

MINUTES
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BOARD OF SELECTMEN
MONDAY, JANUARY 9, 2006
REGULAR SESSION
SELECTMEN'S MEETING ROOM, TOWN HALL

Call to Order

A regular meeting of the Board of Selectmen was called to order in open session at 7:00 PM in the Selectmen's Meeting Room of Town Hall. All members were present. Town Administrator Younger and Assistant Town Administrator Conti were also present.

Questions from Town Residents

There were no questions.

Action by Appointment

Discussion of the Western Greenway Project

Members of Friends of the Western Greenway appeared before the Board. The organization is asking the Board to sign on to two letters to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The first letter is endorsing the concept of the Greenway as part of the state Greenways Program. This will allow the group to pursue grants for trail markers. Lexington and Waltham have signed onto this.

The second letter asks that the parcel known as Lot 1 (in Lexington and Waltham near the Belmont border) be transferred to the Department of Conservation and Recreation and incorporated into the Greenway. Again, Lexington and Waltham have signed onto this.

A map of the Greenway parcels and Lot 1 was shown.

The Board moved: to sign both letters.

The motion was carried unanimously (3-0).

Action by Consent

A. *Approval of BOS Minutes (11/14/05; 11/21/05; 11/28/05 and 12/05/05)*

The Board moved: to approve all meeting minutes for 11/14/05, 11/21/05, 11/28/05 and 12/05/05.

The motion was carried unanimously (3-0).

Other

The Board moved: to approve a resolution proposed for a vote by the Massachusetts Municipal Association at its upcoming meeting.

The motion was carried unanimously (3-0).

Action by Appointment

Discussion of Proposed February Special Town Meeting – Financial Software

Town Administrator Tom Younger reported that the Town's current financial software vendor will no longer support our current software after December 31, 2006. He does not expect to complete the process of implementing a new software package until December 2006. There is a 6-month lead time for implementation. In order to expedite this process and choose a vendor sooner, the funding would need to be in place before April Town Meeting. If a Special Town meeting is held in late February, the Town will be able to do this. Town Accountant Barbara Hagg is recommending that the Town go ahead with a Special Town Meeting.

Ms. Hagg appeared before the Board. She explained that the software used by the Town is proprietary and it will require lead-in time to make a transition. It will need to be tested before we move our information over.

The Board asked if we are still looking at outsourcing payroll. Ms. Hagg replied that this is still an option but does not seem to offer any major advantages since we are still the ones who have to gather the data.

Ms. Hagg reviewed efforts over the last couple of years to address the issue of replacing our software. She recommended a bond issue to do this. Part of the cost would be paid by the Light Department. Our share of the cost would be about two-thirds of \$1 million- the other third to be paid by the Light Department - to be paid back over a 5 year period. The software would cover not only payroll but all the financial services – accounting, assessors, treasurer, human resources, collections, etc., including the schools, and would mesh with the new GIS system.

The Board discussed whether we are making a hasty decision under pressure from the old software vendor. The Board expressed its desire to see some numbers in writing comparing the cost of this approach to other options.

Ms. Hagg explained that a vendor would not be in place when Town Meeting voted, but the funding authorization may be needed to encourage bidders to participate. Our consultant is writing the proposal now.

The Board discussed delaying a decision on this question for two weeks to allow more documentation to be assembled as well as information about how this fits into the budget and a timeline for the process. The filing date requirements for Town meeting could still be met after this amount of time.

The Board requested Ms. Hagg to return with members of the relevant committees to make a presentation on this at the Board's next meeting in two weeks on January 23rd.

Approval of Kennel License Renewal

Mr. Younger stated that the Board of Health has inspected the kennel and found it to be satisfactory.

The Board expressed its desire to have confirmation that the kennel is and will be compliant with the Town's kennel by-law. There was discussion of one incident of non-compliance with the by-law which has been resolved.

The Board moved: To approve the license renewal subject to the condition that all current and future staff have been and will be trained to comply with the Town's kennel by-law.

The motion was carried unanimously (3-0).

Action by Writing

Fire Chief re: Ambulance Fee Increase

Fire Chief Dave Frizzell appeared before the Board. He briefly updated the Board on progress of construction of the new fire stations. He believes these are on target for substantial completion by July and move-in by September. The contractor and sub-contractors have been good to work with.

Chief Frizzell went on to explain that there has been an increase in the Medicare rates for ambulance services and he would like to increase these rates correspondingly for non-Medicare payers. He recommended that we move from a fixed fee to a relative fee of Medicare's rate plus 30 percent. This would result in about \$14,000 in additional ambulance fees, and combined with increases in Medicare and non-Medicare calls would mean about \$32,000 in additional revenue for the Town.

Currently, we provide basic life support and contract out to Armstrong for advanced life support. The Board asked about contracting out ambulance services completely. Chief Frizzell stated that this would actually result in a net revenue loss of about \$300,000 and might increase response time. He explained that emergency ambulance response is not a profit-making concern – private companies make most of their money from non-emergency transport. In fact, we have looked into cutting out the private vendor altogether and providing advanced life support in-house.

The Board moved: to accept the Chief's recommendation and set the rate at Medicare allowable plus 30%.

The motion was carried unanimously (3-0).

Assistant Town Administrator re: Insurance Bidding Consultant

Assistant Town Administrator Jeff Conti reported that the Insurance Advisory Committee is asking the Board to authorize the hiring of a consultant to oversee our bidding of the Town's insurance coverages. The Committee feels that this could potentially save the town money. The last time a consultant was hired to do this, the cost was about \$6,500. We believe we would make this back in savings. The Committee voted unanimously to recommend this course of action.

The Board moved: to approve the recommendation to hire a consultant.

The motion was carried unanimously (3-0).

Action by Appointment

Town Administrator's Report

Mr. Younger reported that the Zoning Board of Appeals has scheduled a public hearing Wednesday, January 11 at 7:30PM on the comprehensive permit for the Belmont Uplands 40B affordable housing proposal. Mr. Younger contacted the City of Cambridge and they are not interested in weighing in on the idea of moving this development to Cambridge at this time. The Board discussed the \$400,000 that O'Neill (the developer) had previously promised to pay to the Town in a Memorandum of Agreement and whether to now insist on the payment of this money.

The Board agreed to ask Town Counsel to take the next step to prepare to enforce O'Neill's obligations to the Town under the memorandum and come before the Board to discuss this at its next meeting on January 23rd.

Mr. Younger reported that work is scheduled to begin January 23 installing the equipment in the communications tower on the cemetery site. The Town is obtaining revenue by leasing the tower annually.

The Board expressed its concern about fencing around the tower, both for the protection of citizens and the protection of the tower itself.

Mr. Younger reported that the state's School Building Authority notified us that the moratorium on submitting school building projects for reimbursement will be lifted on July 1, 2007. This date was anticipated so this is not really news. School Committee Chair Elizabeth Gibson explained that the Wellington plans will be put on hiatus until the

SBA releases their guidelines and we can then make sure that they mesh. We will not be asking for a vote on the Wellington project until the fall. The Board asked about what level of reimbursement we can expect. Ms. Gibson replied that we are assuming 40% which is the minimum, and it will be clearer before we go before the voters. There was discussion of whether the bond issue would take into account this expected amount or not.

There was discussion of Purecoat North (PN). Selectman Brownsberger stated that PN has not displayed much interest in working with the Town on anything, and we can move forward on testing for contamination outside the PN property, which we had put on hold to see if we could work with PN on picking up some of the cost. Meanwhile, the Board of Health is litigating the odor issue to pursue a cease and desist order against PN.

Town Assessor Dick Simmons and Bob Reardon, a member of the Board of Assessors (BOA), appeared to discuss a letter sent to residents by the Assessing Department seeking info the state Department of Revenue (DOR) is looking for. They wanted to address the Board to clarify this.

Mr. Simmons confirmed this information was requested by the state.

Mr. Reardon explained that with most homes you use the market approach to value. However, we have a number of small 4 and 8 unit rental buildings and DOR has requested we build up our database of rental information on these.

Mr. Simmons stated that we submitted a request to multi-family homeowners for information. The BOA has the right under statute to fine homeowners if they do not respond within 60 days, however the BOA never intended to impose such a fine and should have taken that out of the letter. That will not be enforced.

Mr. Reardon noted that the goal was to collect real rental data from people that are actually renting out these units. Mr. Simmons added that these units depend more on their rental price for value than their sale price. Sale prices are increasing but rental prices may not be.

The Board inquired whether people's assessments could go down because of this. Mr. Simmons confirmed this. The Board noted that some residents had expressed their concern about an invasion of privacy and would have been more comfortable providing this data anonymously.

Mr. Reardon explained that this data is not open to public record. Only the BOA can look at it and when it is passed on to DOR, the property designation is redacted so DOR can't identify individual properties or owners.

Resident Sam Garozzo of Becket Road asked why we are being asked the tenant's name, whether it is a tenant at will, when the lease term begins and ends, and whether utilities

are included. Why do you need this information? You say you will lower assessments but they go up every year.

Mr. Simmons responded that most assessments on multi-families stayed the same or went down this year. He did not recall asking on the form for a tenant's name. The Assessors do need to know if rent includes heat or hot water in order to compare figures accurately. They are not concerned with who rents to whom.

The form was examined and it was noted that there was a box which looked like it might be for a name, but the form does not actually ask for a name. The form only requires a check in the box for water being included, not a figure, but this is not clear on the form. Each line represents one apartment.

The Board clarified that assessments will be calculated based on the average of the data that is collected, not on the data submitted by an individual. This needs to be communicated to the homeowners.

It was noted that 1800 letters were sent out, 218 have come back. Mr. Simmons stated that it would cost \$700 to send everyone a new, clearer form. Mr. Reardon added that the BOA has put information in the Belmont paper to clarify this.

Mr. Simmons stated that he has spent most of the last week answering the phone himself to try to clarify this. The BOA will put a press release in next week's paper explaining things more clearly, perhaps including a filled-out sample form.

Mr. Younger reported that he is meeting Wednesday afternoon with the Archdiocese on extending the lease on the Senior Center, so apparently they are now ready to talk.

Initial FY07 Budget Discussion

Town Accountant Barbara Hagg appeared before the Board to make a presentation on Town Administrator Younger's operating budget proposal for the Town for FY07.

Mr. Younger noted that cooperation between school and town has been very good.

Ms. Hagg began by explaining that there are two budgets being presented. One is a Reduced Services budget living within the amount of revenue we will have available. The other is a level services budget which would require additional revenue. We expect to have a total of 4.06% more revenue available than last year, or about \$3.24 million out of roughly \$80 million in total revenue. This includes a 2.5% property tax increase as well as the increase for debt exclusion, new growth, and use of \$850,000 in free cash reserves.

However, the town is facing increased fixed costs in employee health insurance, pension funding obligations, fuel and utilities. We are also facing new debt for capital projects such as the fire stations and the senior center, new software implementation, two more elections than last year, and the opening of the new cemetery.

Under the reduced services budget, we will be able to fund our health insurance and pension funding obligations and maintain our capital projects. We will deliver core services but some DPW summer workers and part-time weekend library positions will have to be cut as well as one police officer and the Youth Coordinator for a total of five full-time equivalent positions. (It was noted that since we are not fully staffed with police officers, this would not mean an officer would be fired but just that a position would not be filled.) We will have to reduce work on sidewalk construction and eliminate some street lights. We will reduce custodial services for town buildings. We will move the Senior Center to modular units at the high school until the new one is built. We will close the Benton library and cut hours at the main library. There would be no burials at the cemetery on Saturday.

By contrast, the Level Services budget would maintain the employee positions and all of the services mentioned as well as restoring the Community Development Assistant Director's position. This would require an operating override of Proposition 2 ½ . The additional amounts would be approximately \$940,000 for the Town and \$1.4 million for the school for a total of approximately \$2.4 million in additional funds.

The presentation concluded with an overview of the budget process timeline. The School Committee will receive a similar presentation to this tomorrow night (Tue 1/10). Hearings will then be held and the town's committees will make their recommendations culminating in a vote at the Annual Town meeting which begins on April 24.

Other

There was brief discussion of concerns about motorists not stopping for pedestrians in crosswalks on Trapelo Road. The Board agreed that the police should increase their efforts to do everything possible to enforce the law in this area and protect pedestrians.

The Board moved: to enter into executive session for the purpose of discussing litigation and not to return to open session.

The motion was carried unanimously (3-0).

(The Board entered executive session at 10:06 PM. During the executive session, one substantive motion passed unanimously.)

Thomas G. Younger
Town Administrator