Budget Committee Meeting

Town of Gorham

Gorham Town Hall

Public Meeting Room

Minutes of JANUARY 22, 2024

Members Present: Mary White, Adam White, Marie Duguay, Dio Thagouras, Judy LeBlanc, Paul Bousquet, Stephanie Russell, and Greg O’Neil

Absent: Kathy Corrigan

Town Staff Present: Peter Gagnon, Town Manager; Bronson Paradis, Finance Director; Jimmy Willhoite, Police Chief; Lt Eoin Stapleton; Shannon Buteau, Library Director; Jeff Stewart, Recreation Director

Minutes Taker: Shelli Fortin

AGENDA ITEMS & DISCUSSION

**1.** Call to order: 6:00 PM by Mary White

**2.** Review of Minutes of January 18, 2024

**On a motion by Judy LeBlanc, seconded by Adam White, the Committee voted to approve the minutes of January 18, 2024, as written.**

**3.** Review of Library Budget

Shannon Buteau addressed the committee on the items discussed at a prior meeting. Buteau advised that she does not like to make comparisons between libraries, and instead would like to focus our community and what we want for services. Buteau advised that she is proud to be able to offer 40 hours each week to the community, and noted that both Berlin and Lancaster have higher budgets but fewer hours. Berlin’s budget was $213,614, and Lancaster is $262,892. Buteau noted that less hours does not necessarily equal a cost savings. Buteau noted the need for the custodian, as the library needs to be cleaned every day to keep the hygiene at an acceptable level. The custodian works 8-10 hours per week. Buteau noted that the library has been adjusting lines within the budget since she began to try to keep the budget flat. Buteau noted the budget for books has been reduced from $28,117 to $16,100 over several years, and other lines reduced were conference and travel as they try to take advantage of online training, along with supplies and technology. Buteau stated that they have made a lot of effort to make adjustments and sacrifice as needed. Buteau noted that the building costs about $20,000 to run annually, which would not decrease with a reduction in hours. Buteau noted that the town has worked hard to get the library to where it is now, because it is what the town wanted, and it is important to be available to let people in to use the resources. Buteau advised that the on-call staff do more than just sit at the desk, completing tasks such as shelving books, processing new material, mending books, sanitizing the children’s room, updating book lists, and more. Not having these on-call workers would leave less time for the director and assistant director to do other tasks. Buteau noted that the negative impact of cutting $20,000 from the budget would be less opportunity to access the library, a less organized library, a limited collection of materials, less sanitary, and reduced programming. Buteau noted that the positive would be a savings on taxes, however this would amount of $5 a year for a house assessed at $100,000, and $17.50 per year for a house assessed at $350,000. Buteau noted that the negative impacts far outweigh any positive impact on tax savings.

Mary White stated that her suggestion to cut on-call workers also assumed a reduction in hours the library is open to 30 hours per week, which would leave the director 10 hours per week for other tasks. Mary White asked what programs would stop if the hours were reduced, and Buteau advised that it would be a painstaking process to decide what to keep. Buteau stated that she believes limiting access is not in the best interest of the town. Mary White noted that the proposed 2024 budget as a whole has increased $577,501, and that this cannot be reduced by cutting Capital Reserve Funds alone.

Judy LeBlanc noted that the Catholic school uses the library, as well as homeschoolers, and toddler time. Buteau noted that the library had over 14,000 visits last year.

Mary White asked about the 3% salary increase, as opposed to 3.5% for the town employees. Buteau stated that the Library Trustees set this.

Stephanie Russell noted that as a girl scout leader, they use the library after school until closing time.

Buteau was asked about fundraisers, and advised that she has worked with the Recreation Department, and has applied for grants. They have a donation bin and make money on the craft fair. Buteau noted that they do not have a Friends of the Library group like many towns do, but would love to see this in the future.

Mary White noted that the Murphy Fund earned about $5,000 in interest last year and asked if this could be used for maintenance and repairs. Buteau advised that the Library Trustees are working on a plan for using interest, but have not decided how this will be done yet.

Chief Willhoite noted that Salve Regina Academy uses the library as a meeting place in case of emergency and would hate to see the library closed if there was one.

Dio Thagouras asked what grants the library has applied for. Buteau advised a list will be in the Town Report, however some are the Tillotson Library Technology grant, the Tillotson DASH grant, and the Dollar General Literacy Grant. Adam White advised that grants for personnel come with a cost to the town when the time has lapsed, and noted the ABLE workers the Town had in the past. Buteau advised that the custodian position was filled with an ABLE worker, however this position was already in the budget before this worker was hired. Judy LeBlanc advised that most grants the Town applies for are for projects, not personnel.

**4.** Budget Review with Gorham Police Chief Jimmy Willhoite

Chief Willhoite advised that he would like to correct some information shared at the last meeting, stating that some of the information obtained from the internet is incorrect. Chief Willhoite reviewed the department staffing over the last several years, which has fluctuated between seven officers to as low as three.

Chief Willhoite addressed the comment that NHSP covers any serious crimes, advising that NHSP has only investigated one crime in the three years he has been here, and that was the double homicide. It was noted that NHSP investigates all homicides in the state, except for two cities that do their own investigations. It was noted that NHSP assists when asked, however they also do not have manpower. Judy LeBlanc noted that Coos County Sheriff’s Department is similar, and Chief Willhoite advised that the Sheriff’s Department handles mostly civil items and transports.

Chief Willhoite noted that money is not the issue in losing officers, as many leave because they work alone. Chief Willhoite noted that it is a safety concern. Chief Willhoite also noted that with six officers, there will be shifts that are unmanned. Mary White stated that there are other towns, such as Bethlehem, that have six officers. Chief Willhoite advised that Whitefield does, however they do not provide coverage from 1am until 6am each day. Chief Willhoite advised that he is doing his best to maintain coverage 24/7, however for three months this year he did not have coverage from 4am-6am. Adam White noted that there are 168 hours in a week, and six officers would cover 240 hours. Chief Willhoite advised that they were not factoring in vacation time, sick time, bereavement leave, training, and 91A requests, of which took 500 hours this year.

Chief Willhoite advised that campgrounds alone can add 934-1888 residents each night from Memorial Day until Labor Day. Walmart serves 1.3 million customers per year, which is 4,000 people per day that come through Gorham to visit the store. Businesses in town are surviving due to tourism, and in the summer Gorham’s population can rise to between 5,000 to 7,500.

Chief Willhoite compared Gorham to Lincoln, which is also a tourist town. Gorham has a population of 2,700 compared to Lincoln at 1,645, and Lincoln has 13 full-time officers. Chief Willhoite also compared staffing to Colebrook, Whitefield, Berlin, and Manchester.

Chief Willhoite advised that there were 416 crimes reported in 2021, and that was down to 280 last year. Mary White asked if these were serious crimes, and Paul Bousquet noted that any crime that happens should be taken seriously regardless of what it is. Stephanie Russell asked what portion of the crimes involved residents or outsiders, and Chief Willhoite advised the majority are outsiders. Lt. Stapleton advised that the department deals with residents very little, and it has been his observation that most of the people they deal with are people they have never met before. Chief Willhoite advised that because there are now more officers on the street, it has prevented crimes from occurring.

Mary White asked about overtime, and Chief Willhoite advised that overtime costs are for officers working on cases that they have started, and that being fully staffed will reduce leave time.

Chief Willhoite noted that the Town Manager has done a good job putting people in positions, and that department heads are knowledgeable. Chief Willhoite stated that he has 36 years of police experience and knows what is best for his officers and for the town.

Peter Gagnon asked Chief Willhoite if there was organized crime, or drugs, in the town and Chief Willhoite advised there is. Lt. Stapleton noted that there are positions in law enforcement, such as ICAC, that are not currently filled by GPD as there is not time.

Chief Willhoite noted that he appreciates the budget committee trying to save money for the town, and advised there is a perception by town employees that it is us vs. them. Adam White reiterated that he did not want to waste anyone’s time coming back unless the Committee agreed, and Mary White noted that they are looking critically at each department to try to reduce the increase in the budget.

**5.** Review of Recreation and Parks Budget

Recreation

Jeff Stewart reviewed line items in the Recreation budget noting that Temporary Positions was up $4,205 due to raising the hourly rate to $20 per hour. Telephone/Internet is down $570, Heat is down $780, Water increased by $100, and Supplies are up $500. Maintenance and Repairs is up $200, and Salaries and the associated line items is down $13,407. The total Recreation Administration budget has decreased by $9,752.

Mary White asked about the change in Health Insurance and was advised it is a demographic change.

The Committee reviewed the senior program director position with Stewart, noting the hours budgeted over the last several years, which has changed from 29, to 34, to 40.

Parks

Jeff Stewart advised that the Salary and associated lines has increased $1,927. Maintenance and Repair is up $500. The total increase is $2,430, which makes for a total decrease between the two budgets of $7,322. Stewart noted that he started in 2009 and the budget is $29,871 less today than 15 years ago.

Peter Gagnon noted that you can cut taxes through growth. Gagnon stated that more programs equate to more revenue, which brings the cost down for taxpayers. It was noted that growth is a balancing act, as more population also increases some costs, such as public safety. Gagnon noted that Gorham has done an excellent job of balancing, especially when it comes to short-term rentals, as they have respected the rights of property owners to monetize their investment to a certain level, while keeping out speculative out-of-staters.

Revolving Fund

The current balance listed for the Revolving Fund is $183,555, however this does not include a payment of $58,000 for the Limitless Playground, of which they will get back $29,000. This will leave a remaining balance of about $153,000. Jeff Stewart advised that the revenue for all programs goes into the Revolving Fund, and the expenses for those programs also comes out of the fund. Stewart advised that there was talk of taking the additional cost of the senior program coordinator out of the Revolving Fund, and that all summer employees are now paid from the Revolving Fund. Stewart advised that they made almost $200,000 in revenue last year, and this would be more than enough to over the salary for the senior program coordinator if it was decided to take it out of the Revolving Fund.

Adam White suggested that they should increase rates for non-residents to attend the programs offered by Gorham. Marie Duguay noted that she believes the relationship between the communities is going well, and that Berlin does not charge extra for Gorham residents. Duguay noted that residents are served first, and those from other communities go on a waiting list and attend if there is room.

Stephanie Russell asked about maintenance, such as painting lines, and asked if this comes from the town or Revolving Fund budget. Stewart advised a little of both. Stewart provided a handout of the revenue, costs, and profit from each of the programs. Russell asked about the bathrooms at Libby’s, and asked if there may be away to open the bathrooms in the morning and close them at night. Stewart advised there may be, however there is not enough revenue to offset having someone staff Libby’s. Russell asked about vehicle replacements and Stewart advised they will be purchasing a new bus from the Revolving Fund. The old one will be put out to bid.

Mary White noted the proceeds from the Festival of Trees, which was $13,359.48 this year.

Adam White asked that they think about handicapped parking spots a the common and at Libby’s. Stewart advised that the bathroom at the Information Booth will be renovated to be handicapped accessible, and they are hoping to do the renovations this year.

Stewart advised there is one more piece of equipment to be installed on the Limitless Playground, and that they are looking at fencing on three sides.

**6.** Budget Committee Work Session

**7.** Next Meeting Date

Wednesday, January 24, 2024, from 6-8 pm

School Budget Hearing Thursday, January 25, 2024

**8.** Adjournment

**On a motion by Adam White, seconded by Dio Thagouras, the meeting was adjourned at 7:55 pm.**

Respectfully Submitted,

Shelli Fortin