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BELMONT WARRANT COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES

APRIL 29, 2020, 7:30PM

VIRTUAL MEETING ON ZOOM

DATE: May 29, 2020
TIME: 9:32 AM

Present: Chair Slap, Members Alcock, Cragg, Dionne, Doyle, Fallon, Helgen, Levin, Lubien, McLaughlin, Read, Rickter, Schreiber and Weis.

School Committee Liaison Crowley.

Select Board member Caputo. Town Administrator (TA) Garvin and Assistant Town Administrator (ATA) Marshall.

Superintendent of Belmont Public Schools Phelan.

Member Halston arrived into the meeting.

The meeting was called to order at 7:30pm by Chair Slap.

I-Approve minutes

- April 15, 2020:
Motion (Member McLaughlin; Schreiber seconded): To approve the April 15, 2020 minutes. Motion passed, roll-call vote: Slap, McLaughlin, Weis, Rickter, Fallon, Read, Doyle, Lubien, Crowley, Levin, Caputo, Dionne, Schreiber and Alcock voted yes; Cragg abstained.

II-Review and discussion of potential impacts from COVID-19 on FY20 and FY21 Town and School budgets

TA Garvin presented latest information on the FY21 budget, which had been reviewed and discussed at the Select Board meeting this past Monday:

- Narrowed down revenue assumptions to two scenarios - 20% and 25% reductions to State Aid. Revenue targets also included adjustments to certain line items (e.g. local receipts, new growth) on a case-by-case basis. Bottom line projected revenue shortfall of \$4.4m-\$5m.
- Garvin had worked with her team and department heads to put forth \$3.9m in proposed reductions to expenditures, leaving a remaining gap of \$532k/\$1.1m.
- Rundown of proposed reductions: salary adjustments on Town side; reduced OPEB contribution to the minimum allowed under the policy (expected this would be made up in later years); transfer of road reconstruction funds to the operating budget; reductions in overtime allocations; sewer pension contributions would be transferred from the operating budget back to the Sewer Enterprise Fund; Capital Budget Committee had approved a reduced capital budget, thereby turning back funds to the operating budget; reductions in Sunday hours for the Library; Health Insurance savings.
- No impact to FTE count being proposed at this time.

Questions/comments from WC members:

- Slap requested the WC be provided with further details on revenue adjustments to the other line items.
- Doyle asked about the Sewer Pension costs – why are these not maintained in the Sewer Enterprise Fund already? Garvin said she had been working to slowly transition such costs to the Enterprise Fund, but had not gone all the way yet.
- Schreiber commented on reduced overtime for the Town Clerk’s office. Would this be feasible with the upcoming election? Garvin said that a creative solution would be necessary to maintain overtime for the election, e.g. close the office a few days of the week to introduce savings.
- Fallon: 1] Reported from Capital Budget Committee – the CBC had agreed to reduce its discretionary budget and transfer road reconstruction funds to the operating budget. She stressed that the underlying capital needs are not going away, and that these actions would have serious implications for the FY22 budget. 2] What about overtime for emergencies? Garvin answered that overtime for emergencies had been preserved in the budget.
- Cragg commented that the staffing level was unchanged, however certain departments such as public safety seem relatively overstaffed. Halston reported the Public Safety subcommittee had been working on a benchmarking exercise, and that initial work showed that the departments’ staffing numbers were in line with other comparable towns; would share results at an upcoming meeting.
- Rickter asked whether any prioritization of reductions had been considered yet, for e.g., in the event that revenue is actually higher than projected in the fall. Garvin noted that FY21 budget was already heavily reliant on one-time funds, and that FY22 posed a bigger challenge than even FY21.

Next, Superintendent Phelan reported from the School side:

- Finance team has been focused on dealing with reimbursement of fees related to current school year.
- More recently the team had turned to looking at possible reductions to the School budget to help cover the remaining budget deficit. At the Select Board meeting on Monday, Phelan raised the issue of what is the equitable ask of the School Department in this respect. Planned to present list of possible reductions at the upcoming School Committee meeting.
- May be necessary to rearrange budget line items to meet challenges presented in the fall, e.g. taking students’ temperatures, providing masks/PPE, changes to busing contracts.

Questions/comments from WC members:

- Weis commented that his initial view – i.e., that it seemed fair for the Schools to consider reductions which covered the remaining deficit – had in fact changed; he was sensitive to the potentially changing nature of education for the upcoming year due to COVID, and the leanness in non-salary expenditures.
- Crowley emphasized the need to prioritize critical services across both Town and Schools jointly.

- Schreiber pointed out that it was necessary to parse out the \$3.9m in proposed reductions on the Town side, as some of these changes would affect both Town and Schools.
- Doyle: 1] Request to clarify status of State Aid funding specifically for Schools. 2] As schools are figuring out new mode of operation in COVID times, incumbent on other departments to put forth review/plan of how they can ‘do business’ in a different way. (Cragg echoed the latter point).
 - o Phelan expressed concern about Circuit Breaker funds given that \$1.7m in reserves had already been committed to the FY21 budget, prior to the COVID-19 adjustments. He worried that it might be politically expedient at the State level to cut these funds going forward via reducing reimbursement rates (as had been done in the previous downturn).

III-Discuss Warrant Committee Report

Looking ahead to a potential (remote) June 16 Town Meeting, Slap asked when firm budget numbers could be expected, on which to base the Report – Garvin said that middle of May was reasonable.

Rickter updated from discussions of the Warrant Committee Report Working Group. The view of the group was that the report should focus on what is happening with FY21 and key implications for FY22. The Executive Summary should serve as the ‘meat’ of the report, conveying implications for the FY22 budget; individual department sections should be very brief.

Weis pointed out there were still risks within the FY21 budget that should be highlighted and not ignored. Cragg thought it was important to highlight some of the long-run structural issues, some of which were planned to be taken up this year pre-COVID. Garvin suggested it be made clear the challenges to the budget that were present pre-COVID vis-à-vis use of one-time funds to balance the budget.

IV-Reports from Select Board, Town Administrator, School Committee, and liaisons

School Committee: The Committee has a vacancy for a position ending April 2021 – posting would be available soon, accepting applications for a two week period, would be a joint selection by Select Board/School Committee. Andrea Prestwich was recently made Chair at an organizational meeting.

Select Board: 1] Implemented a temporary emergency order requiring use of face coverings at essential businesses. 2] Update on McLean Zone 3 development with respect to the traffic plan. 3] Proposal raised to experiment with altered traffic pattern in Belmont Center – approval of the experiment was forthcoming pending more details. 4] New Hire Advisory Committee had provided recommendations with respect to the hiring freeze for FY20.

Community Preservation Committee: Meeting Friday to review the Housing Trust proposal

for an Emergency Rental Assistance Program.

Belmont Middle/High School Building Committee: Carpenters back on-site, work progressing. Topping off ceremony originally planned for May 8 has been postponed. Working closely with project manager Skanska to address challenges/additional costs related to COVID-19 safety measures.

V-Adjournment

Motion (Member McLaughlin): To adjourn at 8:51pm. Motion passed.

Submitted by
Christopher S. Henry