

MONTAGUE FINANCE COMMITTEE
Wednesday, June 14, 2023 at 6:00 p.m.
This meeting was held via Zoom and recorded:
<https://vimeo.com/838310376>

Finance Committee Chair Francia Wisnewski called the meeting to order at 6:00 PM.

Finance Committee members present: Chair Francia Wisnewski, Vice Chair Gregory Garrison, Clerk Dorinda Bell-Upp (left at 6:30) and members Fred Bowman, John Hanold, Chris Menegoni (arrived at 6:06 PM), and Jennifer Waryas

Finance Committee members absent:

Others present: Town Accountant Carolyn Olsen and Director of Assessing Karen Tonelli

The meeting was recorded by MCTV as well as by Carolyn Olsen.

Meeting minutes:

Mr. Hanold moved to approve the minutes of May 10, 2023. Seconded by Mr. Bowman and approved.
Bell-Upp – Aye, Bowman – Aye, Garrison – Aye, Hanold – Aye, Waryas – Aye, and Wisnewski – Aye

Transfers:

Reserve Fund Transfers – current balance of Reserve Fund is \$25,275

The bill for the professional valuation of a parcel whose value was being challenged was delayed, and the final bill, after a courtesy discount of 50%, was a very unexpected \$21,587.50. There is enough left in the total budget to cover about half of the discounted bill, but not the total. The request is for a transfer of \$11,000.

Mr. Garrison asked if the issue of value has been resolved. We are still waiting for an opinion from the Appellate Tax Board. Mr. Garrison asked if this would be the only expense for this particular valuation, the owners have the option of appealing the value annually.

Ms. Waryas asked about the process of appealing a property value. Ms. Tonelli explained that every taxpayer has the ability to appeal their assessment. It first goes to the Board of Assessors, and if it is not resolved there, the taxpayer can take the appeal to the Appellate Tax Board. Sometimes the Board of Assessors hires a professional valuation expert to appear on the town's behalf and do an independent appraisal.

Mr. Hanold moved to approve a Reserve Fund transfer of \$11,000 to Assessors Legal Expense (001-5-141-5302) Seconded by Mr. Garrison and approved.

Bell-Upp – Aye, Bowman – Aye, Garrison – Aye, Hanold – Aye, Menegoni – Aye, Waryas – Abstained, and Wisnewski – Aye

Plan for Stipend Review:

In advance of the meeting Ms. Olsen sent members a summary of the committee's previous discussions on how to approach recommendations for stipends back in 2019 and Mr. Hanold's summary of information from the 2019 Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG) Wage Survey. Ms. Olsen also provided the limited updated information from the 2023 FRCOG Wage Survey, and a sample of how a cost-of-living adjustment could be applied to the current stipend amounts since the last recommendation for FY20. Ms. Wisnewski emailed information she received from a list serve.

The committee discussed options for how to approach the review:

- Ms. Bell-Upp suggested asking affected positions if anything significant has changed since 2019. Ms. Bell-Upp, doesn't think we need to reinvent the wheel and is more interested in what has changed. If there's an increase in duties, it makes sense to recognize this when making general increases across the board.
- Mr. Bowman said we need a short statement of what each position does and how much time is involved. We also have to realize that some positions, like the Moderator, have more duties than are obvious, such as the Moderator being responsible for making appointments to various boards.
- Mr. Garrison thinks that the stipends have been on a scheduled basis for review. In the past we've looked at cost of living, expense reimbursement, etc. It's only if the responsibilities or time commitment have really changed that it needs to come before the Finance Committee. As the Finance Committee we should put the onus on those receiving stipends to identify changes and why the stipend should be increased and bring that to the Finance Committee. We will need to consider time between reviews. If something changes between reviews, it's incumbent on the person to request a change. Suggested keeping five years, with addition of allowing people to petition for changes as discussed.
- Ms. Waryas asked about the original purpose of these stipends. She is very confused about the tendency to provide stipends for salaried employees for additional work. What are the goals and parameters of stipends? We should have intentional parameters and rules about what is worth how much and what the stipend is meant to do; come up with a system of evaluation and measures.
- Mr. Menegoni says it's always a long, interesting conversation about a few dollars. He noted that stipends for employees should require specific skills. It's tough to monetize. If stipends are broken down to hours, it will come out to pennies per hour.
- Ms. Wisnewski participated in a neighboring town charter evaluation of stipends. Some of her reflections are about making it fair to both the person and town. The bottom line is a person should break even in terms of childcare or transportation and additional costs to participate. She asked peers in other towns about how they deal with stipends and noted that every community has a different approach. (Document attached at bottom of minutes.) Northampton just did a review of stipends and employee wages. Ms. Wisnewski wonders if we're open to appointing a group to investigate? She also asked about the timeline, and if town counsel will be involved in compliance issues with stipends, or if we can do this with just a survey and analysis.
- Mr. Hanold said that he reviewed the list of stipends and only found three town employees- Town Clerk as Clerk to the Board of Registrars, IT Administrator, and Police IT Administrator. Mr.

Hanold does not favor a stipend to reimburse expenses, but sees it as an honorarium, as each individual has different circumstances, and it wouldn't make sense to have to continually address the specific time, travel, and childcare needs of each stipended person. Ms. Wisnewski noted that the issue of travel and childcare are barriers preventing participation from some people.

- Ms. Bell-Upp left at 6:30. Her last comment was that she thinks the childcare stipend needs to be addressed at the state level.
- Mr. Bowman said stipends are pay for a job done, regardless of what person does with the stipend, or what their expenses are. Mr. Bowman is more interested in what people do, and then we can determine if the stipend is appropriate. He also noted that if stipends aren't high enough, we won't be able to get people to fill the positions. Mr. Bowman reiterated that it's important to really understand what the individuals do and make sure they are fairly compensated. His view is that the stipend is a wage rather than an honorarium.
- Ms. Olsen noted that the question of what the positions do has been documented in budget narratives, and asked if the committee wanted to start from scratch in terms of determining what everyone does or just determine what has changed.
- Mr. Hanold supported just determining what has changed and making adjustments for that, and then determining what is a reasonable basis for paying in the future so we have guidance in place for further changes during the periodic review, which, based on the Annual Town Meeting votes, should be reduced from five years to three or four years.
- Mr. Garrison noted that we dealt with this five years ago, and if the stipend positions have changed/evolved, that can be addressed in this review. Agrees with Mr. Bowman that these are jobs. We're in a set schedule for review, we've already addressed the rationale behind the current stipends, and thinks we should focus on changes in the positions and inflation. Mr. Garrison noted that Northampton is large enough, with enough staff, to really dig into a full-blown detailed review. If that's what Montague needs, it should be brought to the Finance Committee as a request by the Town Administrator or Selectboard.
- Ms. Olsen noted that the committee should complete the process by November for the Fiscal Year 2025 budget. Town Counsel is not involved in this at all, and the Selectboard's approval process is the same as it would be for any article.
- Ms. Wisnewski summarized that there is a foundation in place, and work to do in updating roles, and also would solicit comments from the public.
- Mr. Menegoni noted that this is the review year, and each individual who wants more should request the increase and support that request. If they aren't asking for a raise, he doesn't see any reason to give them one.
- Ms. Wisnewski noted that GMRSD School Committee has requested stipends. Mr. Bowman would like to have someone from the School Committee come to the next meeting to discuss this.
- Mr. Hanold does not favor asking everyone coming in with their own requests because the personality of the individuals will result in a disproportionate cycle. Noted that more assertive town employees have been able to request higher wages. Stipends are our responsibility to propose and to come up with a reasonable basis for them.
- Ms. Waryas wants to make sure we know why we're doing what we're doing in terms of determining stipend amounts. We need a baseline and a metric for variances.

- Mr. Bowman said that a stipend for a school committee is done differently than how it's done for town employees. Ms. Olsen noted that the legal basis for that is already in the meeting material for that meeting.
- Mr. Menegoni noted that people asking for what they want is what lead to the changes approved by ATM.
- Mr. Hanold noted one question discussed is to gather information, and suggests we do this before next month. Ms. Olsen will send out an email survey questioning what changes have occurred, and then try to collate previous information about duties for each position.

Additional conversation about the reserve fund transfer

- Ms. Waryas had additional questions about the reserve fund transfer. She noted that we were billed \$43,800 for services. When we are going through the process of defending an appeal, wonders how often the cost of litigation is more than the tax bill itself. Ms. Olsen noted that the actual bill was reduced to just under \$22,000, and that this was a very rare occurrence. Mr. Hanold added that the assessors were asked by the judge to provide more detail on the valuation.

Officers

Ms. Wisnewski reminded members that a Chair, Vice-Chair, and Clerk will be voted on at the next meeting. Ms. Wisnewski noted that she will be unavailable on the 12th, and Ms. Waryas has reconsidered and will be reappointed to the committee.

Future meetings –

- July 12th – end of year business/transfers, committee reorganization, stipend review process

Topics not anticipated within 48 hours of posting – none

Finance Committee Adjournment

Mr. Bowman makes the motion to adjourn at 6:57 PM. Seconded by Mr. Garrison and approved.

Bowman – Aye, Garrison – Aye, Hanold – Aye, Menegoni – Aye, Waryas – Aye, and Wisnewski – Aye

Respectfully submitted,
Carolyn Olsen

Documents and exhibits:

Reserve Fund Transfer Request for Board of Assessors

Ms. Wisnewski's Report on Montague Stipends

Francia Wisnewski, 6.14.23

Montague Report on Stipend

Annual Report Pg 55 and 56

[1 FINAL Annual Town Meeting Report 2023.pdf \(montague-ma.gov\)](#)

Arlington

Arlington has had stipends for select board, assessors, moderator and has just voted for the school committee. The Board of Health gave theirs up and the FinCom only has stipends for the chair and vice chairs. We have no formal or informal policy. My guess is that very few towns have such a policy, dealing with each request individually.

Cambridge

Cambridge approved some stipends for the first time... especially those like the Board of Zoning Appeals and the Planning Board which are enormous time commitments.

Below is link to the City Manager agenda item, Attachment E is some info. on other communities stipends.

We had received a legal opinion that we could have stipends for people serving, and now for some boards we do.

https://cambridgema.igm2.com/Citizens/Detail_Legifile.aspx?Frame=&MeetingID=4181&MediaPosition=&ID=17188&CssClass=

Reading

I was on the Select Board in Reading and this topic has come up a few times informally. Personally, I love the idea of reimbursing childcare and transportation. The issue that was raised here regarding a stipend is that many of our volunteers work at companies where they cannot have a secondary source of income related to government work due to the regulatory nature of some industries (mainly those in financial services). Just something to consider, depending on the demographics of your community.

From a selectboard member

An interesting implication of stipends is the local option to provide health insurance to elected officials that receive compensation. For example, if your Planning Board is elected and receives a stipend, Planning Board members may be eligible for the same health insurance as full-time employees. This is at the same split, so the city/town might pay 60-80% of the cost depending on your benefit agreements. This is a local option, by vote of the Select Board/City Council. On one hand this can provide health insurance savings to elected officials who have a hard time affording it other ways. On the other hand, it's a cost well in excess of most stipends. This is all from MGL Chapter 32B, Section 2. It may be worthwhile to determine if your Select Board/City Council has ever voted on this option to avoid surprises one way or the other.

I'm on a Select Board, and receive a stipend of around \$1500 per year. That's way too low if I wanted to be paid fairly for the time I put in. I look at this as a volunteer position so for me it's way too high. I donate the money back to local causes.

Malden

I wish we had a solid policy -- we give stipends for some things that take an enormous time commitment, such as Planning Board, but not for others that also require a lot of time but maybe fly under the radar such as Community Preservation Committee. And, we give stipends to city staff for the time they spend staffing these boards, e.g. Traffic Commission and Cannabis Licensing Board, when in my opinion that falls under their job duties. For example the city planners do not get a stipend for attending Zoning Board, City Council, or Planning because it's considered part of their duties, but the police chief, parking director and fire chief get stipends for attending meetings (some of which aren't even after hours?!) Makes no sense to me. In practice, when we create a new body (for example the ARPA oversight committees) we are allowed to petition the Mayor to ask for stipends for the resident members and it is at his sole discretion as to whether we do them or not.

Cambridge City Council

I just sent this to my friend Mark Sandeen in Lexington a few days ago, from the City Manager's response to our request (we subsequently changed the law to allow BZA stipends):

V. Stipends

Exploring ways we can provide stipends to boards and commission members, particularly those who meet more regularly like the Planning Board and Board of Zoning Appeals.

The City acknowledges that members of the Planning Board (PB), Board of Zoning Appeals (BZA), and the Historical Commission provide substantial volunteer hours as compared to those on other boards and commissions. During the period from October 2021 through October 2022, PB held thirty-eight meetings, BZA held twenty-three meetings, and Historical Commission held fourteen meetings. Any of these meetings can last for 3-5 hours and include hours of advance preparation time. By comparison, many other boards and commissions meet for two hours or less, approximately ten times per year.

Things like childcare during meetings and travel to and from meetings can create a barrier for many residents when they consider whether to apply for the Planning Board or the Board of Zoning Appeal as well as other boards and commissions and could potentially limit board and commission member diversity.

A survey of other Massachusetts communities' approach to these types of stipends (Attachment E) indicates that the provision of stipends to Planning Board and Zoning Board of Appeal members is uncommon but does occur. Perhaps the most relevant comparable community to focus on is Somerville, which provides its Planning Board and Zoning Board of Appeals members a stipend of \$5,943.96 annually.

Cambridge will begin to provide a \$6,000 annual stipend to all Planning Board members starting in January 2023. This stipend is intended to offset the annual out of pocket costs incurred by Board members in connection with participation on the Board.

Cambridge will begin to provide a \$2,500 annual stipend to all Cambridge Historical Commission Members starting in January 2023. This stipend is intended to offset the annual out of pocket costs incurred by Commission members in connection with participation on the Commission.

Cambridge also intends to provide a \$3,500 annual stipend to all full members of the BZA starting in January 2023, assuming the Municipal Code is amended to allow this. This stipend is intended to offset the annual out of pocket costs incurred by Board members in connection with participation on the Board.

Additionally, Cambridge intends to provide a \$2,000 stipend to all associate members of the BZA starting in January 2023 if the Municipal Code is amended accordingly. BZA associate members attend meetings on an as-needed basis when full-members are not available. Previous patterns of participation indicate that this could average 50% of meetings attended by full members.

Because Section 10.12 of the Cambridge Zoning Ordinance requires that BZA members serve without compensation, the Zoning Ordinance would need to be amended to remove that provision and to authorize providing a stipend to BZA members. The City Solicitor has prepared the attached proposed zoning amendment (Attachment F) to allow for the provision of stipends to BZA members. I recommend that the Council adopt it as a City Council zoning petition and refer it to the Ordinance Committee and Planning Board for hearing.

There are other City Boards and Commissions as to which certain statutes, special acts, or ordinances prohibit or limit the City's ability to provide stipends to their members. There is, however, no limitation on providing stipends to Planning Board members, so it is not necessary to amend the Zoning Ordinance or Municipal Code to do so.

The City will continue to evaluate the time involved and barriers to participation in volunteering for other City boards and commissions and may consider allowing for the provision of additional board or commission stipends in the future based on this evaluation.

Participant

I suspect the differences among city staff are based on how good the negotiators for the police and firefighters unions are. AFSCME needs to start poaching some of those people to come work for them.

Sunderland

I feel like a stipend should reflect the amount of work, which is a way to make the office available to someone who really needs their working hours to produce income. We don't want elected office to be available only to people who can afford to give their labor for free.

But it's also not like there's a set number of work hours; different people holding the same office can invest wildly different amounts of time in "executing" the same role, but to different levels. If someone did run for office just for the money and did a lousy job it's hard to hold them accountable before the next election.

Sunderland Selectboard is similar. School committee is zero, which is a choice my predecessors made during a brutal budget year. I don't know about BoH and Assessors.

Hatfield

As an elected Planning Board member in Hatfield, we each get ~\$800 per year. I'm not doing it for the money so I'm not sure if it's the "right" amount but it's a nice "thank you." The other elected paid

positions in town: Selectboard members get ~\$2,300 per year, BoH members get ~\$5,000, Assessors ~\$2,000 and School Committee ~\$150. I'm not sure the reasoning behind these amounts.

Northampton

[Advisory board presents salary proposal for elected officials in Northampton \(thereminder.com\)](#)

[Recommendations to streamline serving on boards and commissions presented \(thereminder.com\)](#)