



Minutes of the
Town of Belmont
REGULAR SESSION
of the
SELECT BOARD
January 30, 2024

RECEIVED
TOWN CLERK
BELMONT, MA

DATE: March 4, 2024
TIME: 9:29 AM

To view the recording of the meeting, please click [HERE](#).

Approved by the Select Board:
Monday, February 26, 2024

I. Call to Order: Mr. Epstein called the meeting to order at 8:32am.

| Select Board Members | Present | Staff Members | |
|-------------------------------------|---------|--|--------|
| Roy Epstein, Chair | Yes | Patrice Garvin, Town Administrator | Yes |
| Elizabeth Dionne, Vice-Chair | Yes | Jennifer Hewitt, ATA/Finance Director | Yes |
| Mark Paolillo, Member | Yes | David Blazon, Director of Facilities | Yes |
| | | Glenn Clancy, Town Engineer | Yes |
| Others Present | | Others Present | |
| Mark Haley, Rink Building Committee | Yes | Geoff Lubien, Warrant Committee Chair | Yes |
| Sarah Boyle, BHS PAC Patrons | Yes | Chris Doyle, Comprehensive Capital Budget Committee Chair (CCBC) | Remote |

II. COMMENTS FROM TOWN RESIDENTS - None

Update on recent gas leak and oil leak

Gas Leaks: Ms. Garvin explained that the smell of natural gas was reported at the Winn Brook School and the Beech Street Center and outlined the response by the town. She pointed out occupants of both buildings had been smelling gas but did not notify the Facilities Department. She then spoke about the challenges of maintaining town buildings and expressed her confidence that the Facilities Department will appropriately address any problems.

Mr. Paolillo asked if there is any technology that the town could use to detect natural gas, rather than rely on individuals to notice it. Mr. Blazon said he would look into it. The Board and Mr. Blazon discussed possible technology, the incidents recently reported, the abilities of Facilities employees, actions to be taken to test town buildings, and investment planning for infrastructure.

Oil Leak: Ms. Garvin explained that on Friday she was notified about an oil leak at the skating rink site where the current building is being demolished. She outlined the staff, contractor, and OPM response. Mass DEP was notified, and they approved the town response. It was estimated that about 10 gallons of heating oil were released on the surface of the site near the tank. She went on to detail how the leak was contained and what follow-up was done, and next steps planned.

Mr. Clancy explained his concerns about storm water when there is an incident like this, specifically Clay Pit Pond. He reviewed what happened in response to the leak and explained why the tank leaked and confirmed that the contractor did not puncture the tank. He also outlined the plan to contain and remove the damaged tank. He confirmed that no oil entered Clay Pit Pond.

There was a discussion of the incident and the tank as well as next steps.

Mr. Haley explained the involvement of the design team, who will be doing sampling and testing as the tank is removed. He pointed out that there were previous leaks from the tank, and that the extent of this will become apparent once the slab under the old mechanical room is lifted. He also explained how the waste oil will be disposed of.

There was a discussion of the leak, tank and next steps.

Ms. Dionne explained that the response from the Select Board was quiet not because they were unaware or uninvolved but because they wanted to allow professionals to address and handle the issues. She added that this is the reason why she opposed putting underground tanks at the DPW.

Mr. Epstein asked about paying for the soil remediation and Mr. Haley confirmed that there is money available in the building budget for this. There was another discussion about next steps and appreciation expressed at the quality of the response.

Possible vote on request from the Belmont High School PAC Patrons, for a one-day liquor license (beer and wine only) for a fundraiser to be held at the Beech Street Center on Friday, February 9, 2024 from the hours of 7:00 PM – 10:00 PM

Ms. Dionne spoke about how much she enjoyed last year's event and looks forward to the one in February. She went on to talk about the important service the PAC provides to performing arts students.

A Motion was made to approve the request from the Belmont High School PAC Patrons, for a one-day liquor license (beer and wine only) for a fundraiser to be held at the Beech Street Center on Friday, February 9, 2024 from the hours of 7:00 PM – 10:00 PM. The motion was seconded and passed unanimously by 3-0 vote.

Discussion and possible vote on request from the Henry Purcell Society of Boston for one-day liquor license (all alcohol) for a fundraiser and musical evening to be held at the Beech Street Center on Wednesday, February 14, 2024 from the hours of 7:00 – 9:00 PM

Ms. Dionne explained that Henry Purcell was a composer in the 1600s and expressed her pride that Belmont is hosting the Henry Purcell Society.

A Motion was made to approve the request from the Henry Purcell Society of Boston, for a one-day liquor license (all alcohol) for a fundraiser and musical evening to be held at the Beech Street Center on Wednesday, February 14, 2024 from the hours of 7:00 PM – 9:00 PM. The motion was seconded and passed unanimously by 3-0 vote.

Discussion and vote on the operating override amount to be placed on the April 2, 2024 Annual Town Election Ballot

Mr. Epstein started by inviting public comment.

Judith Feinleib asked that the Board remember that seniors who have reverse mortgages must have their property taxes paid in full and cannot defer them. Also, if someone wants to get a reverse mortgage and has deferred property taxes, they must pay everything in full including interest. She added that Mr. Epstein's report at Town Meeting indicated that repealing either of the two capital projects would not impact anything in the Operating Budget. While she agreed, repealing would make a difference to the bottom line for residents.

Erin Rowland thanked the Select Board for supporting an override and explained that she wants to see Belmont thrive and spoke about the positive financial impacts on the town.

Heather Rubeski said she had spoken with community members about the override and was buoyed by the level of support for it. She said that residents feel good about Belmont and want the town to be fiscally solid.

Matt Taylor acknowledged the difficulty of the situation and spoke about change management and the work that needs to be done to create a successful community.

Angus Abercrombie spoke about the impacts of the different override amounts under consideration.

Allison Lenk asked how an override could only "last" a certain number of years when it is actually a permanent increase and asked that the Board clarify what this override will be used for and its timeframe. Ms. Dionne explained that no single override solves the problem of town expenses increasing at a higher annual rate than the 2.5% annual tax rate increase allowed by Prop 2 1/2. Mr. Paolillo suggested that the Select Board provide specific information about where any override will be spent.

Ms. Dionne spoke about a compact with the voters, similar to the pledge made by Arlington in its recent successful override campaign, committing to bring down spending growth, and this was discussed.

Ms. Doyle explained that the CCBC voted to have \$500,000 from any override dedicated to capital and that her understanding is that the Select Board is considering only \$250,000, which they also support. She added that the Committee continues to advocate for this amount to be used for building infrastructure and pointed out that funds will be coming to the Town from the State that will be dedicated to sidewalks. She asked that the Select Board maintain flexibility on how the capital funds would be spent.

Ms. Garvin explained why she is recommending that the \$250,000 be dedicated to sidewalks:

- Sidewalks are very deteriorated, and the town receives regular complaints and insurance claims due to people falling.
- Sidewalks are now a public safety issue.
- The current budget of \$225,000 each year only allows the town to “triage” sidewalks.
- The cost of cement has increased significantly.
- The Sidewalk Assessment Plan should allow the town to plan appropriately, rather than triage.
- Investment initiatives that cannot be done due to funding (such as bike lanes, crosswalk improvements, signage, etc.).
- The uses and investments of Discretionary Funds.
- The uncertainty around continued Chapter 90 funding.

There was a discussion of sidewalk investment and problems, as well as plans for growing the Facilities Department.

Ms. Dionne acknowledged the work being done by the CCBC and the Community Preservation Committee to plan for capital needs. She then recommended that creativity is needed to fund capital projects and spoke about some efforts being taken to do this.

Mr. Epstein spoke about the increase in “slip & fall” reports this year, and how the town is responding to the sidewalk problem. He added that the \$250,000 is not enough to address the problem but will help the town make inroads. He went on to explained that the ballot question will state that “the purpose of the override amount is to supplement the town’s capital and operating budget.” He recommended that a separate motion be included stating that “If the override is successful, that the \$250,000 be escalated at 2.5% and be maintained for at least 3 years, after which it can be revisited.”

Mr. Epstein went on to talk about the high costs of many of the needed capital improvements needed in town and options for paying for these items including new debt (once some existing debts have rolled off), and the Capital Endowment Fund.

Mr. Paolillo outlined why he would prefer to vote on the override amount today and identify spending details for sidewalks as Mr. Epstein indicated in his recommended motion, above, as a separate meeting. Ms. Dionne agreed with this suggestion.

There was a discussion of how to proceed with the wording of the ballot question. It was decided to vote on the override amount at this meeting and specific funding allocations at the next meeting.

Mr. Epstein said the town has been working to “bend the curve” of spending, and asked Warrant Committee Chair Geoff Lubien to provide an update on the Committee’s thoughts on this topic.

Mr. Lubien said the Committee does not have a formal recommendation, but there is consensus around:

- The replenishment rate of Free Cash is now \$3,000,000 and they will use this as a starting point for the Operating Budget.
- Any excess Free Cash will be dedicated to a Capital project that year or go into a stabilization fund (either Capital or General). This will stop the town from using one-time funds for ongoing operating expenses.
- A sizeable override is needed to meet the existing structural gap.
- The override will provide the opportunity to make a plan to “bend the curve” downward by maximizing revenue and controlling expenses.
- Most of the Warrant Committee thought a \$7,500,000 override was adequate to meet current needs.
- Bringing Special Ed Out-of-District services in-house was supported, although this will take time but that this is the time to make that investment.
- The Warrant Committee was generally worried about anything beyond \$7,500,000 getting passed.

- Strong communication will be needed to get any override passed.
- A compact with residents is needed.
- A cross-functional working group has been established which includes the School Department, School Committee, Warrant Committee, and the Town to work on how to forecast and manage OOD costs. Their work will be part of the compact to help illustrate that rigor and discipline are being used for fiscal decisions.

There was a discussion about the Warrant Committee's position and the Select Board's support for the potential override amounts.

Ms. Dionne spoke about the need for the School Department to work within this year's override amount and to work "faster, smarter, better", and streamline their operations to deliver a better product with the funding they will have. If the override passes, this will be the largest infusion the School Department will receive. The next override request will be smaller. She then spoke about the Select Board's efforts to expand new growth.

There was a discussion of actions being taken to accomplish the goal of reducing expense growth and revenue growth and which override amount to support.

Aaron Pikcilingis spoke about sidewalks being a macrocosm of issues in town that have been underfunded for a long time and a reflection of short-term fiscal prudence that have long-term negative effects.

Ms. Hewitt outlined the proposed Override Mitigation Fund that presumes an \$8,400,000 override and shows excess funds that would be held aside for use in future years. Based on the current Free Cash Policy, using \$1,500,000 for the Chenery Boilers, \$3,000,000 for unrecurring operating budget support, and removing the Opioid Stabilization Fund there is a remaining amount of \$3,129,439. The proposal is to dedicate this money to create an Override Mitigation Fund. She then outlined the structure and funding sources for this fund and how it would then be used for the FY26 budget and beyond.

| Proposal - Override Mitigation Fund | | | |
|--|--------------|-----------|-----------|
| The purpose of the Override Mitigation Fund is to set-aside monies intended for use in future years to supplement operating budgets. The figures shown below reflect current modeling for an \$8.4M override, with appropriations to the fund and intended uses in out-years. If additional revenues come to the Town in the future, policy makers may choose to offset drawdowns from this fund, thereby extending the time period between overrides. | | | |
| | FY2025 | FY2026 | FY2027 |
| Free Cash - FY2025 | \$ 3,129,439 | | |
| Tax Levy - Seed \$ | \$ 930,000 | | |
| Interest Earnings (est.) | \$ 162,378 | \$ 99,204 | \$ 17,581 |
| TBD | \$ - | \$ - | \$ - |
| Total Revenue | \$ 4,221,817 | \$ 99,204 | \$ 17,581 |

There were questions and discussion of the proposed mitigation fund and how it would work, with the Select Board being supportive of the recommendation.

There was a discussion of the details of wording for the motion to identify the override amount.

Mr. Epstein explained that the Select Board understands the magnitude of the override and that he believes the number will be acceptable to many of the residents.

Ms. Dionne pointed out that the number is painful but also responsible and does require discipline and planning to avoid being in a similar situation in three years.

A Motion was made to place on the April 2, 2024 Town Election Ballot the following question:

Question 1: "Shall the Town of Belmont be allowed to assess an additional \$8,400,000 in real estate and personal property taxes for the purposes of supplementing the capital budget and the town and school operating budgets for the fiscal year beginning July first, two thousand twenty-four".

The motion was seconded and passed unanimously by a 3-0 vote.

Ms. Garvin pointed out that now that this has been voted and will be on the ballot, the town cannot use any resources to advocate for the ballot question, although it can provide facts and information.

Adjournment

A motion was made to adjourn the meeting of the Belmont Select Board Committee, and the motion was seconded and passed unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 10:24am.

Respectfully submitted by,

Susan Peghiny, Recording Secretary