

Needham Finance Committee
Minutes of Meeting of January 11, 2023

The meeting of the Finance Committee was called to order by Chair John Connelly at approximately 7:00 pm in the Great Plain Room at Needham Town Hall, also available via Zoom teleconference.

Present from the Finance Committee:

John Connelly, Chair; Louise Miller, Vice Chair (arrived at 7:20 pm)

Members: Karen Calton; Barry Coffman; Carol Fachetti, Carli Hairston, James Healy (attended until 8:05 pm), Joshua Levy, Richard Reilly

Others present:

David Davison, Assistant Town Manager/Finance Director

Timothy Muir McDonald, Director of Health & Human Services

Sara Shine, Director of Youth & Family Services

Stacey Mulroy, Director, Park and Recreation Department

Christopher J. Gerstel, Chair, Park and Recreation Commission

Theodora Eaton, Town Clerk

John Schlittler, Police Chief

Chris Baker, Police Deputy Chief

Paula Sheerin, Police Department, Administrative Assistant

Thomas Conroy, Fire Chief

Anne-Marie Condon, Fire Department, Fire Business Manager

Citizen Requests to Address the Finance Committee

No requests.

Approval of Minutes of Prior Meetings

MOVED: By Mr. Levy that the minutes of the meeting of January 4, 2023, be approved as distributed, subject to technical or typographical corrections. Mr. Reilly seconded the motion. The motion was approved by a vote of 8-0.

FY2024 Department Budget Hearings

Commission on Disabilities

Mr. Connelly stated that the budget is level-funded for FY2023. Mr. Davison stated the no representative was able to attend. The Committee raised no questions that required rescheduling the discussion.

Health and Human Services

Mr. Coffman introduced the budget. He stated that the base budget has a relatively small 2% increase. Including all of the DSR4 requests, the increase would be 7.2%. There is also one DSR5 request. The department, with 4 divisions, receives almost \$1.5 million in grant funding, allowing the department to increase the services provided and expand its reach. There is a

heightened need for mental health services in the schools and also at the senior center. The department submitted a DSR4 request for \$40K for the traveling meals program which has been struggling to find a source of meals. Mr. McDonald stated that since the budget request was submitted, the department has determined that it can cover all of the DSR4 requests other than the traveling meals program with additional grant funding. Mr. Coffman asked if they expected that the additional needs will be permanent. Mr. McDonald stated that the need for additional clinician in Aging Services will be addressing current acute mental health needs attributable to Covid and post-Covid issues. He is not certain if the need will be ongoing. He will reassess the need in 1-2 years. Mr. Levy asked if the additional clinical hours approved last year have helped alleviate the backlog in the availability of services. Mr. McDonald stated that the additional hours for the clinician in the Youth Services division has resulted in more service and decreased wait times. He stated that the way that the Aging Services division receives referrals is different, so the additional need is not as clear. People often seek help for different services and then they are referred to the clinician. Although the amount of backlog is not clear, there is unmet need.

Mr. McDonald stated that Needham's traveling meals service has been in place for 52 years, prior to the national Meals on Wheels program. The hospital has been providing healthy meals at a good price, but has asked the Town to find a different partner as soon as possible. The Schools' food services has staffing problems and would be able to fill in for a day now and then but cannot take on the program on a daily basis. The Town has been unable to find a new partner, and plans to put out another RFP in February. Mr. McDonald has learned that, with an appropriate kitchen, the meals can be made for \$4 each. The hospital was providing them at \$6 per meal, packaged and ready to deliver. The program provides 100 meals per day, 5 days per week. There is a hot midday meal and a refrigerated supper. The requested funds would be to subsidize the meals so that the elderly and disabled clients will not have a huge jump in fees. He would be open to have the funds held in reserve until they can find a substitute provided.

Ms. Fachetti asked if the Town could partner with another community. Mr. McDonald stated that the state Meals on Wheels program is run from Waltham, but it is unclear if the Town can join the program mid-year. He stated that those meals come frozen and are lower quality, so the Board of Health, along with state Senator Rausch and Rep. Garlick, are all opposed to that solution. Ms. Rausch and Ms. Garlick are seeking to have \$50K funding from the state made available to modify the kitchen at the CATH to be able to produce the meals. Mr. Connelly stated that they may need to default to the state program if there are no other options. Mr. Levy asked if the need for delivered meals is increasing. Mr. McDonald stated that 5-10% of the people in the program die each year, and new people join. There tends to be some increase but the need fluctuates. He stated that the program is run and staffed by volunteers except in the summer when there is a paid driver. He noted that it has been more difficult lately to get volunteers. He stated that they have had preliminary discussions with the Minuteman School hospitality program, but the trip is potentially too long to maintain food at the required safety standards.

Mr. McDonald stated that there are three DSR4s for FY25 that are intended to preview requests for next year. They include three positions: epidemiologist, Public Health nurse and Youth Services clinician that are currently funded with Covid-relief money through calendar 2024. The request will be to cover costs for half of FY25, then covering full years after that. Ms. Shine stated that the Youth Services mental health services help youth and families in crisis. She stated that since the pandemic began, the amount of activity has increased significantly, first manifesting as increased anxiety and fear, and now isolation. Some are also dealing with loss.

There are now more cases, and the cases are more time intensive. She stated that they hold more support groups and provide more clinical programming. There are also more cases that they work to connect with other services, and more community partnerships than in the past. They are finding that it is more difficult to find places to refer people for in-person services and that there are longer wait lists. They used to provide services as bridge gaps, but the gaps are longer and needs more intense.

Ms. Fachetti stated that she heard of a new state program in this area. Ms. Shine stated that every town will be assigned to a community health center that will provide help with crisis management. The center will not provide long-term help, but will provide a much-needed service. Mr. McDonald stated that there will still be the structural issue that there are not enough clinicians to meet the need. The new state program will not be enough.

Mr. Reilly asked if the Town could be getting reimbursement for services through clients' medical insurance. Mr. McDonald stated that they did an analysis and found that it would cost more in administrative costs to do the billing than they would recoup in reimbursements. He noted that they could charge parents for services, but they think it is important that there is not a financial barrier. Mr. Reilly stated that the Town might be able to bill medical insurance a significant amount. Mr. McDonald stated that they could re-do the calculation.

Mr. Levy asked if most referrals come from the Schools. Ms. Shine stated that they receive referrals from the schools and from the community. The Schools usually refer clients when they can't fully service the individual. The work that is done in the Schools is very different. The sessions are shorter (within one class period) and not as long term. Some youth tend to have longer term needs.

Mr. Reilly asked if the front desk administrative work at the CATH requested in a DSR4 could be performed by a volunteer. Mr. McDonald stated that they have used volunteers, but the volunteers have tended to get distracted from the work and have had a difficult time enforcing rules with their peers. He stated that the Town will be receiving more funding than he realized with their formula grant and they will be able to cover this cost with the bump in funding.

Mr. Coffman stated that there is a DSR5 request for a warrant article to have Town Meeting place funds that the Town receives as part of an opioid settlement into an earmarked reserve for substance use and abuse services. The Town is obligated to use the funds in a certain way, but they will be paid into the General Fund. There was a bill in the state legislature that would require the funds to be channeled to these uses, but the bill never moved forward. The point is to ensure accountability. Mr. McDonald stated that the Town received \$217K and will receive additional funding this year. The funding will be provided through 2038. He would like to put the funding aside and use it at a steady pace rather than a large amount at first. His plans for the funds are to assist with referral to treatment, recovery services, and harm reduction and prevention measures. Mr. McDonald stated that they would like to focus more of the substance abuse measures on youth and prevention efforts.

Ms. Miller stated that she is not comfortable with appropriating funds through a warrant article which then give the department a blank check. She asked why the Town is not using a different mechanism. Mr. Davison stated that this is dedicated revenue and needs to be used for specific purposes which would normally be provided to the department as a pass-through. The DOR submitted a bill for that to the legislature which did not act on it. However, the Town is still

obligated to use the funds for the correct purposes or it can be clawed back by the state. This is expected to provide a 30-year revenue stream for its purpose. Ms. Miller stated that she would like to talk further about the plan for setting aside these funds. Mr. Connelly stated that it might make sense to have a collaborative with other towns rather than 350 different programs in the state. Mr. McDonald stated that he did not disagree.

Fire Department

Ms. Miller recused herself from the discussion because her son is a firefighter in the department, and left the room. Mr. Healy introduced the budget. He stated that it is a base budget with no DSR4 or DSR5 requests. He noted a few changes from the write-up. The 3-year SAFER grant covering new firefighter salaries expired in June 2022, so the salaries are fully covered in the FY23 budget as well as in the requested FY24 budget. He stated that the number of full-time equivalent positions in the budget is 80. He stated that he had concerns about overtime which he discussed with the Chief. Mr. Healy stated that the overtime levels were approximately \$1.5 million in FY21, \$1.6 million in FY22 and projected to be \$1.53 million in FY23. The FY24 request includes \$1.595 million, an increase of 3.5%. The salary and wage increase for the department comprised mostly of step increases and longevity. The union contract expired in FY22, so there may be increases to the levels of step and longevity if the new agreement is settled before Town Meeting. They are now in negotiations.

Mr. Healy stated that in the expense budget, there is an increase the in Repairs and Maintenance line which is primarily due to the maintenance contract on the radio system since the warranty ended. Vehicle supplies and gasoline costs in the budget are increasing consistent with the larger trend. There is a capital request for \$51K for the replacement cycle for personal protective gear in which 10 sets are replaced every year. There is also \$40K in the operating budget for personal protective gear for promotions, new hires, and replacements that may be needed during the year. The capital request also includes \$30K for a defibrillator for an ambulance. There are several Fire Department vehicles slated for replacement in FY24. The Chief's car is replaced every 5 years. It is in the FY24 capital request for \$70K in FY24. The current vehicle will be moved down in service. There is also a request for a new ambulance for \$500K and a new fire ladder truck for \$2 million. The ladder truck is replacing a 20-year old truck at Station 2 which requires much repair work. Mr. Healy noted that the requested cost is from fall of 2022, and there is a 1.5-2 year backorder, so the cost will undoubtedly be higher.

Chief Conroy stated that the issues with ordering fire trucks, such as long delays and price increases, are widespread. He acknowledged that there are challenges with the amount of overtime. There have been increased overtime needs related to Covid as well as Civil Service. The Civil Service tests were cancelled, so they could not get people into the academy. He stated that there are currently two vacant positions and two long-term absences. There can be one vacancy without affecting overtime, otherwise they need to fill the absence. Mr. Levy asked if the ladder truck would be funded with debt. Mr. Davison stated that he is planning to fund it with debt, but he has just learned that there may be sufficient free cash to pay for it. Mr. Connelly asked about the new facility. Chief Conroy stated that it functions well and should work well for the long term.

Ms. Miller returned after the discussion ended.

Town Clerk

Mr. Coffman introduced the budget and stated that the budget will be up only 1%. He stated that there will be 2 elections in FY24 compared to 3 in FY23. There was an expense of about \$8K for new polling pads, but no increase in personnel or other meaningful increase in expenses.

Ms. Eaton stated that a new state law expanded early in-person voting, so that required more hours for poll workers. She noted that approximately 40% of the total vote was done by mail. She stated that they are submitting cost information on early in-person voting to the auditors and may receive \$30K. She stated that the poll pads are working well.

Park and Recreation

Mr. Coffman stated that the Park and Recreation budget is essentially level-funded, but is up 10% due to two primary drivers. First, the cost of temporary labor is increasing due to the increase in the minimum wage in 2023, and also the need to pay more to recruit temporary staff. He stated that the pool report shows a net revenue of \$70K, though the pool was not designed to be a profit-generator. It shows that there is a demand. The recent summer was the first one that was not disrupted by the pandemic.

The second big driver of cost increases in the Park and Rec budget is in the expenses related to CO2 which are affected by both cost and the lack of availability. The budget includes an increase of \$24K for CO2, plus increases for other pool chemicals. He stated that there are no DSR4s or other significant items. Ms. Mulroy stated that chlorine usage also increased significantly. She stated that the drought burns off the chlorine, so they need to use much more of it. She stated that the CO2 costs doubled, and the suppliers wanted to deliver to hospitals and restaurants first. Because of the issues with availability, she is considering using acid. She stated that when the facility was built, no one wanted acid in the building. However, liquid acid was the only option at that time. Acid is now available in dry tablets. She believes that even with the cost of converting, they will save money in the first year by changing to acid. She will need to work with the Fire Department. She stated that MIT and Tufts use acid in their pools and have found that it keeps the pool pH more consistent rather than constant ups and downs with chlorine, so it is not only cheaper, but also a better alternative.

Ms. Mulroy stated that the playground maintenance budget in FY24 will focus on repairs at the four schools that house after-school programs so that they do not need to close the playgrounds down. An additional \$25K was added to the playground maintenance line to fund upgrades at the Mills playground. She has learned that developmentally disabled adults from the Charles River Center use that playground, and there are few options that are adult-sized. The additional funding will allow them to add larger swings and some benches.

Mr. Reilly asked Ms. Mulroy if she foresaw future expenses related to the pool such as replacement pumps. Ms. Mulroy stated that she does since the 5-year warranty has just run out. Mr. Reilly suggested that there should be a plan to set aside the pool profits so they can be dedicated to pool costs. Mr. Davison stated that the Town could create a special stabilization fund. Ms. Mulroy stated that the costs could be as small as \$10K or up to \$50K to \$250K if a filter or pump died. Mr. Reilly expressed the thought that if pool “profits” could be dedicated to future capital needs, there would be an incentive to reflect some portion of those costs in the pricing structure for the pool.

Ms. Mulroy stated that there is a future capital request to install a shade structure at the pool and to extend to retaining wall to keep the pond from flooding into the pool. She would also like to get rid of the sand, since it clogs the filters. She stated that the cost of opening the pool at the end of FY23 is in the last contract, but the costs of closing the pool at the end of the summer of 2023 in FY24 is based on a discussion with Weston & Samson (who was the builder) as well as on their bid for the work. They were the only bidder. Mr. Levy asked if the playground at Claxton field would be replaced. Ms. Mulroy stated that it was removed during the field project and the Active Recreation Working Group is looking at whether to replace the playground or to add pickleball courts or something else.

Ms. Miller asked if the wages for seasonal workers are high enough since the signing bonus has been discontinued. Ms. Mulroy stated that they had offered a bonus to staff who stayed through a certain date, but they found that some of their best workers could not benefit from it because they had to leave early to go to school. Instead, the department looked at raising wages across the board. Ms. Miller stated that the wages looked lower than others in the area, but if they are getting staff, then that is fine. Ms. Mulroy stated that they were able to hire 75 lifeguards last summer when other facilities could not find enough.

Mr. Connelly asked how the new park ranger is working out and if the trash issues have been resolved. Ms. Mulroy stated that he started recently and is very busy and doing well. She stated that the fields are currently not subject to permits, so the trash situation is worse. She stated that most of the current enforcement work is related to dogs being where they are not allowed. She stated that the ranger has a daily list of places to take care of. If he is overwhelmed, he will call the Parks Department and send a video of the issues and ask for help. He is not yet taking care of everything, but he is making progress. Ms. Mulroy stated that there is a new person handling field permitting because the billing was not happening and fees were going unpaid. However, that is being fixed. There is a fee per player per field. Mr. Connelly asked if the department is fully staffed. Ms. Mulroy stated that they should have 4.6 FTEs. They currently have 3.6 FTEs since there is no Assistant Director.

Police Department

Ms. Miller stated that the budget provides for level services. She stated that additional funding is needed for training due to new requirements, and there are increases in equipment maintenance costs. She stated that the clinical support provided through Riverside is working well and that it may be a good year to add more since the budget has no other additional requests. The vacant positions are being filled, and the department will be close to fully staffed in the future. Chief Schlittler stated that there are 48 officers in the department and there are 53 positions. Two laterals are currently being hired, and should be ready for patrol by later February or early March to bring the officer count to 50. The department will then start the hiring process for an additional one to two officers. He cannot predict the future staffing level since there are no mandatory retirements in FY23 and he does not know whether others will leave or change professions. He believes he will be able to get to 52 officers in FY24. He stated the budget covers 63 employees in the department including 53 sworn officers and 10 civilian positions when fully staffed.

Chief Schlittler stated that Riverside provides a clinician who spends 20 hours of time per week in Needham and 20 hours in Dedham. Both departments are considering increasing to 40 hours per week. Needham has seen a great benefit. They have been able to develop strong outreach

and the clinician is a big part of that. The clinician is of most benefit during a crisis, and is very helpful with follow-up as well. Because of the clinician's medical background and connection with Riverside, they are able to assess a patient and place them in critical care treatment without going to the hospital first. He stated that they are starting to discuss increasing the hours to full time. Mr. Connelly stated that it would be helpful to have metrics regarding the work of the clinician in order to expand the program. Ms. Miller stated that at the time that the budget was created, they had limited time on which to base metrics. Mr. Connelly asked whether the person currently doing the work would go to Needham or Dedham full time. Chief Schlittler stated that the person who had been doing it left the position, but said that they would be willing to come back to work full time with the Town of Needham. The position will still be an employee of Riverside. Mr. Levy asked what the Town does during the hours when the clinician is not available. Chief Schlittler stated that follow-up is very important after a crisis. He acknowledged that the department works 24/7 while the clinician is only 20 hours per week, or potentially 40 hours per week. He stated that about 60% of the officers are trained in crisis intervention so they can handle crisis calls and collaborate with the clinician later. Deputy Chief Baker stated that the clinician will then be able to help prevent the next crisis through follow-up.

Ms. Fachetti asked what the required training is in the budget. Chief Schlittler stated that the officers are trained on firearms, de-escalation techniques, and use of force. The new requirement is to attend training four times per year instead of once. He stated that the force now has younger officers who are likely to need more training. Mr. Levy noted that overtime has increased. Chief Schlittler stated that there have been injuries. Therefore, they have been near the minimum and have been short staffed at times and had to use overtime hours to fill in. He stated that the amount of shift overtime needed will come down when the new officers come from the academy and the new laterals start. They also need overtime to be able to meet training requirements. He stated that they can over shifts with overtime but it has been stressful to meet the minimum numbers with the increased amount of training. Mr. Connelly asked who set the standards. Chief Schlittler stated that the Town sets the standards and that Needham is on the lower end compared to staffing requirements in other towns. Mr. Connelly asked how the new facility is working out. Chief Schlittler stated that it is functioning well and has a good flow. Mr. Connelly asked if there were revenue opportunities. Chief Schlittler stated that there may be revenue opportunities from the shooting range in the future once they have had more time in the facility. Mr. Reilly asked what the traffic supervisor wages of \$214K covered. Chief Schlittler stated that the Town has crossing guards at 64 crossings per day.

Updates

There were no updates.

Adjournment

MOVED: By Ms. Miller that the Finance Committee meeting be adjourned, there being no further business. Mr. Reilly seconded the motion. The motion was approved by a vote of 8-0 at approximately 9:05 p.m.

Documents: FY2024 Department Budget Requests; 2022 RRC Pool End-of-Season Report.

Respectfully submitted,

Louise Mizgerd
Staff Analyst

Approved January 25, 2023