

Shutesbury Finance Committee
Tuesday, December 14, 2021, Virtual (Zoom) Meeting

Members Present: George Arvanitis, Ajay Khashu, Jim Walton, Susie Mosher, Bob Groves, Melody Chartier, Jim Hemingway

Members Absent: None

Town Administrator: Becky Torres

Non-Members present: Walter Tibbets (Fire Dept), (Library), Timothy Logan, Diane Jacoby, Mike Vinskey, Rachel Schwab, Kevin Rudden (Assessor), Amanda, Mary Anne Antonellis, Brad Foster (Library), Melanie DeSilva (Library), Kate (Library), Weezie Houle

Meeting called to order at 6:31 PM

1) Motion to approve 11/17/2021 minutes as amended passes unanimously 7-0.

2) Fire Dept Budget Review

- a) Operating budget increasing \$1,000 from \$7,100 to \$8,100. The software system the department uses for its MFIRS/NFIRS reporting is not supported/maintained by the current vendor. Walter got a quote from ESO to cover the cost of new reporting software (it will cost \$995 per year).
- b) The proposed maintenance budget is increasing between \$7,000 to \$11,000 to cover the cost of maintenance services that have historically been performed by the chief. Not knowing what skills our future chief will have, Walter states that we should be prepared to spend an additional \$7K to \$11K to hire out for services to maintain the department's vehicles.
- c) Most other budget lines are staying the same or increasing a very small amount.
- d) SM asks how other towns deal with maintenance costs. Walter responds it will all depend on what skills the new chief will have.
- e) BG states that we should wait for the new chief to be hired before we budget an increase in the maintenance line by a significant amount. It is possible that the new hire will have similar skills.
- f) Walter reports that he is very happy with the new radios the town has received through the state grant program. Over the next four years, the state is building out its transition to digital communications. The radios we have are combo analog/digital radios. There is currently no user charge.
- g) JH asks if the department is participating in the AT&T First Net phone program with the new cell tower coming in. Walter responds that it will be up to individual employees whether they want to purchase First Net phones. Right now, the AT&T coverage is so poor in Shutesbury that it doesn't make sense. This may change when the new tower is constructed.
- h) Walter got a quote (approx. \$2,200) to install a new antenna when the Vertex tower is installed to improve the coverage of our communication systems for fire and police. There will be no rental cost for public safety. [Walter Tibbets later clarifies that the cost for the antenna, cable and other equipment is going to be covered by the Emergency

Management Performance Grant capital account. The cost for a tower climber and installation will also come out of this same account.]

- i) Walter's last day will be 6/30/2022.

3) Library Budget Review

- a) The library's budget for FY23 is almost the same as FY22.
- b) Mary Anne recommends an increase to the Library Assistant/Aid/Other Salaries line from \$17,516 to \$18,465. There currently isn't enough funding in this line to cover the cost of staff coverage during the director's vacation/sick time.
- c) JH asks why we can't apply the minimum TAMI figure to the library's budget. Mary Anne explains that if we did that, it would require a reduction in services.
- d) MC asks why the Director's salary is not increasing. Mary Anne responds that we do not put salary increases in the budget. The Personnel Committee will recommend what COLA increases should be applied to town employees' wages, including the library director's.
- e) AK asks for an update on private fundraising for the new library: On this year's Giving Tuesday, a total of 193 people donated a total of \$35K. The last Giving Tuesday the library received \$13,000. Our best giving day before this was last April when the library received \$21,000. After this recent round of fundraising, the Friends of the Library have raised approximately \$305,000. In addition, there is approximately \$250,000 in the town's new library fund.

4) Tax Classification Hearing Results (Kevin Rudden)

- a) Kevin Rudden reports that the average single-family homeowner is paying less than they did 2 years ago despite the fact that assessed values have increased (average single-family home value has increased \$19,077 (+ 7.5%). That is in part due to our free cash allocations and that department budgets have been level-funded or included relatively small increases. BG adds that changes to the Regional Assessment method also reduced contributed to a reduced tax rate.
- b) Kevin states that the assessment of the new cell tower and increased assessed values for single-family homes are likely to lead to a reduced tax rate for FY23.
- c) For most of the year, sale prices have been above assessed values.
- d) The final FY22 Tax Rate = \$21.83
- e) The average tax bill for a single-family homeowner is \$5,883.43.
- f) Kevin states that it does not make sense for Shutesbury to adopt a split tax rate.
- g) AK asks about the status of implementing the Seniors Tax Exemption. Kevin Rudden reports that the Shutesbury bill is sitting in Massachusetts legislative committee. Kevin expects that it will be voted on in January. The Assessors association filed a bill that would allow any town to implement a senior's tax exemption. On December 30 there will be a hearing on this bill. If one of those two votes passes, the Fin Com will need to discuss the parameters and implementation details.

- h) Kevin will come back at a future meeting to discuss implementation of the Seniors Circuit Breaker Tax Exemption.

5) MVP Action Grant – Fincom rep

- a) Shutesbury participated in a series of Community Resilience workshops. We have an opportunity to make an application to the Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness (MVP) program to follow up on some specific projects. The Select Board is requesting that all major boards select 1 representative to review the MVP process and discuss our priorities. In future years, we are expecting that a new Energy Committee will take the lead on implementing these projects.
- b) **Motion to appoint Susie Mosher as the Fin Com representative to the MVP review committee passes unanimously 7-0.**

6) Expense Report Review

- a) Police wages line appears to be spending ahead of schedule. This was because Kristen's (acting Chief) wages were being paid out of this line. For the rest of the year, her wages will come out of the Police Chief's Salary line, which has plenty of room.
- b) The Cruiser maintenance line has been spent at 80%. All 3 police vehicles required brake work.
- c) The Contributory Retirement line was overspent by \$1,283. We will need to make a Fin Com transfer for this.
- d) U28 has hired Bruce Turner's replacement. Becky reports that she is a math teacher at Franklin County Technical School. There were only 2 applicants for the position. Unfortunately, there will be no overlap as she won't be assuming this role until January.

7) Committee Reports

- a) SM for School Committee – Committee is meeting this Thursday. SM received a draft budget for the elementary school. SM submitted some questions to Bruce Turner but he has not responded. SM will share her questions with the committee.
- b) AK for Capital Planning – Committee received preliminary requests from the School Committee, Library, Fire Dept, Highway, and Police.

8) Future Meetings

- a) December 21 – Meeting w/ Select Board and School Committee to review preliminary Elementary School budget
- b) January 8 (tentative) – Rescheduled 4 towns meeting

Meeting adjourned at 8:50 PM