

Budget Committee
October 26, 2023

Present: Jerry O'Connor, Chair; Tom Daniels; Howie Knight; Bob Ouellette, School Board Rep; Denny Miller; Dave Mankus; Marc Taliaferro; Peter Kasprzyk, SWP Rep; Priscilla Colbath; Charlie Edwards, BoS Rep; Dino Scala, Town Administrator; and Toni Bodah, Secretary. Josh Fuller joined the session in progress.

Those also present included Brock Mitchell, DPW Director; Relf Fogg, Board of Assessors; Wayne Robinson, Parks & Rec Director; Valerie Ward, Town Clerk; and Cindy Bickford, Assessing Tech. Mr. O'Connor led all in the Pledge of Allegiance.

Mr. O'Connor stated that the purpose of this session is to begin review of the proposed 2024 municipal budget.

Gen'l Gov't – Elections, etc., - Valerie Ward

Mr. Miller asked whether we are comparing the 2024 requests to the default budget or the 2023 Budget Committee's budget. Mr. Scala confirmed that the percentage of increase reflects the change in the 2024 requests from the Budget Committee's 2023 budget. Mr. Miller noted that we need to make that obvious in front of the public. Mr. O'Connor noted there are areas where the BoS recommendations are higher than the Department Heads' requests. Mr. Scala stated that a few numbers had been tweaked; however, most of the increases have to do with application of a 5% COLA.

Mr. Miller referred to the increase in the Town Clerk's wage line (01-41401-130) from \$61,538 to \$74,097. [Note: This discrepancy was later found to be in error and was corrected/addressed at the October 28 Budget Committee meeting.—tb] Mr. Scala noted there will be 4 elections in 2024. Ms. Ward referred to the significant amount of work that goes into each election prior to it being held. Mr. Kasprzyk asked how the rate can be based on 52 weeks when the Clerk was not in the office when he was in 3 times over the past month. Mr. Scala stressed the use of earned time as well as educational conferences. He can personally attest to the Clerk's presence as they often close the building together.

Mr. Kasprzyk asked why the Town is paying benefits to an elected official. He believes one is either an elected official or a Town employee. Mr. Scala noted that this situation has existed prior to his arrival. Mr. Kasprzyk believes it to be government waste which should be addressed. Mr. Miller stated this discussion has been held every year since he's been on the committee (with which statement Mr. Kasprzyk initially disagreed, but later acknowledged was accurate). This has been done for 25 years. Either a change should be made or let the issue go. Mr. Kasprzyk stressed the line should be reduced.

Mr. Daniels understands the line will fluctuate from year-to-year based on the number of elections. He then referred to the increase in the hourly rate. Mr. Scala referred to the wage study done in the fall of 2022, comparing wages with other towns. The results indicated that Wakefield's rates were low and wage lines/charts were then modified. Ms. Ward stated that in October of 2022 she was advised of an increase in her wage line/chart. Then the budget did not pass and we reverted to a default budget. Mr. Daniels referred to the Clerk's rate being \$29.29 in the 2022 budget. [Note: This was later found to be the original rate presented in the 2022 budget, prior to the Selectmen's revision of the wage line/chart.—tb] Mr. Scala confirmed that Ms. Ward's current rate is \$32.73/hour. Mr. Daniels referred to a 24.4% increase in this line. Mr. Kasprzyk stressed that the senior citizens on fixed incomes do not get such an increase.

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Mr. Scala confirmed that every fulltime position is being budgeted at 40 hour/week, while some of those positions were reduced to 35 hours/week in the default budget. **Mr. Kasprzyk moved to table this line to another meeting. Mr. Taliaferro seconded the motion.** Mr. Kasprzyk would like to view the wage study as other towns may not include insurance benefits. **The motion then failed by a vote of 5-6.** Mr. O'Connor stressed that this, or any, line in the budget can be revisited at any time. Mr. Fogg called a Point of Order, stating that a Motion to Table does not require a vote. Mr. O'Connor will check with legal counsel. Regardless, the Budget Committee decided to move to another section of the budget.

Parks & Rec – Wayne Robinson

Mr. Mankus asked about the tent used for summer programs. Mr. Robinson stated that while the tent was used in 2022, there were insufficient funds to do so in 2023. The same is true for the fireworks display. Mr. Mankus stated that this department provides an important service for working parents. What effect did the default budget have on that service? Mr. Robinson stated that the biggest problem was not having the tent. The building is so small, that the tent provides extra space for participants. The kids could also be outside if it was raining. We didn't have many concerts in the park because of the default budget, as we could not make up the difference between the costs and the sponsorships. Mr. Robinson and his assistant were required to be more hands-on with programs instead of being in the office to prepare for various fall programs. Mr. Kasprzyk asked whether the new building will have solar power on the roof. Mr. Robinson stated that it has been discussed, but it was decided to see what the actual electricity cost is once the building is in operation.

Mr. Miller refereed to the \$24,000 for programs and asked what percentage the Town is paying for these programs. Mr. Robinson explained that the \$24,000 does not go to summer camp or the afterschool programs. It does help with transports and will help with the tent. The programs have associated user fees. **Mr. Knight moved the section total at \$249,583. Mr. Miller seconded the motion, which passed 10-0-1 (Mr. Daniels abstaining).**

Town Hall Annex (Parks & Rec Building) – Wayne Robinson

Mr. Daniels moved the section total at \$20,648. Mr. Knight seconded the motion, which passed 11-0. Mr. Miller asked whether there is a maintenance plan for the building. Mr. Scala stated we are considering siding, issues in the basement, and general improvements since it will be remaining in service.

Sewer – Brock Mitchell

Mr. Daniels asked whether the salary request (02-43211-110) is reasonable given the assumption that the current attendant is retiring. Mr. Scala stated that the Town may need to go to a third party, which might actually save the Town money. Mr. Miller referred to the relationship of the Town/sewer system. Mr. Scala confirmed to Mr. Kasprzyk that there will be an increase in the sewer rate. **Mr. Daniels moved the section total at \$137,723. Mr. Miller seconded the motion, which passed 11-0.**

Public Works – Maintenance – Brock Mitchell

Mr. Mitchell stated that the only increases relate to salaries and vehicle maintenance (both in the Highway Department section). Mr. O'Connor noted that Mr. Mitchell had proposed moving the road construction appropriation to the operating budget.

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Mr. Mitchell had considered that, but decided against doing so. A brief discussion followed regarding the Outside Hire line (01-43121-810) being at \$44,000. **Mr. Knight moved the section total at \$165,500. Ms. Colbath seconded the motion.**

Mr. Kasprzyk noted the Sanbornville Water Precinct has been working with several construction companies. They had tried to use the Town crew when possible; however, there was no line to absorb any revenues to be paid by the Precinct to the Town. Mr. O'Connor does not believe we can use Town equipment for a private company. Mr. Kasprzyk noted it is a government body. Mr. O'Connor stressed that it is a separate entity. Mr. Mitchell and Mr. Scala agreed that this had been looked into. However, there is no way to accept revenue from the Precinct and put it back into an expense line. Discussion followed regarding establishment of a fund that would allow for such revenue. **The motion then passed 11-0.**

Highway Department – Brock Mitchell

Mr. Miller referred to the increase in the Vehicle Maintenance line (01-43122-660). Mr. Mitchell referred to the high cost of Def filters, adding that 'green' technology costs a lot of money. Cost of parts and equipment has also increased. In response to a question from Mr. Kasprzyk, Mr. Mitchell stated that the vehicle maintenance line is for trucks, while the equipment maintenance line (01-043122-630) is for the loader, grader, excavator, etc.

Mr. Daniels referred to the wage lines. He understands the need for fair wages, but he questioned the amount of increase. The fulltime line (01-43122-110) covers 6 employees. Mr. Scala stated that the Board increased this line during its review with Mr. Mitchell. The Board was concerned that more funds might be needed in order to retain employees. The Board also increased the line for the DPW Director (01-43122-100). Mr. Fuller estimated the average fulltime highway worker receives \$58,000/year. He was advised that current hourly rates range from \$22 to \$29. Mr. Mitchell stressed the loyalty of the current staff, who have remained with the Town despite having a lower wage schedule than other towns.

Mr. Miller moved the section total at \$621,152. Ms. Colbath seconded the motion, which passed 11-0.

Street Lights – Brock Mitchell

Mr. Knight moved the section total at \$38,000. Ms. Colbath seconded the motion, which passed 11-0.

Solid Waste – Brock Mitchell

Mr. Miller referred to the decrease in the electricity line (01-43241-410). Mr. Mitchell had increased the line last year in the wake of anticipated increases by Eversource; however, the impact was not that great. Mr. Kasprzyk questioned whether \$12,500 is adequate for diesel (01-43241-636). Mr. Mitchell clarified that this line does not apply to the highway trucks—only transfer station. **Mr. Daniels moved the section total at \$521,890. Mr. Taliaferro seconded the motion, which passed 11-0.** Mr. Miller was advised that not only is there no market for paper, but it would actually cost the Town to recycle it.

Assessing – Cindy Bickford

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Mr. Daniels questioned why the Board of Assessors receives a stipend. Mr. Fogg advised that this line (01-41522-130) was zeroed years ago, and the Board of Selectmen tried to eliminate the Board of Assessors. Several years later, a \$600 stipend was reinstated. Mr. Daniels noted that no other board, other than the Board of Selectmen, gets a stipend. Mr. Miller referred to an attempt to reduce this line; however, at Town Meeting the voters put it back in. **Mr. Daniels moved to reduce this line to \$0. Ms. Colbath seconded the motion, which passed 9-2.**

Ms. Bickford noted that most other towns do not have a Board of Assessors, the responsibilities of which are handled by the Board of Selectmen. All cities have a Board of Assessors. Mr. Fogg stated that Wakefield is the only small town with an elected Board of Assessors. Mr. Miller confirmed that the Board of Selectmen did attempt to eliminate the Board of Assessors. A member of the audience said it would give too much power to the Selectmen. Mr. Fogg suggested the Committee look at budget totals over the past 20 years. We have been very fortunate to have a very capable technician, which has reduced the amount necessary to pay a contracted assessor.

Mr. Daniels referred to a \$15,000 increase in the New Property Assessment line (01-41522-312). Ms. Bickford explained that the annual contract was at \$45,000 and has increased to \$50,000. We hired a utility appraiser at \$9750 a year. The first year of that contract, utility values doubled. We now have an additional \$10,000 contract for 2024 in order for the Town to be represented at PSNH appeals. This will include mediation in June, and Court in September. Wakefield is one of 52 towns being represented by this appraiser. All towns are using the same counsel as well, both of which help to reduce our overall cost. Mr. Daniels thanked Ms. Bickford for all she has done for this community, noting she will be missed. **Mr. Knight moved the section total at \$158,752. Mr. Miller seconded the motion, which passed 10-1.**

Legal – Dino Scala

Mr. Scala stated that several of the legal lines have been increased as the hourly rate for services has increased. Also, the Town has had several significant issues over the past year. Mr. Scala is very pleased with the work of Drummond & Woodsum. Mr. Kasprzyk agreed with that sentiment, noting the Sanbornville Water Precinct also uses their services. **Mr. Daniels moved the section total at \$20,000. Mr. Miller seconded the motion, which passed 11-0.**

Gen'l Gov't Executive – Dino Scala

Mr. Daniels noted that, while the members of the Board of Selectmen deserve their stipends, we are coming out of a default budget and this is not the right year to include an increase. Mr. Miller noted that neighboring towns have 5-member boards, and he doesn't believe \$5000 is out of line. We are not overpaying the members. Mr. Kasprzyk agreed, noting the many hours that go into that position. Mr. Edwards stated that the Board decided to leave it up to the Budget Committee, adding that the Board members are ok with any decision made. Mr. Scala noted that we had been increasing this line (01-41302-130) in steps, with \$5000 being the goal. **Mr. Daniels moved to reduce this line to \$13,000. Mr. Edwards seconded the motion, which failed 1-9-1 (Mr. Edwards abstaining).**

Mr. Miller moved the section total at \$156,680. Mr. Knight seconded the motion, which passed 10-1.

Gen'l Gov't Town Hall – Dino Scala

Mr. Daniels moved the section total at \$61,518. Mr. Knight seconded the motion, which passed 11-0. Mr. Scala noted that the Water Precinct waived the cost of water for Town buildings due to the default budget.

Gen'l Gov't Insurance – Dino Scala

Mr. Knight moved the section total at \$158,446. Mr. Daniels seconded the motion, which passed 11-0. Mr. Kasprzyk questioned whether the Town had many filings for Workers' Comp and/or Unemployment, which Mr. Scala indicated was not the case.

Gen'l Gov't General Administration – Dino Scala

Mr. Miller referred to the 15% increase in the line for Bookkeeper (01-41991-110). Mr. Scala cited a merit increase, reinstatement of a 40-hour work week, as well as application of the COLA. All agreed Ms. Daigle does a great job! **Mr. Miller moved the section total at \$114,359. Mr. Fuller seconded the motion, which passed 11-0.**

Mr. Scala referred to having brainstormed with Mr. Miller upon learning of the need to operate under a default budget. They met with TD Bank, who made some adjustments in the Town's revenues/earnings. Total interest on this account was \$17,145 in 2022. As of September 2023, the Town has earned \$77,686—a \$60,000 increase.

Minutes

Mr. Daniels moved to approve the minutes of the September 12, 2023, meeting with the School, as presented. Mr. Knight seconded the motion, which passed 9-0-2.

Ms. Colbath moved to approve the minutes of the September 12, 2023, meeting with the Town, as presented. Mr. Knight seconded the motion, which passed 8-0-3.

Next meeting: 9 a.m. Saturday, October 28! Mr. Scala sought clarification as to the information requested regarding benefits for elected officials. Mr. Kasprzyk would like information from towns of similar size to Wakefield as to benefits received by elected officials—such as, insurance and earned time. Mr. Scala will endeavor to have this information available by next Wednesday evening.

The meeting adjourned at 8 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Toni Bodah, Acting Secretary