

Selectboard and Finance Committee Joint FY24 Budget Meeting #4

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

Wednesday, March 8, 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 and other department heads as noted below.

S. Bannon stated the process will be to go through each department, capital, Berkshire Hills Regional School District and Special Articles and noted this is not the final vote, it is in preparation for the public hearing and questions or changes/motions should be raised. He noted there is a need to make budget cuts.

M. Pruhenski stated as follow up to last night's meeting, he sent an email regarding the 1986 warrant article, FY23 nonprofit awards – noting he is comfortable making some cuts as there are other funding opportunities for the nonprofits and veterans benefits and state aid.

2. Review and Discussion

- a. Budget by Department

- i. Selectboard/Town Manager – There were no comments.
 - ii. Finance Committee – it was confirmed the Contingency Fund should be moved under the Selectboard.
 - iii. Town Accountant - S. Bannon stated this is the first of five new positions being proposed here - he noted all the positions are important, but he voiced concerns about funding them all at once and ongoing. A. O'Dwyer noted there is a 7.1% increase in the tax levy – M. Pruhenski replied the school assessment includes capital and the number is subject to change, but it will be confirmed by the March 23 public hearing. She continued to state the salary increases this year plus new staff positions in a lot all at once – she noted the priority is to retain current staff. She continued to state there are changes in GB now, but they may not last. S. Bannon suggested deciding on the number of positions that are approved for funding and leave it to M. Pruhenski to decide. There was agreement on phasing in new staff over 2-3 years. For the finance position, it was confirmed that the plan is to combine the new position with the two quarter time roles and eliminate those in FY25. E. Gabriel stated the priority is public safety and expressed support for police, fire and DPW additional staffing.

M. Pruhenski asked what positions the Selectboard and Finance Committee are comfortable with so a proposal can be made at the public hearing – S. Bannon stated we can post that before the public hearing. M. Pruhenski stated the total impact of all positions on the average tax bill is an increase of \$41.00 in FY24 and the total cost of the positions is \$194,739 which is 1.3% of the total budget. He was asked to calculate the total liability for a full/future year(s). A. Crespo made a case for the new position due to her years of municipal experience and the Town's significant/increasing workload. S. Bannon suggested continuing to review the budget and perhaps there will be some cuts that may free up budget for staffing - and asked that M. Pruhenski come

- back with a recommendation prior to the public hearing.
- iv. Technology – There were no comments.
 - v. Assessor's Office – P. Orenstein asked if the budget for contracted services is enough to accommodate additional research on matters that may come up - it was noted that any additional work would need a majority vote to move forward. Ross Vivori stated the amount budgeted is good for the work that is planned, but additional funds would be needed for other requests. It was noted that committees requesting research should be informed it may incur additional costs.
 - vi. Collector/Treasurer - P. Orenstein asked about the \$10,000-25,000 budgeted for tax title litigation and asked if we need to budget for it or can we use a contingent source – S. Bannon replied it does not impact the bottom line as it goes to free cash if it is not used. Alicia Dulin stated we know \$10,000 will have to be paid to Land Court for Stonegate and other cases may come up. M. Pruhenski clarified the reserve is for unanticipated expenses.
 - vii. Human Resources - M. Pruhenski asked if there is interest in adding hours which would bring us to 19 hours - it was agreed the hours would be added.
 - viii. Town Clerk - It was confirmed that clickers for Town Meeting was put off to next year.
 - ix. Conservation – There were no comments.
 - x. Planning Board - L. Davis asked about a potential new housing position - C. Rembold replied it did come up with the Selectboard and Planning Board, but details were not discussed. He clarified the position would fall under Planning and Development and noted the idea of adding \$20,000 to the \$30,000 we are already paying for a planner through Berkshire Regional Planning. L. Davis suggested adding funds under the Affordable Housing Trust Fund Special Article – C. Rembold clarified it is the Trust's decision.
 - xi. Zoning Board of Appeals – There were no comments.
 - xii. Planning/Community Development - L. Davis asked if new staff to cover housing could be utilized now – C. Rembold replied there is not a plan for services/projects/priorities. S. Bannon stated there are funds elsewhere in the budget for housing needs and asked if \$20,000 would make a difference. L. Davis asked about the status of the two Housing Sub- Committee recommendations – C. Rembold replied it has not been discussed. S. Bannon suggested Community Preservation and the Housing Trust may support additional work.
 - xiii. Buildings and Grounds
 - A. O'Dwyer confirmed the Assistant DPW Superintendent position is split between two budgets totaling \$82,000 with hiring planned for January – M. Pruhenski clarified it is posted internally now. The group discussed the Landscaper position that was approved last year and the high cost of supplies required for landscaping work. It was clarified that contracted services is for building consulting work and it is part of the street maintenance budget. It was noted there is nothing in the Town Meeting vote line for the landscaper -
 - M. Pruhenski stated he would look into it as it was funded last year.
 - xiv. Police Department - P. Orenstein asked about using Community Impact Funding to support police department programs. He referred to Town Counsel's advice that the funds can be used for policing, substance abuse and youth programs to offset costs related to the cannabis business – such as on substance use intervention, training, etc.

– and that is consistent with what we are doing. A. O’Dwyer pointed to the community outreach and the Co-responder programs and any high school initiatives. E. Abrahams cautioned that towns are being challenged on the use of these funds – if the Co-responder is dealing with marijuana use related issues that might be acceptable, but there is a view that police are less taxed because they are not enforcing marijuana laws. M. Pruhenski stated he would discuss this with Town Counsel. S. Bannon stated there is a plan for using those funds and if we spend aggressively, it will end sooner and we will have to absorb more costs in the budget or programs may end. He added that we may be called on to justify the use of those funds with documentation and could end up in court. It was confirmed by Chief Storti that case details cannot be tracked, but he stated the importance of the role for deescalating situations, finding long-term care programs/options, supporting first-responder mental health and student/in-school programs. E. Abrahams stated, thinking ahead, if we want a co-responder 24/7 would that be useful or is on-call enough. E. Gabriel stated this is a very important issue and a vital role for which we should budget as needed. Chief Storti suggested GB hire a full-time co-responder and offer those services to other towns. Chief Storti stated two towns will not support the program and the others are still in the budget process. S. Bannon suggested a part-time position with the Brien Center and Berkshire Health Systems being asked to support/partner with us and the other towns.

P. Orenstein made a motion to allocate \$25,000 to this line item provided it comes from Community Impact funds; A. O’Dwyer seconded. P. Orenstein asked for any discussion – S. Bannon stated he would rather budget for this as a part-time position regardless of whether Community Impact funds can be used – and ask for Brien/BHS/other town support. It was debated how to budget/position funding for this program and it was determined that M. Pruhenski would ask Town Counsel about using Community Impact funding for this position and if it is allowed, to add it to the Community Impact Special Article for an increased request of \$525,000 with \$25,000 earmarked for the program. Chief Storti confirmed the \$25,000 would work in partnership with Brien/BHS. S. Bannon stated another meeting will need to be scheduled before the public hearing. There was no vote.

- xv. Fire Department – There were no comments
- xvi. Emergency Management – There were no comments.
- xvii. Building Inspector - P. Orenstein asked about updating the fee schedule to reflect real costs – M. Pruhenski replied multiple departments are reviewing their fee schedules and they will be presented all at once rather than piecemeal.
- xviii. Animal Control Officer – There were no comments.

S. Bannon stated there are 10 panelists and 11 attendees at the meeting

- xix. DPW - Highway - P. Orenstein asked about the budget for gas/diesel which is much higher than the year-to-date spend – it was explained that actuals are only through December and there is \$2,931 remaining in the budget.
- xx. Health Department - G. Reed asked about the nature of the contracted services – R. Jurczyk replied it is the Public Health Nursing Program, lake/river water testing, sharps disposal and other small items.
- xxi. Community Services – There were no comments
- xxii. Council on Aging - M. Pruhenski confirmed Polly Mann is retiring in May and the position will be posted. He confirmed her replacement will have the same

salary, but there could be flexibility in the contingency line.

- xxiii. Veterans' Affairs - M. Pruhenski verified the veterans district is our assessment and likely covering our portion of the director's salary and office rent. P. Orenstein asked about veterans' benefits being low compared to what was approved – M. Pruhenski replied the excess goes to free cash and state aid will reflect that.
- xxiv. Libraries - A. O'Dwyer asked about the full and part -time positions – S. Klein replied full and part -time positions were broken out this year – there are five full and six part time employees and salary is \$17-\$18/hour. G. Reed asked that a local vendor for supplies be considered.
- xxv. Parks and Recreation - P. Orenstein confirmed the Town cannot charge fees for use of the lake because we use federal funds.
- xxvi. Boards and Commissions – There were no comments.
- xxvii. Celebrations and Events – E. Gabriel clarified the request for veterans flags for Housatonic village along the parade route and on phone polls.
- xxviii. Debt Service – M. Cerna confirmed the interest rate on the new issuance is 4.5% on short-term and 5% on long-term.
- xxix. Retirement – There were no comments.
- xxx. Insurance – P. Orenstein noted the retiree medical fund expenses decrease of 25% in FY22 and asked if the unspent funds move into the reserve - S. Bannon replied the reserve would go up and then to free cash. M. Meagher asked about relabeling health and life insurance – P. Orenstein replied A. Dulin will provide a schedule of the three components of the line item for the last 3-5 years and we can see what to do from there.
- xxxi. Wastewater – There were no comments

b. Berkshire Hills Regional School District – It was noted there is a final vote of the School Board tomorrow, but it is anticipated not much will change.

c. Capital

- i. Police – G. Reed confirmed the \$78,000 is a contract for repairs and parts.
- ii. Fire – Chief Burger stated some lights are always on at the station due to OSHA or other regulations – he confirmed there are no on/off switches for those lights.
- iii. G. Reed asked about the riding leaf blower – J. Aberdale replied there is one now, but it cannot keep up with the need.
- iv. Buildings and Grounds – There were no comments.
- v. Streets and Bridges – P. Orenstein asked about \$350,000 for sidewalk/path work not covered by grants – how important is it – C. Rembold replied he would find out.
- vi. Parks – A. O'Dwyer asked about improvements and was directed to the packet. P. Orenstein asked about the adding a parking lot at McAllister Park – J. Aberdale replied he proposed three options to the Conservation Commission and is awaiting response.
- vii. Sidewalks – C. Rembold stated the \$100,000 budgeted is for sidewalks anywhere in Town and there is a new sidewalk inventory. He also noted a portion is for Lake Mansfield, but there may be grant money for that, and if so, the Town will not borrow.
 - A. O'Dwyer asked if there is a way to know how \$6m in borrowing will increase our debt – it is 25% of the total budget increase and will hit next year's budget. S. Bannon stated if we delay, the work gets more expensive.

- viii. Technology – P. Orenstein asked about the next step after make-ready work – C. Rembold replied an RFP to providers to use the trunk line extended into Housatonic village. He confirmed the budgeted amount is from National Grid and Verizon for the preparation of poles for fiber optic. He added costs for the placement of fiber depends on the number of subscribers – and there have been initial conversations about it. E. Gabriel stated it is a good investment as it may promote business/use of the mill buildings and boost cell service.
- ix. Wastewater – There were no comments.

d. Special Articles

- i. Community Impact Funding – It was discussed that \$25,000 would be added here if eligible. M. Pruhenski clarified that the funding was requested by the Committee and this is the fourth year - in prior years funding was \$185,000 and \$350,000 for two years.
- ii. Vocational Tuition and Transportation – There were no comments.
- iii. Stabilization and Capital Stabilization – It was agreed this is an important item.
- iv. Other Post Employment Benefits (OPEB)
 - M. Pruhenski stated the process at Town Meeting is to vote on establishing the Trust and then vote to create an OPEB Trust using the \$820,000 – and it would be renamed OPEB Trust.
 - P. Orenstein made a motion to modify Special Article number 5 to eliminate the allocation of \$176,500 to the OPEB Trust to be created with the \$820,000; R. Geiler seconded. P. Orenstein 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 repeat the motion as presented by P. Orenstein; E. Gabriel seconded. S. Bannon asked if any discussion – E. Abrahams stated the \$176,500 should go into the Trust as we have been wanting to fund this for a long time. E. Gabriel stated moving these funds can help fund staff positions. Roll call vote: Ed Abrahams, “no,” Steve Bannon, “aye,” Leigh Davis, “aye,” Eric Gabriel, “aye,” Garfield Reed, “aye.” Motion passed 4-1.
- v. Emergency Medical Services – A. O’Dwyer stated she is inclined to support this, but asked for financial information behind the request to understand how they got to the dollar amount. Chief Burger stated he was on the board and the organization is better managed and there are solid controls in place now. He added they have good historical data on revenue/expenses and are likely to provide the information requested. He expressed support for their funding request. L. Davis asked if funding will go up annually – Chief Burger replied the other towns will not back out as they have no other options for these services - and increases will be in line with cost of living.
- vi. Housatonic Water Works Relief – S. Bannon stated it is likely the \$150,000 will get approved by the Senate so options are to remove this Special Article now, leave it in until the next meeting in hopes of getting state approval or leave it in and fund it at \$400,000. He noted \$250,000 was the goal. M. Pruhenski confirmed it will be April before we receive the funds and some options have been identified on allocation. S. Bannon stated if we hear from the state before the public hearing, we will take it out. If we keep it in, we can vote to pass over it at Town Meeting. It was agreed that it should not be taken out until the additional funds are confirmed by the state.

It was agreed the next meeting would be on March 14 at 6:00pm.

S. Bannon stated by 9-1 vote there is \$176,500 available and may have an additional \$150,000 – he asked how much more should we ask M. Pruhenski to remove and come back with a recommendation on allocating those funds. P. Orenstein stated budgeting for new staff is \$200,000 based on partial years - and asked for projected cost of new staff for a full year – it was confirmed he will provide that at the next meeting. He stated the intention is to determine what level of staffing increase would keep the budget level for FY24 and FY25. A. O'Dwyer stated the new positions for a full year total \$350,000 with benefits budgeted for elsewhere at 30% of salary. E. Gabriel stated he agreed with finding savings to support additional staffing. It was agreed the main concern is the impact on the tax levy. The landscaper position approved last year was discussed and determined it should be confirmed where it is budgeted. P. Orenstein requested that M. Pruhenski come back with \$150,000-\$200,000 in budget cuts. M. Pruhenski clarified the ask of staff is to reduce the proposed budget by \$325,000 from the two Articles plus another \$150,000-\$200,000 and determine how that would impact the tax rate – there was agreement on this approach. It was stated there may be additional funds from the HCAs. It was stressed that use of the \$4.5m must be justified. It was discussed that residents are not clear on how the cannabis money received by the Town is used. S. Bannon stated their question is about using the 3% - we used \$4.1m to reduce the tax levy. M. Pruhenski clarified it is lower this year - the Town is mindful of keeping Community Impact funding portion of free cash separate last year there was a question what portion of free cash should be reserved for Community Impact funding. It was agreed the public should be aware.

R. Geiler asked for the Accounting position if the role could become full time instead of having a new position – M. Pruhenski stated once it gets to 19 hours the Town must offer benefits – under that threshold it is hard to find someone.

G. Reed announced it is International Women's Day and recognized L. Davis for helping a neighbor in need.

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

4. Media Time – There were no media comments/questions.

5. Adjournment - Chairman Bannon adjourned the meeting by unanimous consent at 8:42pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Stacy Ostrow, Recording Clerk

Approved by Finance Committee Oct. 16, 2023