

Budget Committee
November 3, 2021

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

Mr. O'Connor called the posted meeting to order at 6:30 p.m. and led all in the Pledge of Allegiance. Mr. O'Connor suggested that the Committee members first review the section of the budget, allowing time for questions/discussion, then move to approve/amend. This process would avoid having 2 motions on the floor at one time. Ok!

Public Safety – Police Department – Chief John Ventura and Lt. Chris Waldron

Ms. Twombly advised she is often asked about individual salaries; however, this wage line includes a number of staff members and does not break out the individual salaries. Chief Ventura will provide a document that will not include names.

Mr. Miller asked about the canine program. Chief Ventura advised that the dog can detect drugs and do tracking. The canine is on duty when his handler is on duty, but is available on call should he be needed.

Chief Ventura advised Mr. O'Connor that there are currently 12 full-time officers. 2 vacancies were recently filled, one of which has been vacant since May. One new officer comes to Wakefield already certified, while the second new officer will need to go to the academy. Chief Ventura advised Mr. Miller those officers sent to the academy must sign a 3-year contract with the Town which does not begin until graduation from the academy.

Mr. Fogg was advised that the ACO is in a separate budget. Mr. Daniels asked about the increase in the software line. Chief Ventura advised it relates to body cams. The current body cams were purchased in 2018, and the 3-year warranty has expired. In 2022, we will have to renew the warranty and update the associated software. Chief Ventura does not believe this will be a recurring expense. He hopes to replace these cams, when needed, via a grant. Chief Ventura advised Mr. Miller that the officer should have the body cam on at all times and must announce use of it.

Mr. Mankus questioned whether the line for ammo should be increased given the increase in cost to the public. Chief Ventura has not experienced much of an increase in cost. He confirmed that the officers continue to train. Mr. Fogg questioned whether there are any Federal funds to offset the operating budget. Chief Ventura stated that the department does get grants, which are listed in the Capital Outlay section of the budget, and will continue to actively pursue same. These grants include quarterly reporting requirements. **Mr. Miller moved the section total at \$1,021,005. Mr. Fogg seconded the motion, which passed 9-0.**

Public Safety – Civil Defense – Chief John Ventura and Lt. Chris Waldron

Mr. Miller referred to the Board of Selectmen requesting an increase in their yearly stipend and wonders whether Chief Ventura thinks that an increase is warranted for the emergency management stipends. Chief Ventura noted he has put in a significant amount of time but did not ask for an increase.

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He is optimistic that there will be less time involved than was expended over the past 18 months. Mr. Miller suggested that Chief Ventura track his time for the Budget Committee's consideration. Chief Ventura noted that time was tracked during the pandemic. **Mr. Miller moved the section total at \$3500. Mr. Fogg seconded the motion, which passed 9-0.**

Public Safety – Public Safety Building – Chief John Ventura and Lt. Chris Waldron

Ms. Twombly requested that Chief Ventura elaborate on the building maintenance line. Chief Ventura advised he has been addressing a number of repairs over the past couple years, noting that the building is now 21 years old. A separate capital reserve fund was started for replacement of the roof. Carpets have been replaced on both the Police and Fire sides. Exterior lights have been replaced. New signs are coming soon. A grant has been written for the purpose of replacing the generator, which application required submittal of a bid. If the grant is approved, the Town will need to pay the entire cost, then be reimbursed for 50%. Next on the list is the sally port. Chief Ventura confirmed to Mr. O'Connor that there is adequate work space inside. **Mr. Miller moved the section total at \$114,693. Mr. Fogg seconded the motion, which passed 9-0.**

Public Health - Animal Control – Chief John Ventura and Lt. Chris Waldron

In response to Ms. Twombly, Chief Ventura advised that the AC officer is a civilian and only works in animal control. Mr. Miller questioned when the AC would require a new vehicle. Chief Ventura stated that it is needed. The current schedule is for replacement of the command vehicle and the canine vehicle. He is considering holding the pick-up (instead of passing it on to another department) for use by the AC officer. Or, the AC officer could use the current Code vehicle. Chief Ventura clarified that they have 3 patrol cruisers, 2 admin vehicles, a supervisor vehicle and a vehicle for the school resource officer. **Mr. Miller moved the section total at \$20,489. Mr. Fogg seconded the motion, which passed 9-0.**

Capital Outlay – Chief John Ventura and Lt. Chris Waldron

Chief Ventura referred to the \$39,800 grant for replacement of the generator, which would be 50% reimbursed. All patrol grants are 100% reimbursed. Mr. Miller questioned whether there is any value to the existing generator. Chief Ventura stated that the Town may wish to use it at another location, perhaps at the Highway Garage or Transfer Station. Hmmm... **Mr. Fogg moved the section total at \$56,900. Mr. Miller seconded the motion, which passed 9-0.**

General Government – Voter Registration

This request is lower than 2021. Mr. Scala noted that 2021 was a purge year, which required much time. Even though there will be 3 elections, the Supervisors believe these funds will be sufficient. **Mr. Miller moved the section total at \$2557. Mr. Fogg seconded the motion, which passed 9-0.**

General Government – Financial Administration – Angie Nichols

Ms. Nichols noted she has increased her weekly hours to 40 (from 37). Mr. Miller asked about delinquent tax properties. Those properties actually come under the Board of Selectmen. Mr. Scala advised that the Town can sell the properties and recoup only what it is owed (taxes, interest, penalties, etc.); any remaining funds received must go to the former owner.

Ms. Twombly referred to the low expenditure for training. Ms. Nichols does expect to do more training this year. She has been doing virtual free training sessions through Primex and NHMA. Mr. Fogg asked about distressed property with EPA issues. Mr. Scala noted there is one such property, for which the Town has not accepted a deed. **Ms. Twombly moved the section total at \$111,584. Mr. Miller seconded the motion, which passed 9-0.** [Thanks for the cookies, Angie!]

General Government – Land Use

Mr. Scala noted that the legal line was increased due to potential issues on the horizon. Mr. Fifield noted that the wage line was adjusted by the COLA. In response to Ms. Conner, Mr. Scala advised that this department deals with Planning Board and Zoning Board of Adjustment issues. The wage line is only for the clerk (minute taker). Mr. Scala confirmed to Mr. Miller that this department has off-setting revenue. Mr. Scala confirmed to Mr. O'Connor that these boards now use the services of Strafford Regional Planning Commission, rather than an outside consultant. Mr. Mankus noted that much of the cost of a large subdivision is passed on to the applicant. **Ms. Twombly moved the section total at \$13,658. Mr. Miller seconded the motion, which passed 9-0.**

Public Safety – Code Enforcement/Building Inspection

Mr. Scala advised Ms. Conner that the Committee will not see a representative from this department this evening; however, Mr. Fifield and Mr. Scala will try to answer questions. Mr. Miller referred to a recent mass mailing regarding the need for a separate shoreland protection department and asked how many employees we currently have, as well as the responsibilities of each. Mr. Scala advised that there are 3 full-time employees in this department: Victor Vinagro is the Land Use/Shoreland/Health/Code Officer; Peter Gosselin is the Building Inspector (and was previously part-time); Larissa Mulkern is the assistant to Mr. Vinagro. All work at an hourly rate. Mr. Vinagro is paid to attend Planning and Zoning Board meetings, and he will sometimes take time off to compensate for working evening meetings. Mr. Daniels was advised that the clerk has been full-time for quite a while.

Mr. Miller questioned whether a petition warrant article is still in the works. Mr. Scala advised that Mr. Robbins had made a presentation to the Board of Selectmen, prior to sending out his mailer. Mr. Scala expects to see a warrant article seeking a full-time position, with an assistant and a vehicle. He confirmed to Mr. Miller that such a department would assume some responsibility now held by the current department. Mr. Vinagro would relinquish shoreland duties. Mr. Scala noted that Mr. Vinagro currently refers many issues to the State. Mr. Miller questions the use a new department would serve. Mr. Fifield referred to Mr. Robbins looking to create a 3-person department, who would perform various projects with Town-owned equipment. The Board of Selectmen decided to make the position of Building Inspector a full-time position. We can evaluate down the road whether we need another part- or full-time position; however, he does not believe it is necessary to create an entirely new department. If equipment is needed, we already have equipment at the Highway Department. The original proposal was well-intended but it replicates existing assets. Mr. Miller is still confused about the Town's role, noting it appears as though the Shoreland Protection officer is a go-between. Mr. Fifield noted the problem is that the Town has to expend quite a bit of energy before the State will take notice. The Town does not always get the response it needs from the State.

Mr. Fifield confirmed to Mr. Miller that any Town citizen could go directly to the State, bypassing the Town. Mr. Scala noted that the State often bounces issues back to the Town. Mr. O'Connor questioned whether this warrant article would be binding or advisory only. Mr. Scala stated it would be up to the Board of Selectmen whether to move forward. Discussion followed regarding the Budget Committee's ability to vote on a petition article that includes funding. Mr. Fogg noted that the proposal would just create bigger government. Mr. Miller noted that construction fluctuates in the Town of Wakefield and we are currently on an up-hill slope. Mr. Vinagro is a good resource to advise property owners regarding State regulations for shoreland. All is running pretty smoothly right now and eventually will be in another down turn. **Mr. Daniels moved the section total at \$183,830. Mr. Miller seconded the motion, which passed 9-0.**

General Government – GWRC

Mr. Daniels noted there has been no expenditure in 2021 and suggested the line be changed to '0'. Mr. Scala suggested that at least \$1 be left in the line to keep the line open. This line has been used for emergency situations in the past, such as for a septic issue. Ms. Twombly stressed that this line is generally included each year. Mr. Fifield confirmed that we are putting money in a capital reserve fund to replace the roof. This \$500 is for incidentals. If not needed, we don't spend. If these funds are removed, we may need to spend funds from another line. **Ms. Colbath moved to reduce the line to \$1. Mr. Daniels seconded the motion.** Mr. Daniels noted that the Town takes care of the outside of the building; the GWRC takes care of the inside. Mr. O'Connor stressed that the Town still owns the building and must protect its investment. Discussion followed as to when the Town's obligations under the grants received ends. Under the terms of the 2 grants received, the Town is obligated to serve a certain percentage of low/moderate income people for a specified number of years.

Mr. Fifield noted that the group was recently awarded another grant to renovate office space and offer more services, which will likely require the Town to continue ownership. The Committee expressed concern that if the \$254,000 grant is accepted, it would be making a long-term commitment to owning and maintaining the building. Mr. Daniels suggested a capital reserve fund for all/any Town buildings. Mr. Scala advised there is about \$30,000 in the capital reserve fund for this building, which is earmarked for the roof. Mr. Fogg suggested looking at old invoices to determine the number of squares needed in order to estimate the cost to replace the roof. Ms. Conner would like to know how long the Town is obligated under the grants received. She referred to the new building being considered by the Town, which might replace some services provided at the GWRC. Mr. Fogg referred to the historical significance of the GWRC. Ms. Conner added that office rental space is not currently in high demand. Mr. Miller noted that the Town should not be landlords or real estate developers. If we accept the grant and build the new upstairs offices, we would be entering the commercial real estate business and competing against the private sector. Mr. Fifield noted that the JW Garvin building is a good example of what the Town could ultimately achieve with the GWRC, although he agreed that the Town should not be in the commercial real estate business. He also noted that it is not the intent of the proposed multi-generational facility to offer the same services as the GWRC.

Mr. Mankus believes this building will keep coming up at meetings of the Budget Committee. Perhaps the Town can be a bridge for a while until the building can be taken over, adding the building seems worth saving.

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Ms. Colbath moved the question, which passed 4-3-1 (Mr. Fogg, Mr. O'Connor and Ms. Twombly voting against; Mr. Fifield abstaining; Mr. Miller out of the room for the vote).

Ms. Colbath moved the revised section total at \$1. Mr. Miller seconded the motion, which passed 7-1-1 (Ms. Twombly voting against; Mr. Fifield abstaining).

Ms. Twombly questioned whether the tax rate had been set. Mr. Scala advised that it was set today at \$12.34 per thousand. Last year the Selectmen used \$200,000 from the undesignated fund balance to keep the rate fairly level. This year, with more funds having dropped into that undesignated fund balance, the Selectmen chose to use \$400,000 to offset the tax rate, bringing the undesignated fund balance to \$2.2 million.

Community Services – Patriotic Purposes

Ms. Colbath moved the section total at \$1500. Mr. Daniels seconded the motion, which passed 9-0.

General Gov't – Personnel Benefits

Mr. Scala noted that the merit/sick pay line was increased from \$20,000 to \$60,000. The \$20,000 originally included in this line covers potential pay-outs for out-going long-time employees. \$40,000 was added to cover potential merit increases to be awarded throughout the year. Mr. Scala noted that health insurance rates declined for next year; however, NHRS rates have increased. Ms. Twombly noted the merit/sick pay line shows quite an increase and questioned whether this is COLA related. Mr. Fifield advised that the COLA is located within each wage line in the budget. The funds in this line will allow the Board of Selectmen to authorize step increases as recommended by Department Heads. Ms. Twombly noted that there has been no expenditure in 2021. Mr. Scala stated that no long-time has employee has left. We still have several employees with banked sick time, a portion of which the Town would need to pay out upon termination of employment.

Mr. Daniels asked how the \$40,000 figure was calculated. Mr. Fifield advised that the average merit increase is 2%. If each employee were to receive a 2% increase, it would require about \$70,000. The figure proposed will not fund each employee receiving a merit increase, but it will support same for a number of employees. Mr. Miller noted that if 100% of employees received the increase, it would not be a merit increase. Mr. Fifield stressed we will have a better idea of the exact figure next year. **Ms. Colbath moved the section total at \$1,442,359. Ms. Conner seconded the motion. Mr. Miller thanked the Town for doing a great job on the budget again this year. The motion then passed 8-1 (Ms. Twombly voting against).**

Mr. O'Connor stated the Committee will likely meet with the Town again in December to review warrant articles. Mr. Miller would like to see projected revenues at that time.

Minutes: Mr. Mankus moved to approve the minutes of October 28, 2021, as presented. Ms. Colbath seconded the motion, which passed 9-0.

Ms. Colbath moved to approve the minutes of October 30, 2021, as presented. Mr. Mankus seconded the motion, which passed 8-0-1 (Mr. Daniels abstaining).

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Mr. Fogg questioned whether the Budget Committee members would consider a 3% COLA for School employees palatable, as contract negotiations are underway for both teachers and paraprofessionals. Several members expressed their agreement.

Mr. O'Connor noted that the next meeting will be on November 9 with the School. [Note: This meeting was subsequently canceled, with the meeting dates now being November 15 & 22.] Mr. Miller would like to see enrollment numbers for Spaulding High School prior to Deliberative Session. **Mr. Miller moved to adjourn at 8:18 p.m. Mr. Fogg seconded the motion, which passed 9-0.**

Respectfully submitted,
Toni Bodah, Secretary