Finance and Warrant Committee minutes

7/14/2020

Kevin Preston, Dave Roberts, Michelle Persson Reilly, John Heffernan, Beth Pierce, Susan Fay, Michael Leahy, and Marty Lindemann present

Mr. Preston called the meeting to order at 5:08. He gave the opportunity for public comment.

Deb Harrison took the floor to speak as a member of the sustainability committee. She explained that she is one of the committee’s founding members, and she worries that diminishing our approach of climate issues will leave us ill-prepared to deal with the challenges of climate change. She suggested the town should be acting as a role model for both our citizens and future generations.

Chuck Kabat took the floor to speak as a member of the sustainability committee. He explained that while we have seen great involvement from our community on environmental projects, these have been lead by the environmental coordinator, and he does not believe the new proposed position can handle that on top of their other responsibilities.

Leigh Hafrey took the floor to speak as a member of the sustainability advisory committee. He emphasized the importance of environmental considerations and the crucial role the environmental coordinator plays in the work of the sustainability advisory committee.

Emily Walton took the floor to speak as a member of the sustainability advisory committee. She expressed strong opposition to cutting the environmental coordinator position and the environmental department budget. She attributed Dedham’s good environmental reputation to the work of this position, and expressed disappointment that the town would de-prioritize the need to move towards sustainability.

John Gorham took the floor to speak as a member of the sustainability advisory committee. He informed the committee that he had sent town management a letter elucidating his feelings and the feelings of the sustainability committee, and urged the Finance and Warrant committee to do the right thing.

Mr. Lindemann asked for further information on the grants brought in by the work of the Environmental coordinator. Ms. Harrison shared a document showing grant money brought in for different environmental projects. She emphasized the role that experience and reputation plays in successful grant writing.

Mr. Lindemann asked if grant money goes into the general fund. Mr. McGoldrick answered that they go into a special revenue fund.

Ms. Fay asked for information about one of the presented grants. Ms. Harrison responded that it pertained to a solar panel project. She noted that the energy credits earned by those panels funds future improvements for the town.

The committee moved to discussion of the operating budget.

Mr. Goodwin presented the Debt Service budget. He noted that Debt Service isn’t really the kind of thing you can adjust like a normal budget, but it is down just over 2% this year. However, we should expect it to slowly increase in the future.

Mr. Goodwin presented the excluded debt service budget. It is $2.3 million this year. This is a slight decrease from last year.

Mr. Goodwin presented the major capital debt service budget. It is a little over $4 million this year. He explained that this is covered largely by the Robin Reyes fund. Mr. Preston asked if there was any source of funds for this besides that and the yearly contribution. Mr. Goodwin answered no, but there may be in the future.

Mr. Preston asked if this year invalidated all previous projections for contributions required for the Robin Reyes fund. Mr. McGoldrick answered yes. He asked if we had those updated projections. Mr. Goodwin answered yes, but it has not yet been distributed. Mr. Lindemann asked that there be some historical context when that information is distributed.

Mr. Goodwin presented the Employee Benefits budget. He explained that they are down 1.2%, but the major driver of the decrease is the OPEB 25% partial holiday.

Mr. Heffernan asked how they would fund it in the years to come. Mr. Goodwin answered probably not, but they hope to reach full funding again in the future.

Mr. Goodwin highlighted that workers comp insurance was $66,000 above estimate so they will need to increase their request by that much.

Mr. Goodwin presented the sewer enterprise budget. He stated that this year’s request is down from last year, and the sewer enterprise will require no infusion from the general fund and is becoming solvent.

Mr. Preston asked if there would be a sewer rate increase. Mr. Goodwin answered no, but he does believe one is necessary.

Mr. Mammone explained that there has been some relief to communities from the state sewer management.

Mr. Goodwin spoke on the issue of the “other articles” section of the budget. There is a proposed $500,000 transfer to the Robin Reyes fund. Other costs are related to the proposed warrant articles.

The committee moved to discussion of Warrant Articles. Mr. Preston explained that he requested recommendations from town management on what articles should be deferred until November.

Town Moderator Dan Driscoll explained that delaying less essential articles is being done by many towns to attempt to minimize the duration and difficulty of the town meeting, given the Covid circumstance.

Mr. Heffernan asked if the article sponsors were notified. Mr. Driscoll answered yes. He has communicated with most of them directly.

Mr. Lindemann pointed out that a lot of these articles are complex and data-driven. He asked how this information would be presented in a cohesive way to the assembled town meeting. Mr. Driscoll answered that they are hoping to use a wi-fi booster to give those assembled access to the data, as well as including it in the data packet.

Mr. Mammone took the floor to speak on the articles he was involved with. He explained that they are requested $300,000 to comply with permit requirements. Handling it this year will avoid a great expense later. Part of this is a phosphorous control mandate to remove phosphorous from the Charles River. There is a great deal of technological and legal hurdles to handle this issue.

Mr. Lindemann asked if there would be future offset funds available for this. Mr. Mammone answered no.

Mr. Mammone moved to article 16. This is phase 11 of the NWRA project which is 75% a grant and 25% an interest free loan.

Mr. Mammone moved to the next article. He explained this will allow town meeting to vote to approve payments those seeking just compensation and damages for temporary or permanent easements on their property. Mr. Lindemann asked if there was adjudication in the future for additional money. Mr. Mammone answered this is currently the total but they could choose to appeal it later.

Mr. Mammone moved to article 33, the acceptance of Leana Lane off of East Street. The developer has put this road through the planning board and met the town’s requirements to become a public way. This property has already been inspected. Mr. Preston asked if this had a cost associated with it. Mr. Mammone answered no.

The committee moved to discussion of article 5, recommended to be deferred. Mr. Heffernan asked if they vote to defer it or indefinitely postpone it. Mr. Goodwin confirmed they would vote to defer it.

Mr. Driscoll reminded the committee that town meeting cannot dissolve until every article has had action on it.

The committee moved to discussion of article 6, which has been recommended to be deferred.

The committee moved to discussion of article 7, which has been recommended to be deferred.

The committee moved to discussion of article 8, which has been recommended to be deferred.

The committee moved to discussion of article 9, which has been recommended to be voted on.

The committee moved to discussion of article 10, which has been recommended to be deferred.

The committee moved to discussion of article 11, which has been recommended to be deferred.

The committee moved to discussion of article 12, which has been recommended to be voted on.

The committee moved to discussion of article 13, which pertains to the sewer enterprise fund. It is recommended to be voted on. Mr. Preston asked if there was a number associated with this article. Mr. Goodwin estimated just under $7.2 million

The committee moved to discussion of article 14, which has been recommended to be deferred.

The committee moved to discussion of article 15, which has been recommended to be deferred.

The committee moved to discussion of article 16, which has been recommended to be voted on.

The committee moved to discussion of article 17, which has been recommended to be deferred.

The committee moved to discussion of article 18, relating to the new public safety building. They have anticipated a need of an additional $10 million. This has been recommended to be deferred due to the size of the discussion required.

Ms. Fay asked if this would impact the future of the project. Mr. Goodwin answered that this would be discussed at the upcoming Selectboard meeting. Ms. Fay raised the concern that continuing with the project would make this expense necessary, thereby functionally confirming this article by deferring it. Mr. Goodwin explained that there will still be option for the use of the site, and that this will not be restrictive.

Mr. Lindemann asked how they could be estimating the cost of splitting the public safety building project back into separate fire and police. Mr. Goodwin replied that they can use estimates and projections based on similar projects from similar towns.

Ms. Fay asked if the current town hall would be demolished prior to November. Mr. Goodwin replied that is his recommendation as he believes any feasible use of that site would require the demolition of the current building.

The committee moved to discussion of article 19, which has been recommended to be voted on.

The committee moved to discussion of article 20, which has been recommended to be deferred. Mr. Preston asked if this sponsor had been contacted. Mr. Driscoll answered yes, he is okay with the deferral.

The committee moved to discussion of article 21, which has been recommended to be deferred.

The committee moved to discussion of article 22, which has been recommended to be deferred.

The committee moved to discussion of article 23, pertaining to an increase to the senior tax work credit, which has been recommended to be deferred.

The committee moved to discussion of article 30, which has been recommended to be deferred.

The committee moved to discussion of article 34, an amendment to the stormwater management fee schedule which has been recommended to be deferred.

The committee moved to discussion of article 35, pertaining to blue hills facilities energy credits, which has been recommended to be voted on. Mr. Goodwin explained that this is required to realize the lead certification for the ECEC. They are purchasing credits from blue hills to get a certification. Mr. Roberts pointed out that there is a savings associated with this. It is recommended this be voted on this year.

Mr. Preston suggested the committee leave the hearing open until tomorrow in case there were loose ends to be cleaned up.

Mr. Lindemann pointed out that the environmental coordinator position is controversial and that they would like the chance to provide a straight up or down vote on the matter.

Mr. Heffernan pointed out that it seems to him that the support is for the environmental coordinator position, but not necessarily the environmental departments.

Mr. Goodwin suggested that the town is not changing their goals away from environmental factors or grant applications by removing this position.

Ms. Fay noted that they seem to be deliberating. She noted that it may assist the sustainability committee to know what the future of their relationship to the town would be. She suggested that the position being created have more explicit responsibilities.

Ms. Fay asked if Mr. Goodwin felt confident that the new assistant town planner position would be able to handle the responsibilities pertaining to the environmental department.

Mr. Lindemann asked if there was a way to support adding a social worker to re-imagine the police department without adding a new FTE.

Ms. Fay asked if there was a job description for the proposed police social worker. Mr. Goodwin answered not at this time. Ms. Fay noted that her concern is the safety of the social worker and the line between healthcare and police work. Mr. Goodwin explained that there are other non-law enforcement professionals working alongside the department, so there is a framework for it.

Mr. Heffernan quoted his grandfather as saying “the most dangerous calls to respond to are domestic disputes,” and raised the concern that a healthcare professional is being put into a dangerous situation.

Mr. Lindemann noted that the police department has 3 unfilled full time employees, and suggested those slots could be filled by social workers. Mr. Preston noted that that may require town meeting approving re-classification of the positions, as well as causing union problems.

Mr. Roberts suggested Chief D’Entremont take more time to fully develop this proposal. Ms. Fay suggested that the Chief would not enter the hiring process without it being fully developed.

The committee discussed free cash during the next budgeting cycle.

Mr. Heffernan motioned to adjourn, Mr. Lindemann seconded. It was unanimously approved. Meeting adjourned at 7:16.