD Vocational Tuition and Transportation for \$140,000 for FY24; M. Cerna seconded. A. O’Dwyer asked if there was any discussion – there was none. Roll call vote: Milena Cerna, “aye,” Richard Geiler, “aye,” Madonna Meagher, “aye,” Anne O’Dwyer, “aye,” Philip Orenstein, “aye.” All in favor: 5-0.

L. Davis made a motion to approve BHRSD Vocational Tuition and Transportation for \$140,000 FY24; E. Abrahams seconded. L. Davis asked if any discussion – there was none. Roll call vote: E. Abrahams, “aye,” L. Davis, “aye,” E. Gabriel, “aye,” G. Reed, “aye.” All in favor: 4-0.

R. Geiler made a motion to approve \$150,000 for the General Stabilization Fund for FY24; M. Cerna seconded. A. O’Dwyer asked if there was any discussion – there was none. Roll call vote: Milena Cerna, “aye,” Richard Geiler, “aye,” Madonna Meagher, “aye,” Anne O’Dwyer, “aye,” Philip Orenstein, “aye.” All in favor: 5-0.

L. Davis made a motion to approve \$150,000 for the General Stabilization Fund for FY24; E. Abrahams seconded. L. Davis asked if any discussion – there was none. Roll call vote: E. Abrahams, “aye,” L. Davis, “aye,” E. Gabriel, “aye,” G. Reed, “aye.” All in favor: 4-0.

R. Geiler made a motion to approve \$150,000 for the Capital Stabilization Fund for FY24; M. Meager seconded. A. O’Dwyer asked if there was any discussion – there was none. Roll call vote: Milena Cerna, “aye,” Richard Geiler, “aye,” Madonna Meagher, “aye,” Anne O’Dwyer, “aye,” Philip Orenstein, “aye.” All in favor: 5-0.

L. Davis made a motion to approve \$150,000 for the Capital Stabilization Fund for FY24; E. Abrahams seconded. L. Davis asked if any discussion – there was none. Roll call vote: E. Abrahams, “aye,” L. Davis, “aye,” E. Gabriel, “aye,” G. Reed, “aye.” All in favor: 4-0.

R. Geiler made a motion to allocate \$151,294 from free cash for the Emergency Medical Services Subsidy for FY24; M. Meager seconded. A. O’Dwyer asked if there was any discussion – A. O’Dwyer stated not enough financial information was received for this and expressed interest in receiving additional data over the course of the year. James Santos, President Board of Directors shared some numbers to back up income/expenses and the net loss for FY23. He noted a percentage of the deficit is distributed across towns

using the service. He detailed expenses for operating, administration, dispatch, building, vehicles, etc. M. Cerna asked for additional detail on administrative expenses and what are assumptions on revenue - J. Santos replied income is based on insurance and that declines year to year. Expenses go up and income decreases. Chief Burger added that projections are based on historical data – he noted that call volume is expected to go up and reimbursements will go up some, but expenses continue to increase. He expressed confidence in the numbers – but noted there are many variables. It was confirmed that staffing accounts for the majority of cost increases. J. Santos confirmed a review of financials/audit for 2021 is online with the IRS – and the 2022 audit has not been completed. G. Reed expressed support for the Ambulance service – M. Cerna stated it is an important service, but we have responsibility for expenditures and we are just requesting complete information. P. Orenstein stated we are supportive of ambulance services and they are receiving funds as requested. He continued to state the Town is providing direct funding and should have access to audited financial information. Roll call vote: Milena Cerna, “aye,” Richard Geiler, “aye,” Madonna Meagher, “aye,” Anne O’Dwyer, “aye,” Philip Orenstein, “aye.” All in favor: 5-0.

L. Davis made a motion to allocate \$151,294 from free cash for the Emergency Medical Services Subsidy for FY24; E. Abrahams seconded. L. Davis asked if any discussion – there was none. Roll call vote: E. Abrahams, “aye,” L. Davis, “aye,” E. Gabriel, “aye,” G. Reed, “aye.” All in favor, 4-0

R. Geiler made a motion to repurpose \$820,918.16 from the Pension Reserve Trust Fund to the OPEB Trust Fund; P. Orenstein seconded. A. O’Dwyer asked if there was any discussion – M. Pruhenski stated the OPEB Trust should be created first. R. Geiler withdrew and motion; P. Orenstein withdrew the second.

R. Geiler made a motion to create the OPEB Trust Fund; A. O’Dwyer seconded. A. O’Dwyer asked for any discussion- there was none. Roll call vote: Milena Cerna, “aye,” Richard Geiler, “aye,” Madonna Meagher, “aye,” Anne O’Dwyer, “aye,” Philip Orenstein, “aye.” All in favor: 5-0.

L. Davis made a motion to create the OPEB Trust Fund; E. Abrahams seconded. L. Davis asked if any discussion – there was none. Roll call vote: E. Abrahams, “aye,” L. Davis, “aye,” E. Gabriel, “aye,” G. Reed, “aye.” All in favor, 4-0.

R. Geiler made a motion to repurpose the balance of \$820,918.16 from the Pension Reserve Trust Fund to the OPEB Trust Fund; M. Cerna seconded. A. O’Dwyer asked for any discussion- there was none. Roll call vote: Milena Cerna, “aye,” Richard Geiler, “aye,” Madonna Meagher, “aye,” Anne O’Dwyer, “aye,” Philip Orenstein, “aye.” All in favor: 5-0.

L. Davis made a motion to repurpose the balance of \$820,918.16 from the Pension Reserve Trust Fund to the OPEB Trust Fund; E. Abrahams seconded. L. Davis asked if any discussion – there was none. Roll call vote: E. Abrahams, “aye,” L. Davis, “aye,” E. Gabriel, “aye,” G. Reed, “aye.” All in favor, 4-0.

R. Geiler made a motion to allocate from free cash to provide temporary relief to residents serviced by Housatonic Water Works; M. Cerna seconded. A. O’Dwyer asked for any discussion- there was none. Roll call vote: Milena Cerna, “aye,” Richard Geiler, “aye,” Madonna Meagher, “aye,” Anne O’Dwyer, “aye,” Philip Orenstein, “aye.” All in favor: 5-0.

L. Davis made a motion to allocate from free cash to provide temporary relief to residents serviced by Housatonic Water Works; E. Abrahams seconded. L. Davis asked if any discussion – it was confirmed the Town is awaiting approval from the state Senate for these funds. Roll call vote: E. Abrahams, “aye,” L. Davis, “aye,” E. Gabriel, “aye,” G. Reed, “aye.” All in favor, 4-0.

R. Geiler made a motion to transfer \$30,000 in funds from the Town Sale of Cemetery Lot Fund to pay for a comprehensive cemetery study and provide for general maintenance expenses for Town cemeteries; M. Cerna seconded. A. O’Dwyer asked for any discussion- there was none. Roll call vote: Milena Cerna, “aye,” Richard Geiler, “aye,” Madonna Meagher, “aye,” Anne O’Dwyer, “aye,” Philip Orenstein, “aye.” All in favor: 5-0.

L. Davis made a motion to transfer \$30,000 in funds from the Town Sale of Cemetery Lot Fund to pay for a comprehensive cemetery study and provide for general maintenance expenses for Town cemeteries; E.

Abrahams seconded. L. Davis asked if any discussion – J. Aberdale clarified the study is to update rules/regulations and bring the cemeteries into compliance as well as evaluate free space. Roll call vote: E. Abrahams, “aye,” L. Davis, “aye,” E. Gabriel, “aye,” G. Reed, “aye.” All in favor, 4-0.

R. Geiler made a motion to allocate \$20,000 in free cash to replenish the Town’s reserve for unemployment costs; M. Meagher seconded. A. O’Dwyer asked for any discussion- there was none. Roll call vote: Milena Cerna, “aye,” Richard Geiler, “aye,” Madonna Meagher, “aye,” Anne O’Dwyer, “aye,” Philip Orenstein, “aye.” All in favor: 5-0.

L. Davis made a motion to allocate \$20,000 in free cash to replenish the Town’s reserve for unemployment costs; E. Abrahams seconded. L. Davis asked if any discussion – there was none. Roll call vote: E. Abrahams, “aye,” L. Davis, “aye,” E. Gabriel, “aye,” G. Reed, “aye.” All in favor, 4-0.

R. Geiler made a motion to approve \$175,000 from free cash to the Affordable Housing Trust to use as directed by its Board of Trustees for any eligible affordable housing initiative; M. Meacher seconded. A. O’Dwyer asked for any discussion- there was none. Roll call vote: Milena Cerna, “aye,” Richard Geiler, “aye,” Madonna Meagher, “aye,” Anne O’Dwyer, “aye,” Philip Orenstein, “aye.” All in favor: 5-0.

L. Davis made a motion to approve \$175,000 from free cash to the Affordable Housing Trust to use as directed by its Board of Trustees for any eligible affordable housing initiative; E. Abrahams seconded. L. Davis asked if any discussion – there was none. Roll call vote: E. Abrahams, “aye,” L. Davis, “aye,” E. Gabriel, “aye,” G. Reed, “aye.” All in favor: 4-0.

R. Geiler made a motion to approve \$30,600 to provide citizens with a more robust, user friendly, upgraded website and streamlined online services; M. Cerna seconded. A. O’Dwyer asked for any discussion- there was none. Roll call vote: Milena Cerna, “aye,” Richard Geiler, “aye,” Madonna Meagher, “aye,” Anne O’Dwyer, “aye,” Philip Orenstein, “aye.” All in favor: 5-0.

L. Davis made a motion to approve \$30,600 to provide citizens with a more robust, user friendly, upgraded website and streamlined online services; E. Abrahams seconded. L. Davis asked if any discussion – there was none. Roll call vote: E. Abrahams, “aye,” L. Davis, “aye,” E. Gabriel, “aye,” G. Reed, “aye.” All in favor: 4-0

R. Geiler made a motion to approve \$15,000 for legal fees associated with Host-Community Agreement renewals and to utilize Community Impact funds for legal fees associated with these renewals; M. Meagher seconded. A. O’Dwyer asked for any discussion- there was none. Roll call vote: Milena Cerna, “aye,” Richard Geiler, “aye,” Madonna Meagher, “aye,” Anne O’Dwyer, “aye,” Philip Orenstein, “aye.” All in favor: 5-0.

L. Davis made a motion to approve \$15,000 for legal fees associated with Host-Community Agreement renewals and to utilize Community Impact funds for legal fees associated with these renewals; E. Abrahams seconded. L. Davis asked if any discussion – there was none. Roll call vote: E. Abrahams, “aye,” L. Davis, “aye,” E. Gabriel, “aye,” G. Reed, “aye.” All in favor: 4-0.

4. Citizen Speak Time

- a. Sharon Gregory, 32 Hollenbeck, thanked the Finance Committee and Town Manager for their efforts to manage the Town’s finances. She also expressed her support for P. Orenstein’s position on the breakdown of OPEB components – and noted it should include dependents of retirees/employees. She also noted eligibility should be better understood. A. O’Dwyer added that maintenance of Town buildings is another important area of focus.

5. Media Time – No media asked to speak.

6. Adjournment – M. Cerna made a motion to adjourn; R. Geiler seconded. Roll call vote: Milena Cerna, “aye,” Richard Geiler, “aye,” Madonna Meagher, “aye,” Anne O’Dwyer, “aye,” Philip Orenstein, “aye.” All in favor: 5-0. L. Davis made a motion to adjourn; E. Abrahams seconded. L. Davis asked if any discussion – there was none. Roll call vote: E. Abrahams, “aye,” L. Davis, “aye,” E. Gabriel, “aye,” G. Reed, “aye.” All in favor: 4-0.
The meeting was adjourned by unanimous consent at 7:35pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Stacy Ostrow, Recording Clerk