

Town of Groton
Finance Committee Meeting Draft Minutes
Monday March 4, 2019
Town Hall: Second Floor Meeting Room,
173 Main Street Groton, MA

Select Board members present: B. Pease, J. Giger, J. Degan, A. Manugian, B. Pine

Finance Committee members present: Chair Gary Green, Bud Robertson, Arthur Prest, David Manugian, Lorraine Leonard, Colby Doody,

Also present: Mark Haddad, Town Manager; Patricia Dufresne, Town Accountant; Fire Department Task Force Members; Elizabeth Faxon: per diem minute taker, Town of Groton

Meeting held jointly with the Selectboard

Barry Pease called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.

Don Black from the cemetery association addressed the meeting. He asked for a letter of support for their CPC application to restore and preserve the Groton cemetery.

J. Degen moved that the Select Board send a letter in support of the Groton Cemetery Association CPC grant application for the repair and upkeep of the asset. Giger seconded. \$46,000 is being requested for this application. The motion passed unanimously.

Mr. Cunningham announced a Gala fundraiser event for the seniors on April 6 at the Groton Inn. Marlena Gilbert (School Committee), announced that Destination Imagination competition was held this past weekend and that Groton Dunstable participants would be advancing to the state finals.

Mark Haddad updated the Select Board on his Town Manager's report. A housing production plan letter of support (for CPC application) has been added to the packet for the Select Board to consider signing. The Town has also applied for a grant for the housing production plan, but in the event that it is not received, this avenue will be pursued to update that plan.

J. Degen moved that the select board sign a letter of support for the housing production plan application to the CPC. A. Manugian seconded. J. Giger moved to amend the motion to include the CPC project # 2020-01. The motion passed unanimously.

M. Haddad noted he has added article #25 to the ATM 2019 warrant which is the article for the charter. He added that on March 18th, the Finance Committee will meet jointly with the Select Board to go over new information received pertaining to the FY 20 Budget and the ATM 2019 warrant. He also noted an update on the warrant for a citizen's petition regarding Olivia way. B Pease noted the upcoming elections that are specified in the warrant. He announced that he will not be seeking reelection.

M. Haddad commented on the debt exclusion for the DPW facility and the library roof; he has included two separate questions on the warrant. He asked the Select Board to consider adding these two questions to the annual election ballot and confirmed that the warrant articles are contingent on the debt exclusion passing at the ballot. J. Degen asked for assurance that there will be a working group to explain the ballot questions to the voters in an informal format prior to the annual election. M. Haddad confirmed this. A. Manugian asked if there has been any change to the capital plan based on these ballot questions. M. Haddad explained that both of these projects have been in the capital plan and they are bonding issues outside of proposition 2 1/2, so it will have no impact on the operating budget or the capital budget (provided the voters do choose to raise the debt outside of proposition 2 1/2). M. Haddad said that bids will be available prior to town meeting, and this is best practice for budgeting.

J. Degen moved that the selectboard authorize two ballot questions as worded for the annual town election in May 2019. J. Giger seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

The Fire Department Task Force Study Committee members called their meeting to order and summarized their findings. M. Haddad noted that the final report of the task force (as well as the report from the On-Call Firefighters) is available for the Board to view.

Recommendations from the Task Force include changing over to a 24 hour shift for fire protection. Additionally, the low number of On Call Firefighters are a Town problem and the solution should be a collaborative effort. It was suggested that a more permanent ad hoc committee be formed. This committee would include a Select Board member, a Finance Committee member and possibly an HR member. This group should look at additional financial incentives to address retention of On Call Firefighters as well as preparing a marketing plan to get the message out to the town. Goals include: invest more resources into recruitment of on call firefighters and to recruit more women. Allison Manugian notes her concern with information that was requested from the task force, and not received and added she is not clear on the long-term needs. Mr. Robertson asked about total cost of the on call responders. He noted that 2 fire fighters would cost the Town about \$150,000, but outsourcing of ambulance services would cost about \$100,000. The distinction was made that the ambulance personnel are EMTs and firefighters. Chief McCurdy explained that if the ambulance services was outsourced, then the on- call might still go out on ambulance calls depending on the nature of the emergency.

Becky Pine joined the meeting remotely via telephone at 7:31 p.m.

J. Giger noted the variability in the estimate for outsourcing the ambulance service. Mr. Robertson pointed out a statement in the memo that indicated the recommendations made by the task force were based on limited feedback of 50 people attending a meeting to give input on the topic. He noted he saw a lack of facts in the summary of the task force. Discussion ensued as to the decision process. J. Degen talked to the reasoning behind creating the task force as it addressed the problem of the night response time being twice what it is during the day and the responsibility of the Town to the community of adequate public safety. He noted that if having

full time firefighters and better response time means a life or a structure can be saved, then that is quite important. There is a cost involved, there is also a problem with retention of on call firefighters. There is a threshold where the cost is necessary to provide public safety to the Town. Discussion ensued as to the format of the task force report and the ranking of information therein. Task force members agreed the report could have been prioritized differently. Mr. Green agreed with Mr. Robertson's points about the facts and statistics being a critical part of the decision. Emergency services is a matter of managing risk he stated and there is no quantifiable formula found by adding 2 firefighters in terms of risk mitigation. He stated more discussion should take place on this complex topic. Ms. Manugian agreed with the FinCom comments and is concerned that the task force could have done more in-depth fact based analysis. She is still unclear on what the long-term plan is and what other options the Town has for consideration.

The Task Force Committee responded that the on-call focus was important to the long term stability of the system. The need to fill and maintain the on-call department adequately was stressed. Members of the task force named some of the documents and information that was not available to them during the process. They were not overly concerned that this lack of information would have changed the recommendations of the task force. Mr. Prest noted 65 members present at the meeting referenced earlier. He asked that people look at the additional cost which he estimated to be \$55 per year on the tax bill and declared himself in support of the additional firefighters. He felt that some of the statistics were utilized incorrectly by the task force. He would have preferred that they had used the median value (for response times) instead of the averages which can be misleading. J. Giger stated he doesn't feel there is agreement on the issue, but he considers the fire chief and the task force recommendations to be of importance. J. Degen stated that the task force results verified what the fire chief has been requesting for a number of years: the need for additional firefighters. The Select Board expressed gratitude for the hard work completed by the task force.

B. Pease spoke to the recommendation of the Finance Committee and the task force to the Town in terms of what they want to pay for public safety. He is comfortable with the recommendations put forth by the task force committee and the Chief and supports staffing two more firefighters. Becky Pine asked a question about scheduling of staff. Chief McCurdy explains that the additional two firefighters will provide more depth in scheduling while avoiding rescheduling the same 4 people on 12 hour rotating shifts. M. Haddad then asked to move to item #7 of the town manager's report which addresses the impact of this additional public safety request which will put the budget in a deficit position of \$278,000. Of this number, \$150,000 represents the snow and ice deficit. If the town decides not to carry the \$150,000 deficit for next year, that lowers the budget deficit to \$128,000. So he suggested looking for cuts in the operating budget, reducing the outlay to the school budget or seeking an override.

8:34 p.m. Becky Pine joined the meeting in person.

B. Pease suggested it may be premature to have the discussion of the proposed options given that the school budget is not yet complete. Marlene reminded those present that the process is that the finance committee can vote to not recommend approval of the school budget at town meeting, but that M Haddad's proposal was incorrectly worded in that officials cannot reduce the amount payable to the school budget outside of this process. M. Haddad stated that if the school committee will be providing information on Wednesday night, then perhaps schedule a joint meeting of the Selectboard and the Finance Committee on Monday March 11, 2019. J. Degen suggests the decision be made regarding the additional public safety staff. Mr. Green stated that if the school committee decides to use E&D to offset the budget (as an aid to Dunstable) it will just create a bigger problem in the FY 21 budget. The Select Board was informally asked for their opinion on the addition of the 2 public safety staff by a journalist in attendance. The responses were generally in favor of the additional staff assuming the impact to the budget is not too great.

M Haddad suggested a general override just for the 2 firefighters be requested of the voters at the town election. This would be a permanent override not a debt exclusion.

Mr. Robertson stated that it might be better to combine the school and the firefighters in the same override. We will have excess tax capacity raised on the Recap that can be saved to spend next year because we know the school costs will increase. It is possible this strategy will settle the FY21 budget without an additional override. An on-call firefighter spoke in support of the additional 2 firefighters. J. Degen asked if we go to the 24/7 why do we need the incentive pay. Chief McCurdy noted that the incentive pay was established to encourage people to sign up for a few dollars an hour to be 'on call'.

J. Degen would like the Town to focus on the "big picture" of total override requests to be made over the next several years. We are faced with the next 5 fiscal years of having at least a \$250,000 shortfall. His suggestion is to keep the two debt exclusion votes in place, hope the school committee reduces it's assessment and uses the E & D. The Town could potentially package an override for May ATM of FY 20 that would incorporate 5 years of municipal and school expenses. He does not recommend asking for an override to fund solely the firefighters. A. Manugian agreed and noted that the Town will then have ample time to educate the public on the alternatives. Mr. Green stated his opposition to transferring the shortfall problem to FY21.

The Finance Committee members left the meeting at 9:10 p.m. and reconvened in the hall where they briefly discussed the status of the School District's Revolving Fund balances. Mr. Green said the FinCom would begin taking positions on warrant articles on March 18th. Mr. Green officially adjourned the FinCom meeting at 9:12 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Elizabeth Faxon

Per diem minute taker, Town of Groton.