Budget Committee Meeting

Town of Gorham

Gorham Town Hall

Public Meeting Room

Minutes of JANUARY 16, 2024

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

Absent: None

Town Staff Present: Peter Gagnon, Town Manager; Bronson Paradis, Finance Director; Phil Cloutier, Fire Chief

Minutes Taker: Shelli Fortin

AGENDA ITEMS & DISCUSSION

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

**2.** Review of Minutes of January 11, 2024

**On a motion by Judy LeBlanc, seconded by Adam White, the Committee voted to approve the minutes of January 11, 2024 as written.**

**3.** Budget Review with Gorham Fire Chief Phil Cloutier

EMS

Chief Cloutier advised there is a $43,000 increase in the Permanent Positions, partly due to not correctly tracking holiday pay last year and partly due to the 3.5% increase. They are also increasing the on-call pay to $10 per hour from 2am-6am, which equates to $21,000 for on-call pay. Employees are required to be at the station during the on-call hours. The part-time position line has been decreased by $22,000, as they find it hard to staff part-time positions. Overtime has increased by $23,000 due to the difficulty finding part-time help. Benefit lines have increased based on the increased salaries.

Mary White asked about the full-time positions and was advised there are six full-time positions which are 40 hours each, plus half of the Fire Chief’s salary. Of the six, one is a paramedic, two are AEMT, and three are EMT. One is working toward AEMT, and there is a $2 pay raise for AEMT, and $4 for paramedic.

In reviewing the remainder of the budget, Chief Cloutier advised that Billing Contract Services is down $800, General Supplies is down $1,000, Gas is down, Vehicle Repairs is down $500, Service Equipment is down $1,000, Travel is down $500, and Uniforms is down. Overall the budget has increased by $62,374.

Chief Cloutier advised they have been staffing fewer transfers, as the majority of transfers require a paramedic and they only have one on staff.

Stephanie Russell asked about the projected revenue, which is flat. Chief Cloutier advised that there will be a small increase in Medicare and Medicaid reimbursement, however the only way to really increase revenues is with transfers, which also increases the cost with staffing and gas. Mary White asked about billing, and Chief Cloutier advised they can only bill when they transport a patient. Judy LeBlanc noted there is no fee for showing up at a call.

Chief Cloutier provided handouts with a breakdown of what they have been doing in the last year and advised to let him know if there were any questions. Mary White pointed out that there was an 11% change in calls for EMS and Chief Cloutier advised this was due to 911 calls being down. Last year they were called for mutual aid 43 times, and this year it was only 19.

Fire Department

Chief Cloutier advised the Permanent Position line has increased with the 3.5% COLA. The Volunteer Position line has decreased some, but does include the increase. Dues and Subscriptions is up $500, and repairs are also up $500 due to price increases. Gas and Diesel is down. Vehicle Repair is down $1,000, along with Uniforms by $500, and Physicals by $400. Benefits are adjusted based on salary. Training is down $5,000, as it is usually budgeted at $2,000 but was at $7,000 last year. Overall the budget is down $959.

Judy LeBlanc asked about the number of calls for service, and Chief Clouter advised they had 792 calls for EMS and 515 for Fire.

Mary White asked about apparatus, which was included in the handout. Chief Cloutier advised they are looking to replace an engine in 2025, and another will need to be replaced soon after. They have been looking at grants. The current balance of the Fire Truck CRF is $258,300. Chief Cloutier advised he has received quotes of $475,000 and $432,000 to replace the engine. Prices have gone up and lead times are long. A question was asked about the quotes being guaranteed pricing, and Chief Cloutier advised that the price is locked in once a purchase and sales agreement has been signed, regardless of the delivery time. Paul Bousquet asked about used trucks, and Cloutier stated that there are some available, however you need to be ready to buy as the good ones go quickly. Retrofitting was also discussed, but would take about six months to do and would have to be a significant savings to go without the truck for that long. Mary White asked if they would be able to make do with just one engine, and Cloutier advised that if anything were to happen to that one engine, there would be no backup. They would also not be able to respond to more than one call. They do have mutual aid, but staffing is an issue for other communities and it cannot be relied on. If they only had one engine, they would not be able to send it out of town to other communities to help, as it would need to be in Gorham and ready to go.

In reviewing Capital Reserve Funds, Chief Cloutier advised that he would like to increase the Ambulance from $40,000 to $45,000, Fire Truck from $50,000 to $55,000, and SCBA from $7,500 to $10,000. They are not planning to add anything to Fire Equipment or Ambulance Equipment, and will set a floor for each. The total CRF for 2023 was $130,000, and 2024 is $110,000. The SCBA were all replaced with a grant and have a lifespan of 15-20 years. Judy LeBlanc noted that funding this is crucial as it is a safety concern. Chief Cloutier advised he is hoping to continue writing grants for equipment. Mary White asked about the new turnout gear, which is supplied to active members of the department.

Paul Bousquet thanked Chief Cloutier for being proactive in reducing the Capital Reserve Funds. Judy LeBlanc noted that it was a good idea to have a floor for CRF funds. LeBlanc noted that all departments have been more proactive in applying for grants. Chief Cloutier discussed the repeater project, which is also grant funded.

Building Inspection

Chief Cloutier advised that he receives a $7,500 stipend as the Code Enforcement Officer, plus associated benefits. Chief Cloutier advised that Michelle Lutz would cover the rest of the Building Inspection budget.

Chief Cloutier advised that he does inspections on commercial properties and short-term rentals. He also reviews building permits, but does not do residential inspections. Any improvements made to properties are handled by assessing for value. Chief Cloutier advised he also reviews zoning variances for setbacks and site plan reviews.

Emergency Management

Chief Cloutier advised that he receives a $4,000 stipend as the Emergency Management Director. There is also money in this budget for Training and Other Equipment.

A question was asked about billing the County for fire calls and Chief Cloutier advised they are billed when they respond, as this is part of the fire service contract.

**4.** Budget Committee Work Session

Mary White advised that the work session is intended for the Committee to brainstorm ideas.

Mary White advised that she compared the municipal tax rate to other communities in NH and found that Gorham was number 26 out of 236.

Judy LeBlanc noted that the municipal tax rate has dropped every year since 2019.

Mary White noted that for the local school tax, there are 120 communities above Gorham. Mary White advised she will send the link for the tax rate information to members.

It was noted that although the Budget Committee gets a “bad rap” for the tax rate, only a portion of it is for the municipality, there are other factors involved including school, state education, and county tax.

Mary White noted that there are people in the community who are encouraging voters to attend both the Town meeting and the School meeting. Paul Bousquet noted that people did show up for the SAU Public Hearing.

Paul Bousquet noted that the blame for high taxes should be placed on Concord, as they will not look at other funding sources for schools.

Judy LeBlanc noted that expenses increase every year, and that there are costs involved in keeping up with new technology.

Kathy Corrigan shared concerns about the school and advised she will be attending their meeting.

**5.** Next Meeting Date

Thursday, January 18, 2024, from 6-8 pm

**6.** Adjournment

**On a motion by Greg O’Neil, seconded by Paul Bousquet, the meeting was adjourned at 7:12 pm.**

Respectfully Submitted,

Shelli Fortin