

# TOWN OF GROTON FINANCE COMMITTEE

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**Minutes of Meeting Held November 27, 2012**

**Legion Hall, 75 Hollis St., Groton, MA 7:00 p.m.**

**Present:** R. Hargraves, M. Flynn, S. Webber, P. DiFranco, G. Green, J. Crowley, J. Prager (Chair), P. DuFresne (Town Accountant, Recording), V. Jenkins (Finance Director)

**Absent:** None,

**Guests:** Mark Haddad (Town Manager), Members of the Board of Selectmen, Fire Chief Joe Bosselait and Members of the Fire Station Building Committee, Don Walter (Architect- Dore and Whittier), Val Prest & Alex Woodle (Groton Lakes Association), Mike Bouchard (Town Clerk), Don Black (Parks Commission), Members of the Press.

**Documents available at the meeting:** Reserve Fund Transfer Request Documents  
Lost Lake Tax Revenue/Property Value Summary  
Lost Lake/Knops Pond 2011 Survey (Attachment D)  
Central Fire Station Estimated Project Budget

**Sonar Treatment on Lost Lake:** The Finance Committee watched a video presented by the Groton Lakes Association which showed evidence of the extreme nature of the invasive weed infestation. Mr. Prest explained that the current level of weed infestation represents a threat to recreational activity, property values and even human lives. Mr. Degen added that residents in the area pay a premium on their real estate taxes for the benefit of owning water front property, when in fact, no such benefit truly exists. Non-native weeds are introduced when boats are put in the water that have picked up weeds from other lakes or ponds. They in turn bring weeds from Lost Lake to other lakes, making Lost Lake a threat to other communities as well. Therefore, an integral part of the plan must include a mandatory boat wash station to help prevent re-infestation, as well as educating the boaters on the lake. Mr. Prest reminded the group that Diquat had been successfully used to control the weeds approximately 10 years ago. Since then, the weed harvesting machine has been used with much less success; it does not remove weeds from the root but only trims the tops. The DEP approved sonar treatment now being proposed is considered safe, and has been successfully used in other local communities. The contractor queried about this approach, Aquatic Control Technologies, has obtained excellent results in similar infestation situations. They prescribe a first treatment (which will eradicate the lake weeds over a period of several months), followed by yearly spot treatments to provide ongoing control of the problem. The treatment is estimated to cost approximately \$100,000 in the first year, and between \$3,000 and \$7,000 annually for the subsequent follow-up treatments. Mr. Prest mentioned that as the Lakes Association had previously funded the Diquat application as well as the Weed Harvester solution, they would appreciate some support from the Town for the sonar treatment. Mr. Haddad suggested at least partial funding from Stabilization or Free Cash.

The Finance Committee requested information on the mechanics of the sonar solution. Mr. Prest replied that dissolving disks would be dropped from a boat into the lake. As the disks dissolve, the herbicide is released and destroys the vascular system of the plants. The product must remain in the water for 30 to 90 days. The best time to begin the treatment is in April when the plants are still small and the roots more vulnerable. The process prevents the plants from making chlorophyll and therefore they cannot feed themselves and die, falling to the bottom. There is no threat to fish or other animals or to nearby public drinking water wells. However, the lake water cannot be used to irrigate lawns during a sonar treatment cycle. The herbicide will dissipate over a period of 6 months. Furthermore, this treatment is selective as to weed kill; most of the native weeds will remain unaffected.

Mr. Prager wondered whether it was possible to enforce a boat wash station. Mr. Prest replied that education would be crucial to such an effort, and that the Department of Conservation and Recreation has a Weed Watcher Program that informs residents about the importance of watershed management. Currently, there is no way to enforce boat washing, however, a local by-law could be introduced which would provide for fines, etc. Mr. Degen estimated that the cost of building a boat wash would be approximately \$20,000, which could be funded through future CPC awards. This station would have to be staffed and monitored by the police department. Mr. Woodle added that different states have used many different methods of inspecting and washing boats. Approximately 23 nearby towns have used sonar treatments successfully including Westford, Concord, Ayer and Maynard. The Town Manager agreed to provide a copy of the RFP to the Finance Committee; bids are due on December 20<sup>th</sup>.

**Central Fire Station Project** – Mr. Prager led the discussion with a question regarding the way in which the building footprint had increased in size since the project was first conceived. Mr. Haddad answered that the initial design for the Sacred Heart Church site included only 3 bays, and was done before there was a chance to have a professional analysis completed. It is now understood that a 21,000 sq. ft. station would be optimal, but a minimally functional design could work at 18,550 sq. ft. The current design, at 18,780 sq. ft., represents design adjustments that necessarily occur during the early stages of such a project and will provide for the basic program needs without loss of functionality. Mr. Haddad categorized the estimated costs of the project as follows:

- \$5.9 million for construction costs
- \$1.4 million for soft costs (design, furniture, equipment, testing, permitting)
- \$ .3 million for construction contingencies

Mr. Haddad believes that the total project costs will be bid between 6.9 and 7.5 million dollars. Mr. Hargraves asked whether this included the cost of the land purchase. Mr. Haddad replied that the land purchase was not included in that cost estimate as it will be funded from taxation (\$150,000) and a transfer from EMS receipts (\$200,000). He reminded the group that the Clerk of the Works would be paid \$150,000 via a transfer from the Stabilization Fund (as provided for at the fall Town Meeting). Mr. Prager wondered what the yearly maintenance costs for the new building might be. Ms. Jenkins replied that she had done some research into this issue and had concluded that these cost would be roughly \$50,000 per year. Mr. Flynn asked whether anyone had calculated the costs of de-commissioning the Station Avenue building. Mr. Haddad said that the current plan is to sell that building. He added that the sub-bids for the project are due on December 12<sup>th</sup>, and the general bids by December 21<sup>st</sup>. This was specifically timed so as to allow the bid results to be published in the Special Town Meeting Warrant. The Town will have 30 days after the bids have been received to award the contract; hopefully, construction will commence March 1<sup>st</sup>. Mr. Haddad and Mr. Walter clarified the procedural difference

between sub-bids and general bids. In response to a question from Mr. Prager, Mr. Haddad said that if Town Meeting votes down the project, fire department operations will continue as they are now. Mr. Hargraves asked whether a plan had been developed to incorporate the other two stations into the fire department daily management plan. Mr. Haddad replied that overall management of the Department would not be changing. The Full-time staffers and the ambulance would still respond from the Center Station. Fires occurring near the Lost Lake or West Groton sub-stations would be responded to from those sub-stations as well as from the Center Station if necessary. Chief Bosselait argued that the sub-stations act as more than garage facilities. Groton is geographically a very large town; the substations are active and play a valuable role in stabilizing incidents in these outlying districts. Mr. DiFranco asked whether any data was available regarding the estimated construction cost per square foot. Mr. Haddad said the construction would likely cost \$319.00 per sq. ft., and the total project would cost approximately \$415.00 per sq. ft. Mr. Walter of Dore & Whittier added that this cost estimate compares favorably to other buildings of its size throughout the state. The Finance Committee requested that a comparative list of such buildings and their related cost estimates be made available for their review. Mr. Prager particularly would like to know the cost per sq. ft. to build a competent fire station for a town similar in size to Groton. Mr. Haddad reminded the group that the competitive bidding process would act to hold the total costs down. Also, there is a 3% per year increase in construction costs; therefore the cost of delay is also significant. He went on to say that thus far, 3 separate 2/3rds vote at Town Meeting have carried based on a project cost of between \$6.5 and \$7.9 million. He feels that this has been a very well-publicized process.

Mr. Green asked whether changes would be made to how the Public Safety Building is currently being used. Mr. Haddad answered that EMS would stay where it is, but the Police Department would expand its locker space into the area that the Fire Department is vacating. Mr. Flynn wondered whether there was a plan to deal with cost over-runs. Mr. Haddad said that the plan is to stay within the levy capacity; \$500,000 of annual debt must pay for the Fire Station and Fitch's Bridge repairs. The Town can take on \$8.2 million in debt over the next 22 years and still service that debt within the levy limit. He added that the whole process can still be halted if the bids come in higher than expected. Should this happen, we would have to go back to the architect for reduction change orders. Mr. Prager suggested doing that now. Mr. Haddad replied that certainly the building could be reduced, but the Town would not get the fire station it needs, nor the one presented at Town Meeting. For instance, the second floor could remain unfinished; this would eliminate the training rooms. Mr. Webber mentioned that this option would actually cost more down the road. Mr. Prager would still like an answer to the question of why this specific fire station is needed. The current one is old and inefficient, but the Town seems to be managing and is paying \$50,000 less in building maintenance costs. Maybe there is a middle ground that would still meet the needs of the Town or maybe not, but he would like this question addressed. Mr. Haddad remarked that an enormous amount of analysis, research and presentation had been accomplished thus far and had won Town Meeting support on several occasions. He feels that the argument in support of this design is a valid one. Mr. Hargraves asked why a term of 22 years had been chosen for the debt. Ms. Jenkins answered that a term of 22 years was needed to fund the project within the tax levy limit. She reminded the group that the Fitch's Bridge project would be tied to the Fire Station debt because it would be easier to sell as part of a larger bond. She added that the project costs would be bonded in several pieces as needed; any bond authorization that was ultimately unused could be rescinded at a future Town Meeting. Mr. Hargraves expressed his disappointment that no plan had yet been conceived to more fully utilize the sub-stations in Lost Lake and West Groton in the overall operation plan for the Fire Department.

**Reserve Fund Transfer Requests** – Mr. Black explained that the Parks Department has recently determined through a soil analysis that a lime application is needed for all the playing fields. This is something that has not been done for many years, and is necessary to regulate the pH and allow for maximum efficiency of fertilizer treatments. The lime application must be done immediately as it will take several months to seep into the soil. It will not reduce the amount of fertilization that will be required and may result in more frequent mowing of the fields. The Parks Commission obtained 4 quotes of which the lowest was \$4,320.

**On a motion made by Mr. Webber and seconded by Mr. Flynn, the Finance Committee voted unanimously to approve a Reserve Fund transfer of \$4,320 to the Parks Department FY13 General Expense budget for a lime application for all the playing fields. The Vote: 7-0-0**

Ms. Dufresne informed the Finance Committee that the Accounting Department was requesting a transfer from the Reserve Fund of \$3,000 in order to pay the vacation accrual for the retiring Town Accountant and a salary adjustment for the incoming Accountant. Mr. Haddad mentioned that although Ms. Jenkins had planned to use more vacation time before her retirement date, she was needed in the office to train the new Human Resources Director.

**On a motion made by Mr. Webber and seconded by Mr. Flynn, the Finance Committee voted unanimously to approve a Reserve Fund transfer of \$3,000 to the Accounting Department FY13 Salaries Expense Budget.**

Mr. Haddad informed the group that the Pool & Golf Center was obliged to replace its water heater which failed unexpectedly. The Center is expected to use its entire current budget to meet expenses through the end of the fiscal year. Mr. Prager felt that it was too early in the year to be presenting this request. As the Pool & Golf Center still has a balance of \$145,000 available, he would prefer to see the manager attempt to cut other expenses in order to meet this need. This request could be re-considered before the end of the year if necessary.

**On a motion made by Mr. Webber and seconded by Mr. Flynn, the Finance Committee voted to approve a Reserve Fund transfer of \$3,800 to the Groton Pool & Golf Center FY13 General Expense Budget for the purchase of a new hot water heater. The Vote: 6-1-0**

Ms. Dufresne asked the Finance Committee to approve a FY14 Reserve Fund budget. Mr. Prager felt it would be appropriate to maintain the current budget of \$150,000 for the next fiscal year.

**Approval of Meeting Minutes** – Approval of meeting minutes was deferred to a subsequent meeting.

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

*Mr. Prager adjourned the meeting of the Finance Committee at 8:55 pm.*

Respectfully submitted,

Patricia Dufresne, Recording Secretary