

Questions from Finance Committee members & Answers from Town staff – General Government

[Only those relevant to topics on the Feb 16 agenda excerpted here. Carolyn Olsen maintains the complete document.]

113 Town Meeting:

What are the cost increases, amounts and items, for adapting the meeting to remote or outdoors? The additional costs for remote/outdoor meetings last year were covered by COVID-19 grants.

CO-There are no expected additional costs for remote meetings this year, as we will be using the voting process imbedded in the Zoom platform.

SE-Our FY23 budget does not account for any additional costs of remote or outdoor meetings. Through Fall 2021, these additional costs were covered through CARES funding, and we could potentially use the Town's ARPA funding in the same fashion, if necessary.

The future is clearly unpredictable but given the modest marginal cost of running a town meeting (aside from administrative staff time, which is not accounted for in this budget) and the availability of ARPA funds, we felt it prudent to plan for what we want and expect to be our meeting format, which will include a modest meal at annual Town Meeting.

I noticed that about \$600 have been allotted for food during town meetings, will this be offered to members? With long meetings, it is important to allot time to grab a snack.

Food for town meetings has always been for the town meeting members present.

122 Selectboard:

In comparison with similar neighboring or MA same size towns, is the proposed staffing increase consistent with other towns?

SE - In terms of comparable communities, our most common reference points generally include the cities of Greenfield and Easthampton, Athol, Orange, Hadley and Deerfield. Of these, the two cities are roughly double our population, while Athol is larger, Hadley and Deerfield smaller, and Orange the most similar in population.

Unsurprisingly, the cities enjoy deeper and more specialized staffing, including entire departments that the towns do not possess. To my knowledge, only one of the towns has an ATA (Deerfield) but note they do not employ a Planner and the ATA does not have the role that I am proposing for Montague. Athol has a Town Manager, but no ATA, with generally similar departmental staffing. Orange's staffing is thinner than Montague's. All of these towns share similar structures, but differ in the details of how they staff, assign responsibility, and implement work within them.

The request to expand Selectboard office capacity reflects the reality of Montague's operational needs and limitations. If implemented, it will better position us to move our community forward and meet the diverse challenges of the next decade. I believe it will offer a tremendous return on investment.

Would you consider eliminating the stipend for the IT Coordinator role and integrating those responsibilities into one of the reconfigured administrative positions in the Selectboard office?

SE-We presently have a division of labor relative to IT management and support, with the Selectboard Office already very engaged, particularly with the management and implementation of video-conferencing related tools. I continue to see value in the current role of the IT Coordinator, aspects of which I think are very well-suited to the Town Accountant's Office. I'm not wholly averse to this idea but would want to watch how the demands on Wendy's position

progress before considering its elimination. I would, however, propose to end the MEDIC Stipend.

Would adding capacity in the Selectboard office help us get a better handle on who is doing systems level planning about space needs, professional development, impacts of managing grants, etc?

SE - Absolutely. All of these activities presently happen on what I consider to be primarily a reactive basis and each is an example of where we can and should do better. I could use a lot of words to answer this question, but it is a definitive yes and I'll be happy to elaborate in conversation.

141 Assessors:

Other Professional Services has a budget of over \$15k, but nothing's been spent yet. Could you remind us of what this is for and when it would typically be spent?

KT - The category "Other Professional Services" is relatively new to the Assessors Budget and as such, I am still formulating how to best to proceed. These funds are intended to provide for services & other assistance needed due to, in part, the reduction of a full-time staff person who had retired. I expect that some (but not the majority) of the funds will be used before the end of this fiscal year -- keeping in mind that our task schedule runs through the calendar year (producing tax bills at the end of December).

145 Treasurer:

Can you determine whether or not to buy a new FAX machine before mid-March?"

ES - Since you can no longer buy JUST a fax machine, the department will muddle through using faxes in other departments until they have an absolute need. It helps that most things that used to be faxed are now emailed.

What were the town's efforts to support the local economy with tax breaks? What industries and if this happened, amounts of discounts, exceptions, or forgiveness to taxes during Covid.

CO - State did not authorize any tax breaks, although the SB did vote to reduce certain license fees to local businesses in both calendar years 2021 and 2022.

151 Legal/Counsel -

FY21 actuals appear to be about \$30K below budget, and spending thorough Dec 21 in FY22 is fairly low, making this appear to be a budget we might look to reduce if we need to make cuts. Is there context I'm missing?

SE - Great question. I do think we could trim this budget if necessary. I would not recommend a figure below \$75,000. Some background...

When I arrived mid-year in FY17 our legal expenses trended much higher than presently, peaking at \$104,258 in FY15. The FY17 budget was \$70,000, but spending was \$94,569. Following that year, we consolidated counsel with KP, issued controls on use, and generally worked to make judicious use of resources. With regard to the mid-year figures for dollars spent, they reflected four months of spending and actuals for mid-year are just under \$30,000.

151 Counsel Spending Trends

Actual FY15	Actual FY16	Actual FY17	Actual FY18	Actual FY19	Actual FY20	Actual FY21	Spent FY22
104,258	74,569	94,991	78,753	62,051	47,390	51,028	21,728*

155 IT -

(this is actually a current year question) You have reallocated quite a lot of money from the consultant line to other lines that haven't had any spending yet in FY22. What is the plan? Would it be possible to allocate some of those funds to the website maintenance line in order to do something like have Montague Webworks help us get the town's website in better shape?

The plan for FY22 is to do what we can in the time left to upgrade/replace some more PCs and other equipment. It would be possible to contract with someone to work on the website, but to be honest, I don't really have any available band width for that right now.

With town hall serving remotely, was there a higher need for constituent services from town hall? Are there plans to improve the current structure in place to engage citizens with town hall and town government?

Town hall was never fully remote. The purpose of the IT budget is primarily to provide support for existing IT technology and upgrades as needed. No one has had the bandwidth within this department to further engage citizens with town hall and town government.

161 Clerk:

Have we always paid for Food for Poll workers? [Other increases are addressed.]

CO -The Town Clerk has been providing lunch for poll workers since the Town Accountant told her it was perfectly legal to do so. The expenses were previously charged to 5420 Office Supplies.

DB - I started to feed election workers in May 2020, when we had to relocate 4 of our precinct locations due to the new COVID election law requirements that Montague could no longer meet.

It is a long day for my election workers – from 15 to 18-hour days. Most towns do feed elections workers, plus I did get positive reinforcement from Carolyn, so now I purchase Subway platters for each precinct which gets them through the day.

All my old precincts, except Hillcrest School, had small kitchens with refrigerators and microwave ovens. Four precincts are now under one roof at the FCTS and there is refrigeration or microwave ovens available.

Have there been considerations to relocate the nurse's office i.e., to schools/ Senior center or other location that makes sense for this role, so town clerk staff can expand in town hall? Not sure where this question belongs to but is the nurse's office rented?

CO - There's no space available at the Senior Center. Since the schools are separate districts, I don't know why we'd move the town nurse to a district facility. Besides which, the schools already have their own nursing staff. The nurse's office is used by the nurse, so it's not available for rental to others.

DB - I used to share the nurse's office with the previous BOH director – she let me store election ballots that needed to be locked up when running elections. I started out sharing with the new director but was asked to get my things out earlier this year so the nurse could have more room and perform clinics in that office. My understanding is that the new annex room was for clinics.

175 Planning -

It seems like the Planner's position is shared with MEDIC, has there been a consideration to hire a MEDIC staff?

The planner receives a stipend to staff MEDIC and manage economic development activities under the purview of the EDIC. While hiring a MEDIC staff person has not been considered, the proposed Assistant Town Administrator position would assume the responsibility of economic development manager and managing the EDIC would be part of that position.

There is an assistant planner position in place, has there been a consideration to expand this position (if PT)?

The Assistant Planner is a full-time position and has been since it was created. The assistant planner supports the town planner and coordinates the RiverCulture Creative Economy Program

You note that the department is now highly engaged in economic development activities. If an Asst Town Administrator position is created and takes on community/economic development, grants management, procurement, and other tasks your department has been doing, what will the duties and qualifications of the Town Planner be?

SE-The Town Planner offered an independent response to this question, which is included on the page following this one, but I'll offer that the Planner's core job description does not reflect much of the activity that has grown, by necessity, to become a focus of the office's work. This does not come without cost, as it can and does distract from other intended activities, which are outlined in the Planner's response. The Planner position will always be connected to community and economic development activities, and grant-making, but as a complementary rather than primary resource. The basic qualifications of the Planner will not be amended.

The ATA will supervise the Planner, Assistant Planner/Cultural Coordinator, and Building Department, ensuring continued coherence in operations.

Also note: I strongly support the Town's support for the heavily discounted cost of the Suffolk program as presented. It is an extremely applied program that will enhance Walter Ramsey's job skills to the benefit of the Town. The employee will be investing a substantial amount of his personal time on this program, which occurs on Fridays.

WR - Assistant Town Admin position would oversee procurement and administration of physical infrastructure projects so the planner can focus on strategic and long-term planning and administration of land use regulations.

Specifically, these will be the retained duties of the Planner:

- Land Use Administration
- Staffing the Planning Board (customer service, facilitate permitting process, and compliance monitoring, develop staff reports and recommendations regarding zoning and policy amendments, plan review, Identify and implement BMPs for Board)
- Staff the Conservation Commission (customer service, facilitate permitting process and compliance monitoring, facilitate strategic land conservation efforts)
- Strategic and Long-Term Planning

- Advise+ Support the Selectboard and other Departments/ Boards on matters relating to land use and community planning and special projects under direction of the Selectboard
- Maintain + advance objectives identified in municipal long-range plans: Comp Plan, Open Space and Rec Plan, Housing, Downtown Planning, Canal District. Ensure robust community engagement.
- Municipal Manager of Special State Programs: Green Communities, Municipal Vulnerabilities Preparedness, Complete Streets. Ensure Compliance, update plans as needed, and prepare grant applications
- Municipal Brownfields liaison. Represent at Regional Brownfield Committee, identify/ advance properties, maintain inventory
- Here are some examples of Ongoing/ upcoming Projects under the planner's purview in FY23
 - Montague Comprehensive Plan Update
 - 40R Smart Growth Zoning for housing
 - Advance Placemaking related projects identified in the Turners Falls Local Rapid Recovery Plan
 - Develop new floodplain bylaws to align with FEMA floodplain mapping
 - Next phase of Battlefield Grant Study
 - Reuse planning/zoning for Farren Care center property

Many of these projects involve managing consultants, interdepartmental/interagency coordination, pursuing planning related grant opportunities and ensuring a robust public engagement process.

In my current capacity, I have not had time to focus on permit compliance monitoring, implementation of Board best management practices, updating the 1999 Comprehensive Plan, and maximizing deployment of the Green Communities and MVP program. With the ATM position, time resources would be freed up to manage these, plus all of the above-mentioned items.

The Planner should have a master's degree in planning or a similar field.

Does the Town have a tuition reimbursement policy that applies to the Planner's request? Is there a precedent we can apply to this?

WR - I cannot speak as to what the precedent is in Montague, however there is substantial precedent in other communities in supporting professional development through the [MMA-Suffolk Certificate in Local Government Leadership and Management](#).

According to the MMA, it is typical and customary for the municipality to cover the cost of the program. When I questioned them, they informed me that they accept 25 students/ year into the class and MMA estimates that about 22 or so have their tuition expense paid by the municipality. Planner has been accepted into the FY23 program and would attend this program on Fridays on his own time.