

Selectboard and Finance Committee Joint FY24 Budget Meeting Via Zoom and
in person at 334 Main Street Great Barrington MA
Wednesday, March 1, 2023

1. Call to Order - Chairman Bannon opened the meeting at 6:00pm with a Selectboard roll call: Ed Abrahams, "aye," Steve Bannon, "aye," Eric Gabriel, "aye," Garfield Reed, "aye." Absent: Leigh Davis
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.

M. Pruhenski stated he had follow up information from the last meeting on three items:

- Health insurance numbers – Information was provided by Alicia Dulin via email which was shared at the meeting. P. Orenstein stated the numbers received are different than the retiree medical report and numbers included in the OPEB memo. A. Dulin replied it is just broken down in a different way – some retirees are on active plans if they are not yet 65 and the Town is paying active cost – she noted the retiree plan is a lower cost. P. Orenstein stated for example, for 2021 it is \$205,000, but the actuarial report shows \$474,000 – A. Dulin replied they are counting retirees on active plans. She offered to break it down similarly to the report – and stated she took her numbers from the most recent bill – which includes new employees. P. Orenstein stated he would connect with A. Dulin to discuss.
- Berkshire Hills salary numbers – M. Pruhenski reported the district has two IT support techs with salaries of \$51,000 and \$60,000 and a director making \$104,000 with 4-8 years of service – he noted the Town is low on salary if the plan is to hire at the director level.
- Residential growth – C. Rembold shared residential growth information stating numbers have been collected over time on new multi-unit housing production and population estimates for completed, committed and planned housing. He stated through 2028 there will be over 400 new units (not including single-family homes) with an estimated population of over 1,000 people. He added that if trends continue, for 2020-2030 the Town will grow by 13%. He also shared public safety information noting an example – a significant number of new Police and Fire for one multi-unit development over a one-year period – showing an increased demand for services. C. Rembold also shared economic data showing the importance of GB to the region's economy and the number of employees at GB businesses based on monthly average employment as a percentage of population GB is the highest compared to Williamstown and Pittsfield. G. Reed stated the number of public safety calls is not especially large – M. Pruhenski replied that is just calls, it does not include emails, inquiries, complaints, etc. It was noted an increase in demand for services correlates with the increase in the number of housing units.

2. Departmental Budgets

- a. Conservation Commission – C. Rembold presented stating the budget proposes an hourly rate increase from \$15.30 to \$25.88 for a 32 hour work week based on the vast expertise/experience of the Agent, Shep Evans, and complex job responsibilities to conserve/protect the Town's significant land and water resources. C. Rembold added a salary survey nine years ago found the average salary for the position to be \$43,000 and this year's request is to raise it to that level. He also noted a new line item for Conservation Commissioner training. P. Orenstein asked if homeowners requiring assistance are charged for services – S. Evans replied if there is a proposed project there is an application fee/permitting costs, but no charge for the Agent's time/services. It was noted the Town collects filing fees that can be used for implementing wetlands protection and potentially to fund these increases. M. Cerna asked if residents are knowledgeable enough about regulations/permitting – S. Evans replied part of his role is to educate/guide people, but most local professionals such as contractors and engineers have a good understanding – and, he added, overall, people are much more aware of environmental concerns.
- b. Planning Board

- C. Rembold stated the budget is status quo. There were no questions.
- c. Zoning Board of Appeals
- C. Rembold stated the board meets as needed with some years being busier than others – he added the budget is an accurate projection. There were no questions.
- d. Planning/Community Development
- C. Rembold presented stating the department facilitates and implements the Town’s Master Plan and works with committees such as zoning, community preservation, Selectboard and others in support of large housing/economic development projects such as those under the Affordable Housing Trust, i.e., the Habitat for Humanity housing. He noted there has been discussion with multiple Town boards about an interest in hiring staff to work on housing initiatives. He noted on the economic development line, contracted services of a shared planner through Berkshire Regional Planning for \$30,000 annually to support the Downtown Cultural District and housing related items. He noted if the Town took the \$30,000 already being spent for the contractor and added \$20,000 – it might cover a staff person depending on the scope of services.. S. Bannon stated we should consider whether we want to wait a year or fund this now as C. Rembold’s role/ responsibilities is a significant amount of work. P. Orenstein asked if GB can get more of the planner’s time – C. Rembold stated that is being looked at, but added it would not be difficult to find a full-time person.
- e. Buildings and Grounds
- Joe Aberdale presented stating the budget reflects staff increases due to collective bargaining and a request to add a new position of DPW Assistant Superintendent with the salary split between building/grounds and highway budgets. He noted the significant number of active projects and contracts processed amounting to millions of dollars. He noted there is a total of 26 DPW staff and six consultant engineers. A. O’Dwyer asked about the landscaper position to start in January - M. Pruhenski replied it is posted internally, but no hire yet. J. Aberdale continued to explain the broad reach of DPW structures - 7 cemeteries, 17 parks, 12 buildings, etc. It was discussed that there should be an improved process for residents to use the transfer station. S. Bannon stated there is a lot of work to plan/execute and large expenses associated with DPW projects - and more help is needed. G. Reed confirmed DPW is working on the public bathroom project.
- J. Aberdale continued to state there are increased expenses for supplies for landscaping and noted there may be a part-time person to fill in with planning and planting since timing is close. There was discussion about the proliferation of weeds and the removal/replanting of trees. P. Orenstein asked about the increase in water/sewer – J. Aberdale replied it is because the expense was dispersed under various departments and is now consolidated.
- f. Highway
- J. Aberdale stated the half salary for a new Assistant Superintendent is reflected here as is expenses for trees, safety supplies, etc. P. Orenstein asked if energy costs/gas/diesel was carried over from last year – J. Aberdale replied increases are not as significant and group purchasing is being looked at. It was clarified if the funds are not used it can be applied for another project within the department. J. Aberdale also noted a substantial saving in electric costs even though services increased and the use of LEDs. C. Rembold noted National Grid will pay the Town to switch streetlights to LEDs which will begin soon. It was confirmed that a police detail was moved into the budget and was increased. He also confirmed mattress and bulky item disposal is being worked on.
- g. Council on Aging
- Polly Mann presented stating the main increase is \$2.00 per hour for drivers to get to the going rate. There were no questions.

Samara Klein presented stating there are some budget increases/decreases reflecting shifts in usage and real costs, but baseline is the same except for personnel where increases are due to union negotiation to make salaries market rate. E. Abrahams stated he is the uncompensated president of Friends of the Library and asked about the cut to books/nonprint and shift to subscriptions – S. Klein replied nonprint such as audio books on tape, DVDs, etc. are in use, but at a diminishing rate. M. Cerna asked about future plans/trends for growth – S. Klein replied e-audio/e-books usage is increasing. Staffing was discussed and S. Klein stated there are a total of 14 library employees and noted on the budget library clerk is broken out by part and full time. P. Orenstein asked about staffing of Mason and Ramsdell – S. Klein replied it is a consistent schedule and Ramsdell hours are appropriate. It was also confirmed that the state funds library programming.

Pat Hollenbeck expressed support for library staff wage increases and commented when a holiday falls on a Sunday/Monday Ramsdell is closed for an extended period. S. Bannon replied that is part of collective bargaining – M. Pruhenski added that applies to all Town employees.

i. Parks and Recreation

J. Aberdale stated the budget is unchanged except for some small increases for youth programming and lake management funds most of which is for managing weeds/sand at Lake Mansfield.

Mechanical, biological and other means of managing weeds at the Lake were discussed. P. Orenstein suggested perhaps youth programming could be funded with Community Impact Funds – and it would be looked into.

j. Wastewater

J. Aberdale presented stating the most significant increase is in chemicals to treat wastewater. M. Cerna asked about the amount for maturing debt A. Crespo explained it is principal and interest payment for MA Water Trust low interest loans through the state revolving fund. P. Orenstein asked about the General Fund allocation – A. Crespo replied it is the offset that was recalculated to include indirect costs for Wastewater Enterprise Fund – previous calculations did not include benefits. She continued to explain the General Fund pays for items that have to be accounted for in the Enterprise Fund including employee and retiree salaries and benefits as a percentage of fringe benefits and includes a percentage of Selectboard salary as Sewer Commissioners.

k. Capital

S. Bannon stated department requests do not always mean borrowing—it could be tax levy CPA, etc.

- Police Department – Chief Sorti presented his request for 20 new tasers and accessories that are compatible with the current body cameras and recording platform – he noted the quote is old so might increase slightly. He added tasers are replaced every 7-10 years. He described an additional request for new side arms – which are currently over 10 years old; over the normal replacement life. The request is for an upgrade and the quote includes holsters, sights and lighting. He outlined another request for a new police cruiser which are on a six-year replacement cycle - he noted there is a one year delay on receiving cars.
- Fire Department - Chief Burger presented a request for a utility terrain vehicle and trailer as currently, the Town relies on mutual aid for calls for situations such as mountain rescues.
- DPW – J. Aberdale presented requests for a leaf blower, three trucks, a loader and excavator. It was noted there is no date for receiving this equipment, but there will be a delay. The replacement cycle for equipment was discussed and J. Aberdale noted by FY25 there will be a five-year plan looking at how equipment is being used and cycles for replacement.
- Buildings and Grounds – J. Aberdale presented stating there is no asset management and staffing plan for buildings which need ongoing/periodic maintenance, but one is being developed to plan, monitor, prioritize and maintain/repair buildings proactively on an ongoing basis before there are issues. He noted some repair expenses will be funded through CPA and other grants.

Projects include a leaking roof at the GB Fire Station; Housatonic Fire House water/mold; Town Hall windows; Mahaiwe Cemetery mausoleum; Courthouse water issues; DPW highway garage and transfer station buildings; Mason Library portico; Ramsdell Library access ramp and Police

Station HVAC system. S. Bannon stated the work will happen over a few years and will impact taxes over time. He emphasized the need to address these problems so they do not worsen – but there will be a plan in place so work is not put off again and is done in smaller increments. It was highlighted that staffing, resources and the massive number of active projects impact the ability to keep up with maintenance/repairs – though it was agreed a go forward plan would help. There was overall concern about these expenses and discussion especially about the high cost of building the Fire Station, potential subpar construction, unheeded warnings about leaks/issues and the need to set standards for contractors to ensure expertise/craftmanship. P. Orenstein suggested stating how resources are allocated to buildings by age.

- Streets and Bridges – J. Aberdale presented stating the main focus is on the substantial street work repair and engineering - and he noted there is a plan in place to manage it – and some grant funding for the work. C. Rembold noted there are projections for coming years for larger projects such as Route 41 and Main Street South. J. Aberdale also stated there is a traffic study on Brookside to get ahead of planned work there.
- Parks – J. Aberdale presented describing improvements planned for Grove Street and Dewey Parks - and ongoing collaboration with the Parks Commission. He highlighted work at McAllister Park to install parking and a study of Old Maids Park to see what upgrades are possible. Olympia Meadows was discussed and how maintenance of Memorial Field is handled by teams that use it.
- Technology – C. Rembold presented stating efforts to bring broadband to Housatonic village have progressed – there is a study for the pole route including upgrades to string fiber – with an estimated cost of \$350,000 – and it can be put out to bid. He continued to state what is needed is a digital equity plan to determine who wants and can access the service – and to get a trunk line/backbone into Housatonic village. He noted this is a Selectboard priority item and he is looking into a potential state fiber optic grant.
- Wastewater – J. Aberdale presented stating a new mower is needed as well as facility maintenance and a plan for potential upgrades.

E. Abrahams stated there are three attendees from the public and the remainder are staff/media.

3. Citizen Speak – No citizens asked to speak

4. Media Time – No media spoke.

5. Adjournment - Chairman Bannon adjourned the meeting by unanimous consent at 8:41pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Stacy Ostrow, Recording Clerk