Budget Committee Meeting

Town of Gorham

Gorham Town Hall

Public Meeting Room

Minutes of JANUARY 11, 2024

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

Absent: Greg O’Neil

Town Staff Present: Peter Gagnon, Town Manager; Bronson Paradis, Finance Director; Cindy Cole, Tax Collector; Christina Zornio, Town Clerk; Shannon Buteau, Library Director

Minutes Taker: Shelli Fortin

AGENDA ITEMS & DISCUSSION

**1.** Call to order: 6:01 PM by Paul Bousquet

**2.** Review of Minutes of January 9, 2024

**On a motion by Dio Thagouras, seconded by Marie Duguay, the Committee voted to approve the minutes of January 9, 2024 as written.**

**3.** Budget Review

Tax Collector

Cindy Cole advised that the software line has gone down, as they are getting new software for tax collection and assessing. Everything else was kept as close to the same as possible. There is slight increase due to the pay increase of 3.5%.

Town Clerk

It was noted that Mary and Adam White could comment on the Town Clerk budget even though they are related to the Town Clerk, as they have no direct pecuniary interest, but should abstain from voting.

Christina Zornio advised that the increases in the budget are due to hours being increased to 32 per week, and the addition of health insurance. There will be five elections this year, and they are expensive, with ballots for the Presidential Primary costing $800. Software is going down some. Peter Gagnon advised that new voting machines will be needed, and there is money in the Technology CRF to cover this.

Dio Thagouras noted that the change in demographics for health insurance is the same in every department. Adam White asked if the Town Clerk was also receiving the 3.5% increase, and was advised that Zornio did not ask for it since she was increasing hours and adding insurance. Mary White asked about postage for absentee ballots, and Zornio advised that only half of what was budgeted last year was used, and it should be sufficient. Paul Bousquet noted that the difference in the budget, minus the health insurance and elections, is only about $1,200.

Library

Shannon Buteau advised that the Selectboard requested that she move the Assistant Director’s Salary to the full-time line, which is the difference in the full-time and part-time line items. The custodian is also getting a 3.5% raise, but hours have been less than anticipated. The oil costs have gone down with the new furnace. Buteau advised that the budget is similar to last year, they just made some adjustments to lines to keep it mostly flat. Buteau advised that they have stabilized the part-time positions, and are better able to plan ahead.

Marie Duguay noted that she enjoyed reading the report and it was well done.

Mary White asked about audit services, and Buteau advised this is the Library’s share of the required annual Town audit. Mary White asked about Professional Services and was advised this could be legal fees, or other professional services. Mary White asked how many hours the assistant was working, and Buteau advised it is 32. The Director works 40 hours per week. They are open 40 hours per week, and increase to 42 in the summer. Mary White asked for a breakdown of the custodian’s salary and the on-call workers. Buteau advised that the custodian is at $4,550, and on-call at $12,500. They are hourly workers and will receive the 3.5% increase. Mary White asked about the Murphy Fund balance, and was advised it is around $98,000. Buteau advised they are hoping to increase it a bit, and then just use interest earned for expenses. The Murphy Fund earned $4,966 in interest this year. Bronson Paradis advised that funds were moved to the NHPDIP this past August from the Bank of NH, as the NHPDIP was earning better interest. Buteau advised that they did use funds from the Murphy Fund to help with the replacement of the roof, but was not sure of the exact amount as it was six years ago. Marie Duguay advised that she could provide a list of what the fund has been used for.

**4.** Budget Committee Work Session

Mary White asked about the total cost of the Solid Waste position in Public Works, and was advised it is $65,000-$70,000, and would depend on health insurance. Mary White noted that she has not seen three people working on a trash or recycling truck in other communities, and wonders whether filling the position is necessary. Kathy Corrigan noted that it may take more time to pick up garbage and recycling with just one person, and Paul Bousquet noted that they also have other duties. Sick and vacation time also needs to be covered, along with help during storms. Adam White noted that a position was cut a couple years ago, but was added back in. Adam White also noted that he does not want to see anyone laid off, but staffing could be reduced as people leave and positions are not filled. Marie Duguay stated that there is always something for the workers to do. Mary White noted that it is not a question of people doing their job, but whether the position is needed, as taxes are going up and some cannot afford it. Marie Duguay clarified that this concern is for any department, not just public works. The Committee agreed that they would like John Bijeau to come to another meeting to discuss the open position.

In reviewing the Tax Collector budget, members noted that they did a good job in finding a more affordable software program. Adam White asked if the Selectboard has looked at the new software, and Judy LeBlanc advised they had.

A question was asked about the Town Clerk’s salary and Judy LeBlanc advised that Zornio is an elected official and sets her own salary. It was noted that Zornio only requested 32 hours, as she wanted to work enough hours to get health insurance. The Committee could choose to include the 3.5% raise if they wanted to do so.

In discussing the Library budget, Paul Bousquet stated that he felt it was a good idea to bring the Murphy Fund to a certain level and then just use the interest. Bousquet noted that he admired her budget. Dio Thagouras asked about grants and what those are used for, and Paul Bousquet stated that the Library pursues grants to enhance programs that are offered. Stephanie Russell stated that she is surprised the Library budget is not higher with the amount of programming offered. Judy LeBlanc noted that the Library is a safe haven for everyone who uses it, and it is utilized by more than just children and readers.

Mary White compared the Library budget to other departments, noting it was higher than the Town Clerk and Tax Collector budgets, and only $30,000 less than the Fire Department. Marie Duguay noted that the Library has its own building, which the Town Clerk/Tax Collector does not. Mary White compared the hours the Gorham Library is open to hours in other communities in Coos County, noting it was open more hours than any other town including Berlin. Mary White suggested reducing the hours to 30, which would save on on-call workers, and stated that she proposed this to the Trustees last year. Mary White noted that the taxpayers also support two other libraries in town, one at the elementary school and one at the high school. Paul Bousquet noted that NH law requires communities to support a town library, and stated that we would be remiss if we were to cut anything as it is used by a lot of people. Mary White stated that the $9,500 that could be saved in on-call salaries, plus $4,500 for the custodian if the cleaning was done by the staff, along with $6,300 from the books line would equal about $20,000 saved and nobody would notice the difference. Paul Bousquet noted that unless you run the Library, you do not know what the impact would be. Judy LeBlanc noted that the Budget Committee cannot dictate which lines the $20,000 would come from, as the Trustees decide how to spend the money. Paul Bousquet asked what percentage of the Library budget the $20,000 was and was advised it is 12%. Bousquet suggested that if the Library was asked to reduce their budget, then every department be asked to reduce their budget by the same amount. Adam White stated that there is not as much discretionary spending in safety. Marie Duguay noted that the departments were asked to bring flat budgets to the Committee, which they did and should be commended. Duguay went onto say that since they are following through, they have made progress, and asking for cuts should be something the Committee considers for next year. Mary White noted that some departments have more ability to cut spending than others. Stephanie Russell noted that the Library is the service she appreciates most in town, and that her family spends hours there. Russell also noted that cutting the Library hours to save $20,000 is not a significant enough savings, as the Library is a community service that goes well beyond books and is a place to grow and prosper. Bronson Paradis noted that the savings would represent five cents on the tax rate. Kathy Corrigan noted that departments have to start cutting somewhere. The committee decided to ask Shannon Buteau to come to another meeting to discuss Mary White’s suggestions.

Dio Thagouras noted items that have to be paid, such as the Clay Brook Road project and debt service, and stated that the budget is not flat.

Paul Bousquet suggested that since they have the bond payment of $204,062, they could consider not adding to the Road Resurfacing CRF in the amount of $250,000 this year, or could reduce that amount to $45,000 over the next five years. Bousquet also suggested reducing the amount for reach capital reserve account by 25%, and increasing it by 5% each year over the next five years until the bond payment is done. This would allow the Town to still operate the way it has been. Judy LeBlanc stated that each fund should be looked at on its own, and the consequences of not funding should be considered. Adam White suggested that they look at what funds are not expended every year as places to cut, as they always have an undesignated fund balance to use to reduce taxes. Judy LeBlanc noted that the fund balance needs to be kept within a certain parameter per the DRA. Bronson Paradis advised that they will not know what the fund balance will be until audited. Peter Gagnon suggested that when capital reserve funds reach a certain level, they may be able to stop adding to them.

Adam White apologized for the comment he made concerning Police Chief Willhoite at a prior meeting.

**5.** Next Meeting Date

Tuesday, January 16, 2024, from 6-8 pm.

**6.** Adjournment

**On a motion by Adam White, seconded by Judy LeBlanc, the meeting was adjourned at 8:00 pm.**

Respectfully Submitted,

Shelli Fortin