Finance Committee

TOWN OF HALIFAX

499 Plymouth Street

Halifax, MA 02338

**Meeting Minutes**

**Monday February 22, 2021**

**Committee Members Present**: Cheryll Zarella Burke, Fred McGovern, Drew McGlincy, Tom Connolly

Also, in attendance in the audience were: Charlie Seelig, Sandy Nolan, Jean Gallant, Chief Chaves, Joe Vetrano, Gordon Andrews, Toni Ross, Chief Viveiros, Deb Pasquale, Amy Troup and Ashely Disesa

The meeting was recorded by Zoom

**Fred called the Finance Committee meeting to order at 6:03 pm**

**Fred entertained a motion to accept the meeting minutes from 2/8/2021**

Motion: Cheryll

Second: Tom

**AIF**

Fred said for the next agenda item they would interview Deb Pasquale as a potential candidate for appointment to the Finance Committee. The members present introduced themselves and discussed how long they had been on the Finance Committee. Deb introduced herself and said she moved to the Town 12 years ago and loves the small-town feel. She wants to be part of the structure of the Town and she has been a big advocate for cleaning up the lakes. She said she had been on the watershed committee. Fred explained when the Fin Com usually meets and a general overview of the budget process. Deb said she planned to be in Halifax for a long time and was willing to accept the appointment to the Finance Committee if the Fin Com and the Selectmen recommended her.

**Fred entertained a motion to recommend Deb Pasquale as an appointee by the Selectmen to the Finance Committee.**

Motion: Cheryll

Second: Fred

**AIF**

Fred and Charlie discussed that Joe and Deb would both attend the Selectmen meeting on 2/23/21 with Fred so the Selectmen could appoint them as members of the Finance Committee.

Fred asked Chief Viveiros if he was prepared to discuss his budgets. Fred said in general we are not currently looking at wage lines. Chief Vivieros said he wanted to discuss Line 52 about the Administrative Assistant. He said the Admin position had the hours cut back when they decided to go to an outside source for ambulance billing. The idea was that the outside source would take a lot of work off of the admin assistant position. The Chief said however, that there is still responsibility related to ambulance billing that falls on the admin assistant. He said the admin assistant also has to take on some of the administrative work that used to be handled by the Deputy Chief. He said the increase in hours for the Admin would be about 4 hours a week and some of that could be funded by taking money out of the On Call wages and putting that money into the admin wages.

The Chief said that Line 54 for tuition was higher because more of the employees are now taking college courses and the Town reimburses 50% of the cost of those courses for the fire fighters. He said this is the most we have ever had taking college level courses.

Fred asked the the Chief why there was such a major increase in Line 55 (Fire expense). The Chief said radio communication equipment was up by $1,000 due to the cost of replacing batteries in the radios. He said each battery was very expensive. The Chief said there was also an increase of $3500 in turnout gear because they needed to replace at least one extra full set of turn out gear. He said they try and replace about 3 sets per year because they are only good for 10 years. He said sometimes they have to buy extra sets because people are different sizes and you may replace a larger employee with a smaller employee and then not have the correct size available. The Chief said he is trying to replace 4 sets of turn out gear this year. Fred questioned how long the radio batteries last and the Chief said about 4 years. Fred said if the batteries are so expensive, maybe we should be making a long-term plan for replacing the batteries.

Tom Connolly questioned why the dues and meetings line that had historically been on the lower side was now increasing by $1,000. The Chief said he believed that his dues for the Fire Chiefs Association had gone up some but he was not sure exactly how much.

Fred asked what the Plymovent system (from Line 56) was and why the increase? The Chief said the Plymovent is the system that is used to hook up to the Fire Trucks and remove the diesel exhaust. The Chief said that the cost to maintain the Plymovent system and the compressor have gone up significantly.

The Chief said that Line 57 for vehicle maintenance is going up because the Town mechanic now does very little work at all in house. He said that all Fire truck work is done by outside sources. He said some of that just has to do with regulations and some of it is because the mechanic is not able to handle the maintenance anymore. The Chief said maybe that is a discussion that should be had with Steve Hayward the Highway Surveyor. The Chief said he also used to have staff that tended to be mechanically inclined and helped out with some of the smaller maintenance, but he no longer has employees who are inclined like that.

The Chief said the increase on Line 58-ambulance supplies- was due in part to the massive increase in cost in some PPE. He said he had sent Sandy Nolan an email he received saying that the cost of latex gloves would be increasing by 100%.

The Chief said that Line 59- ambulance billing- is being level funded because he knew of no increases coming up in the cost of outsourcing. He said switching to outside billing had generated extra money for the Town. Amy Troup asked how the extra ambulance revenue is being applied. The Chief said it goes into the general fund and that could be confirmed with Sandy. He said originally some of it helped pay for the increase in staffing levels but now it goes to the general fund. Sandy agreed the revenue is turned over to the general fund as part of local receipts and helps to reduce the tax levy.

Fred said that the School budget numbers (Draft 1) have been added into Sandy’s budget sheet synopsis. Sandy confirmed that is correct. She said that some departments have not turned in budgets yet so she just put those budgets in as level funded. She said the School Assessment had also been added into the sheets. Sandy said the figures are overwhelming and some hard decisions have to be made because we are currently about $600,000 over budget if the Finance Committee still intends to leave $300,000 “on the table” and not tax to the full levy. Sandy said that the business manager for Silver Lake had told her that these budget numbers are first drafts. Sandy also said that it is expected that the Group insurance line will go down a bit, but she won’t adjust that until the increase has been affirmed by the health group. Fred asked Gordon how much the district may be willing to cut budgets. Gordon said his opinion was that Silver Lake is unlikely to voluntarily cut budgets given that they have received notice that State Aid will be lower than hoped. Gordon said he thinks it is important for members of the Finance Committee to attend the next Silver Lake budget meeting and voice their opinions on whether or not the Town can afford this budget. Gordon said the wages/salaries for the Schools keep going up year after year and that is a big factor. Fred agreed and said the wages line keeps going up even though enrollment keeps going down. Gordon said charter schools are a big problem for the region also. He said that the district is losing out on money every time a student goes to a charter school. Gordon said that Kingston (which is closer to the charter school) also has more students going to the charter schools, but Halifax pays the same amount even though they have less students going to charter schools. He said it is disproportionate. Fred clarified that there will once again be an article from the school to support the middle school SRO that was approved last year. Gordon said there would be an article. Gordon said the schools also want a stabilization article for the school system. Fred said he was very surprised to see a request to repair the tennis courts given the dire financial constraints many find themselves in due to the pandemic. Fred asked Gordon about the HES budget as well. Gordon said he realized that the Town probably could not afford the HES budget either. Gordon again asked members of the Fin Com to attend the next HES budget meeting. Fred asked Gordon if the current budget numbers are reflective of a return to school in the fall. Gordon said they were. Fred said he is also concerned with athletic department budget increases. He said he realizes they lost revenue by not holding games, but he thought academics should be the priority. Fred said we could talk more about specific school budget questions when Jill Proulx attended the meeting with Fin Com on 3/29/21. Tom asked Gordon if he knew when we could anticipate a second version of the budget. Gordon said that the HES school committee would meet at the beginning of March and so maybe the second week in March, but he didn’t expect any changes would come voluntarily. Gordon said the Silver Lake budget had to be set by 3/15/21. Gordon said he asked them to prepare another budget with some cuts just to see the effect. Fred wanted to make other Fin Com members (who are newer) aware that if 2 of the three towns in the district vote through a budget then the third town is “on the hook” for that same budget no matter what.

Fred asked Charlie if he had any wage and personnel amendments information that he wanted to share. Charlie said he hadn’t received any information from his colleagues yet. Fred asked if the Selectmen would be discussing any of these matters at their meeting the next night. Charlie said they would not because he does not have any information to share with them yet.

Fred asked Charlie about the RFP for the Zoning bylaw review. Charlie said the Fin Com has to approve the RFP If they want him to send it out because it was their article at Town Meeting last year. Charlie said they may want to also add the 5G new network to the RFP for consideration. Fred said he thought Zoning/Planning should take that up first. Fred asked when the RFP would go out. Charlie said he could send it as soon as the Fin Com voted to approve the RFP. Charlie said the deadline to return proposals was in the RFP and that is also stated that the available budget would be $65,000. Joe said it is unusual to put the budget in an RFP. Charlie said he needed to because it was discussed in an open Town Meeting. He said he did however say that the Fin Com was looking to accomplish the most work possible for the $65,000. Amy asked who gave the specifications in the RFP. Fred clarified with Charlie that if the proposals came back and were not what the Fin Com was looking for, then the Fin Com did not have to proceed any further. Charlie said that was correct. Tom and Fred said that just by putting out the RFP, we may get the added free benefit of law firms telling us where we are most vulnerable in the Zoning bylaws. Fred clarified again that by putting out the RFP we are not committing to have to proceed any further if the Fin Com doesn’t want to. Charlie said that is correct, the Fin Com will have the final vote on the RFP and on what they are willing to accept if they hire someone to review the bylaws. Charlie said it was highly likely that the $65,000 would not cover a full redo of the Zoning bylaws, this is just seeing what it might get them. Tom said this is a RFP for intellectual property and not physical property so knowing the price shouldn’t make too much of a difference. Fred said at a minimum we should go through with sending out the request because Town Meeting voted it through and then it can be decided later how far Fin Com wants to go with what it gets back.

**Fred entertained a motion to approve sending out the RFP as prepared (see attached) for Zoning bylaw reviews.**

Motion: Tom

Second: Cheryll

**AIF**

There were no Reserve Fund Transfers

Linda said the only new correspondence was the letter from Norfolk Agricultural. It stated that Halifax already has 2 students there and 2 have applied and the tuition would be over $22,000 per student (see attached). Gordon and Charlie both said they believed there was also another student in Bristol Agricultural for a total of 5 possible students.

Linda said in previous correspondence there was also the COA van request along with the information from the schools and the RFP about zoning.

There was nothing under As may Arise

Fred said we may need to add more meetings in March but will see how it goes.

**Fred entertained a motion to adjourn at 7:04pm**

Motion: Cheryll

Second: Tom

**AIF**

Respectfully submitted,

Linda Cole, Secretary \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Tom Connolly, Clerk