

**MINUTES**  
**Joint Budget Meeting, Selectboard and Finance Committee**  
**Town Hall, 334 Main Street Great Barrington MA 01230**  
**Wednesday, February 21, 2018 at 6:00PM**

**PRESENT**

Sean Stanton  
Steve Bannon  
Dan Bailly  
Ed Abrahams  
Bill Cooke

**FINANCE COMMITTEE**

Walter Atwood  
Eugene Curletti  
Janet Lee  
Anne O'Dwyer  
Tom Blauvelt

Town Manager, Jennifer Tabakin  
Town Accountant, Sue Carmel

Opening of the joint Selectboard and Finance Committee meeting was delayed 15 minutes due to the Town Hall elevator not operating. In anticipation of having to continue the meeting, Board members agreed on March 5 at 6 p.m. at Town Hall and March 7, same time and place, as needed. Fire Chief Charles Burger resolved the elevator problem and Selectboard Chair Sean Stanton opened the meeting at 7:15 p.m.

At the table with him were Selectboard members Stephen Bannon, Bill Cooke, Ed Abrahams and Dan Bailly and Finance Committee members Thomas Blauvelt, Eugene Curletti, Walter F. Atwood III, Janet Lee and Anne O'Dwyer. Also Town Manager Jennifer Tabakin and Town Accountant Susan Carmel.

Berkshire Hills Regional School District Superintendent Peter Dillon and Business Administrator Sharon Harrison were in the audience.

The Boards worked from a third budget draft.

Ms. Tabakin gave a brief run-through of a Town Meeting PowerPoint presentation of the budget. Ms. Carmel said the total that needs to be raised, with the proposed FY 2019 budget, is \$30,285,070, up \$1,441,251 from FY18. This figure includes an anticipated \$16,357,318 school assessment to the town; the school committee has yet to adopt a budget, and this figure may change. The school amount is a \$1,027,921 increase, or 6.7 percent, over the previous fiscal year.

Ms. Carmel and Ms. Tabakin discussed the Town's FY19 levy limit. Ms. Tabakin said not a lot of borrowing is proposed for the coming year, but free cash is lower. This should not affect the Town's AAA bond rating, she said. She said the Town's policy has been to allocate 80 percent of free cash each year to offset the following year's tax rate. That would leave \$385,626 in free cash. Not as much free cash was accumulated in FY17 (which can be applied to FY19) due to insufficient insurance contingency, lower budget turnback, increase in carryover funding for ongoing work, a tighter budgeting, and delays

in grant receipts, including Chapter 90 road funds from the commonwealth. The Town is generating healthy local receipts, she said.

Mr. Stanton said the tax rate last year was kept level; this year there is a proposed 4 percent growth. Mr. Blauvelt pointed out that for an average home valued \$381,000, with the anticipated tax rate with the current numbers, this amounted to \$120 a week in real estate tax.

Ms. Tabakin said proposed personnel changes include a \$1,000 stipend for a parking monitor and \$150,000 for the fire department (Line 109) to cover one present inspector and two new fulltime firefighter positions. Chief Burger said these individuals would do other departmental work besides responding to emergency calls. There was lengthy discussion of fewer available volunteer firefighters (who receive stipends when they respond to calls) and growing needs of the Southern Berkshire Ambulance Squad. Having on-staff firefighters would mean quick response times, and the availability of a firefighter/EMT to assist in providing ambulance backup. Ms. Tabakin said she had reduced Chief Burger's original request by \$50,000. Other budget changes since the last meeting, Ms. Tabakin said, included Lines 254 (Insurance) and DEP (Line 145). The Stabilization Fund has a \$370,000 balance, and \$100,000 will be used. Numbers in this third iteration of the budget will have to be revised to reflect an erroneous listing in or near Line 109.

Mr. Stanton expressed frustration that the increase was 4 percent, and this is before the Town knows the Berkshire Hills Regional School District numbers. He said the pattern each year is to reduce Town spending to compensate for School increases, and cuts can be painful and the pattern is not sustainable.

There was discussion of how and what to cut. Mr. Atwood and Mr. Blauvelt said they had ideas in particular departments. Mr. Bailly said sincere strategic planning is necessary. Discussion often came back to the Fire Department, of which a comprehensive audit and recommendations are expected this summer. Many at the meeting were uncomfortable making many FD changes without knowing the report's findings. An idea was aired to make the FD budget increase contingent on Selectboard approval following receipt of the report. The money nevertheless would have to be raised through the tax rate. It was suggested increasing full-time firefighters would drain volunteerism in the department.

Mr. Atwood suggested looking to contract some services. Others said savings were phantom, as contractors would include health insurance and other costs in their bids.

Ms. Tabakin said she had made \$160,000 in cuts since the previous meeting.

Mulling the 4 percent increase, members of the two Boards discussed asking her to making further cuts — or at least bringing possibilities to the Boards — based on a specific dollar amount or on a maximum percentage increase, such as 2.5 percent. There was also discussion as to whether the Town Manager should be asked to determine further cuts, or the Boards themselves. Mr. Bannon expressed confidence in her depth of knowledge in the budget and expertise in suggesting further trims. There was some fear expressed of cutting too deeply into Town services. Ms. Tabakin advocated for changing the way the Town handles Free Cash. Mr. Stanton resisted, asking for budget cuts instead.



Ms. Carmel said the budget as it stands has a 3.7 percent increase; \$150,000 in cuts would bring the rise down to 3.1 percent.

In a motion by Mr. Bannon, seconded by Mr. Bailly, to ask for \$150,000 in cuts, the vote was 2-3, with Mr. Stanton, Mr. Abrahams and Mr. Cooke opposed. Mr. Stanton suggested it wasn't high enough.

Mr. Bannon moved a \$250,000 figure and Mr. Bailly seconded, but in discussion, the motion and second were withdrawn.

Ms. Tabakin said she would meet with Department Heads to see what direction to take. Mr. Atwood said the Boards years before reviewed the budget line by line, and said that might be useful again.

After further discussion, Mr. Bannon moved to ask for \$200,000 in proposed cuts, Mr. Bailly seconded, with the understanding that Board members could argue to restore some items. The vote passed, Mr. Abrahams and Mr. Cooke dissenting. Mr. Cooke said the motion didn't give the Town Manager adequate direction.

For the Finance Committee, Mr. Atwood also moved the \$200,000 figure and Mr. Curletti seconded. Ms. O'Dwyer said she would like to hear the implication of proposed cuts. The vote was four in favor, Ms. Lee opposed.

Mr. Bannon said after Town Meeting, the Boards should discuss policy and procedure in future year budgeting.

Ms. Tabakin, in other business, said the Auditor is still waiting for OPEB numbers and has no draft report to share.

The meeting adjourned at 9:22 p.m. on a motion by Mr. Bannon, seconded by Mr. Bailly, and approved unanimously by the Selectboard.

Respectfully submitted,



Bernard A. Drew  
Recording Secretary