Budget Committee Meeting

Town of Gorham

Gorham Town Hall

Public Meeting Room

Minutes of JANUARY 18, 2024

Members Present: Mary White, Adam White, Marie Duguay, Dio Thagouras, Judy LeBlanc, Paul Bousquet, Kathy Lutz-Corrigan, Stephanie Russell (via Zoom), and Greg O’Neil

Absent: None

Town Staff Present: Peter Gagnon, Town Manager; Bronson Paradis, Finance Director; Jimmy Willhoite, Police Chief; Lt Eoin Stapleton; John Bijeau, Public Works Director

Minutes Taker: Shelli Fortin

AGENDA ITEMS & DISCUSSION

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

**2.** Review of Minutes of January 16, 2024

**On a motion by Adam White, seconded by Kathy Corrigan, the Committee voted to approve the minutes of January 16, 2024, as written.**

Mary White corrected some figures she had shared at a previous meeting, noting that Gorham was 40th, not 26th, for the municipal tax rate. The school rate is the 106th highest out of 239, and Gorham is 66th for the total tax rate. Judy LeBlanc stated she would like to know what the population and amenities are of the other communities. Mary White noted that the total assessed valuation, with and without utilities, is on the graph, but not the population.

**3.** Review of MSW Position with Public Works Director John Bijeau

Mary White noted that from what she has witnessed in other towns, there are usually only two workers on the garbage truck. John Bijeau stated that he finds it to be a safety issue, especially for the driver getting in and out of the truck in the winter months. Bijeau also stated that many of the garbage cans take two people to lift, as they are very heavy. Judy LeBlanc commended the staff on the garbage truck, as they help the disabled and elderly by bringing cans back to the house. Mary White asked for the savings they would see by only having two, and after calculations Bronson Paradis advised it would be $27,809. There are currently two full-time and one part-time position for garbage pickup. All three work Monday through Wednesday for garbage, and two work Thursday and Friday for recycling. Only two are on the recycling truck as the containers are not as heavy to pick up. The current position that needs to be filled is a full-time position. It was also noted that it would take longer for trash pickup with only two on the truck.

Adam White asked about the snowblower that broke down. Bijeau advised it is being sent out for service, and it is unknown if it will be covered by warranty.

Stephanie Russell asked about the part-time workers at the transfer station and Bijeau advised they check for stickers and take care of the yard when the transfer station is open.

Peter Gagnon noted that Public Works is being asked to do more and more: taking out docks at recreation areas, the Railroad Street project, and maintenance at the Town Garage.

Mary White asked about stickers, and Bijeau noted many did not have them this summer and were reminded, and it is better now.

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

Police

Chief Willhoite advised that everything in the budget that he has control over has remained flat. Salary has increased according to the contract, along with the associated benefit lines. Willhoite advised that the officers were the lowest paid in Coos County and are now closer to what Berlin is paying. Officers will receive a 5% raise, and the Corporal and Sergeant a 7% raise. The Lieutenant is non-union, and his contract will be negotiated in July. The contract has been approved by all parties, and the cost items will be voted on at Town Meeting. In 2025, the hourly wage for Sergeant will be $32.12, Corporal $30.10, and Patrol $28.79. It was noted that negotiations were a give and take, with uniforms and longevity cut back so there is a savings on the back end. The Part-time line is up due to the wage increase, as well as Overtime.

Mary White asked about Prosecution Services, which are provided by Wendy Roberts. Att. Roberts handles grand jury and jury trials. Sgt. Turgeon handles arraignments, paperwork, and requests for discovery.

Chief Willhoite advised that Dues and Subscriptions are up $5, but otherwise he left it the same to see what comes in this year. Office Supplies has been balanced out with Dispatch, with a $650 reduction in the Police budget, and a $650 increase in the Dispatch budget in this line item. Software has increased for IT support. Field Supplies is down $2,000, as he is only budgeting for two ballistic vests this year. Uniforms is down to $750 per employee from $1,000 per the contract negotiations. Health Insurance has been budgeted for demographic changes if needed.

Chief Willhoite advised that Lt. Stapleton was able to secure $32,000 in grant funding for Special Details. This grant money has been put in a separate grant budget line item. Lt. Stapleton advised that some of this money is for details, such as speed and distracted driving, and some is for equipment, such as the efile software for filing accident reports and paperwork with the court.

The total increase to the budget is $52,315.00. Paul Bousquet noted that if you take out the salary and benefit increases, the budget is down.

Chief Willhoite advised they are currently fully staffed.

Dispatch

Chief Willhoite advised that the Dispatch budget is also flat, except for the items out of his control. Vacation time is down due to a long-time employee leaving who had five weeks of vacation time, and a new employee being hired. Health Insurance is down due to a demographic change. Electricity and Propane is up $100, and this is for the repeater on Pine Mountain. Software Support has increased. The total increase to the budget is $20,642.00. It was noted that in removing the salary lines, this budget is also a little less than last year.

Mary White asked about the salary increase for Dispatch and was advised it is 10% in 2024. Stephanie Russell asked if open positions are now being filled with part-time employees to save on overtime, and Chief Willhoite advised that they changed the contract, and they are now doing this. Part-time dispatchers are paid the same hourly rate as full-time. Russell asked about grants for software items, and Lt. Stapleton advised there are no grants available for ongoing maintenance items.

Chief Willhoite advised that the new repeater project will improve the communications in the region and will benefit GPD.

Chief Willhoite advised that the Part-Time dispatch line is over budget last year, as they hired a new part-time dispatcher who needed to be trained, which is 40 hours per week during training. This part-time dispatcher filled the full-time spot when an employee left.

Animal Control

Bronson Paradis advised the Animal Control line is flat and covers the agreement with the shelter in Conway.

Patriotic Purposes

Chief Willhoite advised that Patriotic Purposes overall has decreased. The Overtime line is down, and the Part-Time line was increased.

Mary White asked about revenue and was advised most is for Outside Details. Peter Gagnon advised that he has spoken with Chief Willhoite about enforcing Town Ordinances, which is a potential revenue for the Town. A portion of Fish and Game citations comes back to the town as revenue, and all of Town Ordinance violations. Nothing is received for state citations for things such as speed, unregistered vehicles, or uninspected vehicles.

**5.** Budget Committee Work Session

Adam White suggested cutting the number of officers at the Police Department from seven to six, noting that Gorham has more officers than most towns in the state with similar populations.

Mary White noted that the cost per person in Gorham for the Police Department is $304.

Judy LeBlanc noted that the Police Chief should be in attendance for this conversation, and Mary White noted this was a Work Session for the Budget committee to discuss ideas.

Paul Bousquet noted that the population in Gorham increases in the summer with tourists, and that needs to be considered.

Adam White made comparisons to Loudon, and Greg O’Neil noted that Loudon is more residential than Gorham is.

Mary White noted that things are mostly quiet at night, and that with scheduling changes six officers could cover it. Cutting one officer could save about $100,000 per year.

Dio Thagouras noted that if they were to cut one officer, they could give the others a bit more for salary and be less likely to lose officers to other departments. Thagouras also noted that any major crimes are covered by NHSP.

Judy LeBlanc again noted that the Chief should be present to answer these questions, and Marie Duguay asked why this was not mentioned when the Chief was here. Adam White stated that he did not want to waste his time if others on the Committee did not want to pursue this suggestion.

Mary White reviewed statistics from the police logs, noting that not a lot goes on, especially at night.

Peter Gagnon reminded the Committee that they can cut a budget, but they cannot cut personnel.

Paul Bousquet noted that if you cut an officer, the Overtime line may increase. Judy LeBlanc noted that some officers have left due to the amount of overtime they were asked to work. It was noted that some officers have also left due to it not being busy enough.

Stephanie Russell asked how long the department has had seven officers, and was advised only since December. Russell noted that they have managed in the past with six. Paul Bousquet asked if the seven included the Chief and was advised it does. Bousquet noted that reducing the department to six would require the Chief to work patrol shifts when he has administrative work to do, and Mary White advised that the position has always been advertised as a working chief.

Paul Bousquet again mentioned, as had Marie Duguay at a previous meeting, that the departments were asked to come in with a flat budget, and the Chief did what he was asked to do. Bousquet also noted that in a previous discussion they had said they did not want to cut positions except by attrition.

Mary White asked if the new officer was already certified, and was advised he is not and will be starting the Police Academy in a couple weeks.

Bronson Paradis advised that with the base rate in the new contract, cutting one position would amount to a savings of $0.22 - $0.25 on the tax rate, or for a $100,000 home, a savings of $22 - $25.

Paul Bousquet again suggested that they should be looking at reducing Capital Reserve Funds by 25% and reducing the amount in the Road Resurfacing CRF.

Paul Bousquet stated that Gorham is busy in the summer, and Mary White noted that the police logs do not show a huge increase in activity in the summer. Mary White noted that the Overtime line was $16,648 in 2023 and $17,975 in 2024, so it did not go down with seven officers. Greg O’Neil noted that the seventh officer only started in December, so the savings would not show up in Overtime until next year.

A question was asked about the money that is not expended in the budget and Judy Leblanc advised it goes back to the Town in the fund balance.

Mary White noted that the 2023 budget was budgeted for seven officers and only $4,500 is not spent. Bronson Paradis advised that there was overlap with some officers being hired and some leaving.

Marie Duguay asked about the turnover rate, and Bronson Paradis advised that in the three years he has been there, he has seen 6-10 officers leave. It was noted that new employees sign a three-year contract if they are trained, and if they leave prior to that they are required to pay back a portion of the cost.

Kathy Corrigan stated that it is hard for the kids, and the community, to build trust with the officers when they keep changing with the high turnover rate.

The Committee voted to ask Chief Willhoite to return for a discussion on staffing. Greg O’Neil asked if a list of questions would be given to him to prepare, and it was noted that he could watch the recording.

Mary White noted that they are looking at ways to change the total and to benefit people, such as adding educational opportunities at WMCC.

**5.** Next Meeting Date

Monday, January 22, 2024, from 6-8 pm

Mary White asked the Committee if there were any non-profit agencies that they would like to be present at the meeting next week. Marie Duguay stated that she would like to hear from AV Home Care, and Stephanie Russell suggested the Gorham Historical Society.

**6.** Adjournment

**On a motion by Adam White, seconded by Greg O’Neil, the meeting was adjourned at 8:02 pm.**

Respectfully Submitted,

Shelli Fortin