

Selectboard and Finance Committee Joint FY25 Budget Meeting via Zoom
and in Person at 334 Main Street Great Barrington MA
Tuesday, February 20, 2024

1. Call to Order – Chairman Bannon opened the meeting at 5:00pm with Selectboard members Steve Bannon, Leigh Davis, Ben Elliott, Eric Gabriel, Garfield Reed and Finance Committee members Milena Cerna, Richard Geiler, Madonna Meagher, Anne O’Dwyer, Philip Orenstein present.
Also present: Town Manager Mark Pruhenski, Assistant Town Manager Chris Rembold, Financial Coordinator Allison Crespo and other department heads as noted below.

2. FY 25 Budget Review and Discussion

R. Geiler stated he has listened to the budget meetings and is familiar with the information being presented.

a. Capital Budget

i. Police Department

S. Bannon stated the Finance Committee should vote regarding the Police Department budget and noted the Selectboard approved \$183,050 with a 4-1 vote at the last meeting. Police Officer Adam Carlotto stated one of the new police cruisers can wait for replacement until next year and one radio can also be deducted.

A. O’Dwyer made a motion to approve the Police Department Capital budget request for \$113,050; R. Geiler seconded. P. Orenstein asked for any discussion – M. Meagher asked about the need for shields - it was discussed that it is life-saving protective equipment and it was debated if it is essential especially in such a tight budget year. Roll call vote: M. Cerna, “no,” R. Geiler, “aye,” M. Meagher, “no,” A. O’Dwyer, “aye,” P. Orenstein, “aye.” Motion passed: 3-2.

ii. DPW

C. Rembold reviewed the budget for vehicles and equipment; buildings and grounds and streets and bridges - he noted expense funding (borrowing, free cash, etc.) and proposed cuts for each line item. Multiple revisions were made to scale back/delay projects such as the Senior Center kitchen, Town Hall campus and some street engineering projects such as South Main Street. It was stated that road engineering is required to be eligible for state funds and that immediate maintenance/ upgrades to Town buildings has to be addressed to prevent further deterioration. It was noted there is \$750,000 in the budget for the Habitat for Humanity project. P. Orenstein stated it is important to know what is previously authorized borrowing in addition to what is being proposed for FY25 – and the cost/impact of borrowing and debt service was discussed. P. Orenstein noted that debt service is 20% of the general fund budget.

- Jim Bailey, Housatonic, stated for the Habitat for Humanity project, that infrastructure funding was to come from the State not taxpayers.

Vehicles and Equipment

A. O’Dwyer made a motion to recommend the DPW vehicles and equipment capital budget request as discussed; M. Cerna seconded. A. O’Dwyer asked for any discussion – there was none. Roll call vote: M. Cerna, “aye,” R. Geiler, “aye,” M. Meagher, “aye,” A. O’Dwyer, “aye,” P. Orenstein, “aye.” All in favor: 5-0.
L. Davis made a motion to recommend the DPW vehicles and equipment capital budget request as discussed; E. Gabriel seconded. S. Bannon asked for any discussion – there was none. All in favor: 5-0.

Buildings and Grounds

R. Geiler suggested funds for Ramsdell be removed pending funding/feedback from the State. It was discussed that engineering should not be cut. The courthouse work was discussed further and Joe Aberdale, DPW Superintendent explained the work under this capital request that is to be borrowed and improvements requested under the lease agreement that will come from free cash.

A. O'Dwyer made a motion to fund the DPW capital request for buildings and grounds with reductions as discussed; M. Cerna seconded. A. O'Dwyer asked for any discussion – P. Orenstein stated funds for architectural/engineering should not be cut. Roll call vote: M. Cerna, "aye," R. Geiler, "aye," M. Meagher, "aye," A. O'Dwyer, "aye," P. Orenstein, "no." Motion passes: 4-1.

L. Davis made a motion to fund the DPW capital request for buildings and grounds with reductions as discussed. The motion was not seconded.

E. Gabriel made a motion to fully fund architecture/engineering at \$425,000 and other budget items as recommended by staff; B. Elliott seconded. S. Bannon asked for any discussion – there was none. Motion passed 3-2 with L. Davis and G. Reed voting "no."

Streets, Bridges and Culverts – it was noted that \$3.5m was removed as well as \$100,000 for engineering.

P. Orenstein made a motion to reduce the Streets, bridges and culverts capital budget by \$3.6m; A. O'Dwyer seconded. A. O'Dwyer asked for any discussion – there was none. Roll call vote: M. Cerna, "no," R. Geiler, "aye," M. Meagher, "no," A. O'Dwyer, "aye," P. Orenstein, "aye." Motion passes: 3-2.

L. Davis made a motion to reduce the engineering budget by \$100,000; G. Reed seconded. S. Bannon asked for any discussion – there was none. Motion failed 3-2 with S. Bannon, E. Gabriel and B. Elliott voting "no."

E. Gabriel made a motion to fully fund the engineering line and take other reductions as proposed; B. Elliott seconded. S. Bannon asked for any discussion – it was noted that Town is awaiting potential grant funding. Motion passes 4-1 with L. Davis voting "no."

b. Operating Budget

M. Pruhenski, as requested, presented three tiers of hypothetical budget reductions of \$100,000, \$250,000 and \$500,000. He recommended that free cash remain at \$1m where it is currently due to reductions in the operating budget and revenue not being as strong as in the past. He also stated that for the Building Department, town partners will be billed before June 30. Regarding cuts for the three tiers, he noted to achieve these cuts both program expenses and staff/FTEs would have to be reduced. He also shared information on the impact of these cuts on the tax rate noting that lowering the budget increase percentage provides only nominal reductions in the actual tax rate ranging from 5-25 cents. It was confirmed that for the the Town would be reimbursed for Building Department expenses. There was consensus that there should not be cuts in staff/FTEs and there was discussion about cutting budget for youth programs and veterans. S. Bannon stated the hypothetical cuts shows the biggest issue is debt service and revenue.

It was agreed that there should be a review/discussion of the operating budget and any cuts prior to the public hearing. It was suggested that the cuts at tiers two and three should be discussed as well as tier one youth and veterans proposed cuts. Each line item cut was detailed and discussed in depth to determine if it should be accepted, revised or restored.

E. Gabriel made a motion to remove from the list of budget cuts technical software for \$15,000, economic development for \$10,000, Council on Aging transportation for \$10,300, Council on Aging activities for \$3,200, VFW lease for \$21,600 and American Legion lease for \$23,000 and the salary line for \$278,350; G. Reed seconded. S. Bannon asked for any discussion – L. Davis asked for clarification on DPW items. All in favor: 5-0.

L. Davis made a motion to remove DPW street and bridge maintenance for \$17,200 and property security and safety for \$24,000; B. Elliott seconded. S. Bannon asked for any discussion – there was none. Motion passed 4-1 with G. Reed voting “no.”

A. O’Dwyer made a motion to remove from the list of budget cuts technical software for \$15,000, economic development for \$10,000, Council on Aging transportation for \$10,300, Council on Aging activities for \$3,200, VFW lease for \$21,600 and American Legion lease for \$23,000, salary line for \$278,350, DPW street and bridge maintenance for \$17,200 and property security and safety for \$24,000; R. Geiler seconded. A. O’Dwyer asked for any discussion – there was none. Roll call vote: M. Cerna, “aye,” R. Geiler, “aye,” M. Meagher, “aye,” A. O’Dwyer, “aye.” All in favor: 4-0.

It was stated there was a \$123,000 cut to the operating budget.

3. Citizen Speak Time – No citizens asked to speak

4. Media Time – No media asked to speak.

5. Adjournment - Chairman Bannon adjourned the meeting by unanimous consent at 8:15pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Stacy Ostrow, Recording Clerk