

Warrant Committee FY07 Meeting Minutes
April 11, 2007, 7:30 p.m.
Chenery Middle School Community Room

Meeting was called to order at 7:32 by Chair Jones.

Present: Town Administrator Younger, Assistant Town Administrator Conti, Town Accountant Hagg; BOS Chair Firenze; School Committee Chair Bowe; Town Treasurer Carmen

Absent: Members Christensen, Bruschi, Paolillo, Doblin, and Tillotson

Discussion of Warrant Articles for Annual Town Meeting

Chair Jones invited the Retirement Board (RB) to the WC table to discuss three articles: 6, 7 and 14.

Article 6 (“Non-Contributory Pensions”) refers to non-contributory pensions. These are pensions for employees (or their surviving spouses) who worked for the community prior to 1939 (which was when the “contributory” pension was established). There is only one retiree in this category. Member Heigham motioned for favorable action; the motion was seconded. All WC members in favor.

Article 7 (“Contributory Pensions”) pertains to funding of pension costs for the Belmont Contributory Retirement system. Member Heigham motioned for favorable action; the motion was seconded. All WC members in favor.

A question arose regarding the funding status of the retirement pension. Member Widmer reported that it has \$60M, which is considered “half funded”. Belmont's performance has lagged, said Widmer. The RB disagreed, calling this a "misnomer." Chair Jones redirected the conversation back to the Warrant Articles.

Regarding Article 14 (“Accidental Death Benefit Increase for Surviving Children”), the Retirement Board referred to a handout: ***Chapter 55 of the Acts of 2006 Accidental Death Benefit Increase for Dependent Allowance.*** Warrant Article 14 pertains to the local option that allows for cost of living increase for death benefits to be granted to surviving dependent children because of the death of a member of system “in line of duty death.” The dependent benefit has been \$312 until the age of 18 (or, in the case of a college student, until age 22). Total benefit is 72% of the employee’s compensation rates, as set in 1951. In 1987 an accelerator was applied, but only for children of ordinary (non-work-related) disability, not for children of accidental death. Favorable action on this article would allow for a built-in cost of living increase, thereby increasing the benefit to \$648.48 per year. There are presently no qualifying dependent children in Belmont at this time. Member Hofmann asked if they (i.e., qualifying dependent

children) would be covered by workers compensation and, if so, would this benefit be in addition to that? The RB replied that it is their belief that surviving dependents cannot receive both workers compensation and this benefit at the same time – “the benefit is capped”. Member Allison put forth that, since Belmont can't finance the benefits it's already promised, what is the case for adding more benefits to an under-funded system? 72% of the current salary is locked in as a pension benefit, replied the RB, this is just an additional yearly benefit for dependent children. Again, no one presently qualifies, so it has no financial impact at this time.

Member Widmer noted that it is a “tiny amount of money”, but we are struggling to fund the retiree liability, and therefore we need to be careful about adding benefits. Our responsibility, Widmer said, is to fund the benefits we have now. Member Hofmann again raised the issue of workers compensation benefits. “What exactly are those benefits?” he asked, “I would like to know what those benefits are before supporting this.”

Chair Jones requested that the RB return with the information Member Hofmann asked for, at which time the WC would return to Article 14.

Chair Jones then invited the Library Trustees to the WC table to discuss Article 19 (“Library Building Committee”).

Chair Jones reported that the Library Trustees had submitted this article to the BOS for support, and the BOS was unanimously opposed. Library Trustee Chair Hal Shubin explained the request:

We are requesting \$300K in funding to establish a building committee. The goal of the building committee is to move ahead with plans for a new library. If we wait until the grant money is available, there may not be enough time to do the necessary design work. It makes sense for us to be prepared now. We would receive certain extensions if the State sees that we are moving ahead and the building committee keeps the grant money alive, and it keeps the idea of new library alive. We will have raised about \$5.3M and we expect \$2.4M more. It will cost \$20-\$29M to build a new library. The current library clearly does not meet the needs of the town and if we wait longer to build, we will incur maintenance and repair costs of \$3-5M due to building costs increasing. Belmont is 10th on the list, and the State is prepared to spend \$33M in grant money, including Belmont.

Member Oates asked if the grant money was for new construction or renovations? Chair Shubin answered that some of the money will be for new construction, some for renovations, and some for additions. He continued: it would cost almost as much for a renovation as a new building in Belmont. Member Hofmann asked: Why was the BOS opposed? BOS Chair Firenze replied that the Library Trustees were now asking for \$300K which was not requested when the trustees originally asked to have a Building Committee formed. We just don't feel it's appropriate at this time, given everything else

that is needed. There are lots of costs associated with replacing the building on that site such as underground parking, temporary relocation expenses and tearing down a usable building. Adding the fact that the Capital Projects Review Committee has just been formed, they may find other options which should be considered. The existing building, as is, has a lot of inherent value and could be used as a medical office building, for example.

Chair Shubin replied that the library site issue has been looked at exhaustively and doing it again won't turn up any new information. There is not enough space or parking to build a new library in town center.

Member Heigham noted 3 problems: 1) \$18M would have to be bonded; 2) there is talk about private donations, but we've only seen half of what the Senior Center claimed it would raise; 3) the prior architects' designs have given nothing in the way of results.

Chair Shubin replied that we have initial design plans from the architects, and the funds for that came from state grant money.

Member White stated that the \$300K makes sense if we're sure we're going to do the project. However, the tax rate is due to go up 33% with a scheduled set of overrides for the roads, the Wellington, and now \$18M for a new library? This \$18M comes ahead of which other capital projects? White wondered. Chair Jones confessed to feeling conflicted on this issue. Clearly it would mean adding another project – and should the WC be the gate-keeper in deciding which projects get moved forward? Or, he asked, should the voters decide on a menu of options for overrides? Member Allison concurred, suggesting that the voters could be given a menu of capital projects so they could vote for Wellington or roads or the Library or all or some.

Library Board Trustee Matt Lowrie agreed that there are many issues here that need to be addressed. We also have to look at the price of not doing anything, he said. BOS Member Firenze noted that this is a significant amount of money, and that sometimes leadership means saying No: “These decisions have to be made in the context of all the demands on the capital budget, the roads, education, the Senior Center -- how to find a balance?” Member Curtis said he understands Chair Jones' thought of letting the voters decide, but feels it is appropriate for the WC to make recommendations – and that the Wellington is more important than the library at this time. Member Callanan agreed that choices can be put before the voters, with the WC making recommendations. Let's try not to pit one interest of the town against another, she said, overrides don't pass when the town is divided.

Lowrie said he favored a Wellington override, but followed by a Library override. The building committee needs to be formed to keep the possibility open to present it to voters, he said. Member Widmer stated that he was a strong advocate of the library, and that a new one is needed, but agreed that we can't proceed with the building committee unless we're serious about bringing it (a new library) to the voters. The WC has a gate-keeper role, he said, and the Wellington School is the priority.

Member Heigham motioned for unfavorable action on this article (Article 19); the motion was seconded. 8 members voted for the motion, 4 were opposed.

Anne Mahon from the audience stated that she agrees with Member Allison and Chair Jones that it (a new library) should be the voters' choice and not that of the three selectman or 16 appointed individuals on the WC. She felt that by introducing the library in a tier structure, similar to that which the SC uses, that the Wellington would have a better chance of passing in an override.

Reports from Subcommittees

Chair Jones said that Member Oates would now present her subcommittee report on Public Works, Community Development, and Building Services, after which the WC would return to the Warrant articles.

A multi-page handout about the subcommittee was provided and reviewed. Chair Jones asked if the subcommittee was confident that the Building Services Department will have the funding for oil and gas, given that we have more space to heat. The budget looked fine at this point for those expenses. Member White noted that it had been a mild winter, which would have helped that line item. Chair Jones nevertheless requested more information on heating and utilities, "given that we are adding buildings [e.g., fire stations] to our footprint."

Member Oates noted that in Community Development, there was no assistant for Glenn Clancy. This coming year they will be adding a student intern, whom they would like to extend for the summer. Member Hofmann expressed concern for the lack of assistant for Glenn: "From a management point of view, Glenn needs backup if he gets sick – we should consider designating a number two person." Town Administrator Younger noted that the department has been restructured in such a way to assist Glenn.

There is planning underway in Public Works around billing changes, Member Oates continued. We are looking for a software program for Highland Meadows, and we have requested \$1.2M to continue water main replacement program, she said. BOS Chair Firenze noted that the mutual use of equipment was discussed at the regionalization group meeting.

Return to Discussion of Warrant Articles for Annual Town Meeting

Chair Jones stated that we need to take positions on the Warrant articles by the end of next week.

Regarding Article 2 (“Authorization to Represent Town’s Legal Interests”), favorable action was motioned by Heigham; the motion was seconded and was passed with all in favor.

Article 3 (“Authorization to Transfer Balances”) will be deferred until the June Town Meeting.

Article 4 (“Budget Appropriation”) concerns the budget, and will likewise be deferred until the June Town Meeting.

Regarding Article 5 (“Salaries of Elected Officials”), Member Widmer asked, “From where do the proposed salary numbers for Town Clerk and Town Treasurer come?” Town Accountant Hagg replied that the salary numbers were recommended by Department Heads. Widmer provided clarification on the raise increase formula: For those above the midpoint, it is equal to the average percentage increase for management personnel; for those below the midpoint, it is 4 percent plus the average management increase. Because these are elected positions and the individuals don’t report to anyone, the Warrant Committee has followed this policy in recent years and has taken the lead in presenting the salary recommendations to Town Meeting.

A discussion ensued about the appropriate number for Town Clerk and Town Treasurer positions – is the connection to management raises based on the current fiscal year or the next fiscal year? Member White suggested that it be the current year rather than a forecast for the next year. Which would mean a 4 percent increase for the Town Clerk who is above the midpoint of the Clerk’s range, and the same 4 percent plus 3 percent (instead of 4 percent) for the Town Treasurer, which would bring him to the midpoint of the Treasurer’s range. Member Widmer said this would be consistent with past practice and would not require any change to the numbers presented in Article 5. Upon motion made and seconded, it was unanimously voted to support Article 5.

Regarding Article 8 (“Appropriation of “Up Front” [i.e., Chapter 90] Funds for Highway Improvements”), Chair Jones motioned for favorable action; the motion was seconded, all were in favor, approved as presented for favorable action.

Regarding Article 9 (“Position Classification and Compensation Plan”), Diane Crimmins will come in next week for a presentation to the WC.

Articles 12 (“Authorization of Expenditure from Revolving Funds”) and 13 (“Rock Meadow Maintenance”) will be handled next week.

Regarding Article 14, we are awaiting information (as noted earlier).

Article 15 (“Voting in Adjudicatory Hearings”) pertains to Adjudication Hearings. The BOS is in favor, but did not report on it.

For Articles 16 (“Disability Access Commission”) and 17 (“Zoning – Housekeeping Amendments”), there is no need to report.

Article 18 (“Zoning – Public Building Conversion to Multi-Family Housing”) pertains to the former site of the Fairview Ave. fire station. The current owner requests a zoning change to allow 2 units to become 3 units. There may be a neighborhood benefit. The BOS is waiting on the Planning Board's decision before deciding, said BOS Chair Firenze. Town Administrator Younger noted that this was a “Citizen's petition” to put it on the ballot.

Donna Ruvolo from the audience noted that this neighborhood was “mostly a two family neighborhood.”

Chair Jones opted to wait for the Planning Board recommendation as well.

Minutes Approved for 4-4-07

After corrections were made, the minutes of 4-4-07 were approved, with two abstentions (from members who had been absent).

Member Heigham motioned to adjourn the meeting at 9:32.

Submitted by Lisa Gibalerio
Recording Secretary