

Needham Finance Committee
Minutes of Meeting of December 13, 2023

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

Present from the Finance Committee:

Louise Miller, Chair, Carol Smith-Fachetti, Vice-Chair (arrived at approximately 7:03 pm)
Members: Karen Calton (arrived at approximately 7:08 pm), Barry Coffman, John Connelly, Joshua Levy, Paul O'Connor, James Healy

Others present:

David Davison, Deputy Town Manager/Director of Finance
Katie King, Deputy Town Manager
Demitri Kyriakis, Public Library Acting Director
Jenna White, Library Administrative Assistant
Jay Fialkow, Chair of the Board of Library Trustees
Police Chief Schlittler
Deputy Chief Baker
Fire Chief Conroy
Assistant Fire Chief Anastasi
Anne-Marie Condon, Fire Business Manager

Citizen Requests to Address the Finance Committee

Joe Abruzese, Precinct D Town Meeting member, addressed the Finance Committee regarding the Foster property. He stated that Town Meeting had voted to purchase some portion of the Foster property at a prior Town Meeting according to a pre-negotiated agreement with the developer of the property, Northland. In the last few days, it has become public that the seller has decided to go with a different buyer. Mr. Abruzese asked that the Finance Committee consider a warrant article to release the \$2.5 million that had been voted at Town Meeting for the property. Ms. Miller directed Mr. Abruzese to the Select Board as the warrant committee and explained that Mr. Abruzese should request that a rescission of the \$2.5 million debt. Mr. Connelly clarified that the funds have not been borrowed so that Town Meeting would be asked to rescind the authorization.

FY2025 Department Budget Hearings

Public Library

Ms. Calton and Mr. Levy are the liaisons to the Department and met with the Library on 12/7/2023.

The DSR2 budget request for FY25 is a 3.3% increase over the FY24 budget. With the DSR4 request, the increase would be a 5.2% increase.

Currently, the library has 44 staff members, 16 full-time and 28 part-time. Currently, one full-time position is vacant (the Library Director), and three part-time positions are vacant. Patron visits at the library have increased 21% from FY2022 to FY2023 with an average of 680 patrons a day. Material circulation went up 2.6%, study room usage was up 41% and computer usage was up 31%. Attendance at library programs increased across all three age groups (Adult, Young Adult, and Children). According to the Library's assessment, it would appear that Needham patrons continue to want increased access to physical and electronic materials and services as well as hybrid and in person events. The Library is very focused on making sure they maintain baseline service. Maintaining this goal has been difficult as they are continuously trying to fill vacancies that are empty for a long time. In addition, they want to add to their current services but in order to enhance those services they need personnel. The Library has historically tried to promote from within, which unintentionally exacerbates the issue of continuing vacancies.

A number of items that were previously funded by the State and by the Friends of the Library are now requested for funding through the operating budget: Summer Reading Program tracking software (State), Kodable coding software for children (Friends), Library of Things items (Friends)

In an effort to increase staff to keep up with increased demand, especially in the Young Adult section, the Library submitted a DSR4 request to fund a new, part-time Reference Librarian/Young Adult Specialist. The Library sees about 5-100 teens in the building after school each day. The Library currently has a full-time Young Adult Specialist in the Reference Department who spends 40% of her time on-desk performing reference librarian duties. Off-desk time is committed to responsibilities of maintaining the Young Adult collection, doing school outreach, and conducting program development. This leaves little time to be in the Young Adult room or out in the areas where teens sit after school to be a presence and a resource directly to them and to help with managing that group so that they do not interrupt other library patrons. The DSR-4 request is a new request for FY25.

The Library also embarked on a Space Planning Study that outlines some of the physical changes that will be taking place over the next 8 years. In the opinion of the Library, the changes to be made to the physical space will necessitate the hiring of the above referenced part-time Reference Librarian/Young Adult Specialist because the change in the physical space will most likely lead to an increase in students coming to the Young Adult space.

Police Department

Mr. Healy and Ms. Calton are liaisons to the department. Mr. Healy introduced the Police Department budget. He thanked Chief Schlittler, Deputy Chief Baker, and Administrative Specialist Paula Sheerin for their work on the department budget.

Mr. Healy noted that wages are up in the Police Department due to the collective bargaining agreement settlement. The CBA is in effect through FY2025. There are no new FTEs. There are 3 vacancies currently and the Chief is working on a test for new police applicants following the Town's exit from civil service. Mr. Healy reiterated the concerns that had been raised at the time of the vote to exit civil service regarding the preference for Needham residents. Chief

Baker and Deputy Chief Baker believe that the Town will be able to attract Needham residents and Needhamites who are not able to stay in Needham because of the cost of housing while getting better candidates outside of civil service. Chief Schlittler stated that he could hire lateral officers more quickly than offering opportunities for new officers. However, he is committed to giving an opportunity to Needham residents or those with Needham ties who are no longer Needham residents will be able to apply and will be selected based on the police test. There are 10 non-officer employees in the department: 5 civilian dispatchers, 1 animal control person, 3 administrative staff, and multiple part-time traffic supervisors. There are no changes proposed to the non-officer employees.

While the Police Department is anticipating savings in its gasoline budget from lower budgeted cost for FY2025 relative to FY2024, expenses in FY2025 are increasing, primarily due to 3 factors. 1. The Department's motorcycle taser is obsolete. The Department is looking to a 5-year lease-to-own for a new model of taser at \$18,000 annually. The life expectancy for the taser is 10-12 years. The importance of de-escalation and tasers as a de-escalation, less lethal, tool was emphasized. 2. The contract for the clinician is increasing by \$5,000 for FY2025 due to COLA and benefits costs increases. As a reminder, the Finance Committee recommended and the Police Department has funding for a full-time clinician in the current FY2024 budget. The program has been very successful for crisis response and follow-up response. There is a report available on the Police website regarding responses. 3. The cost of dues and memberships is increasing in FY2025.

The Police Department's Operating Capital line request for FY2025 is increasing significantly over FY2024 because the department is replacing 6 vehicles in FY2025. The 4 sector cars are being replaced, which is done bi-annually. In addition to the sector vehicles, 2 vehicles are on the replacement cycle: the Chief's vehicle and a pick-up truck, which is being upgraded to an F-350. The Chief's vehicle is on a regular replacement cycle, with the current vehicle, being reassigned and an older vehicle being obsoleted. The pick-up truck is being upgraded to provide the potential for use in snow plowing operations. The truck would plow the Police Department building, which is also Fire Station 1. This would free up DPW. As is well known, DPW has had difficulty finding contractors for plowing services and is not able to meet all the snow plowing needs with DPW staff. Needham auctions the vehicles being replaced, the proceeds of which generally are placed in the Capital Improvement Fund.

The Police Department has no request for DSR-4s.

There was a discussion regarding the new POST (Police Officer Standards and Training) training requirements and anticipated increased costs as a result of the new requirements. Some of the requirements are for more frequent training in areas where police officers were already trained. Needham is seeking accreditation for its Police Department from the Massachusetts Police Accreditation Commission. There may be some additional requirements for training and for updates to policies and processes as a result. Chief Schlittler is hoping to complete the accreditation process by the end of summer 2024.

There was a brief discussion of the range, which is helpful for fire training on-site on a daily basis, without disruption to schedule from travel to other communities. The range also provides the training room for taser and other non-lethal response training. There is interest in the range from other police departments and the State. Any future fiscal impact is unknown.

Finance Committee Updates

Mr. Levy provided a HONE update. He stated that Needham is required to add 1,700 additional units of housing within a half mile of each of 4 commuter rail stations. HONE was instructed to not include the Hersey station in the zoning that would allow additional housing as of right. HONE has instructed consultants retained by the Town to look at 2 scenarios for zoning at each of the other 3 commuter rail stations between Needham Junction and Needham Heights. The HONE meeting of January 18, 2024, will be a public hearing. Mr. Levy did not know what the format of the public hearing would be. The zoning would be brought before Town Meeting in October to meet the state-mandated December 31, 2024 deadline.

Mr. Connelly reported that he, Ms. Fachetti, and Mr. Levy had their first liaison meeting with the School Department. He reported that the FY2025 request is an increase of 6%, or 5.5 million, over FY2024. The next meeting of the liaisons will be January 2, 2024, with a Finance Committee meeting scheduled for January 16, 2024. Ms. Miller asked about the MSBA invitation to feasibility for the Pollard School. Mr. Connelly stated that there will be a request for funding for a feasibility study at the May Town Meeting. The amount requested is \$4 million, which seems very high. Mr. Connelly stated that he would review the MSBA guidelines for feasibility vs. the scope that is being proposed. He further clarified that 19 towns and cities were invited to the feasibility stage. Not all projects will move to the next stage. Those that are invited to the next stage will be on the MSBA schedule, which may be slower than the School Department and School Committee may want. The speed at which school projects move forward depends on the availability of state funds.

Ms. Miller reported that there had been no applicants to date for the Executive Secretary/Financial Analyst position for the Finance Committee.

Fire Department

Ms. Miller recused herself from the discussion and left the room. Ms. Fachetti chaired the meeting for this discussion. The minutes for this entire meeting of December 13, 2023, including this portion of the meeting were created by Ms. Miller from the video recording of the meeting, which is a public record.

Mr. Healy and Ms. Calton are liaisons to the Fire Department. Mr. Healy presented the FY2025 budget request. Mr. Healy stated that, similar to the Police Department, he complimented the Fire Department staff to be very professional and detailed allowing for a good liaison meeting.

The FY2025 salary request is an increase of \$1.1 million, which Mr. Healy explained represents 2 years of salary increases, since the FY2024 budget did not include settlement of the Collective Bargaining Agreement. Once FY2024 salary increases are accounted for, the request for FY2025 is an increase of \$640k over FY2024. The CBA settlement affects all aspects of salary and wages, and overtime. The department is staffed with 66 firefighters/paramedics. There are currently 3 vacancies. There are 8 non-union personnel, the Fire Chief, the Business Manager, the Emergency Management Administrator, 5 Dispatchers. Other staff include 1 Administrative Assistant in the ITWA union, 4 Deputy Fire Chiefs, and 2 Captains.

With respect to expenses, Mr. Healy highlighted changes from FY2024. There is an increase of \$20k for defibrillator and stretcher maintenance because the equipment is out of warranty. This will cover service repairs that are needed. The Fire Department has included \$10k for a new phone app that will provide firefighter/paramedics for real time medical information. The annual renewal for the app is \$4k. The department is including \$7k for pediatric life support training, driven by the new pediatric hospital. There is an increase of \$8k for hazmat data record software, which is a new state mandate, that will allow the department to create a hazmat report with the location of chemicals in buildings and information regarding the chemicals. The response in the event of emergency differs for different chemicals. The department is proposing a records software change, but the cost is equivalent to the software currently being used. Supplies are increasing by \$20k for training apparatus that will allow the department to provide in-house training and is expected to result in savings over contracted-for training.

The operating capital is essentially flat from FY2024 to FY2025 and includes the turnout gear for new firefighters as needed during the year. Turnout gear replacement for firefighters in the department is included in cash capital.

The Fire Department has a DSR-5 request to remove the fire alarm box wires that remain. The fire alarm boxes were removed a number of years ago. The wires were not. They are on the utility poles and can hold up changing of poles, because the utility companies will not move their wires and remove poles until after the fire box wires are moved. The Fire Department obtained a quote for removing the wires in excess of \$400k, which did not include overtime for the police that would be needed when the work is done or the disposal of the wires. The Fire Chief is proposing instead that the work be done in-house. Firefighters who have electrical licenses would perform the work when off-duty. The cost would be paid in overtime. The DSR-5 is for \$200k and includes all overtime costs for firefighters, for police details and for disposal.

The Fire Department has 2 capital requests for vehicles: a fire inspector vehicle, which would be a Ford Edge, at a cost of \$47k. The equipment for the fire inspector vehicle is an additional \$15k. The current vehicle would be auctioned. The department is also requesting replace of Engine 1. The department currently has a 2005 vehicle and a 2013 vehicle. The 2013 vehicle is the first line vehicle. The 2005 is the backup. The request would result in the 2013 vehicle being the back-up and the 2005 vehicle would be auctioned. The cost of the new engine is \$1 million. The equipment needed for the fire engine is \$140k. The Fire Department has 2 additional requests for capital: \$45k for replacement of an out-of-date defibrillator for an ambulance, and \$54k for turnout gear for firefighters. The turnout gear has a 10-year useful life.

Mr. Levy asked about Fire Department software and how it would be budgeted in the future if the School and Town IT departments merge. Mr. Davison stated that the budget for department specific software will not change and will be carried in the department's budget.

The next meeting of the Finance Committee is scheduled for January 2, 2024.

Adjournment

MOVED: By Mr. Healy that the Finance Committee meeting be adjourned, there being no further business. Mr. Coffman seconded the motion. The motion was approved by a vote of 8-0, at approximately 8:12 p.m.

Documents: FY2025 Department Budget Requests

Respectfully submitted,

Louise Miller
Finance Committee Chairperson