

BUDGET ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETING

Wednesday March 29, 2023 – 3:00 PM

Zoom

PRESENT: Bob Gniadek, Chair, Finance Cte.; Steve Patterson, Finance; Pat Callahan, Finance; Eileen Martin, Finance; Bob Youdelman, Finance; Peter Dillon, School Super.; Beth Choquette, Principal; Ina Wilhelm, School Cte. Chair; Roger Manzolini, Chair, Selectboard; Neal Pilson, Selectman; Alan Hanson, Selectman; Danielle Fillio, Town Admin.; Angela Garrity, Town Accountant/Clerk

Bob G. called the meeting to order at 3:02 PM.

Second Version of School Budget: Peter reported that the 6.08% increase shown on the original version submitted to the Committee has been reduced to 4.94% on this second version, representing a reduction of a little less than \$50,000.

School Committee Expenses: Reduced from \$6,000 to \$2,000 intended for attendance by the Committee at the annual School Committee Conference in the fall. That will mean that not everyone on the Committee will attend next year.

Superintendent's Expenses: Professional Development reduced by \$825. Membership dues - \$115.

Teachers' Salaries: Reduced by \$19,000. That will be covered by funds from the Federal Dept. of Education monies. The Librarian's salary has been taken over by the Town and removed from the school budget. Technology will rely on grant-funding.

Tuition to Monument Mt. H. S.: An unusually low number of graduating 8th graders has allowed the tuition to Monument Mt. to be reduced by \$10,042 or from 8% to 4%.

Roger voiced his concern that moving the librarian's salary to the Town would allow the school to hire someone to fill that vacancy. He was assured that there was no such intent. The school is planning to reallocate the time of a current employee.

Teachers' Salaries: In response to Bob G's comment about raising grant money to reduce a teacher's salary by \$19,000, he was advised that grant money is used to reduce the bottom line overall, not to decrease a single salary. Peter will ask Sharon to reorganize the line items to clarify that.

Cultural: There are grants available for in-school events, but they tend to be low numbers. An additional \$5,000 in the budget will make it possible to bring in more expensive, professional events that are of great value to the students.

Electricity: Roger was concerned that there be some guarantee that the Solar Company would not charge the school over the agreed-upon per-kilowatt hour rate. He was assured that would not happen. The delivery rate from EverSource, however, could easily double this year.

Heating System: It was reported that progress is being made but the system still does not run at 100% efficiency.

Peter said regarding OPEB, most places are making small token contributions currently. Teachers are self-funded, so there is no liability, but anyone part of the Berkshire Retirement System (paraprofessionals, etc.) must meet all obligations by 2040. That was followed by a discussion of retirement benefits and how health insurance is covered for retirees.

The school budget number presented to the BAC (\$4,216,573.) will be reduced by \$5,000 as the health insurance cost for Kristen Smith, the Librarian, is being taken over by the Town.

Ina raised the issue of the constantly increasing cost of education and suggested that parents begin to be educated as to sustainability and encouraged to consider some alternatives. This was followed by a discussion of the 2.5% limit and how close the budget is already. The potential financial benefit to merging some school districts was discussed. Bob Y suggested that the town residents be advised of the ultimately unsustainable yearly increases in the cost of education and begin to think about some alternative arrangements at the Town Meeting.

Page 101 – Summary: Discussion and clarification of the estimated versus the actual tax rates for FY23 and FY24.

Pat asked about looking seriously at health insurance costs. Danielle said she has three separate plans in hand to look at. Roger recapped the individual lines that had been changed at the last meeting with the school for Pat's benefit.

Total Budget Review: Roger raised the issue of payment of fees to the Town's inspectors in relation to municipal projects, where the fee is often waived. A discussion resulted in the decision to arrange for the inspectors to be paid at their normal rate out of the Building Funds. The Building Committee will decide how to make that happen.

Library – Line 82: Bob G. did a review of line 82 and arrived at the figure of \$77,067 as a result of the increases and decreases suggested at the last meeting. That needs to be approved and discussed with Kristen.

Health Insurance – Line 85: \$24,061.81 equals the Town's 75% of the cost for Health Insurance. (Employees pay the remaining 25%.)

Line 88 – Cemetery Superintendent Salary: The issue of compensating Steve Parsons for the additional three months of the year that doing winter burials will require him to be available was re-visited. The final decision was made to give Steve half of the increase in salary he is asking for this year and assess what the actual number of winter burials amounts to. If he is

required to be available for a substantial number of extra days, increase the salary by the second half – make it a two-step process.

Driveways and Parking Lots: \$250,000 – There is \$300,000 in ARPA funds available. There was some thought about having the school’s parking lot redone at the same time by the same vendor, but the project would have to be put out to bid.

Preservation of Vital Records: This amount was reduced to \$8,500, which is the exact amount of the quote received. That figure includes digitizing of the files.

Pick-Up Truck, Sander, and Plow: These are necessary equipment for the new full-time employee approved in this budget, to do his job.

Loader: Was to have been replaced last year, but the funds were switched to paying for the Backhoe (\$270,000 - \$100,000 from Free Cash; \$170,000 from Chapter 90). Bob G. reiterated his suggestion to take the funds entirely out of Chapter 90 but Danielle defended her decision to divide the cost between Free Cash and Chapter 90, which was approved by the Cte.

Ambulance Stabilization Fund: It was decided to hold off on creating an Ambulance Stabilization Fund of \$5,000 out of Raise and Appropriate and remove the additional \$10,000 out of the Ambulance Reserve that was going to be put into the Ambulance Stabilization Fund. That \$10,000 was added to their Expense Account and deducted from Free Cash by \$5,500 instead of \$6,500. Steve asked for an explanation of how the fund works: \$50,000 out of the Ambulance Expense Fund, \$55,000 out of Free Cash to pay upfront for two employees, expenses, health insurance. West Stockbridge would then reimburse us for their portion of the costs.

Conservation Commission: Reduced. Danielle and Jodi Hollingsworth, Treasurer, are working together to find investment opportunities.

Richmond Pond Goose Treatment: Reduced by \$5,000. \$2,500 was left over from last year’s payment by the Richmond Pond Assn. A discussion of the value of the system used to reduce the goose population was questioned, but it was decided to leave the \$600, which is the Town’s portion of the cost to do just the beach area, in the budget.

Food and Fuel Emergency Fund: Left at \$5,00 – the Board approved.

Revenue: \$60,000 of local receipts from Hancock. Bob G. felt that the total should be \$70,000 when all receipts are counted. The Audit reconciles the budget to actual revenues for licenses, permits and fees.

Next Meeting: Next Wednesday, April 5th

There being no further business before the Committee, Bob G moved that the meeting be adjourned at 5:35 PM. He was seconded by Bob Y and the motion was carried by unanimous consent.