

Wakefield Budget Committee
September 14, 2021

Present: Jerry O'Connor, Chair; Priscilla Colbath; Denny Miller; Peter Kasprzyk (SWP Rep); Paul Romano; Ken Fifield (BoS Rep); Dave Mankus; Connie Twombly; Tom Daniels; Howie Knight; and Relf Fogg (School Board Rep).

Also present were Dino Scala, Town Administrator; Jim Miller, Clearview Community TV; Mary Collins and Bob Ouellette, School Board members; Pam Stiles, Superintendent; Mike O'Neil, Finance Manager; and Toni Bodah, Secretary.

Mr. O'Connor called the meeting to order at 6:30 p.m. and led all present in the Pledge of Allegiance. He then asked for comments/questions regarding the YTD revenue/expenses for the 2021 municipal budget.

Mr. D Miller noted that we are 66% through the fiscal year; however, expenditures are ½ million over that percentage. The biggest item was in the Transfer Station budget, where they have hauled 465 more tons of bulky waste than in all of 2020, at a cost exceeding \$100/ton. He stated that the Budget Committee should encourage the Town to increase the cost of a permit fee for the Transfer Station.

In addition, Mr. D Miller referred to a number of salary lines being expended over 66%. Last year, the Committee encouraged the Town to make changes relating to health insurance. He anticipates the Committee will expect employees to pick up a higher percentage of this cost.

Mr. Scala agreed that Mr. Miller is correct on all points made. Several departments have experienced staffing issues. The Fire/Rescue Department has sufficient fulltime staff, but is having difficulty getting call personnel to respond. The Police Department is down 2 fulltime officers. The volume at the Transfer Station has drastically increased. In addition, former summer residents are staying; and they are remodeling, expanding, etc. Mr. Scala noted that if we had not purchased the roll-off truck, we would be even more over-budget. With respect to health insurance, our plan increased by 6.4% for 2021—lower than increases faced by many across the State. Currently, the Town pays 88% of the plan (with employees paying 12%). The Board can certainly look at adjusting that split. Another department seeing a higher expended salary line is the Town Clerk. However, she has recently been able to hire an assistant.

Mr. Knight noted that although expenses are high, revenues at the Transfer Station are currently \$168,000 more than anticipated. Overall revenue numbers look good. Mr. Scala stated that if one removes Capital Outlay and Capital Reserves from the equation, expenditures are closer to 62%.

Mr. Fifield agreed that the Board definitely needs to look at the Transfer Station fee structure. The Board has also discussed having all businesses go over the scale and paying by weight. We would need to consider how to establish reasonable fees. Currently those who don't use the Transfer Station are subsidizing those who do. He stated that we need more cost-sharing. In addition, we will also look at amending fees relating to the sewer system, given several large ticket items recently experienced, including replacement of the tractor.

With respect to wage lines, Mr. Fifield noted that usually department heads present draft budgets that anticipate a step increase for each employee. A step increase should actually be based on merit; however, if not awarded each year, the employee's rate falls behind. This year department heads will submit budgets based only on current pay rates. The Board will then determine a COLA to be applied to all rates. Thereafter, only those employees who have earned a merit increase will advance on the wage chart. We will no longer need to revise the pay chart each year.

Mr. Fifield stated that health insurance was brought up at a department head meeting, at which it was made clear that employees cannot expect the Town to continue to cover all increases in the cost of health insurance. He added that we should also compare insurance costs and plans offered to School and Town employees.

Mr. Kasprzyk stated that years ago we spoke about a private contractor for ambulance services. Perhaps we could offer a private agency use of one of our bays (and use of quarters). All operating expenses would be theirs. He also referred to the increase in population and questioned whether the building is being monitored, especially in East Wakefield. Mr. Kasprzyk referred to several properties on Pine River Pond selling for more than \$1million. He stressed this will affect all assessments and result in more tax revenue. Therefore, the Town should not over-budget thinking that we may be running short.

Mr. Scala confirmed that we are watching the effects of recent property sales. He advised that the Fire/Rescue Department now has 3 cardiac monitors, so we are running 3 rescue vehicles. He believes the higher percentage of calls received relate to rescue rather than fire. Mr. Scala asked Mr. Kasprzyk if he sees allowing a private company use of one of our bays as a potential source of revenue. Mr. Kasprzyk advised that he sees it as an opportunity for cost-avoidance as we would not need so much staff. Mr. Fogg suggested that the East Wakefield Fire Station might be a better location for that scenario.

Mr. O'Connor reminded all that the purpose of this meeting is to review year-to-date revenues/expenses.

Mr. Daniels was advised that the rate charged to users of the sewer system is adjusted each year, depending upon the budget for that department. He asked who pays for the capital expenses, such as were recently incurred. Mr. Scala noted the intent to use ARPA funds for upcoming work. However, most large projects are paid for by the taxpayers overall. Mr. D Miller noted that work at the sewer lagoons should be shared by all taxpayers as that is where septage haulers dispose of waste pumped from private systems. However, expenses to address the downtown system should be borne by those on the system.

Mr. Kasprzyk questioned replacement of the wastewater tractor. Mr. Scala noted that the old tractor was a 1987 and was often experiencing breakdowns. Mr. Kasprzyk referred to the tractor purchased for the Highway Department several years ago at a cost of \$75,000, which purchase Mr. Kasprzyk cautioned against. Discussion ensued between Mr. D Miller and Mr. Kasprzyk regarding use of equipment. Mr. Scala will check into the tractor to which Mr. Kasprzyk referred.

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The Committee considered dates for review of the proposed 2022 municipal budget as follows: Thursday, October 28 @ 6:30p; Saturday, October 30 @ 9a; and Wednesday, November 3 @ 6:30p. Mr. D Miller hopes to be able to discuss COVID related grants during these meetings.

At this point (7:04p.m.) the Committee proceeded to discuss year-end reports for the School (at which time Ms. Colbath assumed responsibility for taking minutes).

Respectfully submitted,
Toni Bodah, Acting Secretary