

Budget Committee
October 28, 2021

Present: Jerry O'Connor, Chair; Dave Mankus; Elizabeth Conner; Denny Miller; Howie Knight; Tom Daniels; Connie Twombly; Relf Fogg, School Board Rep; Ken Fifield, Selectmen's Rep; Paul Romano; and Priscilla Colbath. Also present were Dino A. Scala, Town Administrator; Toni Bodah, Secretary; and Department Heads/Committee Reps as indicated below.

Mr. O'Connor called the posted meeting to order at 6:30 p.m. Mr. Scala addressed the Committee with a brief synopsis of the budget process to date. He referred to the impact of COVID on various Town departments. The Board of Selectmen charged Department Heads to present flat-lined budgets again this year, which pretty much occurred. The increase the Budget Committee will see mostly relates to wage/COLA increases. Mr. Scala noted that the rates for health insurance were reduced.

Mr. Daniels noted that a substantial amount of the overall budget relates to payroll and benefits—COLA, pay study, etc. He asked about specific additions to staffing in 2021 and whether there are plans to add personnel for 2022. Mr. Scala referred to the long vacancy in the position of Deputy Town Clerk, which resulted in significant overtime for the Town Clerk. A part-time Transfer Station employee was moved to full-time. The part-time Building Inspector was moved to full-time. An employee whose costs were previously split between Transfer Station and Sewer was moved entirely to Sewer.

Mr. Miller referred to the 5-7% rate of inflation this year and the cost of fuel and food. He expressed concern that a 3% COLA for 2 years may not result in keeping up with inflation. Perhaps we should consider increasing the budget in case we need a 4% COLA. Mr. Scala referred to the importance of employee retention. The Board has addressed the wage chart with this in mind in order to keep up with surrounding towns. Mr. Fifield noted the Social Security is 5.9%. If the Board had not adjusted the wage chart throughout the year, it would have recommended application of a higher COLA. However, the wage chart has been adjusted and, therefore, a 3% COLA should be sufficient.

Election, Registration & Vital Statistics – Valerie Ward

Ms. Ward verified that there will be 3 elections in 2022. Ms. Twombly asked about the increase in the printing line. Ms. Ward indicated that is a result of there being 3 elections. Mr. Scala referred to the number of absentee ballots requested due to COVID, which trend is anticipated to continue. Mr. Miller questioned why the Selectmen reduced the wage lines. Ms. Ward explained that she had included anticipated merit increases, as has been done in previous years; however, the Board has revised that process. Mr. Miller pointed out that only the COLA has been added to wage lines. Funds for merit increases has been placed in another line. Everyone will receive the COLA; however, everyone might not receive a merit increase. Ms. Twombly does not believe this process will improve employee relations. Mr. O'Connor stated that if a supervisor believes the employee has done an exceptional job, that supervisor will recommend a merit be awarded by the Board.

Ms. Ward advised Mr. Fogg that the \$5277 reduction in this budget by the Board will not adversely impact her ability to conduct her job. **Mr. Fogg moved the section total at \$122,781. Mr. Knight seconded the motion, which passed 11-0.**

Community Service – Parks & Rec – Wayne Robinson (and Alyssa Hall)

Mr. Fogg moved the section total at \$202,143. Mr. Miller seconded the motion.

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Ms. Twombly asked whether the only change in the wage line reflects a COLA. Mr. Robinson advised that there was an increase in the number of hours worked by a part-time employee. Mr. Daniels noted that the increase from the 2021 budget appears to be greater than application of a COLA. Significant discussion followed regarding construction of this line. Ms. Conner does not believe that wage lines for each department were treated the same. Mr. Fifield stressed that each department was treated the same. In the case of Ms. Ward, she had developed her budget to include merit increases. The Board took that out. Then the COLA was applied (as it was to each departments' wage lines). Funds for merit increases are in a separate line in the budget. He noted that some departments have multiple employees. During 2021 they may have received a merit increase. The appropriations for 2022 are based on the current pay rates (or the anticipated pay rate as of December 31, 2021). Mr. Miller noted that YTD expenditures are low. Mr. Robinson advised that his department was shut down for 2 months. [Note: It was noted that the wage lines reflect wages paid for time worked through the end of September only.]

Mr. Fogg referred to the shortage of bus drivers. He asked whether Mr. Robinson would be able to assist in transporting students in the After School Program from Paul School to Parks & Rec, if an additional CDL driver becomes available. Mr. Robinson indicated that would be a possibility. He then confirmed to Mr. O'Connor that the wage line includes 4 employees. **The motion then passed 11-0.**

Sewer – Brock Mitchell

Mr. Mitchell noted that most of the increase in this budget relates to moving the attendant position to this budget 100% (having previously been shared with Transfer Station). Mr. Miller asked whether the plan is to repair the pump stations with grant money. Mr. Mitchell confirmed that is the intent. The engineering is already in the works. He hopes that ARPA funds will be allocated to this purpose, hopefully to begin in the spring of 2022. The project has been estimated at \$700,000; however, once the engineering plan is complete, he will start chopping away in hopes of lowering the ultimate cost. Mr. Scala stated that Wakefield was awarded \$554,000 in ARPA funds, half of which has been received, with the second half expected around June 1, 2022. He is 100% confident that the funds will be received. **Mr. Daniels moved the section total at \$135,137. Mr. Miller seconded the motion, which passed 11-0.**

Public Works – Town Maintenance – Brock Mitchell

Mr. Mitchell noted that this budget request is down \$12,000 from 2021. He is using stone rather than winter sand in many cases and this is working better, although sand is still used when it is really cold. Salt prices have increased dramatically. All sheds are full at present, so we are ahead of schedule in that regard. Mr. Miller stated that when requests for capital reserve funds are discussed, the Budget Committee would like to see a detailed plan per road. Mr. Mitchell spoke to the difficulty in planning given the increase in material pricing. Bonnyman Road is now being surveyed. **Mr. Fogg moved the section total at \$165,000. Mr. Knight seconded the motion, which passed 11-0.**

Public Works – Highway Department – Brock Mitchell

Mr. Mitchell noted the only increase in this budget relates to wages. **Mr. Fogg moved the section total at \$479,699. Mr. Miller seconded the motion.** Mr. Daniels asked whether the same situation relates to these salary lines.

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Mr. Mitchell stated his request used current rates, which likely included merit increases awarded in 2021. Ms. Conner pointed out an error in the total of the 2022 Department column. [Note: The error was found to be an incorrect formula.] **The motion then passed 11-0.**

Public Works – Street Lighting – Brock Mitchell

Mr. Knight moved the section total at \$34,600. Mr. Daniels seconded the motion, which passed 11-0.

Public Works – Transfer Station – Brock Mitchell

Mr. Mitchell stated that the Transfer Station has been swamped for 2 years. One employee was moved from part-time to full-time. In addition, we needed to replace a CDL driver that left. Mr. Mitchell referred to revenues realized YTD, which he anticipates will reach \$300,000 by year end. If you reduce that figure by the cost of the truck payments, tires and fuel, the Town will still save about \$50,000/year by running our own truck. Mr. Miller asked about the status of the old truck. Mr. Mitchell advised the old black truck is no longer with us, while the old white truck is still in operation. **Mr. Fogg moved the section total at \$535,413. Mr. Miller seconded the motion.** Mr. Scala added that we now own all our cans, rather than renting them from Waste Management. Mr. Mitchell advised Mr. O'Connor that the tipping fee at Waste Management is about \$100/ton. **The motion then passed 11-0.**

General Government – Assessing Operations – Cindy Bickford

Ms. Bickford advised Mr. Knight that the town-wide reval will take effect in 2023, for which purpose there is a capital reserve fund. She advised that the New Property Assessment line relates to annual pick-up work, plus the 20% measure & list. **Mr. Miller moved the section total at \$139,816. Mr. Daniels seconded the motion, which passed 10-0-1 (Mr. Fogg abstaining).**

General Government – Legal

Mr. Knight moved the section total at \$15,000. Mr. Miller seconded the motion, which passed 11-0.

General Government – Executive

Mr. Miller noted that the Board of Selectmen sought an increase to \$5000 last year, but were given \$3500. They are asking for \$5000 again for 2022. This would be a 43% increase, while employees are only being given a 3% COLA. **Mr. Miller moved to support \$4000 per Board member for 2022. Ms. Colbath seconded the motion, which passed 11-0.**

Mr. Fogg moved the section total at \$156,370. Mr. Miller seconded the motion, which passed 11-0.

General Government – Town Hall

Mr. Fogg moved the section total at \$55,650. Mr. Miller seconded the motion, which passed 11-0.

General Government – Insurance

The total requested is \$132,969. Mr. Knight understands that the Workers' Comp and Unemployment are based on experience; however, he wonders why the increase in property liability. Mr. Scala noted that in part it relates to an increase in property value, as well as an increase in payroll. However, those increases do not seem to support the increase in our rates.

Mr. Scala will seek a more definitive reason from Primex. Mr. Knight recommends the Board seek bids from commercial carriers in the future. This line will be revisited when Mr. Scala has more information.

General Government – General Administration

Mr. Daniels moved the section total at \$111,603. Mr. Knight seconded the motion, which passed 11-0.

Mr. Miller referred back to street lighting and wondered whether the Town pays whether the lights work or not. He questioned whether anyone is assigned to check on the status of the lights for which the Town is responsible. Mr. Fifiield noted that the Police Department used to be asked occasionally to check on the status. The list will be located and sent to the Police Department.

Mr. Miller moved to approve the minutes of September 14, 2021, as presented. Mr. Romano seconded the motion, which passed 10-0-1 (Ms. Conner abstaining). Next meeting: Saturday, October 30 at 9 a.m. Mr. Knight moved to adjourn at 7:40 p.m. Mr. Miller seconded the motion, and the motion passed unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,
Toni Bodah, Secretary