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DATE: October 13, 2021
TIME: 8:58 AM

**Minutes of the
Town of Belmont
Warrant Committee Meeting
Wednesday, September 8, 2021
7:30pm**



To view the meeting recording click [HERE](#).

Call to Order. Ms. Slap called the meeting to order at 7:32pm.

Member	Present		Present
Lauren Slap, Chair	Yes	Anne Helgen	No
Christine Doyle, Vice Chair	Yes	Robert McLaughlin	Yes
Elizabeth Dionne	Yes	Lynn Read	No
Jennifer Fallon	Yes	Paul Rickter	Yes
Elizabeth Goss	Yes	Ellen Schreiber	Yes
Andrew Levin	No	Geoffrey Lubien	Yes
Daniel Halston	Yes	Jack Weis	Yes
Tom Caputo	Yes	Adam Dash, Ex-officio - Select Board	Yes
		Staff	
School Committee		Patrice Garvin, Town Administrator	Yes
Jamal Saeh	Yes	Anthony DiCologero, Director of Finance, Business & Operations for BPS	Yes

I. Election of officers

Motion: Ms. Fallon moved to nominate Geoff Lubien as Chair, Chris Doyle as Vice Chair, and Elizabeth Dionne as Secretary. Mr. McLaughlin seconded, and the motion passed unanimously by rollcall vote.

M. Lubien took over as Chair of the meeting and thanked Ms. Slap for her service.

II. Review of certified FY21 Free Cash.

Ms. Garvin presented the review of the certified FY21 Free Cash. She pointed out that this presentation is online at the town website.

Free Cash Summary

The FY21 Certified Free Cash number is \$15.7 million dollars. The largest factors are the Covid-19 impact and the Town's conservative fiscal management.

Breakdown of Free Cash

There are 4 major areas responsible for this free cash: generation from the uncertainty of Covid (covid relief funds, unused budgets, etc.), conservative fiscal management, the close out of old encumbrances released to free cash, and staff vacancies (turnover, challenging hiring market, pending override vote).

What Got us There?

A chart showing the details of the breakdown was presented:

- \$4.0 FY20 Free Cash Rollover
- \$3.2M Receipt of FY20 State Aid Adjustment
- \$1.3M School Salaries & Benefits
- \$1.09M School Expenses
- \$2.3M Town Salaries & Benefits
- \$08M Town Expenses
- \$.08M Fixed Costs (borrowing)
- \$1.5M Release of Encumbrances
- \$.07M Prior Year Adjustments

Ms. Garvin then reviewed the details of these numbers for the Town side.

School Breakdowns

Mr. Saeh provided the details of the savings that the Belmont Public Schools saw which were mostly due to Covid, especially in staffing.

- Salary Savings: \$1.3M including an increase of staff on leave; staff exchanges, attrition & backfilling; contract negotiations; and fewer extracurricular programs.
- Non-Salary Savings: \$1.09M (net savings after Covid expenses) including supplies funded through the CVRF Grant; software subscriptions to support remote learning funded through the CVRF Grant, Covid-related expenses reclassified to Town CARES Act Grant in Q4; Transportation savings; and Sped tuitions under budget.

Next Steps

Ms. Garvin said the town continues to carry a structural deficit between \$6-8M. The town will continue to look for ways to save money and will continue community conversations as they begin the FY23 budget process. The Town can also incorporate the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA funding) into the financial model and is well positioned due to the early certification of Free Cash.

Mr. McLaughlin thinks the Free Cash number is both good and bad news. He feels the town financial leadership has suffered a credibility gap and wonders why the override was not withdrawn. Ms. Garvin said they budgeted based on what they knew at the time and could not anticipate much of what happened.

Mr. Weis asked why the vacancies in the Police Department show as a savings when his understanding is they are usually more expensive because of the need for overtime shifts. Ms. Garvin has the Police Chief's breakdown of this, which she can share with the Committee. Mr. Dash said some positions did not get filled or covered because of lack of manpower.

Mr. Weis remembered discussing that vacant school positions would be filled with more expensive teachers and wondered if this changed. Mr. DiCologero explained that generally staff rollovers result in a net savings, but it can vary depending on the school, level, etc.

Mr. Weis asked why the Vocational Tech tuition was lower when generally students must be turned away from the program. Mr. DiCologero explained that there were significant transportation savings because of the breakdown of which of 3 programs students attended.

Ms. Fallon asked that the Warrant Committee have a good discussion about what comprises real one-time expenses, and at staffing (perhaps not all vacancies are sustainable).

Ms. Doyle asked if they could take a look at using more ARPA money for capital expenses. Ms. Garvin said this is being considered. Ms. Doyle also suggested that Ms. Garvin's office create a timeline showing when override decisions needed to be made along with when state funding information was received to document the timing issue that contributed to the large Free Cash number.

Mr. Halston pointed out that the police are facing a lot of trouble hiring (and that 2 vacancies were military call-ups, which are a different kind of vacancy).

Ms. Dionne feels a good Belmont-specific explanation of why the open police positions should be filled will be needed. She asked what services were lost due to town-side understaffing. Ms. Garvin said the Police Chief has grave concerns about the ability for him to run the department. She said the Office of Community Development had no Planner so there was a service lag. She is very concerned about staff burnout because staff are being asked to do more with less. Mr. Dash added that they have gotten complaints about things like park cleanliness, traffic control, and building maintenance all of which were due to vacancies and service cuts. All costs for events in town are being charged to the organizers because Belmont cannot cover the costs.

Mr. Caputo said that favorable borrowing terms could have been modeled better, and that the town could be more robust in how they manage encumbrances. He feels the structural deficit will have to be addressed, and the credibility challenge needs to be addressed.

Mr. Weis is struggling with the Covid-related expenses and reimbursements and would like to see expenses that the Town did not incur, and what regular expenses were there that Covid reimbursements were used to pay. Ms. Garvin reminded the group that CARES funding changed 26 times and they were just starting to learn

about it in June 2020 when they were doing the budget. She spoke about the overall situation during that budget time. There was a lively discussion about this topic.

Ms. Garvin said they should focus more on recurring revenue being used for recurring expenses, rather than continuing to use one time revenue like free cash for recurring expenses.

Mr. McLaughlin suggested that the explanations should be kept simple, such as “at the time we made the decisions based on the information we had”, and then move on.

Ms. Doyle suggested there should be two lists: one that shows ongoing services that are lost (free coverage for special events, some crossing guards, etc), and other services that were lost due to Covid (library hours, the pool, etc). She also pointed out that the Civil Service structure is impacting hiring abilities.

III. POD Subcommittee report out of the Retirement Board response to the Warrant Committee Report.

Mr. Lubien outlined how the report had been distributed. Ms. Doyle outlined how the POD had worked. There were 4 items and 3 recommendations reviewed. She said that in the future they would provide the Retirement Board with a draft of the report before it goes in the full report. There were other minor items in the response. Otherwise, the main issue is that the POD would like increased transparency and communication with the Retirement Board. The POD will distribute a response which they will send to the Warrant Committee for review and comment.

IV. Overview of Fall Schedule

Mr. Lubien shared the Fall calendar and said it would flesh out in the next few weeks.

Ms. Dionne reported that the bids for the rebuilding of the Town fields came in substantially higher than expected. The Community Preservation Committee had expected a Fall Town Meeting, so the fields issue will be postponed until the next Town Meeting.

Ms. Garvin reviewed why there will be no Town Meeting.

Ms. Fallon expressed concerned about being able to provide a level service budget and feels department heads should be asked what level of services they think they can provide given staffing levels they expect to have.

Ms. Schreiber said the perception is that there has been no change or loss because of the defeat of the override and asked that these changes/losses be listed and communicated. There was a discussion of staff burnout.

V. Discussion of Subcommittees

Mr. Lubien shared a list of Subcommittee assignments, which he will distribute to the Committee. He asked members to think about what they are interested in for a full discussion at the next meeting.

He also listed the Working Groups and asked that members consider whether any need to be removed. There was a discussion of some of the groups and their status.

VI. Reports from Select Board, Town Administrator, School Committee, and liaisons.

Mr. Dash reported on several upcoming events and highlighted the activities of the Select Board.

Mr. McLaughlin reported that the new high school is open, and things are going well.

Ms. Schreiber reported that the Communications Subcommittee had its first meeting and is looking forward to working on a ‘state of the town’ type report. They will also look at creating explainers for communicating with Town Meeting Members and the general public on certain topics like free cash, the high school, and ARPA. If there are suggestions for other topics, please notify her. Mr. Lubien suggested Property Tax Assessment. Ms. Dionne gave a Community Preservation Committee update, including possible signage for CPA projects under construction, increasing outreach, asset inventory, and collaboration with other groups.

Mr. Saeh reported on the schools, and their major goal of keeping them open. A tentative agreement has been reached with the union on teacher and staff vaccination. They are restarting ANA contract negotiations.

VII. Approve minutes.

Mr. Lubien moved to approve the minutes of the POD meeting September 3, 2021. Mr. Levin seconded and the motion passed 3-0 by rollcall vote with Ms. Dionne and Mr. Saeh abstaining.

VIII. Public comment.

There was no public comment.

IX. Adjournment

Mr. McLaughlin moved to adjourn the meeting of the Warrant Committee. Mr. Lubien seconded, and the motion passed unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 8:35pm.

Respectfully submitted by,

Susan Peghiny
Recording Secretary