

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)

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