Finance and Warrant Committee Minutes

October 22, 2019

Kevin Preston, Susan Fay, Beth Pierce, Kevin Hughes, Michael Leahy, John Heffernan, and Marty Lindemann present.

The meeting was called to order at 6:34. Mr. Preston gave the opportunity for public comments on items not listed on the agenda. The committee welcomed Dedham’s new library director Ryan Brennan.

Mr. Preston noted that the agenda would be re-arranged to accommodate the needs of those speaking. He explained the process that would occur this evening, emphasizing that this was a hearing, not deliberations.

The committee began with discussion of Article 11, pertaining to the School Department’s capital request. Mr. Rippen took the floor to speak on behalf of the school department. He noted that the request was originally $88,000, but the request has been reduced to only two components. The first is $28,000 for exhaust fan repair at the high school. Mr. Hughes asked if there was a pricing breakdown for these requests. Mr. Rippen noted that the second request is $30,000 for the computer refresh, and the estimates can be found in the prior season’s capital request.

Ms. Terkelsen clarified that there was a short list of approximately $300,000 cut by the finance committee from the various requests from the town. She suggested the committee should focus their evaluation on these items. Mr. Rippen noted that the exhaust fan request was actually cut twice, and this request restores it to its lowest ebb. He feels it is important to get this done.

Mr. Preston summarized that the current ask for Article 11 is $58,000: $28,000 for the ventilation repair and $30,000 from the request for the computer refresh.

Mr. Langenhorst, the school technology director, explained that there were cuts to the smartboards and to the computer refresh. He noted that the only funds they are requesting are for the computer refresh. These are largely to replace iPads that have not been supported since 2016. These go primarily to elementary and middle schoolers. He believes with this $30,000 request and some incoming E-Rate money he can complete the iPad refresh. He explained that they already stretch out the viability of these machines beyond manufacturer’s recommendation. Mr. Heffernan asked what Mr. Langenhorst would estimate he will be requesting in Spring for the computer refresh. Mr. Langenhorst listed the items that would be requested but was unable to provide a monetary estimate.

Superintendent Welch thanked the committee for their time.

The representatives of Article 15, pertaining to plastic bag use, took the floor. Virginia Leclair, head of the Environmental department, and Emily Walton, member of the Sustainability Advisory Committee, introduced themselves.

Ms. Walton explained that this article has the support of the Sustainability Advisory Committee, and distributed a letter of support from the Board of Selectmen.

Ms. Leclair explained that the board of selectman has expressed support for this Article. She noted that the average length of use of a plastic bag is 14 minutes. These bags represent a cost to both the town and the business owners. 129 cities and towns have approved similar bag laws. There are exemptions contained within this bylaw, such as for newspaper bags, dog waste bags, or business hardships. If this bylaw passes town meeting, it will go to the attorney general’s office, and prior to its enactment there will be an education outreach campaign.

Mr. Preston asked if the supermarkets have expressed an opinion on this. Ms. Leclair explained that larger store chains are prepared for this, as similar legislation has occurred across the country.

Mr. Leahy asked about the mentioned $74,000 in fines. Ms. Walton explained that we are charged $74,000 in fines for contaminants in our single-stream recycling, and plastic bags are the #1 contaminant.

Mr. Hughes asked about the mentioned waivers and exemptions. Ms. Leclair answered that there will be a grant funded position to evaluate these, preventing it from turning into an expense to the town.

Mr. Lindemann asked if there was a charge per bag placed in the bylaw. Ms. Leclair responded that paper bags will still be allowed, and stores are permitted to charge for them, but there is nothing specific in the bylaw.

The representatives thanked the committee for their time.

The representatives of Article 6 took the floor. Article 6 pertains to the proposed lands known as Striar Field and the creation of a public park.

Mr. Briggs informed the committee and the public of upcoming site walks and outreach scheduled up until town meeting. He noted that the proposal, if passed, would go to a vote at the next general election. Mr. Briggs presented a timeline of the town’s ownership of the Striar property. The engineered site plan was approved in 2014. He noted that last year; this proposal was suspended pending the completion of the Master Plan.

Mr. Briggs presented an image of the proposed park. He explained that the planning has been reactive to the shift in priorities expressed by the master plan. He explained that the part has an estimated total cost of $14.2 million dollars, a tax increase of $81 dollars per year for 20 years to the average consumer.

The park will contain 2 multi-use artificial turf fields. Our current fields see high volume usage. Mr. Briggs explained that natural fields need time to rest and recover to be repaired, which our current fields do not get time for.

Mr. Briggs noted that our town’s Lacrosse teams are paying to use fields out of town. The proposed park has a Lacrosse Field and four lighted tennis courts. There is also a proposed pickleball court. This sport is particularly popular with the 55+ demographic. There are 2 lighted basketball courts and a set of Bocce Courts proposed. There is also a proposal for 1.7 miles of walking trails, a playground, a dog park and picnic areas. There is other open space in the proposal for future desires.

Mr. Briggs said that there is never going to be a good time for a $14.2 million dollar project, and the Parks & Recreation committee has been looking into the grant process for several facets of the park.

Mr. Preston asked about the previous access issues. He asked why the Capen school property is not being used as an access point, given that making an access point over the wetlands requires a $1.3 million bridge. Mr. Briggs explained that there are width and elevation issues with that idea. Mr. Preston asked if Mr. Briggs had an estimate for the cost of annual maintenance. Mr. Briggs explained that he does not have that estimate.

Mr. Lindemann asked if there is a list of meeting with the school committee for coordinating this project with the Capen property. Mr. Briggs noted that he was not present for those conversations, but knows that the building is still being used as an educational space. He said that they expect it to take 4-5 years for them to know the fate of the Capen building. Mr. Lindemann noted that there is a concern that the properties being considered separately could create inefficient land use. He emphasized the importance of approaching the design stage with this perspective. Mr. Briggs explained that the school has their own schedule of construction and expansion that is a priority for them.

Mr. Rippen took the floor to express his best understanding of the joint conversations. He expressed that there was a discussion on care and custody agreements and M.O.U. agreements. He believes the Capen was looked at as recently as 2016 as part of a feasibility study with the MSBA to build a new or rehabbed ECEC, or perhaps combining it with an elementary school. This was ultimately passed on. He noted that there has been usage of the building by Blue Hills, in part to keep the building occupied to reduce vandalism. He is not aware of any dialogue between the school committee and the Parks & Recreation department. Mr. Briggs explained that the recent conversation he mentioned was in an M.O.U. discussion with Superintendent Welch.

Mr. Lindemann asked about the amount of walking plans in the new trails in the new plans, vs the pre-existing trails. Mr. Briggs noted that he will have that number for him. Mr. Lindemann asked for a size comparison between this dog park and the dog park at Dolan Field. Mr. Briggs noted that the Dog Park in Dolan was planned to be temporary initially, but is likely to remain permanently. They are anticipated to be similar in size.

Mr. Lindemann noted that he has received concerns regarding the increased traffic in the surrounding neighborhoods. He asked if traffic mitigation was part of the $14.2 million request. Mr. Briggs explained that some input from the traffic study was included in the plan. Mr. Lindemann asked how much of this 14.2 figure was traffic mitigation and safety. Mr. Preston asked what the actual mitigation is. Mr. Briggs explained that the entrance will be moved 50 feet down from previous plans. Mr. Preston asked if there is traffic mitigation being done outside the bounds of the construction. Mr. Stanley explained that they took the recommendations that came out of the traffic study as well as input from the planning board in their plan.

Mr. Briggs noted that there will be a great deal of new information about this proposal available online.

Mr. Leahy asked about the $81 on the average tax bill. Mr. Goodwin explained that roughly every $2 million in costs on the project is roughly $10 on the average tax bill.

Mr. Briggs emphasized the importance of additional fields in Dedham’s future. Overuse of fields can result in long term issues and lack of rest time that fields need. He believes that without this manor field project, we are looking at our youth sports facing restrictions.

Mr. Preston opened the floor for members of the public to speak on Article 6.

Mr. Loporto, a Dedham resident on Crane Street and town meeting member took the floor to mention the tax concerns and opposition to the park from the abutters. He presented the committee with signatures from people with 100 yards of the property. He noted upcoming construction in Hyde Park, people who he expects will be using the parks without it being on their taxes. He thanked the committee for their time.

Mr. Quinn, town meeting member, took the floor to speak. He is a lifelong resident of Dedham, who is now raising children in Dedham. He is disappointed in the current state of Dedham’s fields, and agrees that they need increased maintenance and rest. He knows that there may be difficulties for abutters and traffic issues in the neighborhood, but not particularly different from those who live around existing parks or schools. He noted that overcrowding of our current public use areas leads to serious safety issues around parking and street crossing. This is particularly bad when there are multiple games at a field and children are crossing streets. He encouraged the town to use this opportunity for improvement.

A member of the public who did not identify himself took the floor. He stated that in his experience, he sees children in the manor neighborhood area playing in the streets because there aren’t fields or playground in their area. He believes in the project and hopes the committee will support it.

Ms. O’Neil, a precinct 2 town meeting member raised concerns with the cost of this project. She asked if this cost was the same as presented at previous town meetings. She pointed out the town’s recent budgeting issues and the approaching public safety building. Her concern, and the concern she hears from her neighbors, are about their tax bills. She understands the need for fields, but hopes the town to pursue other avenues. She also raised concerns with the safety of artificial turf fields.

Ms. Gustin, a citizen who lives across town from this proposed field, took the floor to voice her concerns. She noted that this proposal has not gone through the planning board or through the conservation department. She believes this proposal should go back through those processes before it reaches town meeting. She also stated that Amazon is looking to triple their space, which means she expects them to be running trucks up and down Sprague Street. She also raised concerns with the artificial turf fields.

Mr. Briggs explained that there are already plans in place to go before the Planning Board and the Conservation department.

Precinct 5 town meeting member Monica Linari took the floor. She explained that she voted in favor of this project when it was first proposed. Since then, she has moved and is now an abutter. She expressed enthusiastic support for this project. She sees the safety of having dedicated field areas as the primary concern. She does not see the value of the current use of the space and hopes to see the project go through.

Ms. Staton, a precinct 6 town meeting member, took the floor to voice concerns. She expressed that we missed an opportunity to use grant funds from the community preservation act to develop this project. She believes usage of the CPA would have been an optimal way to offset this cost.

Lindsey Barrett, a Precinct 6 town meeting member took the floor. He stated that the cost of this project does not represent a huge expense to the average taxpayer. He feels that this project fills a need for the town and represents a sound investment for the future. Usage rates at current fields mean unsafe and unusual parking in neighborhoods. He agrees that the fields need rest and repair. He knows that there are great paths and opportunities in the Wilson Mountain area but believes that the Manor neighborhood deserves development in their area. He pointed out that the town purchased this property to develop a long time ago. He thanked the committee for their time.

Ms. Keaveney took the floor to comment. She expressed sadness that there was intent to rip up the woods area at the proposed site. He believes this area is valuable conservation land, and the original owner Dan Striar could not build on it in order to avert flooding issues. She feels that the land needs to be preserved. She pointed out that real estate brokers sold abutters property with the promise that the Striar property was protected land and could not be developed. She also raised the possibility that the area was a potential historical site, worthy of preservation. She echoed previous safety concerns, and described the project as the most fiscally irresponsible she has seen in her time at Dedham, and thanked the Parks & Recreation department for their hard work for the town in general.

Karen Palumbo, an abutter in the proposed neighborhood and precinct 5 town meeting member, took the floor to speak. She explained that trails in the Striar area already exist and the people who live in that neighborhood already maintain the area. She was unpleasantly surprised when Amazon moved in. There have been DPW projects occurring in the area already that have disrupted the neighborhood with noise, traffic, and dust. She thanked the committee for their time.

Bob Scheffler, from Tower Street, took the floor to make clarifications on the discussion. He believes the expenses of this project will far exceed $14.2 million. He heard it said that the fill has been removed from the area. However, he has seen crushed asphalt dumped in that area by the town. He heard it said that parks around the town that currently exist are dangerous. He suggested the town expand their existing park parking lots and expand their existing fields to address those issues, not build a new one. Mr. Scheffler explained that in 2001, this project was pushed through to abutters under the threat of the town allowing low-income housing there if the town did not approve a park.

Mr. Pape, Precinct 5 town meeting member. He wants to see the forest in the Striar property cleaned up, but does not want to see it developed to this extent. He also has seen a great deal of complaints about tax increases in recent years, and he sees this as a further increase. This project may be a want, but its not a need.

Mr. Briggs addressed the concerns of the public and acknowledged the cost, but feels that this project has something for the whole town. He noted that his department came in on time and under budget on Gonzalez field, and this $14.2 million estimate is conservative. He directed the public to look at the new FAQ that will be going up on this project.

Ms. Fay asked about the history of ownership of this property. Mr. Briggs answered that since the town bought it in 2001, it has been under the control of the Parks & Recreation department.

Mr. Briggs explained that the DPW can arrange walking tours for citizens who contact him, if the public tours do not work for their schedule.

The committee moved to discussion of Article 1, Line Item transfers. Ms. Terkelsen directed the committee to the content of the request. She summarized the line item requests, which total $1,494,154 in transfers.

Item 1 is a transfer to cover a short-term vacancy in Accounting.

Item 2 is a 1-time police wage surplus being transferred to safety supplies. Computer updates are needed in the dispatch radio system, upgrades to the fingerprinting system, and an interrogation camera are needed to meet national standards. Mr. Preston asked if these would be capital requests at a normal time. Chief D’Entremont answered only the dispatch computers would be capital.

Item 3 is a transfer from Wages & Stipends and Vehicle Maintenance to cover fire department Overtime. Chief Spillane explained that the Overtime budget held accurate until around July, when several extended injury leaves led to overtime issues. There were 3 retirements and 6 long term absences due to injury, medical, or other leave. Since August, the department has been down 8 people from the beginning of the year. Some of these members are expected to return within a few weeks.

Ms. Fay expressed frustration at the recurring appearance of fire department overtime expenses in Line Item transfers. Mr. Spillane answered that injury rates are down overall, but the department needs to follow medical recommendations. Ms. Fay asked if there are similar injury rates for police & fire departments. Mr. Spillane answered that it is difficult to compare. He noted that there have been 5 on-the-job injuries in the fire department.

Mr. Heffernan asked what we were doing to minimize injuries. Mr. Spillane answered that they learn and develop from each problem and that some injuries come from reduced staffing, when one person tries to do the job of two.

Mr. Lindemann pointed out that Fire staffing has been on the rise in recent years with the goal of reducing overtime expenses. He asked if Chief Spillane had data on the actual savings over the last few years. Chief Spillane explained that the changes in staffing have been positive, but it is not feasible to go below a certain staffing level. He reminded the committee that they used to budget higher for overtime then give the money back at the end of the year, but they reduced the budget.

Mr. Heffernan requested the opportunity to look at the relevant data to injuries and overtime. Mr. Preston suggested looking more in-depth into this data in December.

Item 4 is a transfer from surplus wages to cover library overtime changes. Mr. Preston asked if this would be a one-time or recurring need. Mr. Brennan answered the overtime was largely incurred by his absence and positions that need to be filled, so would be a one-time charge.

Item 5 is a transfer of $500,000 from Free Cash to remove materials for the DPW. Mr. Flanagan explained that this covers the removal of the materials at their storage yard at the Striar property. He clarified that they have already spent out of their regular operating budget to cover this expense. Mr. Heffernan asked if this was a one-time cost. Mr. Flanagan answered probably not, as these materials would still have to be dealt with. Mr. Heffernan asked how much material remained to be removed. Mr. Flanagan answered none, but there may be costs if they need to restore the original grade. Mr. Flanagan explained that he expects it to cost $350,000 in his operating budget to store this material at a new location yearly.

Mr. Hughes asked if the Striar project can be built on top of the previous dump site. Mr. Flanagan responded that is outside his expertise.

Ms. Fay asked how long we have been using Striar for storage dumping. Mr. Flanagan answered since 2009. He explained that now we bring these materials to nearby towns.

Mr. Heffernan asked if Mr. Flanagan had an estimate of removing contaminated material. Mr. Flanagan replied that the material may or may not be suitable for construction. Mr. Goodwin noted that the material is not toxic, so contaminated is a strong word to use.

Item 6 is a transfer from Legal: Judgements to Town Manager: Insurance. This is to cover deductibles for our liability insurance. Mr. Goodwin clarified that this is not a recurring expense.

Item 7, 8, and 9 are transfers from Police: Civilian Wages to pay for a new car allowance for the town nurse, Health Department Wages, and a Human Resources intern. Mr. Preston noted that this new car allowance seems to be being added to the budget in an indirect way. Mr. Goodwin answered that this is in the by-laws under the discretion of the town manager. Mr. Preston raised issue with the process of this introduction to the budget as a recurring cost. Mr. Goodwin explained that the town manager has the option to pay employees for mileage or with a car allowance. This employee is being switched from a mileage payment to a car allowance.

Mr. Hughes asked when this employee’s car allowance began. Mr. Goodwin explained that it has been since they have been in the health department.

Mr. Preston asked if the HR intern would be a recurring cost. Mr. Goodwin answered that they would not be. Mr. Preston raised the concern that creating a position would create a recurring cost. The Human Resources director explained that this is a position to establish online Open Enrollment, that will not be needed once that job is done.

Item 10 is a transfer from Town Facilities: maintenance wages to the school facilities: maintenance wages. The transfer for $66,704 is for one position, which is being transferred to a different facilities budget because the employee is under a school union contract. This is a simple bookkeeping move.

Item 12 is a transfer for $650,000 from free cash to the school administrative salary contingency. This is because the school collective bargaining units did not settle by the end of the year, so this money is to cover the possible outcomes of the collective bargaining.

Item 11 is a transfer from free cash to cover an insurance claim and travel and dues expenses. Mr. Lindemann asked what the $5,500 for travels and dues is for. Mr. Goodwin replied that it is to cover professional development, travel, and conferences.

Mr. Preston took the opportunity to ask the members of the Retirement Board to speak with the committee. He noted that the pension funding approved at prior town meeting was roughly $700,000 under the amount the retirement board had assessed, with the intent of discussion in the future and voting in the fall to make up the shortfall. Ms. Terkelsen noted that this information is in an Article in the Warrant. The Retirement board has made a recommendation for their Fiscal Year 21 assessment, which will be discussed at a later date.

Ms. Terkelsen noted the request from the Retirement Board is for $739,905. The article is a request for $765,000, to cover possible interest.

Mr. Preston thanked the Retirement Board for their time.

The committee moved to discussion of Article 14. This article has been put forth by Town Moderator Dan Driscoll to alter the requirements for membership of the Public Service Recognition Committee so that it no longer requires Town Meeting membership. This is because Mr. Driscoll views the committee as a good opportunity for those getting involved in local government. Mr. Driscoll asked that the Finance & Warrant committee’s recommendation change the language of the article from its original writing.

The committee moved to discussion of Article 3, pertaining to the Ames building. Mr. Goodwin answered that they do not have a monetary ask at this moment for the article. Ms. Terkelsen explained that excess funds allocated for borrowing would be rescinded. Mr. Preston asked that the figure be available to the committee as soon as possible.

Ms. Fay noted that the delays in the Ames project may be responsible for a lack of public trust in other projects by the town. She suggested town management make a presentation on this project at town meeting.

The committee moved to discussion of Article 9, pertaining to the construction of a cellular tower at 5 Incinerator Road. This is a 200 foot ladder tower, estimated to cost $650,000. Mr. Flanagan noted that the costs of removing the existing smokestack structure will come later. The smokestack is no longer structurally sound, and needs to come down. This tower allows us to meet our leases with cell carriers and possible garner new ones. These leases yield roughly $300,000 annually.

Mr. Preston asked if this tower structure would represent an imposition on future use of this land. Mr. Flanagan answered that it does not need to be constructed exactly where the previous tower is. Ms. Terkelsen explained that the land could not be sold while bonding for the tower is still outstanding.

Ms. Fay asked if this goes through planning boards and appropriate public hearings. Mr. Flanagan answered that it would, yes. Ms. Fay asked how tall it would be. Mr. Flanagan answered 200 feet.

Mr. Heffernan asked about our legal obligation on these cell phone contracts. He asked what would happen if we did nothing. Ms. Terkelsen confirmed there would be legal issues to resolve.

Mr. Lindemann confirmed that Mr. Flanagan has selected the tower design to be usable in the future. Mr. Flanagan assured him that he dedicated considerable thought to the structure and design.

Mr. Lindemann asked about potential future uses at the land at 5 Incinerator Road. He asked if there were any environmental concerns with the site previously being a transfer station. Mr. Flanagan answered that there were not environmental concerns, and that the property does not seem to hold much appeal for developers. Mr. Lindemann asked if there would be any attempts to obscure the tower. Mr. Flanagan answered no.

The committee moved to discussion of their previous minutes.

For the minutes from March 9, 2019, Marty Lindemann motioned to approve the minutes, Mr. Heffernan seconded. They were approved 7-0.

For the minutes from March 26, 2019, Marty Lindemann motioned to approve the minutes, Ms. Pierce seconded. They approved 6-0-1, with John Heffernan abstaining due to absence from the meeting.

For the minutes from April 3, 2019, Marty Lindemann motioned to approve the minutes. Mr. Heffernan seconded with comment that clarified the presence of an important miswording. They were approved 7-0.

For the minutes from April 9, 2019, Mr. Lindemann motioned to approve the minutes. Mr. Heffernan seconded. They were approved 7-0.

For the minutes from July 9, 2019, Mr. Lindemann motioned to approve the minutes. Mr. Hughes seconded with comment, pointing out a mistake in the attribution of several points. They were approved 7-0.

The committee discussed the scheduling of their future meetings. Mr. Preston requested information on the possible expenditures from the release free cash surplus.

Ms. Fay asked about the conservation status of the Striar property. Mr. Goodwin explained that it is not currently protected or conserved land.

Mr. Lindemann motioned to adjourn, Mr. Preston seconded. The meeting was voted adjourned 7-0 at 10:01.