

TOWN OF GROTON FINANCE COMMITTEE

Minutes of Meeting Held September 6, 2012

Selectmen's Meeting Room, Town Hall, Groton, MA 7:00 p.m.

Present: R. Hargraves, M. Flynn, S. Webber, J. Prager (Chair), P. DuFresne (Accountant in Training, Recording), V. Jenkins (Town Accountant)

Absent: P. DiFranco, G. Green, J. Crowley

Guests: Mark Haddad (Town Manager), Members of the Board of Selectmen, Members of the Fire Station Building Committee, Don Walter (Architect- Dore and Whittier)

Documents available at the meeting: Minutes of Meetings held August 7, 2012

The meeting was called to order by Mr. Prager at 7:00 p.m.

Review of Center Fire Station Project- Mr. Prager explained that as this project is potentially very expensive, the Finance Committee is eager to understand the estimated costs and program needs as fully as possible. Mr. Walter presented the details of the project as it currently stands. He noted that the site measures 18,750 Sq. Ft., with the building footprint measuring 13,860 Sq. Ft. 6,500 Sq. Ft. will be dedicated to housing apparatus, with the remaining area set aside for administrative, training and personnel needs. The particular site location and dimensions of the building are driven both by wetlands issues as well as by a request from the Lawrence Homestead Trustees to leave three (3) buildable house lots intact. Mr. Hargraves asked why the station could not be built closer to the Public Safety Building. Mr. Walter replied that issues with both vehicle turning radius and egress to the intersection at Farmers ROW prevented locating the station nearer the Public Safety Building. Mr. Haddad added that the Lawrence Homestead Trustees approved of the current location as well as the necessary easement for the sewer hook-up. A brief discussion ensued comparing the footprint of the design as created for the Sacred Heart Church site (footprint of 11,600 Sq. Ft.) to the design as created for the LHT site (13,860 Sq. Ft.).

Mr. Walter presented schematics of the floor plan design and described the specialized support areas planned (decontamination room, self-contained breathing room, restroom, training mezzanine/stairs, confined space area, etc.). In response to a question from the Finance Committee, Lt. Daly replied that the training facilities planned for the new station will answer most but not all of the training needs for the Department. Specialized training will continue to take place at the academy. Mr. Prager asked whether the current design was targeted to a firefighting force of a particular size. The Fire Station Building Committee responded that the size of the force was not as crucial to the design as the ability to house people on site during emergencies and after hours in order to improve response times. This is considered a standard factor in designing a modern fire station.

Mr. Hargraves asked what the rationale was for funding the project at \$7,500,000 over 22 years. Mr. Haddad explained that this funding plan would avoid having to vote a proposition 2 ½ override. The

debt service on the loan could then be paid within the levy limit and without impacting unexpended tax capacity. Mr. Prager reminded the group that a number of very costly projects have been proposed for the next few years; therefore, the Finance Committee should make very sure of all the nuances of this project before approving it. Mr. Cunningham (Selectman) felt that the Finance Committee had already voted their support at the last Town Meeting; and the project has not significantly changed since that time. Mr. Prager disagreed saying that they had merely voted to move ahead with the design funding, not a \$7,500,000 project. He added that the role of the Finance Committee is to safeguard the taxpayers' money; there are always ways to cut costs in a project of this size. To that end, an early and thorough analysis would help everyone involved to be more prepared before this is brought to Town Meeting in January. Mr. Flynn noted that while the Town is now considering several expensive construction projects, including Lost Lake sewer, the general economic outlook is still not favorable. Mr. Haddad explained that at their last meeting, the Board of Selectmen voted to support a contribution from taxation of 25% of the cost of the Lost Lake Sewer project; with the remaining 75% to be paid by betterments. A debt retirement in FY2014 will free up approximately \$100,000 in the budget that can be earmarked for this purpose beginning in FY2015. Mr. Haddad feels that this funding strategy will make the betterments more affordable for the Lost Lake residents without adding a financial burden to the taxpayers. He noted that while the current 5-year financial plan looks promising, it will be important for the school district to control its costs very carefully going forward.

Mr. Flynn asked whether the total cost estimate for the Fire Station included furniture. Mr. Walter replied that the cost estimate was all inclusive. Mr. Hargraves said he would like to explore the possibility of building a smaller center station and incorporating facilities already in existence at the Lost Lake Fire Station. A hard look must be taken at the cost estimates for the new station or Town Meeting may not approve the project. He is concerned that the Building Committee may have been following orders to design a station for 7.5 million dollars. Mr. Weber disagreed saying that the Committee worked to satisfy program needs not a specific cost estimate. The program needs in turn were based on modern stations recently built by communities similar in demographics to Groton. Chief Bosselait confirmed that the building was designed first, and then cut back to meet economic imperatives. Mr. Haddad reminded the group that the original size was 21,000 square feet, but had been cut back as far as possible without sacrificing functionality. Continually re-designing the building will also add to overall costs. He added that there will be further research done on the concept of building small now and planning for later expansion. Mr. Black added that a cost inflation factor of 3% per year must be factored in to any plan to expand in the future. Mr. Prager replied that if certain aspects of the program are not in fact needed, building them would be wasteful whether it is done now or at some future date. He suggested that the Town has been getting along adequately without this "optimum program;" maybe there is a balance to be met between building nothing and building to the scale currently proposed. Mr. Webber explained that the HVAC system planned is a very expensive model, but that it will pay for itself within 3 years. Mr. Prager replied that those kinds of operational cost efficiencies were worth discussing as well as the scale of the building itself. The group discussed the level of soft costs for this program, currently estimated at about 1.4 million dollars. These costs will include design architects, the fee for the owner's project manager, permitting and engineering.

Mr. Prager wondered about the 50-year population projection for Groton and whether that statistic is partially driving the design of the building. Chief Bosselait replied that it is more the number of calls, the time of day that those calls are received, and the response from the Call Department that drives the calculation of the number of full-time staff needed, not population growth. He added that while the number of calls has increased over recent years, the Call Department has in fact been shrinking. It takes

a unique individual to be able to commit to the on-call firefighter's program. People are working longer hours and commuting farther from Groton. Training requirements are also prodigious. Mr. Webber mentioned that a modern fire station is a strong recruitment incentive. Mr. Harker (Groton resident) mentioned that new technology available to homeowners (alarms, sensors, life-alert devices) also adds to call volume. As the demographic skews toward a greater percentage of senior citizens in Groton, the demand on the firefighters will be greater. Mr. Shute (Firefighter) reminded the group that call members who live farther away require sleeping space at the station, as well as firefighters from other towns responding to mutual aid requests. Mr. Haddad said that the time is rapidly approaching when the Town will have to finally commit to a design. He hopes to be able to go out to bid on this project in November, in order to be prepared for the Special Town Meeting in January. Mr. Haddad left the meeting at this time (8:05 pm).

The Finance Committee briefly discussed Historic District requirements with the Building Committee. Mr. Bosselait said that the architects were doing a good job of making the structure appealing to the neighborhood. The overall height has been reduced to the maximum of 35 feet. Mr. Degen (Selectman) mentioned that the decision to make the structure look like a barn was made to please the Lawrence Homestead Trustees who had made that a stipulation of the Purchase & Sale agreement for the land. He added that they are also pleased with the current design. The Building Committee members stressed that any additional attempts to shrink the building design will have a negative impact on program needs. Lt. Daly discussed the various training challenges that cannot be met now, but that will be adequately addressed with the new station as currently designed. Mr. Prager wondered about the prospect of a regional training program. Mr. Webber felt that this kind of program would be expensive and time consuming. Mr. Hargraves reiterated that the Lost Lake facility is currently underutilized. The Center Fire Station design should be carefully examined for opportunities to reduce both the size and the cost, while finding ways to better use the space at Lost Lake. Mr. Harker countered that the extra space at Lost Lake had been built at the request of the community, not by the Fire Department. The Building Committee added that staffing the Lost Lake facility puts West Groton at a detriment with respect to response time. They believe it makes more sense for resources to be centrally located.

Mr. Hargraves requested that consideration be given to holding the Special Town Meeting in January on a Saturday in order to increase accessibility for residents. Mr. Prager thanked Mr. Walter and the Fire Station Building Committee for attending the meeting and for providing a great deal of valuable information. Mr. Webber added that much of what had been discussed this evening was available on the Town website. Mr. Walter said he would provide copies of the schematics he presented this evening to the Finance Committee as soon as possible. Mr. Walter and the Fire Station Building Committee left the meeting at this time (8:30 pm).

Mr. Prager would like to explore some design compromises at future meetings. Mr. Webber agreed that some efficiencies could be achieved through rearranging design features. It might also be possible to add a basement, since it is now known that the water table is deep enough to allow this. A basement may cost as much as \$200,000 to design and \$300,000 to construct, but could save even more in the long run. Mr. Prager felt that the Town could learn to live with a less than perfect fire station program; a change in mindset about this project could be instrumental. He felt that going to construction this year would be best, as interest rates are favorable now. But if a design compromise could be reached that saves a million dollars it would certainly be worth implementing.

Approval of Meeting Minutes – The committee members reviewed the meeting minutes from Aug 7th.

On a motion by Mr. Hargraves, seconded by Mr. Webber, the Finance Committee voted unanimously to approve the minutes of their meeting of August 7, 2012 as drafted. The Vote: 4-0-0

The Finance Committee agreed to meet again on September 18th at 7:00 p.m.

Mr. Prager adjourned the meeting of the Finance Committee at 9:00 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Patricia Dufresne, Recording Secretary