

# **Town of Essex Finance Committee**

## **Minutes from January 18, 2024**

Attendees: Ben Buttrick, Jodi Harris, Nina McKinnon, Josh Franklin, Chuck Benevento (Town Accountant), Ruth Pereen (BOS Chair)

Time: Thursday January 18, 2024 at 7 PM EDT

Location: Town Hall – Stage conference room (2nd Floor)

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Meeting called to order at 7:07pm

### **1. Review/approve minutes from 12/11/23 meetings (Buttrick/All)**

- Unanimously approved.

### **2. Review any line-item or reserve fund transfers (Soulard/Benevento)**

- Police and public safety request for \$1,000 from Generator Maintenance to HVAC Maintenance within PSB.
- HVAC maintenance has \$466 having already spent \$7,602. Some discussion on how a new building is triggering such expenditures.
- Ben proposed a motion to table this until having a conversation with the Chief.
- Motion approved.

### **3. Updates on Essex municipal finance (Soulard/Benevento)**

- All town departments had to submit their budgets last Friday, January 12.
- Chuck Benevento conveyed that in review of year end numbers, nothing is jumping out of concern. Jeff was providing assistance for this part of it.
- Ben provided a summary on the “tax talk” presented last week January 11th.
- Nina is attending a municipal finance course Feb 6th online.
- Ben said that confirmation from Sarah Mellish/MBTS for a joint FinComm meeting is still pending.
- Reminder that 1/23 EES School Budget Public Discussion
- Nina/Jodi confirmed that 3.45% assessment increase is still the target.
- Feasibility: increase estimated cost from \$750k to \$1m

### **4. Appoint a new Finance Committee Chair (All)**

- Ben nominated Jodi Harris. Solicited any alternative considerations. There were none.
- Nina made a motion to have Jodi as hew Chair.
- Unanimously approved.

### **5. Discuss FY25 budget liaison roles and process (Buttrick/All)**

- Discussion that we need to be mindful of the “threat” of a “super” town meeting. We all have to be realistic as to what the outcome might be.
- Plan to prepare an austerity budget at 97.5% and even 95% with each department. What does it look like at these numbers?
- An organizational chart is needed to tighten things up. We need to request information using template for consistency.
- Job responsibilities need to be fully understood with areas to consolidate and willingness to be creative. Could we be outsourcing certain functions? Are we fully utilizing those we have?

- Jodi: we need to get more information from department chairs. We need to build a relationship with our partners.
- We need to determine revenue opportunities within each department. Build a relationship and have regular meetings during the year.
- Jodi stressed that there needs to be department policies - create a standardization and efficiencies.
- Discussion around a potential hiring freeze and possibly no backfills. Most likely the BOS deals.
- Jody asked if Chuck knew what direction maybe Jeff had asked to the departments - 2.5%, under/over.
- Jody asked for a report of the warrants to see how money is being spent. It's not to question the money but provide us with knowledge.
- Jeff explained a directive to town departments for funding. Request from Brendhan Zubricki was for level services.
- Ben still advocating for a district review but with district engagement and look at apportionment.

#### **6. Discuss and approve FY25 financial goals**

- Ben communicated that Sarah Mellish had suggested for each town to share goals to understand what each are facing. If members have suggestions, email Ben directly.
- Preliminary thoughts include:
  1. Leverage liaison roles to understand the spending among departments/prepare for potential for a "super" town meeting.
  2. Further explore options to look at MERSD apportionment formula - feeling there is a path that might be a shared interest to both towns.
  3. Develop residence understanding of municipal finance.
  4. Explore viability of EES build to TOE debt schedule.
    - Question: Is there an ability to "pause" the process for a few years? Manchester would like to see the debt in the early '30's rather than late '20's. Helps TOE too. Put all options on table / gain Manchester's perspective.
  5. Identify/recruit others to Finance Committee
- There is no update on the status of collaboration.
- Ruth offered comments:
  - There is development going on in Essex for approximately 50 houses.
  - Feasibility study: not likely to use the information from before. This is required to show we are serious. This will go to town meeting as to whether voters are interested in supporting.
  - MSBA pays 30% of the building cost. If we do defer it as not the right time, we would have to reapply.

#### **7. Items that could not be reasonably anticipated by the open meeting law posting deadline**

- Jodi made a motion to nominate Ben Buttrick as Vice Chair
- Motion unanimously approved.

#### **7. Public Comment**

- None

#### **8. Adjourn**

- Meeting adjourned at 8:30pm