

MONTAGUE FINANCE COMMITTEE

Wednesday, January 17, 2024 at 6:00 p.m.

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

<https://vimeo.com/903917542>

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

Finance Committee members present: Chair Francia Wisnewski, Vice Chair Dorinda Bell-Upp, Clerk Fred Bowman and members John Hanold, Chris Menegoni, and Jennifer Waryas

Finance Committee members absent: Greg Garrison

Others present: Town Administrator Steven Ellis, Assistant Town Administrator Walter Ramsey, Police Chief Chris Williams, and Town Accountant Carolyn Olsen

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

Meeting minutes:

Mr. Hanold moved to approve the minutes of January 10, 2024. Seconded by Mr. Menegoni and approved.

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

Police Request for Increase in Part-Time Police Officer Rate

The current wage range for these positions is \$25-\$28 per hour. Chief Williams had earlier requested that the range be increased to \$29-\$33 per hour. This request is now being further amended to a top pay of \$34.25 due to the retirement of an officer who will be filling some part-time shifts. Ms. Olsen suggested rounding the amount up to \$35 per hour.

Chief Williams reminded the committee that these part-time officers must now meet all full-time officer certification requirements and that means that most part-time officers will be retired police officers or full-time officers from other departments.

Chief Williams is also requesting that part-time officers receive the same shift differential as regular full-time officers. The current rates are \$1.00 per hour for second shift and \$1.25 per hour for third shift.

The FY2025 budget has been increased to accommodate this requested change.

Mr. Ellis noted that the requested wage range for part-time officers is higher than the range for patrolman, but the police union is okay with that because the part-time officers are not eligible for benefits.

Ms. Waryas asked why the recently retired Sgt. Dempsey is still on the staffing section of the budget. The budget will be updated when the position is filled.

It was noted that part-time officers are used for a few specific shifts during the week, and their use only lessens the use of overtime when other shifts are not filled by full-time officers.

Mr. Hanold asked about the town leaving civil service. When the town joined, the proper way to enter civil service was for the town to petition the state legislature for special legislation and subsequently have a town election vote to opt into civil service. While legislation was filed in February of 1932, there is no record that it was ever acted upon. The following month, town meeting approved a special article to enter civil service. It is counsel's opinion that you get out the way you got in meaning that the defect in our process in 1932 would benefit the town in being able to circumvent the requirement for special legislation to remove us from civil service. Our town meeting motion last spring to petition the state legislature to leave civil service was not a direct vote to leave civil service. In discussion with counsel, we've determined that the best thing to do is place an article on the special town meeting warrant to revoke the previous acceptance of civil service. Since Montague has a 10-day waiting period before any town meeting votes become final, the Chief will have to wait until the last week of March to promote and hire outside of civil service. The end result will be a broader pool of applicants.

Chief Williams noted that the Capital Outlay request is lower for FY2025 because he will be purchasing an administrative vehicle rather than a cruiser. The differences are only the paint job, shotgun rack, and the cage in the cruiser.

Ms. Waryas asked if the Chief considered leasing the new vehicle. Chief Williams feels that you don't save any money with a lease as the vehicle would be returned at the end of the lease.

Mr. Ramsey noted that the CIC doesn't vet the annual cruiser but noted that the administrative vehicle will need to meet the miles per gallon per Montague's green vehicle policy.

Finance Committee Recommendations for Amended Schedule II (Appointed Wages)

Note that these requests are for the March 14, 2024 Special Town Meeting. Any approved changes would also be shown on Schedule II for the Annual Town Meeting.

Mr. Hanold moved to add the Sexton position to Schedule II with a wage of \$100 per burial and increase the hourly wage range for part-time police officers to \$29-\$35, to be effective with the March 14, 2024 Special Town Meeting approval. Seconded by Mr. Menegoni and approved.

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

Police and Dispatch Departments FY2025 Requests

Discussed above.

Town Administrator Updates:

Airport Revenue Shortfall Issue

In November, Airport Manager Bryan Camden notified the Selectboard that the solar lease, projected to provide \$152K or 38% of total FY24 funding, had fallen through due to Eversource's request for utility upgrades for interconnection from the solar field to the electrical grid. The cost to do so exceeds \$16M. One view is that Eversource wants the solar company and the town to pay for upgrades to the undercapacity industrial park utility system.

In December, Mr. Camden realized that there would be no resolution in the short term. This left a significant revenue shortfall for both FY 2024 and FY2025. The Airport outlined their belief that the airport is extremely closely budgeted each year in an attempt to be fully self-supporting.

The Selectboard considered several options for FY24. It is not prudent to trim personnel. The operating budget is already upside down by \$10K resulting from \$20K in unexpected expenses. There are possible sources to plug the gap. While there is about \$220K in unallocated ARPA funds, that is tentatively earmarked as a contingency for the Strathmore building, so the Selectboard opted not to recommend using ARPA for the airport shortfall. The Selectboard suggests a combined use of General Stabilization, Sale of Real Estate for some of the debt service, and possibly Town Capital Stabilization.

The Selectboard does not think there should be staff cuts in FY2025 either.

Using excess capacity in FY2025 to fund the airport would have a major impact on both the Affordable Assessment and the tax rate.

The goal seems to be to devote more resources and look for more future revenue streams. The Selectboard asked the Airport Commission to sharpen their view of the budget for FY2025 and consider new revenue sources.

Mr. Hanold asked about the likelihood of additional revenue from aviation or non-aviation airport revenue. Mr. Ellis replied that they are looking at adjusting their current rates, as well as potentially using communication towers as cell phone towers. Mr. Ramsey added that the FCTS will begin paying an annual fee for their hangar of over \$7K.

Mr. Menegoni said that the revenue loss puts the town on the hook. He thinks this should come from taxation rather than reserves as it is likely to last a few years. This should be part of the operating budget until the shortfall ends.

Mr. Ellis, Mr. Ramsey, and Ms. Olsen will come up with recommendations for both FY2024 and FY2025 for discussion at next week's meeting. The intention is to come up with a solution for FY2024 then and discuss FY2025 at the scheduled meeting with the Airport in February.

Funding Options for Collection Systems Costs

The Selectboard was not amenable to adding the requested Collection System Operator position and feels the difficulty in the DPW's ability to provide a second person for certain activities to be more an issue of the three vacant DPW truck driver/laborer positions. There is hope that a new Truck Driver in Training position, which will be at a lower grade, with assistance for them to obtain a CDL, will help fill these positions.

Collection System Lead Operator Kyle Bessette found evidence of significant infiltration in two major lines of the Millers Falls system. He has used all available technology, but more investigation is needed to find the source of the water. This will probably have to be delayed for a while until permission can be obtained to dig on private property and may take months to find the source.

The Selectboard made two decisions. The first is to keep the Collection System Lead Operator position in the DPW budget with overtime for other staff staying in the CWF's DPW Subsidiary budget. The second is to use Town Capital Stabilization or Town General Stabilization to pay for the Millers Falls overflow charge and pick up the calendar year 2023 excess charge from Erving.

Topics not anticipated within 48 hours of posting: none

Finance Committee Adjournment

Mr. Bowman makes the motion to adjourn at 7:56 PM. Seconded by Mr. Menegoni and approved.

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

Respectfully submitted,
Carolyn Olsen

Next Meeting – January 24, 2024- DPW

Documents and exhibits:

Minutes of January 10, 2024

Police and Dispatch FY25 Budget Requests and Narratives