

Buckland Finance Committee
Minutes of Meeting of January 25, 2021

The meeting was held via ZOOM due to pandemic restrictions.

Committee Members in attendance: Karen Blom, Ciara Hayden, Larry Langford (chair), and Raymond Lanza-Weil. Other attendees: Heather Butler, Town Administrator

The meeting was called to order at 6:06 p.m. The chair noted that a quorum had been established.

The minutes from the meeting on December 14, 2020 were reviewed. After a motion by Karen Blom and a second by Raymond Lanza-Weil, the minutes were unanimously approved as written.

It was noted that, after the last committee meeting, Paula Consolo took on the liaison assignment for the Senior Center instead of Larry Langford.

The committee members discussed preliminary budget figures for FY22.

Heather Butler stated she had built out an initial draft of the budget on the existing Google shared worksheet. She said that department heads were in the process of submitting their FY22 budgets now, but not all were in yet, so this initial budget will change in the coming weeks.

1. Capital and debt are based on what has been approved at Town Meeting. We had expected to capture Buckland Shelburne Elementary school asbestos debt payments under the debt exclusion. But this has not been voted on, so we will be voting at Annual Town Meeting to move out of the levy and into debt exclusion.
2. Stabilization account balances and the debt schedule have been updated.
3. A question was asked about the amount of the annual payments for the Highway Garage debt, which is in the debt exclusion.
 - o ACTION: Heather Butler will obtain the correct amounts and check with Ben Murray or Tim Gaulin before updating these figures, to ensure the integrity of the spreadsheet.
4. Salaries have been updated: it assumes 2.50% COLA for now. Nothing has been updated on WWTF.
5. State Aid is based on initial figures from the governor, which includes a 3.5% increase. Local receipts data includes actuals for FY20, estimates for FY21, and no data yet for FY22. In the current year, Meals Tax is at approx. \$5,000 and Rooms Tax is at approx. \$3,500, both of which exceed the budgeted amounts for current year. The committee discussed solid waste fee revenue.

Overall, the committee judged that local receipts were tracking favorably to budget, all things considered. The committee discussed obtaining mid-year local receipts figures to inform our budget deliberations. It was noted that excise taxes are trending well. The consensus of the committee was to be conservative with FY22 estimates for local receipts.

The chair asked for updates from liaison meetings with department heads and asked if there were any surprises.

1. Larry Langford and Select Board member Barry Del Castilho talked to the Collector/Treasurer.
 - a. A significant increase in receipts is not expected. The committee reviewed the budget request and noted it includes an increase over prior year. This is attributed to OPEB (for the required annual study) and Professional Development, which had been zeroed out for FY21. The committee agreed that this expense should be less than it was in FY20 due to lack of travel and expected lower costs for virtual trainings.
 - b. It was noted that the Collector/Treasurer budgeted an increase to \$7,000 for tax/title, which the committee needs to review further. Retirement expense is an assessment over which we have no control. Projected to be \$144,000 from Franklin County, with a 10% split with WWTF. Health insurance is expected to be level funded for third year in a row. Health insurance is obtained through Hampshire County; they expect level expense, plus there may be a premium holiday for one month. Medicare and Unemployment: no significant changes. Veterans is an assessment and includes a small increase, which is also out of our control. The assessment is based on number of veterans eligible for services.

Select Board member Barry Del Castilho joined the meeting at 6:45pm.

2. Larry Langford and Barry Del Castilho talked to the Assessor. This is a revaluation year. Available firms to conduct revaluation may be limited; we have had good pricing for this service in the past, but that firm not available now. If there is new growth, it may generate additional tax revenue. The revaluation gives the town the opportunity to look at every property and determine whether or not the current assessment is accurate. Tax levy limit of 2.5% limits the amount of dollars that can be collected, regardless of increases in valuation.
3. Ciara Hayden and Select Board member Dena Willmore met with the Buckland library. Largest constraint on the library's operations is open hours and availability of people to work. Dena Willmore suggested hiring more people and working more hours. So we should expect their budget to skew toward more labor within an expected \$40,000 budget. Librarians are working longer hours during pandemic due to procedure for pulling and quarantining books, collecting books. Unclear why books have to be quarantined. But there's nothing we can do about it.

At 7:00 p.m. Ciara Hayden left the meeting and a quorum was no longer present.

The following consists of discussion in the absence of a quorum – no decisions were evaluated or made.

1. The committee discussed the Town Clerk's budget, noting that the town has a new clerk. She has been learning a lot in a tough year that has included COVID and three elections.

No significant changes are expected to her budget, except a request for funding an Assistant Clerk, which had been zeroed for the current year. The committee discussed the request. The discussion then turned to the Boards Clerk, for which an increase is requested from \$3,000 to \$9,669. Since the town's administrative assistant left her job, other individuals have been picking up hours that the admin. asst. used to cover, including recording minutes at Select Board and certain committee meetings. This totals up to 24 of the 40 hours the admin. asst. used to work

2. Raymond Lanza-Weil summarized his conversation with Dan Fleuriel of the WWTF, in which Dena Willmore also participated. He noted that this is an enterprise budget, entirely supported by user fees, and it contributes to covering small portions of some town salaries expenses. Barry Del Castilho noted that the user fee rate is set by sewer commissioners annually, which is unusual. It was noted that Dan Fleuriel is retiring at the end of the calendar year and also that he is a very tight budget manager, which will be important to keep this in mind when hiring his replacement.
3. Raymond Lanza-Weil summarized his conversation with FRCOG. The primary change expected is an increase in public health expense.
4. Karen Blom summarized the conversation she and Select Board member Zack Turner had with police chief Jim Hicks. There is no capital request for FY 22: mileage on vehicles is down and no new vehicles are needed this year. Radios will be replaced as part of a region-wide changeover, with a cost to the town of approx. \$10,000, with the rest of the cost covered by grants. A new A/C unit in the station, paid for with grants has lowered energy costs. Station needs a handicap ramp and steps repaired and improved. The roof is missing some slate and this needs to be discussed further. Staffing level is good; the chief wants a third full-time officer, which would cut the hours for part-time officers, which in turn would reduce the training cost for part-time officers and result possibly in net zero change. Heather Butler noted that this relates to a Federal law that requires any part-time officer to be trained to the standards of a full-time officer at a cost of approx. \$10,000 per officer.
5. Karen Blom reported on her meeting with Cindy Schwartz of the Recreation Committee, which now has nonprofit status. They have done a lot of outreach to community and many people want the pool project to go forward, and donations have been coming in. The need to launch a capital campaign and they are applying for grants. Groundbreaking is planned for Fall 2022 (town's FY23) and they are seeking \$300,000 in capital from the Town. It was noted that Zack Turner has recommended considering a 10-15 year bond for this, since bond financing is currently inexpensive. Total project scaled back to \$1.2 million.
6. Larry Langford reported on the Mohawk Trail School capital project working group. They are trying to become more comprehensive and transparent about next 10 years of needs. They are working on refining and ranking a list that will form the capital budget request for FY22. They will be transparent about how they come up with numbers. They are seeking to clearly balance needs with costs via cost-benefit analyses.

Larry Langford noted that the finance committee will have an opportunity to meet with town department heads at each of our next three committee meetings. The committee discussed the duration of each meeting and asked for Heather Butler's help with scheduling. The next three committee meetings are on Feb. 8, Feb. 22, and March 1, all at 6PM.

Heather Butler noted that the Highway Dept. head, Steve Daby, is on extended medical leave, so Heather will speak about the department's budget.

The committee discussed liaison assignments, specifically for the school district.

The meeting adjourned at 8:00 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Raymond Lanza-Weil