

MINUTES
BOARD OF SELECTMEN
SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2007
SPECIAL JOINT SESSION
COMMUNITY ROOM, CHENERY MIDDLE SCHOOL
8:00 AM

A special meeting of the Board was called to order in open session at 8:00 AM in the Community Room of the Chenery Middle School. All members were present. Town Administrator Tom Younger and Assistant Town Administrator Jeff Conti were also present. The Board met in joint session with the Warrant Committee to hear from Town departments regarding their FY08 budget requests.

Selectmen's remarks and opening discussion

Mr. Younger briefly reviewed the overall numbers. The currently proposed budget creates a \$2.8 million deficit over revenues. The total Town budget comes in at \$79.18 million while revenue estimates are at \$76.34 million.

Selectman Firenze expressed the need to address maintenance issues around the Town and supported the idea of applying some of the Town's free cash to meet this need as part of the operating budget. He also said that instead of trying to apply small cuts across the board to close the gap, he would prefer to find one or more programs that can be eliminated so as not to "starve" all the other programs.

Selectman Brownsberger shared a graph showing that Belmont's property taxes have grown at a slower rate than the statewide average over the past few years because of the decision not to implement annual overrides. He noted that the Town is pursuing efforts to address some of the inflationary pressures in the budget such as health insurance. He reviewed the Town's reserve policy of maintaining 10% of revenues as reserves. The Town's current reserve balance is at 16.4% or \$5.1 million in excess of the goal. Mr. Brownsberger said we certainly should be using this money in some fashion. He also pointed out that last year our revenue estimate at budget time was \$1 million lower than it was 6 months later, suggesting that the FY08 estimate is also low. There was some disagreement among the Warrant Committee, suggesting that last year's revenues contained elements that are not likely to repeat again in FY08. Treasurer Floyd Carman said there will be an additional \$500,000 in investment earnings for FY07. Selectman Brownsberger then showed an analysis indicating that the Town could use up to \$2.6 million of its free cash for the FY08 operating budget and an additional \$600,000 for capital and health care reserve and still have enough free cash in FY09 to avoid the need for an override.

Finance

Assessors

Assessing Administrator Dick Simmons said the Board of Assessors is presenting an essentially level funded budget. There is one increase for a new license that will allow use of the new GIS system.

There was a discussion of the department's estimates for new growth and how those are arrived at.

Treasurer

Mr. Carman said the Treasurer's FY08 budget is a \$21,380 increase over FY07, all of which comes from salary elements. Non-personnel items have been level funded. The department will need to use a part-time employee to move and sort extensive records in the old Light Building.

On debt service, the cost of borrowing is increasing by \$158,325.

Retirement

Thomas Gibson appeared for the Retirement Board. He said the Town pays out about \$7.5 million each year in retirement benefits. The average annual pension is \$19,000 and is funded by contributions from current employees and a contribution from the Town. The Retirement Board has been getting an excellent investment return which has helped to keep the retirement fund healthy. The Board's investments target a return of 8.25% in order to be fully funded by 2025, three years before the Town is legally required to be.

Human Services

Health/Animal Control/Sealer/Veterans

Board of Health Chair Dr. David Alper appeared before the Board. The Health Department is asking for an increased budget and an increase in personnel, as they are providing more services and taking on more state mandates every year. Meanwhile, the department is maximizing its income, having brought in over \$20,000 in grants, and obtained reimbursements from state and federal agencies whenever possible for services such as flu clinics.

The department is asking for a new full-time nurse position to focus on communicable diseases as required by the state. Current staff are being stretched with responsibilities like camp and day care inspections and hazardous materials use inspections. Health Director Donna Moultrup is a registered nurse, but the next director will not be, so it is necessary to begin to prepare for that.

Mark Paolillo asked if it is possible to contract out nursing services. Dr. Alper said that in the event of a regional emergency you don't want to be at the mercy of the priorities of a contractor who has to service other communities as well. There was discussion of working with other towns to regionalize this service. Ms. Moultrup said the Board of Health is willing to work with other towns but there are obstacles that have limited our ability to do that to this point. Belmont has a minimum need for a 20-hour nurse, so the Town could work with another town to split a full-time position.

There was concern about hiring a full-time person if the need is only 20 hours. It was explained that the department has been unable to fill a part-time position or find a company that will provide contract public health nursing services. Pat Bruschi suggested combining the position with a school nurse to make a full time position.

Dr. Alper said the department is also asking to increase the hazardous waste budget item from \$5,000 to \$7,500 to reflect the actual cost of that program.

Youth Commission

Laurie Graham, Chair of the Youth Commission, said the Town has a new Youth Services Coordinator who started in September and is doing a wonderful job. The Youth center is drawing 40-100 students per night depending on the function.

Council on Aging (COA)

COA Director Nava Niv-Vogel: said she has asked for some very modest increases to replenish cuts in professional development, vehicle repair and office supplies that were made in prior years. This year the COA is saving money on rent of its building and will eliminate that cost when the new Senior Center is built. There will also be other opportunities to save money with the new building including utility savings through green building design.

Lynn Doblin suggested that transportation services may not be core functions for the department and asked if those can be picked up by other agencies or contracted out. Ms. Niv-Vogel replied that for the most part, Springwell and other regional agencies will not pick up local medical ride services.

Jim Heigham asked how many distinct visitors the Senior Center gets in a week. Ms. Niv-Vogel said they get about 500 people per week and no more than 25% of those are repeat visitors.

Public Works

Community Development/Planning/Economic Development

Community Development Director Glenn Clancy explained that there were inadvertent omissions of items carried forward from last year totaling \$1,600. Under professional services, some money was restored in the fall from additional state aid. Mr. Clancy would like to request an additional \$11,000 over the budgeted figure to carry over most of this additional money in this very important account for the department. He is also requesting \$16,200 for office equipment that will do map preparation and color copies in-house, to generate better presentation materials and make use of the capabilities of the GIS system. The items are a color copier and a color plotter for larger scale maps.

It was clarified that last year the budget included a plotter in the IT department. Community Development can use this plotter, but it is becoming very inconvenient not having it in their offices. There are also a few color copiers in the Town but they do not have the capability to make 11 x 17 copies which is the minimum practical size for presentation materials.

Planning Director Jay Szklut said that last year the department had to use money from other accounts to cover Planning's personal services expenditures. Belmont is facing increased costs this year for review of McLean redevelopment work.

Mr. Szklut presented some small capital requests for presentation purposes including a laptop, projector, digital camera, and screen totaling \$5,550. There was agreement among Warrant Committee members and the Selectmen that these items are necessary for the department to do its job.

Mr. Clancy said the engineering and inspection budgets are essentially the same as last year. The department continues to get leaner and more efficient.

Pat Bruschi and Selectman Firenze said the Town can't be funding review of private projects like McLean and the Uplands at the expense of the professional services needed for routine projects, when it is expected that we will be getting sufficient building fee revenue to deal with those special cases.

Mark Paolillo asked why the projection for building permit revenue is decreasing for FY08. Mr. Clancy said he was not certain that the ARC project will proceed according to schedule.

Buildings

Building Services Manager Kevin Looney said that the department's budget is decreasing from last year. There will be higher costs for utilities and for maintaining the new fire stations, but also a decrease in telephone costs because the Town will be completing a transition in providers and will no longer have to carry both of them.

Mr. Looney said the current staffing levels will not be sufficient to maintain more new buildings. The FY08 budget includes operating costs for the old Light Department building which were formerly picked up by the Light Department.

There was discussion of the line item for major building repairs, which is decreasing by \$70,000, and whether that is sufficient to meet the town's needs. Selectman Firenze said this is clearly an area where we should be directing some of our free cash.

Mr. Looney noted that he would like to be doing more planning and forecasting but is having to do double duty as a manager and a front-line supervisor.

DPW

Town Accountant Barbara Hagg noted that there was an error in calculation of the total for fleet maintenance that increases the bottom line by \$177,000.

Public Works Director Peter Castanino said that centralization of administrative functions of the divisions under DPW administration is continuing. The salary line should be about \$14,000 less this year due to a consolidation of two positions. He is asking for \$6,000 for permitting software to handle street opening permits and link them to the GIS. This will allow the department to track permits more efficiently and allow re-inspection of trenches after the work has been completed.

DPW is also requesting \$35,000 in new funding for soil removal, because it will no longer be possible to deposit soil at the incinerator site once it is capped and it will have to be hauled to a landfill. Also added to this year's budget is \$15,000 to rent a piece of equipment to cut overgrowth of shrubs and trees into the public ways.

The sidewalk construction item is increasing to \$100,000 to try to make some headway on the list of outstanding maintenance items. Some of this money may come from the pavement management program or Chapter 90 state funds so this item may need to be changed.

The department is requesting \$4,800 to replace the rear part of a street line painting machine. Selectman Firenze asked if this could be contracted out and how much it would cost. Mr. Castanino said it would cost about the same to contract it out but keeping it in-house means more flexibility with scheduling the work when it is needed. Mr. Castanino did acknowledge that when he analyzed this several years ago, the comparison did not include the cost of retirement and health insurance, however the employees who paint streets also plow roads and do other tasks for the department.

There was discussion of the snow removal budget and the state law that allows towns to add snow removal costs to the tax rate provided the Town budgets at least as much as the prior year in this area.

The fleet maintenance budget not only covers the maintenance of the Town's vehicles but also much of the cost of the facility where the COA and animal control vehicles are housed. The Town maintains about 130 vehicles plus many smaller equipment items. There was discussion about outsourcing or regionalizing this function. Mr. Castanino pointed out that having this function in-house means that Belmont can service its snowplows and emergency vehicles 24/7 and in the middle of a snowstorm. The department is requesting to purchase a light truck tire changer, a snowplow blade safety lift, and a parts software upgrade for \$15,100.

Last year summer help to takes care of 51 deltas and vacant lots was eliminated; the FY08 budget restores funding for this.

The Parks and Facilities budget includes \$8,000 to replace the zamboni batteries which last about 8 years. The Cemetery budget includes \$28,000 for software to work with the GIS system.

Water Enterprise

Mr. Castanino said the Town is one-third of the way into a thirty-year program to replace all the unlined water mains in the Town. Inflation has impacted the ability to do this work while continuing to make other capital improvements. The Water Division has been able to cut costs for meter reading by combining meter reading with the Light Department and using new technology that allows remote meter reading. The Light Department is also handling the water and sewer billing and will charge that cost back to DPW.

Sewer Enterprise

The Town's MWRA assessment represents about 60% of the sewer budget.

The Board agreed to meet with the Warrant Committee on Wednesday evening for further discussion of reserve fund usage.

The Board discussed having a public planning process with the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC), Arlington and Cambridge to address strategies on transportation, water quality, and Alewife Reservation issues. MAPC will organize and fund this process.

The Board moved: To support a regional public planning process for the stated issues under the guidance of MAPC.

Motion carried unanimously (3-0).

The Board adjourned at 1:34 PM.

Thomas G. Younger, Town Administrator