

Selectboard and Finance Committee Joint FY24 Budget Meeting #5

Via Zoom and in person At 334 Main Street Great Barrington MA

Tuesday, March 14, 2023

1. Call to 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, Assistant Town Manager Chris Rembold, Financial Coordinator Allison Crespo.

2. Review and Discussion

S. Bannon stated the meeting will cover Town administration’s recommended reductions and follow up on outstanding items/questions.

- a. M. Pruhenski stated at the last meeting staff was tasked with returning reductions to the FY24 budget of \$150,000-\$200,000 – he proposed reductions totaling \$167,224 and proceeded to share details/rationale. He stated two of the new positions were eliminated – IT Director and DPW Assistant Superintendent – and he noted eight other lines were impacted. He stated his reasoning is that public safety is a priority, so police officer and firefighter positions remain as well as the finance position due to the system upgrade. He asked for questions on the reductions. He noted there are some increases - the IT Coordinator position was restored and the HR Manager’s 4 additional hours were added - and Wastewater was increased due to offsets from staffing being proposed. He noted health and life insurance was reduced due to the two positions being eliminated.

M. Pruhenski also clarified that the laborer/operator was budgeted for in two different lines and one was backed out – and there is a new line for the Landscaper. A. O’Dwyer asked if the increased workload for the system upgrade was a short-term need – A. Crespo replied it is more than that due to Town growth and additional projects/warrants. She also clarified that current staffing is two quarter time positions so the full-time position is only increasing by a half plus benefits. M. Pruhenski added the Accountant’s Office is the only remaining one-person office. M. Pruhenski further clarified that the IT Director and DPW Assistant positions would be budgeted for in FY25.

P. Orenstein noted cannabis funds will be down next year – S. Bannon replied that will be considered next year, and the situation may change.

- b. M. Pruhenski covered the impact summary - noting \$325,000 removed from Special Articles increases free cash to reduce the tax levy; town operation budget increase reduced to 4.9% from 6.1%; Wastewater Enterprise Fund increase reduced to 3.7% from 4%; and the tax rate reduction to \$14.55 from \$14.99. He also noted he talked to Town Counsel, David Doneski, and he recommended add itional research into what percentage of Co-responder calls/cases were the result of substance abuse. M. Pruhenski stated there is no information on the nature of the cases and he suggested keeping \$5,000 in the budget if/when we hire a Co-responder as a shared resource or via another program, that information can be tracked. It was raised that the person worked for the Brien Center so perhaps that is why it was not shared with the Police Department – and there could be privacy issues with collecting/sharing that information. E. Gabriel stated the Co-responder program is important for the Town. Various levels and approaches to funding the Co-responder role via the operating budget or adding funds to

Community Impact were discussed and weighed against the objective of reducing the budget. S. Bannon stated there are two items to consider –accepting the \$167,224 and deciding on \$5,000 or \$25,000 for the Co-responder role. R. Geiler suggested funding Chief Storti’s original budget request of \$12,000 and working with other communities to get buy in.

R. Geiler made a motion to budget \$12,000 as Chief Storti’s original request for the Co-responder; P. Orenstein seconded. P. Orenstein asked for any discussion – A. O’Dwyer stated Chief Storti did not push back on the \$5,000 - M. Pruhenski replied he made the decision to cut the amount when it was unclear if the program would happen, but he is supportive now. Roll call vote: : Milena Cerna, “aye,” Richard Geiler, “aye,” Madonna Meagher, “aye,” Anne O’Dwyer, “aye,” Philip Orenstein, “aye.” All in favor: 5-0.

E. Abrahams made a motion to budget \$12,000 as Chief Storti’s original request for the Co-responder; L. Davis seconded. S. Bannon asked for any discussion – there were none. Roll call vote: Ed Abrahams, “aye,” Steve Bannon, “aye,” Leigh Davis, “aye,” Eric Gabriel, “aye,” Garfield Reed, “aye.” All in favor: 5-0.

- c. The \$150,000 for Housatonic Water Works relief was discussed – considering the likelihood of approval by the Senate and weighing the risks/procedure if it remains as a Special Article or is taken out – and there was some consensus to leave it in until it is approved by the Senate.
- d. M. Pruhenski shared a comparison of the impact of adding the original 4.5 positions vs adding 2.5 positions with the cost for both for FY24 partial and full year salaries, increase in the tax rate, and increase in the median tax bill per year. He highlighted that adding 2.5 positions reduces the operating budget by 78,500; reduces the tax rate by six cents and reduces the tax bill by \$25.53. He also shared the percent change for FY23 tax rate – reducing the Town budget from 6.1% to 4.9%; reducing the Enterprise Fund/wastewater to 3.7% down from 4%; and increasing free cash to \$4.33m from \$4.1m. He also noted the tax ratio impact went from \$14.99 to \$14.55 which he noted is a conservative estimate. It was noted that assessed value has a significant impact.
- e. Regarding budget reductions, R. Geiler expressed concerns about the impact of eliminating the new DPW position. E. Abrahams pointed out adding in another position amounts to a minimal increase and it may be worth it to taxpayers. P. Orenstein asked if the new finance position could help DPW with project planning/ contractor payments – A. Crespo replied they have been working with DPW on capital projects with C. Rembold and noted the roles do not align exactly. A. O’Dwyer stated her support for anything that can be done to minimize the increase to taxpayers. It was agreed that M. Pruhenski’s judgement/assessment is to be trusted.

L. Davis made a motion to accept the Town Manager’s recommendation of a reduction of \$167,224 from the FY24 budget; E. Abrahams seconded. S. Bannon asked for any discussion – A. Crespo stated it is a reduction of \$160,224 because \$7,000 was added in for the Co-responder.

L. Davis amended the motion to accept the Town Manager’s recommended reduction of \$160,224; E. Abrahams seconded. S. Bannon asked if any discussion – E. Abrahams stated it is a mistake to make nickel and dime decisions. Roll call vote: Ed Abrahams, “no,” Steve Bannon, “aye,” Leigh Davis, “aye,” Eric Gabriel, “aye,” Garfield Reed, “aye.” Motion passed: 4-1.

- f. S. Bannon clarified we are voting on the Town operating budget , but not touching the Special Articles – and noted nothing is set in stone until the public hearing. P. Orenstein confirmed the budget increase is now 5% due to the \$7,000 added in and noted the number reflects the Town not funding the additional \$150,000 for HWW – we are just putting it back as a temporary measure.

A. O’Dwyer made a motion to accept the Town Manager’s recommended FY24 budget reduction of \$160,224; R. Geiler seconded. P. Orenstein asked if 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.

g. P. Orenstein asked for clarification on capital items non-borrowing relative to the general fund number – A. Crespo replied it is likely due to other plans for paying other than borrowing, but would confirm.

h. M. Cerna confirmed updated budget numbers would be sent prior to the public hearing.

3. Citizen Speak Time – No citizens asked to speak.

4. Media Time – No media comments/questions.

5. Adjournment - Chairman Bannon adjourned the meeting by unanimous consent at 6:59pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Stacy Ostrow, Recording Clerk

Approved by Finance Committee Oct. 16, 2023