

TOWN OF GROTON FINANCE COMMITTEE

Minutes of Regular Meeting & Public Hearing Held September 22nd, 2014

(Public Hearing Held Jointly with the Board of Selectmen)

Groton Town Hall, 173 Main St. Groton, MA, 7:30 p.m.

Present for Finance Committee: R. Hargraves (Vice Chair), B. Robertson, G. Green (Chair), Barry Pease, Mark Bacon, Art Prest, P. DuFresne (Town Accountant, Recording)

Absent: D. Manugian

Documents available at the meeting: 9/12/14 Draft Fall Town Meeting Warrant
Public Safety Building Improvements Itemization
Dispatch Officer Request Presentation Packet

Mr. Green called the Finance Committee meeting to order at 7:30 p.m.

Public Hearing for Fall Town Meeting Warrant (continued from 9/15/14) –

Dispatch Officer Request: Police Chief Don Palma explained that he is requesting a restoration of the Communications Officer position for FY15. This position was cut from the budget late in the approval cycle in order to accommodate the needs of the school district. Dispatch continues to operate on a “risk management” basis. Current state mandates require that a dispatcher receiving an emergency call must remain with that call until a responder has arrived at the site of the emergency. This presents a problem during those times when a single communications officer is on duty and more than one call is received during a short period of time. Filling this position would allow the department to advance (though not meet) its goal of having two officers on duty at all times. The Dispatch center is busy and growing: it receives between 1,800 and 1,900 emergency calls per year, and averages 42,000 total calls per year. Chief Palma stressed that it only takes one significant incident in Town to overwhelm the dispatch center. He informed the group that dispatch calls that are unanswered after four rings are automatically transferred to Pepperell and then Townsend. Although the occurrence of such roll-over calls is rare, it should be avoided as it could lead to a delay in emergency response time. Chief Palma distributed the “Request for Additional Dispatcher” packet which itemizes call volume, department responsibilities, and procedural requirements which support the need to add an officer. In response to a request from the Board of Selectmen, Chief Palma estimated the FY15 budgetary impact at approximately \$44,000 including benefits (approximately 2/3 of a full year; the impact of a full year would be about \$60,000). Ms. Eliot asked for information regarding the last full time officer hired for dispatch. Mr. Haddad replied that one officer was hired in FY13; although two were budgeted for in FY15, one was cut, and the other replaced a retiring employee. Ms. Eliot remained unconvinced that there was a need to spend resources on dispatch at this time. Mr. Degen questioned how this hire would impact the use of relief dispatchers.

Chief Palma replied that the relief dispatchers are per diem employees and are often available only on weekends. He added that overtime expenses are an issue in dispatch, although this can be covered by grant funding. Mr. Petropoulos would like to see some research done on whether yearly grant funding has increased as a function of budgeted wages. Mr. Degen noted that local receipts would increase if the regionalization effort were expanded which will act to offset the associated wage impact. Mr. Hargraves said that he supports this request and cannot think of a more important use of taxpayer resources. The Town has made a significant investment in Dispatch operations, and as we have the capability to expand the region, we ought to do so.

Police Data Server Conversion: Chief Palma informed the group that there is incident data and historical information currently held on grossly outdated and occasionally inoperable systems. This should be converted to the new secure internal server before this data is irretrievably lost. The previous IT Director (Jason Bulger) successfully negotiated a very fair price with IMC that would accomplish a conversion of all this “at risk” (prior to 2001) data. Jason Webber (BOH representative) mentioned that he has some expertise in this area and feels that this is an extremely reasonable price. He cautioned that the terms of the contract should include some form of verification of completion to be performed by the vendor.

Mosquito Control Program: Mr. Degen reminded the group that this initiative had been previously approved by Town Meeting, and was subsequently cut from the budget during the GDRSD financial crisis. Jason Webber (Board of Health) indicated that his board was strongly in favor of restoring the funding for this program. It was their understanding that it had been postponed only temporarily until the GDRSD school budget could be sorted out. It should be assumed that the Town residents still support it and therefore it should now be put back on the warrant. He warned the board members that the mosquito problem will only get worse as the climate changes. Mr. Cunningham asked when the charge for this program would be payable. Mr. Haddad replied that if the treatment begins in the spring of 2015, it will appear as a cherry sheet assessment for FY2016. He added that if the local options meals tax is approved at Town Meeting, the revenue to be realized would act to offset the Mosquito Control Program costs. Mr. Cunningham felt it would be prudent to delay restoring the Mosquito Control Program until the uncertainty surrounding the school budget has been resolved. Mr. Petropoulos and Ms. Eliot agreed that while Mosquito Control should certainly be brought back to Town Meeting, it should not be done now. Mr. Schulman would be comfortable restoring the Mosquito Control for this spring, provided that the local meals tax is approved to act as an offset to that cost. Mr. Degen believes this to be a public safety issue and it should be put before the voters to decide. Mr. Cunningham cautioned that funding a mosquito control program does not guarantee that the public will be safe from mosquito borne diseases. Mr. Robertson agreed with Mr. Degen that the voters should be given the opportunity to restore funding for this program. In response to concerns about the parameters of the proposed program from a member of the audience, Mr. Webber briefly described some of the specific attributes of the program. He stressed that Groton can customize aspects of the program to fit the Town’s needs, and that property owners will be able to “opt out” if they wish. Mr. Schulman moved to re-open the Town Meeting warrant in order to insert an article restoring the Mosquito Control Program. Mr. Cunningham seconded and the motion carried by majority vote (4-1-0). Mr. Schulman moved to add an article to the Town Meeting warrant authorizing participation in the Central MA Mosquito Control Program. Mr. Cunningham seconded, and the motion carried by majority vote (3-2-0).

At this point in the meeting (9:20 p.m.) the Finance Committee relocated to the 1st Floor Meeting Room to continue their discussion and to take positions on various Town Meeting warrant articles.

Public Safety Building Improvements – Mr. Pease was in favor of waiting until the surplus appropriation from the Fire Station construction project could be repurposed for this new use. Chief Palma said that police department employees have done a great deal of work already, and that it would negatively impact morale to call a halt at this point. Also, a significant investment has been made in equipment that should be kept undercover at night and in bad weather. While the department cannot garage every vehicle, wear and tear can be reduced for those that can be stored out of the elements. Additionally, staff is seriously overcrowded now; providing space for department expansion will cure this. Currently, the state Board of Health has issued orders of correction regarding the cell areas. The cell check system has failed, and cell fixtures are in dire need of replacement. Chief Palma distributed a list of priority expense items (available as a supplement to these minutes). Mr. Green noted that the building is 20 years old, and that the space has been essentially “over used” for many years. Mr. Hargraves said that it would be unfortunate to undermine the momentum that has been achieved by delaying this funding.

Police Data Conversion – The committee members very briefly discussed this request. It was generally felt that a fair price had been negotiated for a worth-while service.

Dispatch Officer Request – Chief Palma discussed his scheduling needs for the department. Currently, he has three per diem officers, one trainee, and five full-time dispatchers. With this complement, he is able to have two officers on duty during the busiest times and when special events are planned in Town. An additional officer would allow for some overlap in shifts and relieve the reliance on risk-management scheduling. Mr. Green asked whether a single additional officer would be sufficient for the department. Chief Palma replied that ideally, there should be two dispatchers on duty 24/7, but this would require nine full time officers. This is something that may have to be considered for the future should the regionalization effort be expanded to include more towns. Mr. Pease approved of the Chief’s plan to maximize use of available space while working to expand the dispatch region. Mr. Green asked whether there would be any significant new budget requests for FY16. Chief Palma replied that without a further increase in activity and call volume, he could not justify adding more than the one officer that has been requested. *Chief Palma left the meeting at this time.*

Positions Taken on Town Meeting Warrant Articles – A summary of the votes taken by the Finance Committee is available as a supplement to these minutes. Discussion highlights are as follows:

- Free Cash for Stabilization Transfers– The members disagreed on the theory of restoring balances to stabilization accounts. Mr. Green felt that exceeding the recommended reserve balance should not be considered problematic. Mr. Pease worried that this encourages residents to believe that capital spending has no budgetary impact. He said that the funds spent out of stabilization have to be replenished from Free Cash in the future; this is money that could be spent on other needs. On a motion by Mr. Prest, seconded by Mr. Bacon, the Finance Committee voted in the majority (4-2-0) to support a transfer of \$400,000 from Free Cash to the Capital Stabilization Fund. On a motion by Mr. Pease, seconded by Mr. Robertson, the Finance Committee voted unanimously to support a transfer of \$175,000 from Free Cash to the Regular Stabilization Fund. Later during the meeting, information was received that the Board of Selectmen had reduced the amounts to be transferred from Free Cash to restore the Stabilization balances. After a brief discussion, the Finance Committee decided to take a new vote on the amended transfer request to Capital Stabilization. On a motion by Mr. Bacon seconded by Mr. Robertson the Finance Committee voted unanimously to support a transfer of \$365,000 from Free Cash to the Capital Stabilization Fund.

- Prescott School Sale/Lease/TIF Agreement – Mr. Green believes that the bid price is insufficient for prime real estate on Main Street. Mr. Pease argued that once the value of the renovations planned by the bidder should be taken into account. Also, a building of this nature has a severely limited market. Mr. Green mentioned that non-monetary value is also of consideration. He added that as the school district would now prefer to remain in Prescott, perhaps a lease option should be explored. Mr. Pease sees this as an opportunity to allow a lucrative business to help improve the downtown area and correct the perception of Groton as having a “non-commercial” center. Mr. Green reminded him that once the Surrenden Farms debt has been paid off, the CPC will have some funding available that could be used to renovate that building into a community or senior center. Mr. Pease was skeptical that enough funding could be advanced from the CPC to undertake such an enormous renovation. Mr. Prest said that the opportunity cost of not selling at this time should be considered (such as the loss of TIF and eventual tax receipts). Mr. Pease explained the concept of the TIF agreement as a tax exemption that the Town can offer a start-up business that can be structured to each party’s satisfaction. He added that in this case, the creation of a municipal parking lot can be considered a reasonable exchange for the tax exemption in the first three years.
- Sale/Lease/Rezoning of Tarbell School – After a brief discussion, the Finance Committee deferred taking a position on this Article until additional information could be made available regarding the proposed use of the building.
- Engineering Funding for Lost Lake Watershed – Mr. Pease and Mr. Green agreed that the need for additional engineering work had not been specifically proven at this point, and they would like to see a detailed plan before supporting the funding for this Article. Mr. Prest assured the group that his committee would be issuing such a plan shortly.
- Conservation Commission Land Acquisition – The Finance Committee deferred taking a position on this Article until further information could be made available.
- Authorization to Participate in Mosquito Control Program – Mr. Pease informed the group that certain worthwhile events had been cancelled in the past due to the threat posed by mosquitoes. This was unfortunate, and should be avoided in the future. He reminded the group that the Board of Health is strongly in support of this program.

Mr. Green spoke briefly about Open Meeting Law concerns and reminded the committee members that a training video on this topic was available for anyone who may have been unable to attend the presentation by Kopelman & Paige on September 17th.

Approval of Meeting Minutes – The Finance Committee deferred approval of meeting minutes until a subsequent meeting.

Mr. Green officially adjourned the meeting at 10:45 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Patricia Dufresne, Recording Secretary

Fall Town Meeting 10/20/2014

Finance Committee Positions on Articles (votes taken 9/22/2014)

Article #	Description	Dollar Amount	Moved	Second	Gary G	Bob H	Dave M	Bud R	Barry P	Art P	Mark B	Total Vote	Presenter
1	Prior Year Bills	\$ 227.77	AP	BP								6-0-0	
2	Amend FY15 Town Budget	\$ 81,222.00											
2a	BOS Expenses Trails Grant Match	\$ 4,500.00	BH	BR								6-0-0	
2b	Town Acct Wages (Asst Acct)	\$ 6,070.00	BR	BH								6-0-0	
2c	Treasurer Wages (Payroll Clerk)	\$ 3,654.00	BH	BR								6-0-0	
2d	IT Wages (Desk Top Specialist)	\$ 9,898.00	BH	BR								6-0-0	
2e	Fire Exp Officer Training	\$ 13,000.00	BP	BR								6-0-0	
2f	Dispatch Wages	\$ 44,100.00	BH	BR								6-0-0	
2g	Country Club Salary	\$ (70,461.00)	BR	BH								6-0-0	
2h	Country Club Wages (Admin)	\$ 30,538.00	BR	BH								6-0-0	
2i	Country Club Expenses	\$ 39,923.00	BR	BH								6-0-0	
3	Trf Free Cash to Cap Stab.	\$ 365,000.00	AP	MB								6-0-0	
4	Trf Free Cash to Stabilization	\$ 150,000.00	BP	BR								6-0-0	
5	Offset the Tax Rate FY15	\$ 150,000.00	BH	BR								6-0-0	
6	Accept Local Option Meals Tax		AP	BP	N							5-1-0	
7	Mosquito Control Program	cherry sheet chg: 75k for 3 years	BH	BP				N			N	4-2-0	
8	Police Dept Data Conversion	\$ 41,000.00	AP	BR								6-0-0	
9	PSB Rename & Improvements	\$ 60,000.00	BH	BR								6-0-0	
10	Sale or Lease of Prescott School		BP	MB	N							5-1-0	
11	TIF Agreement for Prescott Sch.	\$ -	BP	BR	N							5-1-0	
12	Zoning Town Ctr Overlay Dist											NO POSITION TAKEN	
13	Sale or Lease of Tarbell School											DEFERRED TO TOWN MEETING	
14	Zoning Amendment Tarbell											NO POSITION TAKEN	
15	Engineering for LLWatershed	\$ 15,000.00	BR	BH								6-0-0	
16	ConsComm Land Purch											DEFERRED TO TOWN MEETING	
17	CPA Sargisson Beach Restore	\$ 75,000.00	BH	BP								6-0-0	

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Finance Committee Positions on Articles (votes taken 9/22/2014)

Article #	Description	Dollar Amount	Moved	Second	Gary G	Bob H	Dave M	Bud R	Barry P	Art P	Mark B	Total Vote	Presenter
18-19	Groton Sewer Extension												
20	Dog Code Amendment ch 128												
21-23	Landfill Solar Array Lease		BR	BP								6-0-0	
24	Zoning Bylaw Amendmt 218											NO POSITION TAKEN	
25	Alter Layout W. Main St											NO POSITION TAKEN	
26	Conveyance of W.Main Parcel											NO POSITION TAKEN	
27	Electronic Voting Study Cmttee											NO POSITION TAKEN	
	Total Taxation	\$ 81,222.00											
	FY15 Free Cash Certified	\$ 1,181,587.00											
	Total Free Cash committed	\$ 781,227.77											
	FY15 Free Cash Bal. Remaining	\$ 400,359											

N=Voted Against Support

A= Abstain