

Ways and Means Minutes

December 12, 2017

Police Department

- Chief Reams walked us through a presentation of the desired renovations to the existing police station. He believes the renovations will allow the police department to work comfortably in the building for another 25 years.
 - Note: When asked the question regarding potential growth of the force, the Chief replied that he does not believe he will need to expand his force in the foreseeable future due to the Amherst population growth projections being relatively flat. Therefore, the space will be adequate for at least 25 more years.
- W&M was asked to hold questions until Warrant Article discussions. However the Department Directors were dismissed before that happened so many questions remain. Outstanding questions include:
 1. What are the “must haves” vs. “nice to haves”?
 - Are there parts of the proposed renovation that are essential? If so, what are they, why, and what are the benefits to the residents?
 - Can they be quantified?
 2. Are the proposed renovations going to give Chief Reams all that he needs or will there still be outstanding items required to get the facility where he needs it to be?
 3. What is included in the high level estimates (e.g. new computers)? Are they all-inclusive? What additional costs can be foreseen that are not included in the current estimate?
 4. Which of Chief Reams’ proposed renovations do the Selectmen support? When will detailed drawings and costs be available for these renovations (as opposed to the ballpark projections presented today)?

Ways and Means Position: Ways and Means is supportive of some police station renovations; however we believe that we need the above questions answered in order to fully understand and support the project.

ACC

- ACC is looking for an updated forestry plan (~\$10k), invasive species management (~\$15k, two properties). BOS would like to make these funds, along with funds for a potential grant match that the Recreation Department intends to pursue, a Warrant Article where these costs come out of the LUCT fund for this year. This approach presents a risk that if the Warrant Article fails, the work will not be done.
- As presented, this strategy runs the risk of appearing to the voters that the Selectmen were unable to decide whether these expenditures are worth funding, and so are “kicking the decision” to the voters. However, the voters have no good basis on which to decide the merits of the proposed spending.

- Selectmen Akillian recommended the cost of the mitigating the invasive species be absorbed as part of the general budget as it is a cost of regular maintenance, similar to what other departments have in their regular maintenance budgets. W&M concurs.
- Should the Selectmen continue to pursue this strategy, W&M believes they need to be clear to the voters on why they are doing so and on what their position is on the necessity of these expenditures.

Ways and Means Position: Ways and Means believes that we should consider taking care of the invasive species on town property w/in normal land maintenance and include as a budget item similar to what the BOS has done in the past. If we do not continue to control the invasive species YOY, it will become more expensive to maintain, as the invasive species will have an additional year to entrench themselves. Putting the funding to do this at risk in a separate Warrant Article seems unwise.

DPW

- In previous meetings, Director Bruce Berry stated that over \$1,000,000 in additional funds would be needed to maintain and rebuild roads on a steady state basis. The BOS was not prepared to add this amount in a single year, so a compromise increase of \$200,000 was included as an initiative.
- Today Director Barry came in with a plan which he said he would only require roughly \$1.1 million dollars to work on road maintenance and reconstruction in the upcoming year. Since about \$1.1 million dollars was already budgeted for the DPW, the previously approved \$200,000 increase was removed. Therefore there will not be an increase in road funding in next year's budget.
- Ways and Means outstanding questions are as follows:
 - How did DPW go from requesting an additional \$1,000,000 to requesting no additional funds at all? This sudden, unexplained change is concerning to our committee.
 - What is the Selectmens' reasoning behind failing to continue gradually increasing the road budget to reach an adequate steady-state figure?

Ways and Means Position: Ways and Means is concerned that if we do not continue increasing the budget for road repair and rebuilding now, we will likely need to spend more in the future due to further deterioration of the roads. Prior BOS "kicking the can down the road" on this matter is why we have an inadequate road budget today, and materially contributed to the need for a \$15 million road rebuilding bond.

Community Development

1. Document Management System
 - Director Leedy presented one option for document scanning / management for Community Development.

Ways and Means Position: Ways and Means cannot support an initiative that does not have a clear and comprehensive plan. We would like to see a written, comprehensive specification for the work needed, multiple proposals and options that address the specification and cover document scanning, management, online capability for taxpayers and document storage. We also believe this type of solution should be evaluated to address town-level needs due to all departments currently requiring a solution to this issue.

2. Stormwater

- Gordon presented his thoughts on Stormwater during the meeting. There are a number of tasks contained within the scope of this project however a comprehensive plan has not yet been provided to the BOS. Total cost estimates for addressing this work next year seem to change with each meeting.

Ways and Means Position: Ways and Means has concerns about the lack of a comprehensive plan as to how the Stormwater will be addressed. We believe that the Town should create a comprehensive plan with associated costs at the detailed level to determine what this initiative will ultimately cost to the taxpayers and the town. Furthermore, we believe that Town-wide cost tracking should be done for the next year so that the actual costs of complying with the EPA Stormwater permit requirements can be known for the next budget cycle.

Cost of Living Increase

The Selectmen have decided on a COLA of 2.5% in addition to Step increases for an overall increase in wages of approximately 3% - 4%. The median salary increase of 20 nearby towns is 2.0%, not including Step increases. The Social Security COLA for next year is 2.0%.

Ways and Means Position: Ways and Means sees no justification for the Selectmen's decision to award a COLA higher than 2.0%. We believe we need to stay competitive, but do not need to go above what other, comparable towns are doing.

Absence of HR Data to Support COLA, Benefits Cost, etc.

Ways and Means Position: Ways and Means continues to be frustrated that the Town is unable to provide routine HR data to support the personnel cost structure built into proposed budgets. Such data includes:

- Comparative salary analysis
- HR best practice identification and implementation
- Performance Mgmt / Pay for Performance
- Alternative benefits provider investigation and
- Comparative cost analysis between Amherst benefits and other nearby towns' benefits

Absent such data, proposed COLAs, Steps, and the cost of insurance(s) appear to be arbitrary, or "whatever the current provider will charge next year", and can not be fairly evaluated by Ways & Means, or by the taxpayers.