

DRAFT minutes

Town of Brattleboro Finance Committee

October 14, 2015

4:00 p.m.

Minutes by Paula Melton, Recording Clerk

Attending

Paula Melton, Recording Clerk

Franz Reichsman, Chair

Jacqueline Stromberg

John Wilmerding

The meeting opened at 4:05 p.m. and adjourned at 5:50 p.m.

Deliberations

- Franz reported on the guidelines for online document sharing: you can share, but may not have a conversation about the document among a group large enough to constitute a quorum. (In our case, a quorum is three people.) He reminded the committee that the same rules apply to any electronic or in-person conversation.
- Franz had researched the separate town funds discussed at our last meeting.
 - Based on a conversation with John O'Connor, Franz explained that these funds are there for convenience (they often operate as their own separate budget) or because they are legally required as pass-throughs for federal grant funds and the like.
 - Jackie was interested in discussing certain funds that appear to be no longer in use (e.g. a fund for the Holstein Association) and will discuss why they still exist with John O'Connor before the next meeting.
- Paula had met with Frank Rucker, WSESU Business Administrator, and Ron Stahley, WSESU Superintendent, to discuss the budgeting process for the high school and the Town schools. These meetings will begin soon,

and Paula will be attending the Town school budget meetings as often as she can.

- Paula shared an email she had written to Peter Elwell, Town Manager, regarding rising insurance costs and how the Town is planning to handle them in the long term (the email message is attached). The two will meet soon to discuss the issue.
- John reported that he will be meeting soon with Peter Elwell on another matter and intends to ask about budgetary issues during that meeting.
- Franz reported in detail on the October 6 Selectboard meeting.
 - He summarized three possible scenarios for the police/fire project and mentioned a fourth scenario, not yet available in detail, that would involve bringing existing infrastructure up to minimal standards.
 - The fire-station parts of the project are the same across all four scenarios.
 - Franz reported that, according to John O'Connor, any of the three main scenarios would add approximately 10 cents to our tax bill for the next 20 years.
 - According to Franz, Peter was clearly against the fourth scenario, which would not provide facilities that will last for the next generation.
 - John and Paula provided their own (somewhat conflicting) recollections of how the projects were put on hold in the first place.
 - John pointed out that many citizens will be surprised by the three scenarios: these are all basically variations on the original plan, and still come with price tags in the "teens of millions."
 - It appears there will be a special meeting in February.
 - Franz suggested the Finance Committee should weigh in on the scenario or scenarios presented at this special meeting.
 - Franz reported that Peter has asked all Town departments for a level-services budget—i.e., no additions to the budget except those required by pre-existing contracts. Peter projects an additional \$90,000 in operating costs.
 - John and Jackie questioned the capital budget, particularly items like police cruisers that get replaced frequently. Should we be looking at how many cars we need in the first place? Should we be asking for a cost-benefit analysis of keeping the cars longer—how much maintenance costs would rise in comparison with buying new cars?
 - Franz said the police and fire chiefs are willing to take us on a tour of the existing facilities and explain what needs to be upgraded to meet minimum standards.

- Franz reserved a meeting room at Brattleboro Savings & Loan for the November 11 meeting (because Town offices are closed for Veterans Day).

Action Items

- By November 4:
 - Jackie will research why certain funds still exist even though they do not appear to be in use.
 - Paula will share the WSESU budget calendar with the committee.
 - Paula will attend relevant WSESU budget meetings.
 - Paula will meet with Peter Elwell to discuss insurance costs.
 - John will start a list of questions the Finance Committee should be asking about the police/fire project, beginning with some questions about sunk costs.
 - Franz will continue to attend Selectboard meetings as often as possible.
 - Paula will contact the police and fire chiefs for a tour of their facilities.
 - Paula will send a Doodle poll to schedule the tour.
 - Paula will email John O'Connor to request a case study of towns that have gone into a downward spiral of high property taxes and low residency.

Decisions

- The committee accepted the September 9 meeting minutes as submitted.

ATTACHMENT: Email from Paula Melton to Peter Elwell

3:41 pm, October 14, 2015

Hi, Peter!

I promised to get in touch with you before our finance committee meeting today, which I'm barely doing, so I don't actually expect answers before 4! ;-)

I am interested in speaking with you about our insurance costs in the Town budget. There are three areas in which insurance costs seem to go up each year, and I'm interested in all three:

- workers' compensation – anonymous details of the actual claims, including what they're for (are there patterns like carpal tunnel or back injuries?) and how many workers on average are involved per year; is this a typical number for a town our size in New England? etc.
- health insurance – looking for info on when our union contracts renew with various employee groups, and how you may be looking for ways to save on these costs during the next cycle
- liability insurance – similar to workers' comp; what's the actual origin of suits against the Town (any patterns?); are our premiums typical for towns our size in New England?

It may be easier to meet in person on this, or for you to send me to different people to discuss different things on the list.

For context, these are issues that seem to be hotspots in the budget every year, and every year we ask about them, so I thought I'd get a jump of having a clearer understanding of why costs increase and how much control we have over them.

Thanks!

Paula