

Budget Committee

January 10, 2023

Present: Jerry O'Connor, Chair; Priscilla Colbath; Dave Mankus; Denny Miller; Bob Ouellette, School Board Rep; Tom Daniels; Marc Taliaferro; John Parker; Ken Fifield, Selectmen's Rep; Dino A. Scala, Town Administrator; and Toni Bodah, Secretary.

Those also present during the course of the evening included (but was not limited to): Mark Duffy; Chief Mike Fenton; Wayne Robinson; Bo Keating; Greg Hall; John Myers; Anne Kebler, SAU Superintendent; Mary Collins; Brennan Peaslee; Richard Mauser; Relf Fogg; Larry Moody; Charles Newcomb; and Peter Kasprzyk.

Mr. O'Connor called the posted meeting to order at 5:37 p.m. and led those present in the Pledge of Allegiance. The purpose of this meeting is to review outstanding budget issues for both the Town and the School. We will begin with the Town. Mr. Scala noted that most of the changes in the proposed 2023 Town budget relate to application of a 2.2% COLA.

Mr. Miller would like to address the cost of a mini-split for the Heritage Commission, funds for which appear to be in a warrant article as well as their operating budget. In addition, the Budget Committee voted 'No' on a \$500,000 article to address Bonnyman Road; however, since then the Selectmen have increased their recommended appropriation for the Highway Construction Projects CRF. Mr. Miller wants to be sure the Budget Committee has a voice in each of these cases.

Mr. Daniels noted that the Town's proposed budget has increased by 20%, \$628,000 of which relates to payroll and benefits. The Budget Committee has already approved a substantial amount of funding. Adding more money in the form of a COLA should not be included in this budget. Tonight's changes reflect an additional \$52,000, plus another \$40,000 for merit/sick pay. The Selectmen and Town Administrator should be able to work with what has already been approved. Mr. Miller stated that the increases approved earlier in the year brings employees up to standard in our area. The COLA is only 2.2%. If we do not include a COLA, we will fall behind again. We need to try to stay even with the progress made to date.

Mr. O'Connor referred to the list of outstanding items provided as follows:

Executive - \$161,580 – **Mr. Miller moved the line. Ms. Colbath seconded the motion, which passed 7-2 (Mr. Daniels and Mr. Taliaferro voting against).**

Election, etc. - \$134,492 – **Ms. Colbath moved the line. Mr. Miller seconded the motion, which passed 9-0.**

Voter Registration - \$2593 – **Mr. Miller moved the line. Ms. Colbath seconded the motion, which passed 9-0.**

Financial Admin - \$119,237 – **Ms. Colbath moved the line. Mr. Miller seconded the motion, which passed 8-1 (Mr. Daniels voting against).**

Assessing - \$143,771 – **Ms. Colbath moved the line. Mr. Miller seconded the motion, which passed 9-0.**

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Personnel Benefits – Mr. Daniels spoke to the \$40,000 for merit increases. Our budget will continue to grow if we continue with this type of funding. Mr. Fifield stated that the Selectmen had anticipated to mirror Social Security, but that increase was too high. At least 2/3 of the wage lines received an adjustment; however, 1/3 did not. We budgeted \$40,000 for merit last year, and the Selectmen were generous with merit increases because so many rates were far behind. The Selectmen anticipate being much tighter when considering merit increases in 2023. However, this is an important tool to motivate employees. Mr. Fifield advised Ms. Colbath that the \$60,000 in that line was split with \$20,000 for liability in the event a long-term employee left the Town's employ, and \$40,000 for potential merit increases. The Selectmen used more than the \$40,000 last year. Mr. Daniels suggested that would mean less than \$40,000 would be needed for 2023. Mr. O'Connor noted that we have been trying to address wages for years, but we never seem to get caught up. Ms. Colbath stated that the \$60,000 should stay, noting it does not really have much effect on the \$1.7 million (+) total. **Mr. Miller moved the line. Mr. Parker seconded the motion, which passed 7-2 (Mr. Daniels and Mr. Taliaferro voting against).** [Note: Mr. Miller actually moved 'the \$1.7'; however, it is confirmed that his intent was to move the entire amount recommended by the Selectmen. -tb]

Land Use - \$18,602 – **Mr. Miller moved the line. Ms. Colbath seconded the motion, which passed 9-0.**

Heritage – Mr. Miller suggested the Committee vote as to whether to remove \$7000 for the mini-split as the Heritage Commission has sufficient funds in their separate account for this purchase. **Mr. Miller moved to reduce the section total by \$7000. Ms. Colbath seconded the motion, which passed 9-0.**

Mr. Miller moved the section total at \$16,445. Ms. Colbath seconded the motion, which passed 9-0.

General Admin - \$115,989 – **Mr. Miller moved the line. Ms. Colbath seconded the motion, which passed 7-2 (Mr. Daniels and Mr. Taliaferro voting against).**

Police - \$1,171,154 – **Ms. Colbath moved the line. Mr. Miller seconded the motion.** Mr. Daniels noted that the entire Police Department received an increase. Mr. Miller noted that the Town lost more staff in this department than in any other. We have a responsibility as elected officials to supply the Town with police and fire protection. We cannot blame the Police Department for being underpaid for the last 15 years. Mr. Scala stated that the Police Department was actually the key to starting the entire process. Of 27 other towns, only 1 awarded a lower COLA than Wakefield. Most ran between 4-8%. Even with a 2.2% COLA, our rates for police will be back to average. **The motion then passed 8-1 (Mr. Daniels voting against).**

Ambulance – \$619,823 – Reference was made to the offsetting revenue received. **Mr. Miller moved the line. Ms. Colbath seconded the motion, which passed 8-1 (Mr. Daniels voting against).**

General Fire - \$228,662 – **Ms. Colbath moved the line. Mr. Miller seconded the motion, which passed 9-0.**

Code Enforcement - \$201,370 – This department also generates off-setting revenue. **Ms. Colbath moved the line. Mr. Miller seconded the motion, which passed 9-0.**

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Highways/Streets - \$564,800 – Mr. O'Connor was advised that the floor of the new building has not yet been poured. Mr. Scala confirmed to Mr. Miller that \$50,000 was added to the CRF, not to this section of the budget. **Ms. Colbath moved the line. Mr. Miller seconded the motion, which passed 7-2 (Mr. Daniels and Mr. Taliaferro voting against).**

Transfer Station - \$605,493 – YTD revenues equal around \$280,000. **Ms. Colbath moved the line. Mr. Taliaferro seconded the motion, which passed 7-2 (Mr. Daniels and Mr. Taliaferro voting against).**

Animal Control - \$13,072 – **Mr. Miller moved the line. Ms. Colbath seconded the motion, which passed 9-0.**

CASA - \$1000 – **Ms. Colbath moved the line. Mr. Miller seconded the motion, which passed 9-0.**

Public Assistance - \$56,090 – **Ms. Colbath moved the line. Mr. Miller seconded the motion, which passed 9-0.**

Parks & Recreation - \$238,779 – **Ms. Colbath moved the line. Mr. Taliaferro seconded the motion, which passed 8-1 (Mr. Daniels voting against).**

Conservation - \$5974 – **Mr. Miller moved the line. Ms. Colbath seconded the motion, which passed 9-0.**

Capital Outlay – This includes the \$4.9 million bond for the multi-generational facility, as well as \$33,302 in grants for the Police Department. **Mr. Miller moved the \$4,933,302. Ms. Colbath seconded the motion, which passed 9-0.**

Sewer - \$135,568, with a user rate of \$11.74/000 – **Mr. Miller moved the line. Mr. Parker seconded the motion, which passed 9-0.**

Bridge CRF - \$75,000 – The Selectmen amended this article. **Mr. Miller moved the line. Ms. Colbath seconded the motion, which passed 9-0.** Mr. Scala referred to a one-time payment from the State for around \$100,000, just received.

Public Safety Building - \$58,500 – **Mr. Miller moved the line. Ms. Colbath seconded the motion, which passed 9-0.**

Technology - \$2500 – Mr. Miller questioned why this has not been moved to the operating budget. Mr. Duffy remembers when the server needed to be replaced. This fund is being built for such a purpose. Mr. Duffy added that the fund can also be used for unanticipated computer replacement. The current balance is \$4880. Mr. Daniels stated that CRF's are for larger purposes. This is small money and should be in the operating budget. Mr. Duffy estimated the cost to replace a server at \$15,000. Mr. Fifield confirmed it is a small amount; however, it allows for greater flexibility. **Ms. Colbath moved the line. Mr. Miller seconded the motion, which passed 9-0.**

Highway Construction Projects - \$325,000 – Mr. Miller is disappointed that \$50,000 was added to this CRF request. Mr. Duffy spoke to the \$500,000 for a complete overhaul of Bonnyman Road. Although that project has been scrapped, the Town still must maintain that road.

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Mr. Miller stated that \$50,000 was just an arbitrary number; it was not developed by the DPW Director for specific repairs. Mr. Fifield indicated that the issue was discussed with the DPW Director prior to the meeting to which Mr. Miller is referring. Mr. Duffy noted that the Selectmen can discuss again with Mr. Mitchell and amend the number at Deliberative Session, if necessary. **Mr. Taliaferro moved the line. Mr. Daniels seconded the motion, which passed 8-1 (Mr. Miller voting against).**

GWRC - \$13,000 – This amended amount will allow sufficient funds for roof replacement this year. **Mr. Daniels moved the line. Mr. Taliaferro seconded the motion, which passed 8-1 (Ms. Colbath voting against).**

East Wakefield/Union Precincts CRF - \$23,000 – **Mr. Daniels moved the line. Ms. Colbath seconded the motion, which passed 9-0.**

Boat Launch ETF - \$10,000 – Mr. Scala read this proposed article aloud. **Mr. Daniels moved the line. Mr. Parker seconded the motion, which passed 8-1 (Mr. O'Connor voting against).** Mr. Scala advised we will apply for a \$100,000 grant (75/25 split) through the State, which process has already begun. The priority is the Lovell Lake launch, but we may be able to apply for all 3 launches.

Back to Article #8 - \$4,900,000 for Multi-Generational Facility – **Mr. Daniels moved the article. Mr. Parker seconded the motion.** Mr. Miller indicated we hope to have news that will allow us to reduce the final number soon; however, currently, this is the top number. **The motion then passed 8-1 (Mr. O'Connor voting against).**

At 6:38 p.m., the Committee took up outstanding business regarding the proposed School budget, minutes for which will be provided by Ms. Colbath.

At 7:41 p.m., Mr. O'Connor opened the public hearing for the proposed Town budget. Handouts available included: Draft Warrant; Draft Budget Summary; Draft Default Budget; and Draft Sewer Budget.

It was noted that the Budget Committee had not yet voted whether to approve the Debt Service for 2023, totaling \$401,954. **Ms. Colbath moved the line. Mr. Miller seconded the motion, which passed 9-0.** Mr. O'Connor then referred to various sections of the budget summary as follows, inviting questions/comments from the public:

- General Government - \$2,325,907
- General Government Buildings - \$384,107
- Public Safety - \$2,374,852
- Public Works - \$785,800
- Landfill - \$605,493
- Animal Control - \$13,072
- Human Services - \$132,566
- Public Assistance - \$56,090
- Parks & Rec - \$238,779
- Libraries - \$202,775
- Patriotic Purposes - \$1500
- Conservation Commission - \$5974

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Financial Affairs - \$401,954

TOTAL \$7,528,869

Grants - \$33,302

Warrant Articles (read aloud by Mr. O'Connor):

#8 - \$4.9 million bond

#9 - \$38,500 Parks & Rec Field Maintenance CRF

#10 - \$10,000 New ETF for Boat Launches

#11 - \$75,000 Bridge CRF

#12 - \$25,000 Highway Heavy Equipment CRF

#13 - \$75,000 Highway Truck CRF

#14 - \$325,000 Highway Construction CRF

Mr. Moody expressed his concern with the Board having started out with \$500,000 to fix Bonnyman Road. People never asked for the road to be fixed. He was also disappointed in the lack of understanding and compassion expressed by some members of the Budget Committee. In addition, the Board refused to allow a representative from Bonnyman Road to participate on the planning committee for the road. Mr. Moody referenced incorrect information/statements. He stated he has yet to see the Town attempt to do much work on the road. Mr. Moody cited a lack of communication. Mr. O'Connor noted that only a portion of the \$325,000 appropriation under discussion will be spent on Bonnyman Road. Mr. Moody noted that the entire road needs work and cited safety issues. Mr. O'Connor explained that the Budget Committee makes recommendations to the Selectmen regarding spending of funds; however, the Committee does not manage departments. He understands there have been problems on that road. Mr. Moody stated it could never be a proper road as it is too narrow. He also agrees that the \$50,000 was an arbitrary number. Mr. O'Connor expressed a vote of confidence in the work planned and accomplished by DPW Director Mitchell.

#15 - \$25,000 Transfer Station Heavy Equipment CRF

#16 - \$25,000 Transfer Station Facility CRF

#17 - \$5,000 to establish a Transfer Station Truck CRF

#18 - \$25,000 Wastewater Treatment CRF

#19 - \$60,000 Ambulance CRF

#20 - \$95,000 Fire Truck CRF

#21 - \$23,000 to establish an East Wakefield/Union Precinct CRF

#22 - \$34,525 Invasive Species ETF

#23 - \$44,000 Police Vehicle CRF

#24 - \$58,500 Public Safety Building CRF

#25 - \$2500 Technology CRF

#26 - \$50,000 Town Hall Improvement CRF

#27 - \$12,000 Assessing Statistical Update CRF

#28 - \$13,000 Greater Wakefield Resource Center Building CRF

#29 - \$8,000 Cemetery CRF

#31 - Optional Veterans' Credit

#32 - Adjustment of Elderly Exemption

Petition Warrant Article - \$65,000 Drew Mill Dam. Mr. Scala advised that a similar article was proposed in 2017. Our current Town Counsel has confirmed the opinion of our former Town Counsel that this appropriation is not legal. However, the Selectmen have asked Mr. Scala to dig a little deeper, perhaps with DRA. Mr. Mankus believes information to Concord in 2017 may have been misstated.

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The purpose of this project is for conservation and fire control. We need to examine this with accurate information, and is similar to funding of various non-profit organizations.

Mr. Mauser, a member of the UVCA Board, addressed the Committee. They have been fighting for preservation of the dam and pond. The Wakefield Fire Department wishes to put a hydrant in that pond. The dam has great value to the community. Without it, the pond would be gone. They have much support for this warrant article. Mr. Mauser referred to grants received. They have spent much money on engineering and received a permit to reconstruct the dam. They have received \$65,000 from LChip and now need matching funds. Mr. Mauser advised Mr. Miller that the plan meets requirements for a 100-year flood, although it only needs to meet requirements for a 50-year flood. He referred to various aspects of the reconstruction project. All money would go strictly for the dam. A portion of the building is actually part of the dam, but it is not anticipated that will need any action.

Mr. O'Connor referred to the path from the main road to the pond, which he believes would need to be upgraded at considerable cost in order to allow access by a fire truck (to access a hydrant). It would also need to be kept open in the winter. Mr. Mauser advised Mr. Miller that they have another year to obtain the required matching funds. He advised Mr. Mankus that access is sometimes difficult during mud season. Mr. Mauser advised they have brought in some fill, and he doesn't believe it should cost much to make necessary improvements. The dam was built in 1878 for the original mill, which was reconstructed. Mr. Mauser confirmed that they have had some volunteers doing some painting, etc. Mr. Newcomb added they have had quite a few volunteers. The Wakefield Fire Department was on site offering advice. Subsequently, some trees were removed to improve potential access for fire trucks. A culvert has been cleaned out, with water being redirected, resulting in less mud. Although Mr. Mauser has a personal goal to restore the mill, this project is only about the dam. Mr. Scala noted that the consensus of most is that the Town would like to help; and we are trying to find a legal way to do that.

Mr. Daniels advised that the CRF's as voted by the Budget Committee equal about \$0.03/000. If the bond article is approved, it would be a \$0.36/000 impact on the tax rate.

#33 – Operating Budget @ \$7,697,739; Default Budget @ \$6,874,366. **Ms. Colbath moved the article. Mr. Miller seconded the motion, which passed 9-0.** The Budget Committee will need to meet immediately following the Selectmen's bond hearing on January 17, beginning at 7 p.m.

Mr. Miller moved to adjourn at 8:45 p.m. Ms. Colbath seconded the motion, to which no one objected!

Respectfully submitted,
Toni Bodah, Acting Secretary