

Selectboard and Finance Committee Joint FY25 Budget Meeting #4 via Zoom and in person
at 334 Main Street Great Barrington MA
Wednesday, February 14, 2024

1. Call to Order - Chairman Bannon opened the meeting at 6:00pm with Selectboard members Steve Bannon, Leigh Davis, Ben Elliott, Eric Gabriel, Garfield Reed and Finance Committee members Milena Cerna, Madonna Meagher, Anne O'Dwyer, Philip Orenstein present. Absent: Richard Geiler. Also present: Town Manager Mark Pruhenski, Assistant Town Manager Chris Rembold, Financial Coordinator Allison Crespo and other department heads as noted below.

2. Review and Discussion

S. Bannon stated at this meeting there would be a vote on recommendations on the budget to bring to the Finance Committee public hearing and then to a final vote for the Town Meeting warrant.

a. Special Articles – S. Bannon stated they would start with the five Articles recommended by the Town Manager and then others could be raised for consideration.

i. Community Impact - The Railroad Street Youth Project request was discussed and it was clarified that the organization rents the building for \$300/month from the nonprofit Great Barrington Youth Foundation and rent money is used for maintenance. The building is also deed restricted to use for youth services, and if it is not used for those purposes, it reverts to the Town. It was clarified if \$1m is added to the Community Impact budget for this project, and ultimately it is not allocated, it goes back to free cash. The value of having consolidated youth substance use/prevention services and using Community Impact funds for these purposes was discussed.

- Michelle Loubert, 70 Division Street expressed concerns if the building is sold and asked about using of Community Impact funds as it could potentially be challenged
- Bob Redpath, 190 Castle Hill Avenue, asked about the skate park – it was clarified that is not in the Town budget.
- Buddy Atwood, 370 Maple Avenue, stated the building is for use for youth and it reverts to the Town if that changes.

P. Orenstein stated he would recuse.

A. O'Dwyer made a motion to support Community Impact funding for \$1.5m from the Community Impact portion of free cash and that \$1m be set aside for the Railroad Street Youth building on the recommendation of the Community Impact Committee and approval of the Town Manager; M. Meagher seconded. A. O'Dwyer asked for any discussion – there was none. Roll call vote: M. Cerna, "aye," M. Meagher, "aye," A. O'Dwyer, "aye." All in favor: 3-0 with P. Orenstein abstaining.

L. Davis made a motion to support Community Impact funding for \$1.5m from the Community Impact portion of free cash and that \$1m be set aside for the Railroad Street Youth building on the recommendation of the Community Impact Committee and approval of the Town Manager; E. Gabriel seconded. S. Bannon asked for any discussion – there was none. All in favor: 4-0 with G. Reed abstaining.

ii. Vocational Tuition/Transportation

A. O'Dwyer made a motion to recommend \$80,000 for the Vocational Tuition and Transportation Special Article; M. Cerna seconded. A. O'Dwyer 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.

L. Davis made a motion to recommend \$80,000 for the Vocational Tuition and Transportation Special Article; E. Gabriel seconded. S. Bannon asked for any discussion – there was none. All in favor: 5-0.

iii. Legal Fees

It was discussed and agreed that \$15,000 should be taken out of Community Impact

funding and Special Article 8, Legal Fees, should be eliminated.

P. Orenstein made a motion to strike Special Article 8 with the intention that it be included under Community Impact funding; A. O'Dwyer 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.

L. Davis made a motion to strike Special Article 8 with the intention that it be included under Community Impact funding; E. Gabriel seconded. S. Bannon asked for any discussion – there was none. All in favor: 5-0.

iv. Courthouse Upgrades

M. Pruhenski shared information on the last 10-year lease terms and payments. It was clarified that \$200,000 is for are for improvements requested by the State and for which the Town will be compensated and \$241,000 is under the capital budget is for general maintenance and repairs which are all capital expenses, but for \$76,000. It was discussed that making repairs/improvements is important to preserving the building. It was suggested that perhaps there could be adjustments to the lease over the term.

A. O'Dwyer made a motion to approve the Special Article for Courthouse Upgrades for \$200,000 from free cash; M. Cerna seconded. P. Orenstein asked for any discussion – there was none. Roll call vote: M. Cerna, "aye," M. Meagher, "aye," A. O'Dwyer, "aye." All in favor: 3-0 with P. Orenstein abstaining.

L. Davis made a motion to approve the Special Article for Courthouse Upgrades for \$200,000 from free cash; E. Gabriel seconded. S. Bannon asked for any discussion–there was none. All in favor: 5-0.

S. Bannon asked if there are other Special Articles to discuss.

v. Ramsdell Library

Pat Hollenbeck and Ruby Chang, Library board members, asked for funding of \$150,000 to make the Library sustainable with the addition of State support – and to ultimately, put to a Town Meeting vote. There was discussion about the Town's liability if State/private fundraising is not sufficient to cover costs and it was stated it is hard to raise money without Town support. C. Rembold stated the Town maintains the building to keep it usable and functional and the plan being proposed is to transform/modernize the building and usage. It was noted that the Town will continue to maintain the building so it will not deteriorate. It was clarified that if the State does not provide funding, Town funds go back to free cash.

P. Hollenbeck confirmed the State is supportive of libraries serving multiple purposes, such as a community space, so they are more broadly usable. There was discussion about fundraising and its challenges in the current environment and at such high dollar amounts as needed for the project. Concerns were raised about the Town being responsible if there are funding gaps. It was confirmed that funds would be requested in phases. The benefits/concerns in investing and upgrading the library and its impact on taxes/budget were discussed.

P. Orenstein made a motion to not fund the planning and design phase for Ramsdell Library. The motion was not seconded.

A. O'Dwyer made a motion to fund \$150,000 from free cash for the planning and design phase for Ramsdell Library; 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, "no." Motion passed 3-1.

L. Davis made a motion to fund \$150,000 from free cash for the planning and design phase for Ramsdell Library; B. Elliott seconded. S. Bannon asked for any discussion – there was none. Motion passed 4-1 with S. Bannon voting no.

M. Pruhenski stated at some point it will need to be determined if the \$150,000 would be reduced from the portion of general funds free cash applied to the tax rate or lower

the portion of general funds free cash that is remaining.

v. Emergency Medical Services – Joe Krejci responded to questions regarding revenue and expenses; ambulances/vehicles in use and fundraising efforts. P. Orenstein asked about the 2022 audit and stated the Finance Committee would need to review financial and operational information before approving funding. It was clarified that the audit hold up was with the auditor and the final should be available within the next week. It was confirmed the operating model would be reevaluated.

A. O'Dwyer made a motion to support funding for Emergency Medical Services pending receipt of the audit; M. Cerna 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.

L. Davis made a motion to support funding for Emergency Medical Services pending receipt of the audit; E. Gabriel seconded. S. Bannon asked for any discussion—there was none. All in favor: 5-0.

A. O'Dwyer stated we are in this situation because we have not funded stabilization funds and asked that be discussed in the future.

b. Operating Budget

i. P. Orenstein stated for the Building Inspector, reimbursements from other towns should be netted out. S. Bannon stated it is funded through free cash and it goes back to free cash.

ii. A. O'Dwyer stated debt service, insurance and salary increases are obligations/set payments – and asked to figure out what is that cost/percentage re: the overall increase. It was stated that a substantial part of the increase is due to debt service, insurance and contractual salary increases. It was confirmed there is just over \$1m in free cash.

It was stated that there may need to be significant cuts to the operating and perhaps the capital budget and a target percentage increase was discussed that would be acceptable for the Town and residents. It was discussed that the impact of cuts to the operating budget should be considered and suggested that M. Pruhenski work on those scenarios. M. Pruhenski stated significant cuts have already been made and additional sizable cuts will require reducing staff and services.

P. Orenstein made a motion to ask the Town Manager to put together hypothetical cuts to the operating budget at \$100,000, \$250,000 and \$500,000; M. Cerna seconded. P. Orenstein asked for any discussion – A. O'Dwyer stated \$500,000 is too much. Roll call vote: M. Cerna, "aye," M. Meagher, "aye," A. O'Dwyer, "no," P. Orenstein, "aye." Motion passed 3-1.

L. Davis made a motion to ask the Town Manager to put together hypothetical cuts to the operating budget at \$100,000, \$250,000 and \$500,000; E. Gabriel seconded. S. Bannon asked for any discussion – E. Gabriel stated \$500,000 is too drastic. Motion passed 3-2 with S. Bannon, B. Elliott and G. Reed voting "aye" and L. Davis and E. Gabriel voting "no."

c. Capital Budget

i. Police Department – The request for a new cruiser and for shields was discussed regarding the purpose/use, number and cost. Chief Sorti stated he would evaluate whether the life of the cruiser could be extended by one year.

A. O'Dwyer made a motion to support the budget as it stands for \$183,050, but to reserve the right To find out about the cruiser before the public hearing; P. Orenstein seconded. P. Orenstein asked for any discussion – there was none. Roll call vote: M. Cerna, "no," M. Meagher, "no," A. O'Dwyer, "aye," P. Orenstein, "aye." Motion failed: 2-2.

L. Davis made a motion to support the budget as it stands for \$183,050, but to reserve the right

To find out about the cruiser before the public hearing; E. Gabriel seconded. S. Bannon asked for any discussion – it was raised that shields are important for officer safety. Motion passed: 4-1 with L. Davis voting “no.”

M. Meagher made a motion to fund one cruiser and to cut the shields. The motion was not seconded

A. O’Dwyer made a motion to fund the shields and one cruiser; P. Orenstein seconded. P. Orenstein asked for any discussion – there was none. Roll call vote: M. Cerna, “no,” M. Meagher, “aye,” A. O’Dwyer, “aye,” P. Orenstein, “no.” Motion failed: 2-2.

S. Bannon stated the Selectboard vote stands and the Finance Committee will revisit.

- ii. Fire Department – The advance payment for the replacement of Engine 2 and the replacement of Car 1 was discussed and it was confirmed that its life cannot be extended.

P. Orenstein made a motion to fund the Car 1 replacement, but not the Engine 2 reserve payment;

A. O’Dwyer seconded. P. Orenstein asked for any discussion – it was confirmed that the cost of replacing Engine 1 in 2028 will be \$800,000 and that its lifespan is 25 years.

P. Orenstein withdrew his motion

P. Orenstein made a motion to approve the Fire Department capital request as presented; M. Cerna 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.

L. Davis made a motion to approve the Fire Department capital request as stated; E. Gabriel seconded. S. Bannon asked for any discussion – E. Gabriel stated he understands the need, but the funds can be used elsewhere more immediately. Motion failed: 3-2 with S. Bannon and B. Elliott voting “aye,” and L. Davis, E. Gabriel and G. Reed voting “no.”

E. Gabriel made a motion to approve the Car 1 replacement; L. Davis seconded. S. Bannon asked for any discussion – there was none. Motion passed: 4-1 with S. Bannon voting “no.”

S. Bannon stated the Finance Committee vote takes precedence and it will be noted the Selectboard did not recommend the Engine 2 payment.

- iii. Wastewater – It was stated that wastewater is retained earnings and borrowing is for the pump station.

P. Orenstein made a motion to approve the Wastewater capital request as stated; A. O’Dwyer 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.

L. Davis made a motion to approve the Wastewater capital request as stated; E. Gabriel seconded. S. Bannon asked for any discussion – there was none. All in favor: 5-0.

- iv. Transit – C. Rembold stated the Town is taking possession of a vehicle so \$23,000 can be removed from the budget.

P. Orenstein made a motion to allocate \$22,000 for the transit vehicle capital request; A. O’Dwyer 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.

L. Davis made a motion to allocate \$22,000 for the transit vehicle capital request; E. Gabriel seconded. S. Bannon asked for any discussion – there was none. All in favor: 5-0.

- v. DPW – J. Aberdale explained the requested parks improvement items and noted there are \$95,000 in additional CPA funds for Grove Street.

P. Orenstein made a motion to approve the parks improvement equipment capital request of \$58,000 from the tax levy; A. O’Dwyer 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.

L. Davis made a motion to approve the parks improvement equipment capital request of \$58,000 from the tax levy; E. Gabriel seconded. S. Bannon asked for any discussion – there was none. All in favor: 5-0.

S. Bannon stated that Tuesday's meeting would start at 5:00pm.

3. Citizen Speak Time

- a. Name unintelligible – stated shields are only useful for small caliber bullets
- b. James Garzon, 84 North Plain Road, thanked the Selectboard and Finance Committee for their work on the budget.

4. Media Time – No media asked to speak.

5. Adjournment - Chairman Bannon adjourned the meeting by unanimous consent at 9:24pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Stacy Ostrow, Recording Clerk