

**SELECTBOARD and FINANCE COMMITTEE JOINT BUDGET MEETING MINUTES
(VIA ZOOM)**

CONFERENCE DATE: WEDNESDAY, APRIL 15, 2020

6:00 PM – REGULAR SESSION

LOCATION: ZOOM VIDEO

I. Call to Order; 6:00 pm; Chair A. O'Dwyer called the virtual meeting to order. Those in attendance: Selectboard members, S. Bannon, Chair, L. Davis, B. Cooke, K. Burke, and E. Abrahams; the Finance Committee members, A. O'Dwyer, Chair, M. Loubert, W. Curletti, and M. O'Connor; (Tom Blauvelt absent); Finance Director, Sue Carmel, Town Manager, M. Pruhenski and A. Pulver, Administrative Assistant. (E. May, Building Inspector, C. Rembold, Assistant T. Manager, and S. VanDeusen, DPW)

II. FY 21 Budget Recap. (Discussion/Vote)

L. Davis, recused herself by muting her ability to talk on this subject during this discussion/vote.

Dennis Hogan, Chair of the Board of Southern Berkshire Ambulance Squad (SBAS), said that the Ambulance Squad has responded to over 300 calls, many respiratory, since, March, 2020. Dr. Alex Belman, MD, ER doctor at Fairview Hospital, spoke on the behalf of the Ambulance Squad and its role in the community. He believes that the squad is earnest, upstanding, integral necessity to hospital. The ambulance services are paramedic and not volunteers. They are able to provide a higher level of care, whereas a volunteer service couldn't help care for the patient, they are just able to drive them to the hospital.

He made the argument that we are in a rural community, and thus the ambulance squad currently can be called to automobile accidents, ski resorts, events, etc., and provide more care to get those in need to get to the hospital, or get them to a bigger hospital. He stressed that the insurance companies are cutting out money to ambulance pickups and the 911 calls for ambulance service—the "reimbursement floor" has fallen out, he stated. He noted that the squad supports police and firefighters. He cited that many other private ambulance services are supported by towns (and GB already supports Fire and Police)—he suggested that the only ambulance squads that are financially independent are in large urban areas.

Mr. Hathaway, SB Ambulance Service Director, thanked the Finance Committee and the Selectboard for being willing to hear the ambulance service requests again. Empathized with the tough financial year and that the future looks like it will be financially even more difficult.

E. Abrahams stressed that all had always felt the work of the SBAS is important, but was still unclear of on what basis the amount requested was determined and how the division by the contributions asked by different towns was made. B. Hathaway responded with that the monies given by Medicaid and Medicaid have dropped so they are looking to the towns. M. Loubert noted that we are all living in a different time now than when we first heard about this request. She noted that while initially she had been against contributing funds to the SBAS, given all the challenges faced now, she, too, is leaning towards donating something to the squad, but wanted more information before setting a specific amount.

The item was continued to Special Articles Review, later on the agenda. B. Cooke asked for clarity on what amount SBAS was requesting? B. Hathaway stated that they were requesting \$132,000.

III. Discussion re: Covid-19 Effects on Revenue and Expenses:

Ms. S. Carmel, Finance Director, began her presentation with the caveat that all her information is still preliminary, based on just a few weeks and comparing to prior year. She said that the total amounts

collected in motor vehicle excise is comparable -- only down 10% decrease (75% vs. 85%), from last year at this time (but, noted that timing of due dates could explain this change). Regarding property taxes (recall: deadline extended from May 1 to June 1), collections are still coming in on a fairly steady basis, down only a very small amount from last year. She noted that 23% of total property tax payments are via escrow payments, and feels the big taxpayers are going to be able to pay (Price Chopper, etc.) fully and on time. She is monitoring these receipts almost daily with Karen Fink, Treasurer/Collector.

Regarding other receipts, comparing the first three quarters of last year to this year, nothing suggests any 'red flags'—there was an increase (from last year) in hotel/motel taxes and building permits and interest income are both up. She said that the restaurant and meals tax could be affected, depending on the length of time the social distancing is in place, if it goes into the summer months. Building permits are still coming in, and there will likely be some declines in meals tax, hotel/ motel etc. and cannabis revenue as the Covid-19 restrictions continue. But, she feels it is too early—esp. on property taxes--to make a prediction/ projections; but can expect declines (from previous years) in meals, hotel/motel tax revenues.

S. Bannon asked where/when we are likely to see the effects of decreased revenues—and in which budget? S. Carmel confirmed that all revenues close to Free Cash, and will impact the amount of Free Cash available next year for planning the FY 2022 budget. (FY 2021's budget utilizes the Free Cash available now). A O'Dwyer shared the FY 2021 Local Receipts estimates in the Budget Packet and asked if we are making any changes in our revenue estimates. S. Carmel confirmed that while it is early to know for certain what will be actuals in the coming year, she does not feel we need to make any adjustments at this time, although strongly suggests not going any higher in these estimates.

K. Burke asked if there are other areas that we need to look at in light of Covid-19 before reviewing the final budget. M. Pruhenski suggested that one area is PR, which has become an even more critical part of what the Town Hall needs to do right now, as well as IT. He also suggested we hear from Public Safety Departments regarding their challenges. Fire Dept Chief, C. Burger, spoke that he is working to keep more PPE on hand. This would not dramatically affect his budget, either.

Fire Department and Police Departments have not had any significant changes in budget thus far. DPW had to spend approximately \$1,000 for masks, protection, and cleaning supplies. Some of this expense, he expects, may be reimbursed. M. Pruhenski suggested it would also be good to hear from the Health Department. Police Chief Walsh also indicated that he is comfortable with the current FY 2021 proposed/presented. He also noted that he has not had many unexpected expenses associated with Covid-19. A question came up about fewer speeding- or other-tickets/citations revenues, but Chief Walsh noted that this is minimal (S. Carmel confirmed this), as well. S. Carmel noted that a significant proportion of speeding ticket fines go to the State, not to the Town.

L. Davis did ask about using schools as a medical shelter/space in Covid-19. Chief Burger indicated that congregate housing is not a good option for a pandemic, but the Town has been looking into the dorms at Simon's Rock College (which are currently mostly empty), as well facilities at Camp Eisner. Communal bathrooms remain a problem, so the Town (and most of State) has turned to hotels and motels for non-congregate sheltering. The State has MOU's with various hotels, including one in Pittsfield, and the Town has signed an MOU with a motel in town for housing for first-responders or essential workers who need to stay closer to work and/or are not able to return home for safety reasons. These are being funded by a grant from Berkshire United Way, FEMA reimbursements.

IV. Operating Budget Wrap-ups. (Discussion/Vote):

M. Pruhenski opened this discussion by again noting that PR has become an even more critical part of what the Town Hall needs to do right now, as well as IT. He then reminded the committees that the purpose of this meeting was to review the proposed FY 2021 budget, which had originally been finalized

for the public hearing back in February. Given all that has happened since then, and the delay in the public hearing, the goal is to review our recommendations. A. O'Dwyer shared on the screen and reviewed the original proposed overall budget—including total expenditures and revenues, noting that the tax rate increase would be approximately 2.8%.

Re: Public Relations: S. Carmel reminded the committees that the original PR (“Consultants”) line item of \$18,000. Had been reduced to \$12,000. A. O'Dwyer asked if it would be possible to not make improvements to meeting room, and other places in Town Hall (since the rooms were not being used for meetings at this time), and rather use the monies for IT and communications (PR). S. Bannon confirmed with S. Carmel that \$1,000 or \$5,000 increases in the budget does not increase the tax levy to any significant degree. M. Pruhenski indicated that he feels \$18,000 would be a better budget amount for the coming year; E. Abrahams agreed.

E. Abrahams made a motion to bring the PR budget, line back to \$18,000—to bring as a recommendation to the Public Hearing—B. Cooke, seconded, Roll Call Vote; All in Favor, 5-0. A. O'Dwyer made same motion to increase the PR budget to \$18,000.; M. O'Connor, seconded;; All in Favor, 4-0.

Audience member /citizen question regarding what it would cost to have one ambulance to cover emergency transportation. Question postponed to “special articles” discussion.

Re: IT: M. Pruhenski asked Amy Pulver to speak on IT operating budget. A. Pulver spoke of the increased costs for zoom meetings; could use more laptops and additional webcams for workstations, as well as speakers and microphones. These are the more immediate IT needs. Hard to know at this time how many, its early.

Re: FC Reserve Fund: M. Pruhenski spoke of FY21 asked to increase the Reserve fund while so much is unknown at this time, to allow us to have reserve funds to help departments that will likely see unanticipated expenses. M. Pruhenski, made the recommendation to increase the fund from its historical amount of \$100,000 to between \$125,000 - \$150,000 for the Reserve Fund (S. Carmel noted that in 2018 the budget line was \$150,000). M. Loubert indicated that she agrees with this recommendation to \$125,000, but not more. A. O'Dwyer made motion, to increase Reserve Fund to \$125,000.; M. Loubert, seconded; Roll Call Vote; All in Favor, 4-0. E. Abrahams made the same motion as Finance Committee—to increase reserve fund to \$125,000.; B. Cooke, seconded; Roll Call Vote; All in Favor; 5-0.

Re: Special Articles: M. Pruhenski said he is formally withdrawing the vocational scholarship (MMRHS), \$ 65,000. at this time, due to so much uncertainty. K. Burke asked what other towns are doing re: this request; M. Pruhenski indicated he did not yet know what other towns are doing [see Selectboard vote on this article, in section V, below].

V. Capital Review. (Discussion/Vote):

Mr. Pruhenski said no specific changes needed at this time, followed by Mr. Rembold's acknowledgment that there were no obvious needs for additional monies, though there may be a difference in CPA funds (the committee is meeting later in April). Ms. Loubert asked about **Ramsdell Library renovations** to HVAC, and where the amount of \$300,000 came from. C. Rembold answered that the boiler, heating systems, needs repairs to prevent pipes from freezing; S. VanDeusen reported that the primary issue is the boiler (heating system); it is in such bad shape that it could fail this winter; and the insurance company has also flagged this as a concern. He got estimate from a different job, same issue.

Ms. O'Dwyer asked if the air conditioning in **Town Hall meeting room** was a priority – it seems an excessive expense given that we're not using the meeting rooms much this summer. E. Abrahams said that the meeting room becomes awful in the summer—with the current air conditioning we can't hear

each other in the summer. M. Pruhenski indicated that this amount does not impact FY 2021 budget, as it is borrowed; A. O'Dwyer expressed concern that it is the borrowing interest expenses that are contributing significantly to the tax rate increase for FY 2021.

K. Burke asked that projection displays are not included in the renovation – the \$20,000 includes a new table, sound system, air conditioning. A. O'Dwyer commented that SmartBoards are often not useful, and suggested more research; L. Davis agreed; M. Loubert indicated she would want more information re: technologies before voting, and putting some extra funds in the Reserve Fund and wait for more information.

VI. Special Articles Review. (Discussion/Vote)

S. Bannon brought the **SBAS funding** request to the committee. Recognizing that the request for the Vocational Scholarship funding had been withdrawn, M. Loubert suggested this (SBAS funding) was a place to consider some funding. She made a motion to apply \$65,000 under special articles. to emergency medical services (SBAS). A. O'Dwyer seconded, but asked if the SBAS can apply for Community Impact Funding; E. Abrahams reminded that the calls would need to be marijuana-related, which is not likely. M. Loubert reminded—and all agreed—that the vote here is for a one-year commitment (FY 2021) to fund the SBAS—it is not a multi-year commitment. M. O'Connor asked for confirmation that SBAS's financials would be made available to the Town staff and committees and, in ideal circumstances, we would review these before voting on the funds. A. O'Dwyer suggested that we are authorizing these funds only with the understanding that we will have access to their financials – and review these before releasing the funds.

Fire Chief Burger reminded the committees that the Town is the largest town SBAS services. He noted that Great Barrington could run an ambulance squad at “break even” cost (approx.. 1200 calls result in breaking even, and SBAS has 1300 calls), and noted that the revenues SBAS received from calls in/for the Town are subsidizing the low volume of calls SBAS has from other smaller towns. He noted a similar situation in Lee, and Hudson, NY, where Greenport EMS covers Hudson for \$1 per year, and smaller towns contribute more as they have such a call volume that a subsidy is needed.

E. Abrahams recommended that the amount that GB funds the SBAS be equal to the largest amount of all towns from whom they are requesting support. K. Burke, read from a *Berkshire Eagle* article: Alford (\$2,563); Egremont (\$14,279); Monterey (\$9,985); and Sheffield (\$42,000). In light of the discussion, M. Loubert withdrew her prior motion. A. O'Dwyer accepted the withdrawal.

A. O'Dwyer thanked Chief Burger for the information provided and made motion to allocate \$42,000 to the Ambulance Squad; W. Curletti, seconded. E. Abrahams said he wasn't sure what the right number is (he had also wondered if \$25,000 is a better number) that we need to have the Town Manager research what the proper number would be for next year, but we should do something this year to help SBAS. S. Bannon indicated that this vote isn't about whether or not the Town supports the good work of SBAS, but what is the right amount to fund them in the coming year, and then to consider in the coming year what is appropriate for the future.

B. Cooke, wanted to clarify that Lee makes a profit from their town-run ambulance squad. B. Hathaway said that Lee and Tyringham bills the surrounding towns for the service—not from emergency calls in Lee alone. Chief Burger, said that Tyringham and Stockbridge are billed too. Chief Burger disputed this. It was agreed that the Town might, in the future, explore the option of running our own ambulance service for Great Barrington, but far more research is needed.

M. Loubert raised her concern that simply to match another Town doesn't seem right either, she doesn't feel comfortable; she is more comfortable with \$25,000. All hoped we will have more info regarding the

SBAS financials between tonight's meeting and the Public Hearing and/or Town Meeting to inform our final votes.

Re: the motion to allocate \$42,000 to the Ambulance Squad, W. Curletti said this vote is prudent. W. Curletti, M. O'Connor, and A. O'Dwyer, voted yes; M. Loubert voted no; 3-1. E. Abrahams made motion same as Finance Committee, B. Cooke seconded; Roll Call Vote; All voting approved 4-0 (L. Davis, recused).

Re: **Vocational Trade Scholarship**: E. Abrahams made motion to withdraw **Vocational Trade Scholarship**; B. Cooke, seconded, K. Burke spoke up that she was not pleased that this was being withdrawn, but will go with the Town Manager's suggestion on this [Note: Finance Committee had not voted to support this at a prior budget meeting.] Roll Call Vote; 5-0; All in Favor.

Re: **Vocational Transportation Funds**: Dr. Peter Dillon, Superintendent, Berkshire Hills Regional School District (BHRSD) reminded the committees that in these programs, the Town sending the student (and not the district school) is obligated to pay tuition, not District. The two students attending this program are 9th graders, 10th graders, next year. Sometimes towns can reimburse parents if they transport the students themselves, but otherwise the town is responsible for transport. He noted that this obligation is parallel to much Special Education transportation. This is a Chapter 74 obligation, with vocational training.

A. O'Dwyer asked why the Town SB/FC didn't know about this until recently (as the students have been attending this program since September 2019); he believes he told Board in November. M. Loubert, however, said she recalls first hearing about this in February [Feb 18, 2020], via an email from Sharon Harrison at BHRSD, presented at a joint FY 21 Budget Meeting.

M. Loubert reminded that the plan in February was to look into other options; P. Dillon suggested that the Town purchasing its own vehicle may not result in any savings; M. Loubert wondered if there could be shared services in this shared transportation (sharing cost with other towns in the district or region). P. Dillon will ask Business Manager about this possibility. L. Davis, asked if there is some sort of "cap" on how much the Town will be expected to pay for this program and if there might be help at the state legislature to help with this? P. Dillon, mentioned that Pittsfield built this new school to attract new kids, but Monument's programs are quite strong, and, to put it in perspective, it's 2 students out of 500, which is a very small percentage of students, although currently, he acknowledged, the cost to the Town is significant. Often, as students get older (juniors, seniors), they start to drive themselves; and there may be other communities to share this service with.

S. Bannon noted that the problem is that we don't know how many students are in this program until after our operating budget is set. P. Dillon suggested that other towns probably create a contingency or reserve fund, and if not used, roll those funds into free cash.

K. Burke asked for clarity on if the Special Article is retroactive to the current year's vocational student tuition and transportation or next years. S. Carmel noted that the Special Article is for the next year (FY 2021). She noted that there are currently two students attending, and one student that the Town needs to come up with the funds to pay for in the current year (one student's tuition was already in the BHRSD budget for FY 2020, so the Town has already paid that allotment; P. Dillon indicated that these students are not in the FY 2021 SBRSD budget). K. Burke also asked if, given that all schools are doing remote education and no transportation is happening, if the transportation expense is still relevant for the current year. P. Dillon noted that we still need to meet our tuition obligations, and education is still occurring. Re: the bus transportation costs during Covid-19, this is under negotiation.

A. O'Dwyer made a motion to the FC to approve \$94,400 for vocational transportation; no second. She withdrew her motion. Discussion about how we cover this cost, if indeed, it is an obligation. Recognizing the many unknowns regarding this request still at this time, M. Loubert made motion to table this vote, on this Special Article, citing the need for more information: A. O'Dwyer, seconded, noting that this was the original vote: to table to the Public Hearing. Roll Call Vote; 4-0, All in Favor. E. Abrahams made motion to support the cost, L. Davis seconded; Roll Call Vote; All in Favor, 5-0.

S. Bannon reminded the committees that the Community Impact Special Article had been approved by both committees at a prior budget meeting.

VII. Discussion re: Public Hearing date and format:

M. Pruhenski presented a timeline for the Budget Hearing and Town Meeting, suggesting that it would give the town staff enough time to get all the work done, recommended having the public hearing on 5th of May. He reminded the committees that staff has a lot of work to do for these meetings. M. Loubert stated that she wanted citizens have more interaction, and would want to have the meeting on May 12th, in the hopes of possibly having an in-person meeting and that she felt strongly that this is preferred. M. Pruhenski expressed concern that there was not a lot of cushion for the work to get done between the closure of the Public Hearing and the Town Meeting. S. Bannon said he doesn't feel there will be any change in remote vs. in-person meeting from one week to another, and because of this we should go with the Town staff's recommendation. M. Loubert stressed the difficulty of citizen participation virtual meetings (noting that she had difficulty with access to virtual hearings)—because of challenges in tech savviness, tech accessibility (still noting safety will always be the primary concern). S. Bannon stressed that he would not want any person at risk at an in-person meeting, noting that seniors are the most vulnerable population in relation to Covid-19, and that the 5th or 12th doesn't change much in what is possible.

E. Abrahams shared that the Governor's recommendation are not going to be dropped by May 4th, and will likely be extended, and that given this—and since the Town is now using Zoom, not call-in technologies—feels more could participate from home. He noted that historically, attendance at public hearings has been low, and the remote format on the 5th might actually increase participation. Additionally, he said that the Town Staff is working really hard right now, any effort to support them is worthwhile. K. Burke agreed, citing all the extra work around the pandemic, while also commending M. Loubert's focus on town residents accessing the meeting. S. Carmel shared that the this timeline proposed was made to meet all the post-hearing deadlines, and already the May 5th hearing puts a lot of pressure on the staff. A. O'Dwyer said, noting that meetings have gone better now that the Town and Committees are getting more familiar with the format, feels comfortable with the 5th. W. Curletti stated he was in favor of May 5th. L. Davis, interjected that if Town Staff requested the 5th, it would be respectful to support them, at this time; they are working hard. Steve Bannon asked for a Vote.

A. O'Dwyer made motion to hold a remote public hearing May 5, 2020, at 6pm; W. Curletti, seconded; Roll call vote: 3-1; yes (W. Curletti, M. O'Connor, A. O'Dwyer,); no (M. Loubert).

VIII. Citizen Speak Time.

No citizens spoke.

IX. Adjournment:

Meeting adjourned at 8:39 pm., A. O'Dwyer made motion to adjourn, M. Loubert, seconded, Roll Call Vote; All in favor; 4-0. E. Abrahams made motion to adjourn, B. Cooke, seconded; 5-0; All in Favor.

Respectfully submitted,

15/ JAMIE M. MINACCI 14 ANNE O'DWYER

Jamie M. Minacci
Recording secretary

Anne O'Dwyer
Chair, Finance Committee