

Town of Boscawen
Advisory Budget Committee Public Hearing
Boscawen Municipal Complex
February 23, 2023 after 6:00pm

Present: Ed Cherian, Chair, Dale Randall, Gary Tillman, Rhoda Hardy, Peg Daneau, Lorrie Carey, Matthew Burdick, Katie Phelps, Kevin Wyman, Dean Hollins, Gary Moore, Nicole Hoyt, Kellee Jo Easler, Sarah Gerlack, Tim Kenney, Jason Killary, Kate Merrill, and Kearsten O'Brien

Ed Cherian, Chair opened the public meeting at 6:30 pm.
Roll Call completed by Recording Secretary Kearsten O'Brien.

Mr. Tillman motioned to approve the 02.02.23 draft minutes as amended. Seconded by Dale Randall. All in favor. None opposed.

Chair Cherian opened the public hearing at 6:33 pm and asked the Select Board if they would like to go over the proposed budget changes before members of the public speak. Select Board Chair Carey thanked the Budget Committee and the members of the public who attended the meeting on February 2, 2023. The Select Board took the recommendations from the public and the Budget Committee and brought back a proposed budget of \$4,863,268. The revisions made in the proposed operating budget show cuts and deferrals totaling \$183,853 bringing the operating budget to a 6% overall increase over last year. The cost of living increase decreased from 6% to 4.6% for employees totaling \$67,665 in salary cuts. Approximately \$25,000 in health insurance costs were shifted to be paid by employees. The merit increases have been cut from the budget. The retirees are still receiving 100% of their health insurance coverage paid by the town. The Select Board donation line was cut from the budget so there will be no donations given this year. The Commercial Street historical exhibit was removed from the budget along with, legal books and updates, Old Home Day fireworks, and town beautification. There was a reduction of \$164,000 in the planned capital reserve contributions.

Ray Fisher, 200 Water Street, suggested that the Capital Reserve contribution to the Fire Station and the Public Works building be reversed. He stated the Town needs a new Public Works Building more than a new Fire Station. He recommended changing it to \$50,000 for the Public Works Building and \$25,000 for the Fire Station.

Beverly Drouin, 19 Tremont Street, asked about the retirement and if it could be explained more. Select Board Chair Carey said that retirees get 100% coverage for Health Insurance paid by the Town of Boscawen. Anyone hired before 2019 that meets the service and age requirements will also receive this benefit when they retire. Human Resource Director Merrill said that employees hired prior to January 1, 2019: Town of Boscawen will continue to pay Health Insurance as covered above for the retiree (and their spouse) at the age of fifty-five (55) with a minimum of twenty (20) years, fifteen (15) years of which must be continuous and be immediately preceding retirement; or at the age of sixty-two (62) with a minimum of fifteen (15) years continuous service and be immediately preceding retirement". For employees hired after January 1, 2019 there is no health insurance benefit in retirement. The 100% coverage is for both the retiree and the spouse if

applicable. Ms. Drouin asked for Select Board Chair Carey to go over the COLA and Merit decreases. Select Board Chair Carey said the COLA went from 6% to 4.6%. Merit increases were completely taken out of the budget. The Health Insurance contributions increased by 5% for employees saving the Town an exact amount of \$24,800. There were \$67,665 in salary cuts between COLA and Merit. Ms. Drouin said a salary cut to her is a boss telling you that you'll be making less than what you were making last week. Selectman Burdick said no salary cuts in current salaries, just the proposed increases for employees after Town Meeting.

Ms. Daneau asked about the \$24,800 in Health Insurance shifted to Employees was not another 5% increase happening after the New Year, it had already taken effect 1/1/2023. Select Board Chair Carey said that is correct. Finance Director Merrill said the employees are seeing a 120% increase in their premiums with the additional 5% plus HealthTrust rate increases of 12%.

Ms. Drouin asked if we brought the budget down to 5% or 4% how much more would need to be cut from the budget. Select Board Chair Carey asked why the budget needs to be cut more. What in the budget is so offensive that it needs to be cut more? Which program or employees are you cutting? She noted they are down to just needs now so what needs would you like to see cut from the budget? Ms. Drouin said she doesn't feel the Select Board needs to defend the budget, she is asking solid questions. At her house there is an income and you have to back into your budget when you don't have enough in your budget. She is not comfortable shifting all these changes to the employees. Chair Cherian said \$50,000 to get down 5% and \$100,000 to get down to 4%. Ms. Drouin said where would we cut if the Select Board had to cut down another \$100,000. Selectman Burdick said that is the same question Select Board Chair Carey asked her and the other tax payers.

Anne Marie Hartshorn, 433 High Street, suggested cutting the Capital Reserve contributions more. She appreciates the hard work put into creating this budget and the many changes proposed.

Sheila Serrano, 243 King Street, feels for the employees but everything is going up and she seconds looking at the Capital Reserve contributions.

Polly Dawson, 14 Woodbury Lane, asked if we need another officer and would be keeping the Police Officer given to Boscawen last year through the Federal Government. Lieutenant Killary said yes that Officer is needed and will be staying. The Federal Government did not give Boscawen a Police Officer. The position was first funded by the ARPA funds for a year and then it went into the normal operating budget. Eight Officers are a prudent number for the Town of Boscawen due to the size and activity of the Town. Every Town has different needs they may be the same size but not have call volume. Ms. Dawson asked about the Facilities Director position and why we have that. Select Board Chair Carey said that position was a position voted on by Town Meeting and he is a part time employee.

Ms. Drouin asked for Lieutenant Killary to paint the picture of the Police Department of how many Officers and how many cars we have. Lieutenant Killary said there are eight Police Officers and six cruisers. The amount of vehicles is based off of how many Officers there are. They do share vehicles and maintenance must be maintained on all the vehicles like any vehicle. If they lessen the fleet they may have an issue where officers can't respond to calls because they don't have enough cruisers, therefore six vehicles is a good amount of cruisers in case one has to go out of

commission for maintenance and repairs. Ms. Drouin asked what the cruiser costs were. Lieutenant Killary said just the vehicle without the equipment is \$40,000.

Ms. Drouin asked about the \$50,000 in the capital improvement for the Fire Department, is the building not adequate? Fire Chief Kenney said the goal is to save enough money to do a renovation in ten years or up keep that needs to be done. Currently there are no showers in the Fire Station to offer decontamination after a call. The snow drips off the roof and creates ice on the pavement in front of the doors they go in and out of. Primex had recommended that the issue be corrected with proper drainage for the snow to melt and prevent the ice from building up. The original windows are not appropriate for the weather. The Fire Chief at the time in 2002 said the building will need a renovation for firefighters to sleep by 2011 and now it is 2023 and that still has not been accomplished.

Lewis Marden, 68 North Water Street, asked how long the ARPA Funds last to employ the new Police Officer. Lieutenant Killary said it lasted a year and now the salary will be in the operating budget. Mr. Marden asked if the Police Department was 24 hours a day yet. Lieutenant Killary said currently no, once we have the new officer coming on board it will allow for the overnight coverage.

Michael Fisher, 4 Circle Drive, stated at the last budget meeting everything is going up. There are many elderly people on a fixed income who still may not be able to afford the proposed budget. There are things we may want but we cannot do it right now.

Bill Bevans, 416 High Street, quoted an individual from the Town at the October ⁶, 2022 Select Board meeting: "Prices are rising. There will be a 33% increase for basic needs expenses throughout the year for a single person living in a 1 bedroom. It doesn't include a vehicle. The cost is going up \$500 a month for necessities such as rent, groceries, utilities, and health insurance. The middle class will struggle this year, not just low-income." Mr. Bevans said he is middle class and one day he would like to retire but the taxes continue to go up and something needs to change. Mr. Bevans did the math and it cost \$1279 per person to live in this Town.

Ms. Dawson asked if a department head were to leave would we pay a new hire the same as the department head that left. Select Board Chair Carey said it would depend on the skill set of the individual. We are not competitive in our current rates and we already pay less than other Towns.

Ms. Serrano said that the Capital Reserve contributions could be cut more by \$5,000 each. Hopefully they would be able to put it back in next year. Ms. Serrano suggested moving the King Street Improvements to \$40,000 and that the Town Hall Assessment Study wait a year. Select Board Chair Carey said the Town Hall Assessment Study has been put off for a year already.

Ms. Drouin would like to work to get the budget down to 5%. She suggested making sure that everyone is using the Town vehicles instead of having travel costs. The Police Department should look at the overtime grants through the State of NH Department of Safety. Forest Fire Equipment should be cut in half. Also, there is \$12,000 in library books and materials that could be decreased to \$8,000.

Mr. Bevans said the library budget went up one percent. By state law the town needs to appropriate funds to the library. Mr. Bevans asked what the total amount was in the unassigned assets. Finance Director Merrill said \$1.4 million and that does not include the emergency expenditure approved for a sewer replacement. Mr. Bevans asked if that money could be used to offset the taxes. Finance Director Merrill said that the auditors may make adjustments to that number depending on what they may find. During tax rate setting the Select Board will look at the unassigned fund balance and what they must retain. The Town has a policy that they will retain 8% to 12% and then from there the Town can use the left over money to offset the taxes if they have it. Last year there was no money to use to reduce taxation. Mr. Bevans said it seems like anyone in the Town that has an exemption or credit is poisoned in the Town.

Nate Preisendorfer, 36 Oak Street, asked what the numbers would be for projected revenues if the Solar Exemption were to be rescinded. Select Board Chair Carey said it is \$722,400. Deputy PCD Director O'Brien explained that the exemption if rescinded would go back into the assessed value of the home. Mr. Preisendorfer asked if the Budget Committee felt as though it would be in the best interest of the community to rescind the exemption. Chair Cherian said it is a revenue question not an expense question so it is not within the purview of the Budget Committee just like the other exemptions and credits in town. It does add up. Mr. Preisendorfer asked that everyone look at the long term goal rather than short term gains whether it is fire department improvements or renewable energy.

Stillwater West, 322 High Street, said he does not have a solar exemption but he would like to. He is currently installing solar April 3rd. He said that it is important for people to get solar to help with electric bills along with the current global warming issues.

Chair Cherian closed the public hearing at 7:41pm.

Ms. Daneau wanted to clarify that the employees are not receiving less of a benefit compared to previous years as the town is reducing their contribution back to what it was before they increased it a few years back. Finance Director Merrill explained that is not always true as there used to be a different system where single plans were 100% covered by the town and then only a portion was paid for two person and family plans. She explained that there are multiple employees that are single plans that were hired on with a health benefit that was 100% paid.

Chair Cherian asked what the assessed value with the reevaluation year would work with all the new houses from a revenue stand point. Deputy PCD Director said we cannot give a revenue estimate because they are still at the 2018 assessment values and we do not know what the new assessed values would be for the houses in Boscawen. Chair Cherian asked if we peruse PILOT programs with nonprofits. PCD Director Easler said yes we do in the Planning Process.

Chair Cherian asked about the ARPA paid Police Officer - would the new officer help with cutting back the overtime and what have they seen with volume and type of calls. Lieutenant Killary said the calls have gone up quite a bit. The hope is that the new officer will help with lowering the overtime but with having arrests and they may go over your shift. Also, having to go to court is unpredictable. Chief Wyman said right now there is one officer on medical leave and one in the police academy. Chair Cherian asked if the ARPA money covered the time in the academy for the

new officer. Lieutenant Killary said that they did in house training and the original academy they were going to go to was full and they are now in the academy. Lieutenant Killary said they do take advantage of the overtime grants but it is only things for enhanced DWI patrols, state events and more.

Mr. Tillman motioned to recommend the revised operating budget of \$4,863,268. Seconded by Mr. Randall. Roll Call Vote: Tillman - Yes, Randall - Yes, Chair Cherian - Yes, Daneau – No, Hardy – Yes. Motion passed by a 4-1 vote.

Ms. Daneau said it was not the percentage that the Townspeople would like and she heard that tonight at the hearing.

Mr. Tillman made a motion to recommend the revised Capital Reserve contributions in Warrant Article 7. Seconded by Mr. Randall. Roll Call Vote: Tillman - Yes, Randall - Yes, Chair Cherian - Yes, Ms. Daneau - Yes, Hardy - Yes. Motion passed by a 5-0 vote.

A motion to adjourn at 8:31 pm was made by Mr. Randall, seconded by Mr. Tillman, and passed by a unanimous vote.

Respectfully submitted by Kearsten O'Brien