Finance and Warrant Committee

10/21/2020

Kevin Preston, David Roberts, John Heffernan, Michael Leahy, Michelle Persson Reilly, Beth Pierce, and Susan Fay present.

The Committee began with discussion of Article 15. Leon Goodwin ceded the floor to the article’s proponents, Jim Maher, Brandon Fitts, and Carlene Campbell-Hegerty. Mr. Maher named two other proponents of the article and thanked the committee for their time. Jim Maher is president of the Manor Neighborhood Association, a group that is in favor of building a playground in the neighborhood.

Ms. Campbell-Hegerty explained that Article 15 was first brought to the manor neighborhood association from a concerned citizen. She noted that the neighborhood has seen an influx of young families, creating a high demand for safe play areas in that neighborhood. They have received support from the ADA. This would make this Dedham’s 3rd park with 100% ADA compliance. She has received vocal support from the neighborhood.

Brandon Fitts took the floor to express support. He has been part of the neighborhood committee for 2 years, and referred the committee to budget and design documents he had sent them. The final design is subject to change but the budget is aimed at $200,000.

Mr. Preston noted that it is unusual to see this proposal coming from somewhere other than Parks & Recreation. He asked if the Parks & Recreation Department has been involved, and if there is precedent for a park being developed in this way.

Mr. Maher explained that because the property in question in under the control of the selectboard, the decision was made to go to the selectboard. He explained that the neighborhood association has been working long and hard on this article. Mr. Goodwin expressed support for the project and explained that they are hoping to continue working with them.

Mr. Leahy noted that we have already started the NOI process. He asked what would happen if the town did not reach the front of the NOI line, and what would happen with the donated funds from the Crowley family in that event. Mr. Leahy asked if there is written documentation of this donation or if it was a good-faith agreement. Mr. Maher answered that it is a good faith agreement.

Mr. Heffernan asked if the town had another use for this property and who it would belong to. Mr. Fitts answer it would be the town of Dedham, and their responsibility to maintain. Parks & Recreation would be responsible for upkeep.

Mr. Heffernan asked why the budget had a 20% contingency which he thought to be high. Mr. Fitts answered that they are accounting for costs like benches and landscaping beyond the 164,000 estimate.

Mr. Roberts asked if there would be topsoil removal. Mr. Fitts answered that excavation would have to be done but they have not received the exact data yet. Mr. Roberts asked if the previous house occupying this place was hooked up to the sewer system or if there was a cesspool. Mr. Fitts explained that there have been no such roadblocks discovered yet.

Mr. Roberts asked about oversight on this project. Mr. Goodwin explained that this low-cost project would like not have an Owner’s Project Manager or any sort of comparable position. This is officially a town project if approved. Mr. Roberts raised the concern that the lack of completed preparatory data could create unforeseen problems.

Mr. Preston raised concerns about the jurisdictional aspect of this project as it relates to the parks & recreation department, which has not been involved. Mr. Goodwin answered that this is a town-owned property, not a parks & recreation site. He explained that he has discussed the situation with Mr. Stanley. Mr. Preston asked if Mr. Goodwin would see fit to seek a proclamation of official support for this project from the Parks & Recreation department to put any concerns at ease.

Ms. Fay noted that this project has no available parking, as well as the approval of abutters. She noted that some people won’t be able to walk, and reminded them to consider parking. She asked what the fencing would look like. Mr. Maher answered that town bylaws require fencing in town be black vinyl. There will also not be direct access to the street, for kids running around. Mr. Maher noted that the area is perfect to walk to, and he does not expect parking to be an issue.

Mr. Preston asked how this would be financed. Mr. Goodwin answered that he suggests it be drawn from Free Cash.

Ms. Persson Reilly asked why the playground at the old ECEC is insufficient, and asked about potential funding from Amazon that was mentioned. Mr. Fitts explained that Sprague Street represents a sort of barrier for walking families. He explained that there was a change in their connection at Amazon and they no longer have an interested party.

Mr. Roberts asked if our free cash was certified yet. Mr. Goodwin answered that it was not yet. Mr. Preston asked if they will have an estimate by the time of deliberation. Mr. Goodwin answered yes.

Selectmember Macdonald explained that he thought this idea was a good one when the neighborhood association first brought it up, and they have worked though the development of the plan in an impressive way. He explained that the selectboard does not take an official stance on warrant articles without seeing the recommendation of the finance and warrant committee, but he expects the selectboard will support this article. He praised the steps the design process has taken towards accessibility.

Dimitria explained that in terms of precedence, the development of playground at schools was spearheaded by Parent-Teacher organizations.

Mr. Roberts stated that he would like to see a firm price by the time deliberation comes.

The committee moved to discussion of article 6.

Ms. Baker explained that the received insurance payment from the Endicott barn fire needs to cycle through the budgetary process, and an appeal will be filed with the insurance company.

The committee moved to discussion of article 10. This article is about demolishing the transfer station building and smokestack. Further discussion has led to the recommendation that this be postponed until spring.

Mr. Preston asked if the safety concerns were satisfied. Mr. Goodwin explained that the area is not in use and they want to get it down as soon as possible but think it is a practical, acceptable risk.

Ms. Fay asked for confirmation that the plan was always new tower first, demolition second. Mr. Goodwin confirmed. Mr. Preston noted that the new tower is very close to the existing structure.

The committee moved to discussion of article 11, a change in the management of solid waste and recycling. This article would increase the size of the solid waste disposal carts. Mr. Preston suggested that a 50% larger solid waste barrel could be too large for certain citizens. Mr. Goodwin noted that was a good point, and it would be discussed with the public works director.

Mr. Leahy suggested this program could be by-request only.

Mr. Goodwin noted that they suggest this be IPed until next town meeting.

The committee moved to discussion of article 16.

Steve Heaslip took the floor as the proponent of this Article. He explained that his article proposes using the abandoned rail corridor be re-forested. He noted that this article is lacking in specific logistics, it is only a commitment to move in that direction in the future.

Mr. Preston asked if there was an estimate. Mr. Heaslip answered that he estimated $9,000. There are many programs that provide seedlings for free.

Mr. Preston asked that Mr. Heaslip prepare a monetary estimate for this project. He also asked if the proposal was to have a walking trail nor not. Mr. Heaslip answered that it would be pure forest.

Mr. Roberts asked about the 9,000 mentioned tree budget. Mr. Roberts asked if town meeting could direct spending out of an appropriated budget. Mr. Preston asked for more details from Ms. Baker. Ms. Baker explained that such a re-appropriation is technically possible, but not a typical functioning method and she suggested the article should contain an appropriation.

Mr. Preston suggested that Mr. Heaslip takes step to insure his proposal is properly legally packaged.

Mr. Leahy suggested the corridor will likely require additional cleanup to be budgeted for. Mr. Leahy also noted that should the rail-trail issue arise in the future, he would hate to see this work have to be undone. Mr. Heaslip explained that he did not want to overstep his bounds but he will speak with town management.

Ms. Fay asked for clarification on the motivation behind this article. Mr. Heaslip noted that his personal motivation is to increase natural beautification.

The committee moved to discussion of article 20. Mr. Goodwin pointed out that the sponsor asked that the article be withdrawn, and that it should be IPed to be revisited in the future. Mr. Preston pointed out that this article would make the property tax less regressive than it currently is.

Property tax, like sales tax, disproportionately affects those with lower income by taking a higher percentage of their income. This article would very tangibly mitigate the impact on lower income people. Anybody with a property assessed at $600,000 or less would stand to gain from this.

Mr. Preston suggested the committee take time to familiarize themselves with the graphs presented to the committee alongside this article. He also asked Mr. Goodwin if the selectboard had this power. Ms. Baker explained that it seems that the selectboard would require approval from town meeting.

Ms. Fay asked the reasons for the IP. Ms. Persson Reilly explained that she believes he did it because of the current financial situation. She pointed out that there are not many comparable towns undertaking similar processes.

Mr. Goodwin explained that this would not affect tax revenue.

Brian Keaney took the floor on behalf of the by-law review committee to speak on article 27. This article would change the open space and recreation committee protocols in several small ways. One is to add a designee to help the committee reach quorum. Further, board member terms of service would be changed to 3 years. The name would also be changed to actually include the word recreation.

Alyssa brown, conservation agent, took the floor. She explained that the fees for stormwater permits have not changed since their inception. She believes the fee structure should be removed from by-laws and put into regulations. She stated that the fee structure needs to be changed. She explained that the revenue from the permits is vastly out of line with the hours required. Mr. Keaney noted the bylaw review committee unanimously supported this article.

Mr. Keaney stated that article 29 has received unanimous support from the committee and affects training on public meetings, public records laws and conflict of interest laws. He knows that a lot of the towns committees are civilian volunteers, but the result is failings to maintain proper records, as well as unintentional violations of these laws.

Mr. Leahy stated that he believes this level of training should be mandatory for committee volunteers, because understanding the law is crucial.

Mr. Keaney explained his frustration with directory but not mandatory regulations and bylaws affecting committee training.

Ms. Baker expressed the hope that she would see more training for committee members. Mr. Goodwin agreed.

Mr. Heffernan asked if the wording of the article allowed for online training sessions. Mr. Keaney answered yes.

Mr. Preston gave a final opportunity for comment.

Ms. Baker and the committee discussed scheduling.

Mr. Heffernan motioned to adjourn. Ms. Pierce seconded. It was approved unanimously 7-0.

Meeting adjourned at 7:44.