

Needham Finance Committee
Minutes of Meeting of January 19, 2022

The meeting of the Finance Committee was called to order by Chair Joshua Levy at approximately 7:00 pm via Zoom videoconference.

Present from the Finance Committee:

Joshua Levy, Chair; John Connelly, Vice Chair

Members: Barry Coffman, Carol Fachetti, James Healy Tom Jacob, Rick Lunetta, Louise Miller, Richard Reilly

Others present:

David Davison, Assistant Town Manager/Finance Director

Hank Haff, Director, Public Facilities Construction

Dennis Condon, Fire Chief

Timothy Muir McDonald, Director of Health & Human Services

Sara Shine, Director of Youth & Family Services

LaTanya Steele, Director of Aging Services

Citizen Requests to Address the Finance Committee

No requests.

Approval of Minutes of Prior Meetings

MOVED: By Mr. Reilly that the minutes of the meeting of January 19, 2022, be approved as distributed, subject to technical corrections. Mr. Lunetta seconded the motion. The motion was approved by a unanimous roll call vote of 9-0.

FY 2023 Department Budget Requests

Building Design and Construction

Mr. Connelly introduced the budget. He stated that the budget is straightforward. There are three full time equivalent employees (FTEs): the Director, a Senior Project Manager, and an Administrator. The FY23 projects include wrapping up the Public Safety project (the construction is now finishing up at the Police headquarters), preparing the Hillside School building for School Administration use after the Police Department moves to the new Public Safety building, making changes at the High School, gutting and renovating the Emery Grover Building, and demolishing the building at Ridge Hill. Other smaller projects include lockers at Pollard School and replacing rooftop units at Eliot and Broadmeadow schools. There is also ongoing work on the School Master Plan which will be rolled out in FY23.

Mr. Reilly asked what consideration is made in the budget for the costs that might be covered by construction projects. Mr. Haff stated that they have been relying on an outside contractor as an on call Project Manager, and use the contractor primarily for cost estimates. He noted that last year, the department was able to charge about 1/3 of its costs to projects. Mr. Davison stated that the operating budget needs to include the full salaries for all employees because they don't know how much they might be able to charge to projects. Some smaller projects do not have funding

for project management. He stated that this has been the process for years, and that there is budget turnback if some costs are charged to projects. Mr. Reilly asked if it saved money to do it one way or another. Mr. Connelly stated that the costs are the same, the difference is only which bucket that the funds come from.

Mr. Lunetta stated that the School Committee meeting discussed the School Master Plan which will require more resources from this department to implement. He asked what the plan is for handling that work. Mr. Haff stated that it will take another year to know how the Town will proceed on the School Master Plan. Once the decision is made, it will take another year to work on the Statement of Interest with the MSBA. They will reassess staffing once the School Master Plan is finalized, and at that time they may be looking at supplementing the staff in FY24. Like with the Sunita Williams and the High School construction projects, they may be able to use on-call help to supplement the onsite project managers.

Ms. Miller asked how the department will be involved with the Climate Action Plan Committee. Mr. Haff stated that Committee members are still being appointed, but that he will be working with Cecelia Simchak at DPW. He will be participating in meetings and preparing assignments to support the work.

Mr. Levy stated that ventilation has become a topic of particular interest in light of the pandemic, and that there have been issues with the current building systems, even the newest one at Sunita Williams School. He asked if there will be a process to review decisions on which systems are installed in Town buildings. Mr. Haff stated that they typically have relied on the design team and their expertise to make the choice. The systems need to comply with existing code. All of the new buildings are technologically advanced. He noted that Barry Dulong, the Director of Building Maintenance now attends PPBC meetings and will have a voice in the deliberations and will also help to iron out the transition from building construction to the commissioning of buildings.

Fire Department

Ms. Miller recused herself from the discussion on the Fire Department budget since her son is a Needham Firefighter, and she logged off of the meeting for the duration of the discussion, logging back in after the conclusion.

Mr. Lunetta introduced the department budget. He stated that the revenue last year was \$1.1 million, a decrease from 2020, primarily due to fewer ambulance runs due to Covid. There are 80 staff in the department, all funded in the FY23 operating budget since the SAFER grant has ended. There are currently 4 vacant positions, two of which will be filled by people who have been hired and are currently in the academy. With the brand new Fire Station 2, there has been a positive change in response time. With full staffing, they are now able to staff all emergency fire vehicles and ambulances at all times, and not have to take vehicles offline due to inadequate staffing, which used to happen about 10 days per month. Mr. Lunetta stated that the collective bargaining agreement has expired, so the salary increase of 4.7% only includes step increases and longevity pay. 16% of the increase is a result of the SAFER grant ending. He noted that fuel costs are increasing.

Mr. Lunetta stated that there is a DSR4 request for \$20K for enhanced records manager software to replace the CAD system, which is no longer offering the same support for fire services. The

new software will provide better information in the field such as building floor plans. He stated that there is a \$30K operating capital expense for personal protective gear for new hires and promotions. The FY23 budget is increasing \$450K or 4.8% from FY22, or 5% including capital.

Mr. Reilly noted that regular salary and wages are increasing \$267K out of a \$7.6 million budget and that overtime is increasing \$172K out of \$1.4 million, and asked why overtime was increasing so much in relation to the salary increase. Chief Condon stated that there are 8 new firefighters in the wage line, and that as they gain in seniority, their salaries and vacation pay increases and that is reflected in the overtime. Mr. Reilly stated that it seemed that the amounts would increase in tandem. Chief Condon stated that they used the same matrix, but they also tried to include costs due to Covid, which hit the department hard. At first the additional costs were covered by other funds, but no longer.

Mr. Connelly asked if the DSR4 request for the record management software would be an annual cost, or just for one year. He also noted that \$20K is a high number for software, and also seems like a very round number and asked what it is based on. Chief Condon stated that it is an estimate since they are not yet sure of the cost. They are looking to integrate with the EMS software. They were given a quote of \$17K for software integrated with the EMS software and the rounded up since they are investigating options. He stated that most software is cloud-based and that this would be an annual cost.

Mr. Healy stated that during the DPW budget hearing, there was a question about who cleans fire houses. He asked what area firefighters are responsible for cleaning, and whether additional funds are needed to clean the buildings. Chief Condon stated that the firefighters clean their living area and the garage floor. They do not clean the administrative space or the public space. The custodians clean those areas. He stated that there are such areas in both buildings, but Fire Station 2 has more public space and therefore additional cleaning and maintenance needs. Mr. Healy asked if the additional needs are Covid-related. Chief Condon stated that regular upkeep is needed, and it is not currently in the budget, and is not Covid-related.

Mr. Levy asked if the Emergency Management position is funded in this budget alone. Chief Condon stated that the salary for the position is all within the Fire budget. Mr. Levy asked how the position differed from the expected role due to Covid. Chief Condon stated that the position is not different than envisioned, but they were expected the person to focus more on training. However, due to Covid, the position has done much more real-time work. The position works closely with the HHS Department. He stated that the Town responded very well to Covid, and he attributes much of that to this position.

Health and Human Services (HHS)

Mr. Jacob introduced the budget. He stated that this department had extensive additional functions during the pandemic. He stated that the operating budget is relatively flat, with a 2% increase, mostly in salaries. He stated that his liaison meeting with Mr. McDonald focused mainly on the use of ARPA and other grant funding, and identifying which items are expected to become a permanent part of the operating budget and which will remain funded outside of the budget. Mr. McDonald stated that things have been difficult during the pandemic. The Senior Center had to shut down for a time. Youth and Family Services (YFS) caseloads have increased. Public Health has been active on direct Covid-response issues, with help from the Fire Department. They have run many vaccine clinics and administered approximately 10,000

vaccines in one year and one week. He stated that they also conduct contract (contact ?) tracing, a program has had many changes. He stated that he had prepared a list of grants received by HHS, totaling approximately \$1.2 million, which were mostly in Public Health. He stated that his request for ARPA funds was approved by the Select Board. Many requests were smaller \$20K or \$15K amounts but there was a more significant grant of funds to Public Health to cover part-time wages for contact tracing, as well as a full-time public health nurse and a full-time epidemiologist. He stated they there were 2 requests for ARPA funds approved by the Select Board: (1) to cover a temporary, 24-month clinician to help Youth and Family Services with the heavy caseloads that counsellors are carrying and also the backlog of cases, and (2) a two-year contract for expert consultancy for acute mental health cases, in order to stabilize patients and get them to longer term care.

Mr. Reilly asked whether Public Health has done any wastewater analysis for Covid for Needham specifically. Mr. McDonald stated that the City of Boston does the sampling and does not specify specific communities, but that the situation in Needham is representative of the area. Mr. Levy asked how HHS interacts with the School Department with regard to mental health services. Ms. Shine stated that she meets with the School's Director of Guidance and Counselling every 2 weeks and that she has also joined the mental health initiative with the Special Education Director. She stated that they provide counselling within their office, and also in homes, electronically, or in schools. She stated that referrals are sent by schools, and that they discuss potential cases. She stated that they have an ongoing, fluid relationship.

Mr. Levy asked if there has been anything put off because they have had fewer resources during the pandemic. Mr. McDonald stated that they have fulfilled all responsibilities and reporting requirements during the pandemic, but some things, such as the public health accreditation have been going more slowly. They have delayed initiatives such as messaging on healthy body image and eating issues during the pandemic due to fewer resources. The development or policies and procedures has also slowed down.

Mr. Coffman asked about the future of Covid. Mr. McDonald stated that he thinks the case numbers will decrease, depending on potential variants. He hopes that it will evolve to be less virulent. He stated that Needham has a 95% vaccination rate. He stated that the Town is still offering vaccination clinics. He stated that if people give insurance information, the Town will be reimbursed for the cost of administration, if not, then they are not.

Updates

Mr. Levy stated that next week, he would like to discuss the School Master Plan extension. There was a presentation to the School Committee last night. He suggested submitting any questions ahead of time. Mr. Healy stated that he reviewed the Dore and Whittier slides and found them unclear. He was interested in seeing a clear concise presentation on what the plan is seeking to do, and the financial impact to the Town. Mr. Levy stated that they provided bottom line costs, but that the debt burden on the Town has not yet been calculated. Mr. Lunetta stated that he saw the presentation to the School Committee and felt it could be helpful to get an abridged version. He agreed that on his first review, their slide presentation was confusing but that it was much more clear when they walked through it. Mr. Levy stated that he would walk through and present his understanding of the projections. He stated that much of the current confusion is likely because no firm decisions have been made. The goal of the Master Plan Extension was to provide for additional scenarios, and those were outlined last night. He stated

that the next step is for all stakeholders to decide how to prioritize the projects and whether to commit to seeking MSBA funding for all projects or to try to move forward without some MSBA funding in order to get the work done more quickly and avoid some escalation costs.

Mr. Connelly asked if the numbers shown were today's dollars. Mr. Levy stated that they include escalation of 4.5% per year. The total costs do not account for any MSBA reimbursement. Mr. Lunetta stated that he would like to request that the Finance Committee plan a role in the discussion of which scenarios will be eliminated before the School Committee holds public hearings on their choice. Mr. Levy stated that the School Committee will be holding a community forum on the scenarios on February 8.

There was discussion of trying to prepare some estimates of debt costs by the next meeting. Mr. Connelly stated that the labelling of the four new scenarios needs simplification, and that there need to be placeholder amounts for operating costs for each scenario. He stated that as an example, adding a 6th elementary school will require additional staffing. Mr. Levy stated that the plan accounts for maintenance costs of old buildings until they are replaced, but do not include future operating costs of new buildings. Mr. Jacob noted that the operating costs also include DPW building maintenance costs. There will be effects on other departments than the School Department.

Adjournment

MOVED: By Mr. Healy that the Finance Committee meeting be adjourned, there being no further business. Mr. Jacob seconded the motion. The motion was approved by a roll call vote of 9-0 at approximately 8:15 p.m.

Documents: Town of Needham, FY 2023 Department Budget Requests, submitted December 2021; Town of Needham Capital Improvement Plan FY2023-FY2027; spreadsheet: HHS Covid Grant Information for Finance Committee; Dore and Whittier - Town of Needham School Master Plan Extension Study of 01/10/22 Presentation to School Committee on January 18, 2022.

Respectfully submitted,
Louise Mizgerd
Staff Analyst

Approved January 26, 2022