Finance and Warrant Committee Minutes

March 19, 2019

Dave Roberts, Cecilia Emery Butler, Kevin Hughes, Michelle Persson Reilly, Kevin Preston, Jon Heffernan, Susan Fay, Marty Lindemann, and Beth Pierce present.

Mr. Preston called the meeting to order at 6:34. He gave the opportunity for public comment, and there was none. Mr. Roberts took the floor to explain a document distributed to the committee on the tax rate comparison from 2002 to present.

Mr. Preston informed the committee that selectman butler would be presenting to them historical information on Dedham’s tax rate at a future meeting. He gave the opportunity for public comment. There was none.

The committee moved to discussion of the proposed reserve fund transfers.

Denise Moroney, director of facilities, took the floor to present her transfer requests. The school facilities department has a request to mitigate water damage to several rooms in the middle school. While they have filed an insurance claim, the budget does not contain enough funding to cover the costs.

Mr. Heffernan asked if the damage was contained to the bandroom. Ms. Moroney answered that it had spread to the boiler room and electrical room.

Mr. Preston asked why the drain was insufficient to prevent the water damage. Ms. Moroney answered that the sink was in the art room, and so suffers a great deal of unusual things being sent down the drain.

Mr. Lindemann raised the concern that this could happen again.

Mr. Lindemann motioned to approve the request. Ms. Persson Reilly seconded, it was approved 9-0.

Mr. Munchbach, town clerk, took the floor to present his requests.

Mr. Munchbach’s department has two requests. Early voting was busier than usual this year, and required higher levels of staffing which exceeded the anticipated costs for election staffing. The request is for $1500 to properly staff the upcoming town election. Mr. Roberts asked if this would be adequate for the upcoming elections. Mr. Munchbach answered yes.

Mr. Roberts motioned to approve the transfer for $1500 to the town clerk’s account. Beth Pierce seconded. It was approved 9-0.

The second request from the town clerk’s office is for $2100 for public safety at upcoming elections and town meeting. This price increased due to the need to pay overtime to superior officers.

Mr. Hughes asked if they could be staffed by fewer superior officers. Mr. Munchbach answered no, the overtime goes to bid.

Ms. Fay asked if the police presence was mandated by state law. Mr. Munchbach answered that they are at all elections. They often assist in the election process by delivering and storing ballots.

Mr. Lindemann motioned to transfer the $2100 to the Town Clerk’s office. Mr. Roberts seconded. It was approved 9-0.

Nancy Baker of the Town Manager’s office took the floor to request $12,000 to pay the search firm who will be assisting in the search for the new Town Manager. The firm was chosen after an interview with 3 prospective firms by the selectboard.

Ms. Persson Reilly asked if the three firms were similar in cost. Ms. Baker answered that Community Paradigm was 3-5 thousand dollars less expensive than the others.

Mr. Roberts motioned to approve the request for $12,000 for the firm. Mr. Lindemann seconded. It was approved 9-0.

Jason Mammone of the Engineering Department took the floor to present the operating budget for his department.

The total request is $578,751. The majority of the change from previous budgets is in the payroll department. Mr. Mammone explained that the operating budget is essentially level funded, with cost of living increases in the payroll department. There is an engineering employee who is now being paid in part out of the sewer enterprise rather than the engineering budget. Mr. Preston asked how large the increase to the engineering budget would have been if the employee had not been accounted for differently. Ms. Terkelsen explained that this change was actually made in fiscal year 2019, so there is no need to adjust the number.

Mr. Roberts asked about the new GIS technician position. Mr. Mammone answered that it was new last year. Mr. Roberts asked about a step discrepancy for an employee. Mr. Mammone explained that particularly employee received a step increase mid-year due to an unusual hire time.

Mr. Preston asked if any other employees were newly paid out of the sewer enterprise. Ms. Terkelsen answered no.

Mr. Preston explained that there is pressure on this year’s budget, and asked Mr. Mammone to consider where in his budget he could save money. He asked if their internship was providing crucial value to their workforce.

Mr. Heffernan mentioned that the inflow and infiltration program has been very successful in recent years at keeping sewer rates down, and asked if Mr. Mammone saw that trend continuing. Mr. Mammone answered that for now we are continuing to succeed, but have plateaued and are seeing neighboring communities mimicking our successful program.

Joe Flanagan took the floor to present the budget for the department of public works.   
  
Ms. Terkelsen explained that there will be a demonstration of software for the town on Thursday and invited the committee to attend.

Mr. Flanagan noted that his budget has a significant number of carry-forward items from previous years. There is a new employee position request for a Special Motor Vehicle Operator, which will be paid out of the sewer enterprise.

Mr. Preston asked about the changes to street lighting. Ms. Terkelsen answered that street lighting was a line item in a separate department.

Mr. Roberts asked for a more in-depth explanation of the carry-forwards in the budget. Ms. Terkelsen explained that they occur when an expense incurs in a prior year but do not finish getting paid, and were already budgeted for and allocated. These are essentially a more planned out version of prior year bills. Carry-forwards possess several legal restrictions on their use.

Mr. Preston asked what the street lighting budget covered. Mr. Flanagan explained that it covers everything to do with street lighting, including a joint project with Eversource. Mr. Flanagan explained that the reason for the volatility of the street lighting costs is grants in recent years.

Mr. Hughes asked how the Vehicle Maintenance line item increased from $90,000 to $198,000. Mr. Flanagan explained that it used to be a line item in the snow and ice budget and has moved out.

Ms. Fay asked how many street lights we have. Mr. Flanagan answered over 3000.

Mr. Preston asked how the snow & ice expenses were developing this year. Mr. Flanagan explained that they had just increased by a further $300,000.

Ms. Emery Butler asked about the recently developed technology of plastic streets. Mr. Flanagan answered that they wont seriously consider it until the Mass DOT approves it.

Ms. Terkelsen explained that the trash and recycling budget expenses are mounting, and have exceeded the previously approved amount. Mr. Flanagan explained that there have been significant changes to recycling and garbage disposal in recent years.

Mr. Preston asked how much we would save if we had a contamination rate of 0%, vs our current 24%. Mr. Flanagan answered that it would save several hundred thousand dollars. He explained that bulk item pickup runs roughly $150,000 a year. Waste management contract negotiation is ongoing.

Mr. Heffernan asked how long we would perform recycling education until we moved to enforcement. Mr. Flanagan answered it was for the Selectboard to decide.

Mr. Hughes asked about an apparent repetition of an expense in the budget. Mr. Flanagan explained the distinction between the two items.

Mr. Lindemann asked about a town initiative about shoveling sidewalks. Mr. Flanagan answered that he was not involved but supported the effort.

John Sisson took the floor to present on behalf of the Planning Department and Economic Development department. He began the presentation for thePplanning and Zoning department. Mr. Sisson explained that there are 3 high points of the budget he wants to call attention to. There have been turnover issues with the position of a Town Planner. Mr. Sisson has been working with the planning department, which works collaboratively and staffs multiple boards and committees. He sees a need for increase capacity in the planning department to manage permitting, planning, and zoning work while supporting its boards. Mr. Sisson called attention to projects that have been delayed or grants lost by a lack of available staffing. He proposes that they hire a town planner and a junior planner to meet the needs of the department. The budget has been cut to try to make up the cost gap. Mr. Sisson explained that the current proposal is a 26% increase to the town planner’s office budget.

Mr. Sisson explained that the presence of a second planner can also serve as insurance against staffing turnover and help us build staff development.

Mr. Kern explained that he is aware the planning office is stretched thin. However, adding an entire full time position is a tricky proposition. He suggested the junior employee would take over a current part time position on the town webpage.

Mr. Kern explained that he sees the need for increased planning in Dedham. However, this is only valuable so long as there is business demand to sustain it.

Mr. Heffernan explained that he believes the town planner is an important position. However, he feels that the senior planner should be hired first, and should be strongly involved in the hiring of the junior planner position. Mr. Kern suggested that the hiring field for town planners is currently difficult, and they may wish to seize upon the good candidates they have received. Mr. Heffernan suggested that the opportunity to develop a junior position may be part of the appeal for enticing a senior position.

Mr. Lindemann explained that he feels it is a situation where it may be or may not be the right choice, depending on the candidates. He asked about the history of the two town planners they are interviewing. Mr. Sisson explained that one is indeed senior and the other junior. Mr. Lindemann encouraged the management to seize upon the good candidates while they have access to them.

Mr. Preston explained that he would feel better about the dynamic if a senior planner were hired first, entrenched in the position, and had say in the hiring of the junior. He expressed concerns about the relationship dynamic if they were hired on the same day.

Mr. Roberts asked if our salary structure for town planners was competitive. Mr. Sisson answered yes. Mr. Roberts agreed with the plan laid forth by Mr. Heffernan.

Mr. Lindemann agreed that it could be more ideal to hire a senior staffer and have them assist in hiring a junior staffer under certain conditions, but he sees more advantage in hiring candidates who can do the work at a time when the work needs to get done.

Mr. Preston raised the point that the committee has moved a bit far into deliberations.

Mr. Sisson moved to explaining the Parking Management and Town Bus. He explained that the parking kiosks in Dedham square have reached the end of their useful life. They are currently evaluating parking technology and different parking enforcement strategies. There is a budget item for $49,500 for parking enforcement, which would be used for the rollout of new technology and installation of new signage.

Mr. Preston asked how much revenue the kiosks currently bring in. Ms. Terkelsen estimated $40,000 in parking fees. Mr. Sisson explained it was low due to lack of enforcement. Mr. Preston asked what the personnel costs are. Mr. Sisson explained that it is difficult to calculate but exceeds the income.

Mr. Preston suggested Mr. Sisson should have selected a new parking program ahead of time prior to money being apportioned for it. Mr. Kern explained there may be costs for enforcement and personnel that will be needed before next November.

Mr. Sisson explained that the town pays $139,000 annually for the operation of a Town bus. The costs are roughly $75 per hour with only 2 people per hour on average. Attempts to increase ridership have not seen significant changes, and there are two options they hope to evaluate. One is to dispatch drivers on a call for service basis. This would cost a similar amount per person as the bus does now. Another possibility is to use money to purchase a vehicle for use by the Council on Aging.

Mr. Kern explained that his predecessor also sought to remove the usage of the bus. At that town meeting, people raised complaints about the bus, such as its schedule and tardiness. However, its services have been significantly improved, and receive very few complaints these days. There has not been enough ridership to make the program worth its cost.

Mr. Preston pointed out that the last two topics of discussions both seem to come out as failures, and asked why to continue making efforts at the program. Mr. Kern explained that cancelling this program was attempted in the past, but decisions are made at Town Meeting.

Ms. Persson Reilly asked about the demographics of the ridership, and if they need assistance in the future if the bus is discontinued. Mr. Sisson answered that most are from the public housing units or seniors.

Ms. Fay asked if there was a transportation committee. Mr. Kern answered that there is, but they focus on traffic calming measures and have no relationship with this bus. Ms. Fay asked about the Dedham square planning committee. Mr. Sisson explained that the focus of that group is a focus on the future of Dedham Square.

Mr. Sisson explained that he believes parking should at least be revenue neutral.

Ms. Fay asked where the bus was in the budget. Mr. Kern explained it is in the Town Manager’s budget.

Mr. Lindemann asked if the bus had capacity for handicap accessibilities. Mr. Sisson answered that it has a wheelchair lift. Mr. Lindemann asked why this program was not specifically going after the high-needs customer base. Mr. Kern explained that that level of service is performed by the Council on Aging. He clarified that the goals of the bus system, as laid out by town meeting, are a public transit system. Mr. Lindemann suggested that they be prepared with advanced data if they hope to remove this at town meeting.

Mr. Heffernan asked how much time was needed to inform ridership after discontinuing the bus service. Mr. Lindemann estimated 3-6 months.

Mr. Roberts asked why parking was charged for at Dedham square, since we want people to shop there. Mr. Kern answered that parking management downtown is in service of the businesses, and it is in the best interest of the businesses that the cars have to move. Charging a nominal fee has been shown to work slightly better than enforcement, which can be expensive. When you are charged for the amount of time you overstay, it is better for the businesses than flat tickets.

Mr. Preston raised the topic of publishing draft minutes prior to their official approval. He explained that his goal is to have sets of minutes available in a timely enough fashion to have ready for town meeting and other time-sensitive issues. He asked the committee to vote on the possibility of sharing the minutes in their draft form prior to being approved by the committee.

Ms. Emery Butler asked if they had previously voted on this topic. She suggested they already had. The committee decided to vote on it to be sure.

Mr. Lindemann motioned to post draft minutes to the website prior to their approval, Mr. Roberts seconded. It was approved 9-0.

Mr. Roberts asked if the Town Manager was prepared to distribute their capital budget to the committee. Ms. Terkelsen answered yes. Mr. Roberts asked that they be distributed as quickly as possible.

Ms. Terkelsen suggested the committee could access more financial transparency data on the website.

Mr. Lindemann motioned to adjourn. Ms. Pierce seconded. It was voted 9-0. The meeting was adjourned at 9:07.