

Advisory Meeting

January 8, 2020

Present: Arthur Frontczak, Chair, David Lutes, Jim Lehan, Kristen Balash, Mike Hough, Todd Lindmark/Finance Director and Blythe Robinson, Town Administrator

Arthur Frontczak called the meeting to order at 7PM. Arthur had spoken to Kevin about a representative from the Select Board attending tonight's meeting and hoped that one of them would attend.

Arthur led a discussion about setting a schedule for meetings leading up to the Annual Town Meeting

Arthur then asked Blythe to discuss the budget writing process. She said they are working with all Department Heads and their budgets are due tomorrow, January 9th. She is targeting the last week in January to get out the Budget book, which should spell out what a zero-increase budget and a level service budget looks like and means. There are fixed costs such as elections that cannot change but other things are worth examining. She would like Committee members to gain a clear understanding of what each of these budgets represent in terms of services

There will not be zoning articles in the Spring. Blythe said the State has awarded the town \$224,000 in a grant to study the wastewater treatment plant and what are the options to re-allocate or possibly enlarge the system. Jim asked if the grant allowed them to potentially move the system down Main Street. Blythe said there are a bit of moving parts and it would be helpful to better understand that.

Arthur said he would like to build in more time so we can meet with more boards and committees. It allows more time for drafting and circulation and the Advisory Committee to debate the material.

After a discussion of members availability, Sue will email all about potential changing the evening the Committee meets.

Susan stated that the Select Board had asked every board and committee as well as departments to look at their own budget. Sue presented members with possible options including continuing to mail the Town Meeting arrant, eliminating an Administrative assistant to schedule meetings, take minutes, order supplies, etc. Dave said he is generally interested in printing the Warrant. He said that the postcards can be ignored or missed. He feels that, by receiving the Warrant, people may take the time to get engaged. Dave believes it helps get people to attend Town Meeting. Jim feels that it is a mistake not to mail the Warrant. He believes you get better participation and citizens are better informed. Mike said that he personally thinks that having residents show up informed out-weighs the cost to mail.

Susan said they this means the Committee will need an increase to the printing budget. She would like support from the Committee when she attends the budget meeting before the Select-board.

Jim said we have a very diverse population; the largest population is over 60 and we need to be advocates for everyone in this town. He believes printing and mailing the Warrant reaches everyone. The Committee's job is to reach everyone in the Community and not just the technology groups.

Arthur said that printing shows transparency. Art said he is open to a motion to mail the Warrant.

A motion was made by Jim Lehan to print and mail the Warrants. It was seconded by David Lutes and so voted. All were in favor.

Dave asked if we have had to spend the entire Reserve Fund. Jim said that he thought the town has used it every year but has not had to transfer it all out except in 2008.

Arthur said that each Advisory Committee member could take on the administrative note taking and taking care of the Administrative side of things. Dave said that he would be concerned that if we did not have someone who cannot focus the time needed with most of the volunteers having a full time job.

Dave said he is happy to edit but he is not a great minute taker. He said that his endorsement is to keep an administrative person on board. Jim said he agrees with Dave. Mike said knowing how busy the volunteers on this board are and he is in favor as well as is Kristen.

Arthur said that we have a mostly new Select Board and this is his first year chairing this Committee so there was a need to discuss the budget process. At the Select Board's request, Arthur attended their December 17, 2019 meeting. Arthur said it was a very lively discussion with the main point being raised was that Select Board members felt that there needs to be a broader understanding of the budget and the budget process. He believes that people are looking for a revisit for the way it ought to be.

Blythe indicated that the budget process will involve a number of steps. First, develop a budget presentation that looks back three years. This will help to establish how the budget got to the current baseline. Second, develop a number of budget scenarios, included a zero-based budget and a budget with a three percent increase which is generally considered level service budget.

There was general discussion of what role the Advisory Committee serves. Arthur said that our role is to represent the town at large, to speak for the community, review the budget proposals and come to their own independent conclusion. The Committee is also allowed to request representative of town bodies to come before them, to discuss their budgets. The Committee can also submit our own budget line items if it we feel strongly that it needs to happen.

Members asked Blythe a number of questions about the budget process, including their interest in understanding what happened to funds that are reallocated from one area of the budget to another, the need for a full understanding of current and projected revenues, what the budget book would look like and whether there was an interest in developing a long term capital plan. Blythe responded to members interest and said that she would provide the same level of detail to the Committee as is given to the Select Board though as we get closer to town meeting, keeping up with the various versions of the budget become more difficult.

There were questions about what a zero-based budget meant. Blythe indicated that the approach during this process was that it meant a zero-growth budget. Dave indicated that this would be a difficult approach with departments that had small staff and small budgets. Jim said that he thought it meant an overall approach which could be applied across town government rather than department by department.

A member of the public, Ed Haddid, said that his recollection is that a zero-based budget is where you build the budget from Zero up; he is not sure if there is a miscommunication or misunderstanding on the term. Blythe said that both have been talked about no tax increases a zero-based budget approach to perhaps getting to a place of where a zero-based budget means. Kristen said they mean different things.

Mr. Haddid said that the bulk of expenses and health insurance, payroll and he thought there should be a cut in headcount if I do not have this person. Start the budget process with a head count review. Start with your budget busters. This surprises him. Kristen said that the town just approved money for a compensation study and she wondered how that plays. Blythe said she does not expect this to affect the budget this year. She expect most will be fairly compensated, a small group under compensated and a small group over compensated.

Jim said we need to take a step back and let the process follow its way through they have looked at headcounts in the past. There are certain responsibilities that have to get done no matter what. Head counts are reviewed year after year for each department. Jim said if you look back at the DPW, you can see that it has been understaffed for many years. He added that we are a residential tax-based town; if you want to cut services you can do that. They may be acceptable cuts or they may not.

Arthur added said that there were questions on how the Advisory Committee was picked, who are they and what do they do. He has volunteered to go to the Select-board and answers those questions. He felt that this Committee has a lot of financial expertise. He heard different comments from both the Select-board and some members of the public. Arthur feels that there should be a blurb about what the Committee does and what their responsibilities are. Kristen said some things that are confused by Finance Committee is and an Advisory Committee this Committee deals with all warrant articles to cover the broad spectrum not just finances. Mike volunteered to take a first cut at developing something for the town website about the Advisory Committee and its members.

There was a brief discussion of what departments Committee members would follow during this year's budget process. Jim said he will take both schools KP and Norfolk, Arthur will do Police & Fire, and Kristin volunteered to do the library.

A motion was made by David Lutes to approve a series of meeting minutes. Jim felt that head to abstain and therefore there was no quorum so the votes to approve the minutes were postponed.

A motion to adjourn by Dave and was seconded by Mike.

Meeting adjourned at 8:31PM

Respectfully submitted


'Susan Jacobson

David Lutes, Clerk