

## **MONTAGUE FINANCE COMMITTEE**

**Wednesday, December 13, 2023 at 6:00 p.m.**

**This meeting was held in person and with public participation via Zoom and recorded:**

<https://vimeo.com/864229360>

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

**Finance Committee members present in person:** Chair Francia Wisniewski, Clerk Fred Bowman and members Greg Garrison, John Hanold, Chris Menegoni, and Jennifer Waryas

**Finance Committee members present via Zoom:** Vice Chair Dorinda Bell-Upp

**Finance Committee members absent:** none

**Others present:** Town Administrator Steven Ellis, Treasurer Tax Collector Eileen Seymour, Cemetery Commission Chair Judith Lorei, and Town Accountant Carolyn Olsen

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

### **Meeting minutes:**

Mr. Garrison moved to approve the minutes of October 11, 2023. Seconded by Mr. Menegoni and approved.

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

### **Tax Taking Process**

- Mr. Hanold asked about recent changes in the number of parcels in tax title. Ms. Seymour said we had 29. In September the town had 56 delinquent accounts, but after a lot of working with taxpayers to get them current or on a payment plan, only 2 more parcels went into tax title.
- A tax taking puts the town in the first position to be paid if the property is sold.
- Montague uses the maximum time allowed by statute, which is three and a half years, prior to putting a property into tax title.
- It's not cost effective to put properties into tax title as soon as legally allowed.
- Mr. Garrison asked about home equity theft. The state has not yet changed its laws to adapt to the recent Supreme Court decision that requires any excess gained on the sale of a foreclosed property be returned to the property owner. Montague will not sell any foreclosed property until the state updates the law. Ms. Seymour doesn't think the town should take the excess value but does feel we should be able to recover all of our expenses related to the property. Ms. Seymour noted that she does not make these decisions independently but confers with other town officials.

### **FY25 Personnel Changes**

1. The Treasurer's office has been reduced since an employee moved to another department, and the staff has used that time to evaluate whether to replace the employee. This migration of human resource tasks has freed up time in the Treasurer's office allowing for the

Treasurer/Collector to spend additional time on the collector's side of the business. The Treasurer's budget for FY25 will not fill the currently vacant position and instead will outsource the printing, stuffing, and mailing of tax bills. This will be done much more efficiently as the companies have appropriate equipment. The FY25 budget also includes "additional part-time hours" in the amount of \$2,000 for occasional part time office coverage during vacations and peak tax times. These hours would be worked by the Selectboard's Administrative Assistant.

Mr. Hanold asked how having only two staff was working prior to moving to the outsourced bill process. Ms. Seymour noted that it is challenging, but they wanted to go through most of a full cycle to see what they could handle.

Ms. Waryas asked Steve if it was hard to find a reputable service. We use the same service used by GMRSD.

2. The requested Sexton position would coordinate services, from selling and marking the grave to coordinating with funeral homes and families. The FY25 budget request has been increased by \$2,000 to provide a \$100 per burial payment for up to 20 burials per year. The sale of each lot goes into the Sale of Cemetery Lots Receipts Reserved for Appropriations account. The Sexton will work closely with the Cemetery Commission to ensure that burials are managed in a timely way without sole reliance on volunteers. Adding a Sexton to support volunteer work creates a more sustainable way for the Town to manage the responsibilities of operating an active cemetery. The Selectboard has recommended this request. Ms. Lorei also reported that the new groundskeeping service is doing an excellent job and they will be within their budget, which allows funding for additional work on the grounds in all the cemeteries.

### **Budget Calendar**

A draft calendar was reviewed but will need to be adjusted when the winter special town meeting date is set.

### **Budget Projections**

Ms. Olsen went over the highlights of the FY25 budget.

- The Allowance for Abatements and Exemptions was increased to 400k for FY24, and that amount will also be used for the FY25 budget.
- The actual FY25 budgeted excess capacity is now slightly below the FY24 actual excess capacity.
- The biggest budget impacts are the new solid waste contract, overall wages, and the estimated 5% health insurance. An additional DPW employee will also add notable costs.
- The Airport's budget assumes previously expected revenues from the solar lease project. They will be preparing a Plan B budget to reflect potential decreases in revenue. Mr. Ellis added that there is a potential for requiring additional funding for the Airport this year due to the delay of solar lease payments.

### **Affordable Assessment Calculation Check In**

Mr. Ellis said that while the Selectboard supports the increase in the Allowance for Abatements and Exemptions, this increase reduces the amount available for budgets. The Affordable Assessment is now a 2.7% increase, which is less than the Selectboard originally intended.

### **Updates from Town Administrator**

- The Selectboard decided not to increase the cost of trash stickers this year.
- The Selectboard intends to formally decide that Walter Ramsey will succeed be the next Town Administrator, and the transition will be discussed at their December 18<sup>th</sup> meeting.
- The state's unrestricted government aid is likely to see about a 1.9% increase. There will be a stronger estimate available within the next few weeks and a more definitive number in the Governor's budget by the end of January.
- One other personnel request that has come up is for a laborer to assist the lead collections system operator. Currently a DPW employee has to be pulled away from their job if the lead needs entry to an enclosed space, which happens very frequently. The cost for wages and benefits will be added to the DPW budget after receiving Selectboard approval for the position.
- Ms. Waryas asked about the likelihood of getting a sewer commission that is not also the selectboard. Mr. Ellis responded that this was up to the community to request.

### **School District Regionalization Update**

Ms. Bell-Upp provided an overview of the Six Town Regional Planning Board (STRPB) report.

- The STRPB will meet on January 3<sup>rd</sup> to vote on whether a final report will be drafted, or the project dropped. If it is agreed to draft the report, all towns would then have to vote on the matter and all involved towns would have to approve the plan in order to proceed with further regionalization.
- Ms. Bell-Upp shared a power point presentation that was previously presented at a Selectboard meeting, and which is a slightly more condensed version than the one presented by the STRPB.
- Teachers would move to the GMRSD wage scale, with 2 steps added.
- It would have to be determined which health insurance plan to use. PVRSD's current plan would be much less expensive than GMRSD's current plan.
- The assessment methodology used would have a major impact on the financial costs or savings for each town.
- Mr. Bowman feels that if the towns don't do this themselves, they'll be forced to in the next few years, so the STRPB needs to sell it.
- It is still uncertain whether Warwick will be able to separate from their current situation and join.
- Ms. Wisnewski asked if the unions have opinions about this yet. If the plan moves forward, employee impacts would need to be renegotiated.
- The Selectboard felt that given current enrollment projections we need to do something, and they voted to move forward with the process.
- Mr. Menegoni feels that the plan provides programmatic benefits to the students even if it's financially a challenge. He thinks the main challenge is the name and identification of a new district school.
- Ms. Waryas noted that human attachments to identifications with schools vary widely so she wants the process to focus on the positive benefits.
- Members should directly provide Ms. Bell-Upp with their feedback, as the committee will not meet again to have a formal endorsement prior to the STRPB's January 3<sup>rd</sup> meeting.

**Topics not anticipated within 48 hours of posting:**

Ms. Bell-Upp asked if we have a plan of when meetings will be in person vs Zoom. Ms. Wisnewski will poll members for preferences, but the next meeting on January 3<sup>rd</sup> will be via Zoom.

**Future meetings:**

**January 3, 2024:** Review monthly reports, approve amended Schedule II (Sexton), determine ?s for Departments, vote on Six School Regionalization Proposal

The committee is scheduled to meet weekly thereafter until mid-April.

**Finance Committee Adjournment**

Mr. Bowman makes the motion to adjourn at 7:26 PM. Seconded by Mr. Menegoni and approved.

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

Respectfully submitted,  
Carolyn Olsen

**Documents and exhibits:**

Minutes of October 11, 2023