

Town of Willington

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BOARD OF FINANCE

**Meeting Minutes
Lower Level Conference Room**

**September 19, 2019
7:00 PM**

**Minutes are not official until approved at the next regular meeting*

Members Present (a quorum of 4 members is required to conduct business):

Jim Bulick - Chairman
Mike Makuch – Vice Chairman
Barry Walleth
Laurie Semprebon
Peter Tanaka

Members Absent:

Randy Belair
Bill Rankin - alternate
Fred Schoen - alternate

Also Present:

Erika Wiczenski - First Selectwoman
Chief Tom Snyder - Willington Hill Fire Department
Stuart Cobb - CIP Committee Chairman
Clevell Roseboro - Librarian
Willington Hill Fire Department (WHFD)
Members of the Public

Chairman Jim Bulick called the meeting to order at 7:05pm.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Mike Makuch moved to table the approval of the minutes of June 20, 2019 and August 15, 2019 until a quorum from each meeting is present.

Peter Tanaka seconded the motion.

Vote: 5 Yes (J. Bulick, M. Makuch, B. Walleth, L. Semprebon, P. Tanaka), 0 No

PRESENT TO SPEAK

Peter Tanaka moved to add public works radio project to the agenda.

Mike Makuch seconded the motion.

Vote: 5 Yes (J. Bulick, M. Makuch, B. Walleth, L. Semprebon, P. Tanaka), 0 No

NEW BUSINESS

1) Public Works Radio Project

Stuart Cobb, Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) Committee Chairman, stated that in the current year CIP budget, there was a line item totaling \$14,116 for Public Works for a radio project; specifically for the purchase of a repeater that would help them talk from one side of town to the other. After the CIP plan was approved, the State of Connecticut opened up their state radio system to use by municipalities. The State of Connecticut system is a very advanced 800-MHz system with multiple expensive repeaters and controllers that is maintained by the state, as it is used by an increasing number of state agencies including State Police and DEP.

Stuart stated that buying into the state radio system would be the same idea as the town of Willington buying its own repeater, in terms of being able to talk from one side of town to the other. As it stands right now, Public Works has a difficult time talking from one side of town to the other due to hills and valleys and must rely on someone in the middle who can relay messages. This is especially important during snow season when equipment can become stuck or otherwise need help.

Stuart stated that they feel that jumping into the state radio system would be a better long term investment in terms of reparability, liability, redundancy, etc. It involves buying an individual radio for each individual truck, instead of making one large purchase for a repeater in the center of town. Stuart asked the board whether they can use the \$14,116 that was allotted to accomplish the same end goals, just buying a different technology, and what the process would be to move forward.

Mike Makuch replied that in his opinion, the means and methods aren't as important as the fact that a radio system purchase was already approved. He inquired how the coverage is with the higher frequency radios; whether there is confidence that the state police are getting good coverage in the areas that are troublesome for our current radio system and whether we know a change to the new system will improve things for our Public Works department.

Stuart replied that in conversations with some of the road troopers, they say it's fine. He has talked to the head of the radio network and found out that because our town is located in the middle of the Troop C area, it would use same exact repeaters as the State Police, just a private channel. There are repeaters at UConn, in Union, and in Tolland, and the signal is almost better when the repeater is one town away because it has time to settle down.

Peter Tanaka added that the state will give you two portable radios to try point-to-point and see what your coverage is, and recommended that our Public Works department try them. He stated that Coventry, who recently switched to the state system, doesn't have the coverage that he thought they would and still have a couple of "dead" spots. He stated that in his opinion, it's a matter of how you control your own system and that the state police are letting towns dictate that for themselves, but that overall, it seems to be working well for Coventry. The only problem he sees is that occasionally the new radios 'go digital' and you can't understand anything that's being said.

Stuart restated that feedback from State Troopers has been that they have no problems. He referenced an interview of towns who had switched to the state radio system, published by NBC Connecticut, which concluded that the cost is much higher for individual towns to build and maintain their own radio system to get to the level of what the state system provides.

Laurie Semprebon asked how many vehicles in town were going to have radios when the original project was approved in CIP, and whether by using the state system, are we going to have coverage in as many vehicles as originally hoped, or if we have to start with fewer vehicles because it is expensive.

Stuart replied that we will have to start with fewer vehicles. Radios are about \$2,200 each, plus an antenna and installation, for a total of about \$2,500 each, so we can do the math about how many vehicles the original \$14,000 will cover. He continued that it'll get their major trucks done, i.e. the snowplow trucks and public works director truck. As money allows, you can buy into the system one vehicle at a time at \$2,500 apiece, and that's all the communication equipment that could ever need repairing. Currently, our repeater can break and cost up to \$4000 to repair, but if the state system breaks, they will fix it within hours because state agencies are relying on it as well.

Laurie inquired if it is a concern that there will be some vehicles on the roads that won't have this coverage.

Stuart replied that in the long run they'll all get done and in the short term, vehicles like the street sweeper, loader, backhoe, etc. can still be using their existing radios to communicate. He detailed that another advantage to the new system in the long run is the fact that with everything moving to one band, more systems can speak to one another (e.g. state police to public works) by switching to different channels on the same system. He continued that with different frequencies for different departments as it is now, the town is purchasing and maintaining multiple radios for each vehicle, with up to 4 radios in some vehicles to enable communication with different departments. Switching to the state system will allow the town to pare down the number of radios in the long run.

Peter stated that in the long run, switching to using the state radio system will save money. Selectwoman Wiczenski clarified that the repeater project was not adding radios to vehicles, it was the purchase of a repeater to work with the existing radios. Until they get a new radio in every vehicle, some vehicles will have two radios – one for the old system and one for the new system, so all vehicles will still have coverage to communicate.

Stuart followed that in terms of priority, with snow season coming up, they thought it best to ask at this time and get those vehicles outfitted first.

Chairman Bulick expressed his thought that the plan says they have \$14,116 to spend as they see fit for the radio project; switching technologies and systems is fine as long as it serves public works. He reminded that the goal of the CIP line item was to improve coverage in town, so there should be an assurance that it will actually accomplish that goal.

Stuart agreed and said that the portable radios have been offered, that they just need to be picked up and tested, and that they are willing to do that before committing to any purchases. He mentioned that the portable radios only put out 4-5 watts, while the installed radios are vastly superior and produce approximately 25 watts. If the portables work in town, we know for a fact that the truck radios will work.

Peter Tanaka moved to change the CIP request from purchasing an analog radio repeater to purchasing individual digital radios for town vehicles to access the Connecticut State Police system, toward the goal of improving coverage in town, with the understanding that there is no current change in cost, just application of the funds, and with the expectation that Stuart will conduct testing before the purchase is made. Mike Makuch seconded the motion.

Discussion:

Mike added that typically in CIP requests, you have to declare the believed impact on the operational budget, and that while this changeover occurs, public works will be maintaining multiple radios in each truck, which comes at a cost. In addition, there will be new capital or equipment costs because public works will be purchasing additional radios until all of the trucks are on the new system.

Peter added that there's also a potential savings down the road, in no longer having to maintain repeaters and other components of a radio system in town. Laurie clarified that in the next year or two, there will be an increase in costs for radios, but we are saving money in the long term.

Vote: 5 Yes (J. Bulick, M. Makuch, B. Wallett, L. Semprebon, P. Tanaka), 0 No

2) Library Accounting Services

Selectwoman Wiczenski shared that the Board of Selectmen and the Library Board of Directors both voted unanimously to an agreement for financial services between the Library Board of Directors and the town. She stated that the agreement is similar to the functions the town provides to the fire department, that the money provided from the town budget goes into a grant, the bills are approved at the library level, and then are paid by the town financial office from that grant. The agreement was approved on September 10, 2019 by the Library Board of Directors, and on September 16, 2019 by the Board of Selectmen.

Selectwoman Wiczenski continued that the library typically pays their employees once per month, which they would do through September 30, 2019. Then on October 1, 2019, all of the accounts payable and payroll would be approved through the town financial office.

Chairman Bulick inquired what the cost will be to the town.

Selectwoman Wiczenski replied that at this point, there is no additional cost, although there could be. There have been other changes within the financial aspects of the town, specifically the

treasurer, as far as removing those functions that were financial office functions that were previously being done by the treasurer. She stated that the town currently has a temp who is working with Diane Bulick, Treasurer, to take off all of the financial office functions. Right now, the temp is doing that work instead of Diane. Soon the Board of Selectmen will know how much time it will require in an average week, and whether another individual will be needed. At this time though, moving the library functions to the town financial office will not create any extra expenses.

Chairman Bulick remembered that the library reached out earlier this year, in the absence of a director, about needing help with their books and asking if they could get the same help as the fire departments, as they didn't have anyone on the library board who had the skill set to be able to take care of it.

Mike asked about the logistics of the transfer of responsibility and funds, due to the fact that it is mid-fiscal year. He asked whether money has already been moved to the library and will need to be transferred back.

Selectwoman Wiczenski replied that the change was expected at the beginning of the fiscal year, so only the amount the library needed to get the year started was transferred to them; the majority of that money is still in the town's accounts. Ideally, the change would have happened at the beginning of the fiscal year, but it was too much of an undertaking at that time with everything that was happening.

Chairman Bulick inquired whether the agreement just covered monies funded by the town, and where private donations to the library will be handled.

Selectwoman Wiczenski replied that the library's private funds will still be the responsibility of the Library Board of Directors to manage, the agreement just covers the town taxpayer money that goes to the library.

Barry Wallett asked for clarification on whether the library funds would be available to audit.

Selectwoman Wiczenski replied that the library board decides how they spend their funds, the town is the one who writes the check. The funds that the town gives the library will be part of the financial audit, but not how the library is spending its funds.

The agreement was presented to board members to read by Selectwoman Wiczenski.

Selectwoman Wiczenski stated that the contract is boilerplate language, with the exception of some things very specific to the library. It is a 5-year automatically renewing term, including options for either party to end the agreement if it's not working for either side.

Mike Makuch moved to authorize the chairman to sign the agreement as presented for the services between the accounting office and the library.

Peter Tanaka seconded the motion.

Vote: 5 Yes (J. Bulick, M. Makuch, B. Wallett, L. Semprebon, P. Tanaka), 0 No

OLD BUSINESS

1) Annual Report for the fiscal year July 1, 2018 to June 30, 2019

Chairman Bulick directed the board's attention to this year's version of the letter he produces each year regarding submissions from town committees for the annual report. The letter asks for submissions by October 16, 2019, before the final meeting of the current boards prior to the November election.

Mike Makuch made a motion to approve the letter as presented and to authorize the chairman to send it out.

Peter Tanaka seconded the motion.

Vote: 5 Yes (J. Bulick, M. Makuch, B. Wallett, L. Semprebon, P. Tanaka), 0 No

2) Willington Hill Fire Department (WHFD) Land Purchase

Chairman Bulick made a motion to recommend that the Board of Selectmen call a town meeting to authorize the appropriation of \$60,000 from the General Fund. This appropriation will be used for the following purposes:

- To provide \$10,000 in supplementary funding to Willington Hill Fire Department. Such funds will be in addition to those funds already allocated in the department's 2019/2020 annual budget, and will be used to maintain the property at 25 Old Farms Road.**
- To provide \$50,000 in supplementary funding to Willington Hill Fire Department. Such funds will be in addition to those funds already allocated in the Department's 2019/2020 annual budget, and will be constitute the town's contribution to the department's repayment of loans received as part of the department's purchase of 25 Old Farms Road.**

Peter Tanaka seconded the motion.

Discussion:

Laurie Semprebon said that while she supports the fire departments in town, she was not in attendance for the original conversation and would like clarification on why the board feels that the town needs to spend town money for a private organization to buy land, and what is the benefit to the town when there is zero ownership of the land to the town.

Mike Makuch replied that he likens it to the library or the school, where the town puts money into those buildings but does not own them. Laurie replied that there is a direct benefit to the town from those organizations, where the town will not currently directly benefit from the purchase of this specific parcel of land. Future plans for the land have not been detailed. Barry Wallett wondered if, were there to be a long term plan to expand fire services, that would be the place for it.

Chairman Bulick clarified that the board voted the way it did to be responsive to a need for building in town. Barry stated that the average person in town pays approximately \$5,000 in taxes, so that's 12 taxpayers in town who work hard and are having their money put toward buying an empty piece of land in order to be nice to a fire department. Chief Snyder replied that the purchase is more than being nice to a fire department; it is going toward improving fire services eventually, and that they have to start somewhere.

Barry continued that there are already two fire departments in town, and that he understands that Willington Hill Fire Department wants the land and has made a long-term plan surrounding it, but that the town itself has no long-term fire services development plan. The only plan he has seen that references development of the Willington Hill Fire Department land is in one of the school plan proposals, which recommends tearing down the fire department and extending the school there. He is of the opinion that that would be as much a folly to do that as it would be to build another fire department across the street on this new parcel of land.

Selectwoman Wicinski clarified that Willington Hill Fire Department has already purchased the land; the request is for the money to repay private loans provided to them.

Chairman Bulick brought the conversation back around to the town building needs. Laurie replied that she doesn't see how the town can spend \$60,000 on something for which there is no specific plan, whether the town wants to build a fire department there or somewhere else in the future, because that hasn't yet been researched. She understands their desire to have the land, and recognizes that there is a possibility they might sell it in the future because something else comes up, but brought up the point that the board has had conversations about the town having too little money to repair roads in parts of town, so why do we have the funds to give to WHFD?

Peter expressed that the way he sees it, the town is going to need growth, and that insurance companies need a facility with trucks for response in certain areas of town. He made the point that the current facilities won't last forever; that you can look at it on the scale of how many people have to pay for this, but this is half as much as we spent to fight the gun range, and that he looks at it as a matter of public safety.

Barry replied that the land purchase itself does not help public safety, and Chief Snyder stated that the station and property that they have is falling apart and eventually won't be able to house trucks there. Barry brought up his concern that owning the land will tempt claims that the current building is inadequate and immediately needs replacing. Chief Snyder replied that there is already a long list of inadequacies and deteriorations in the current building.

Barry restated his concerns over whether the town really needs two fire departments, and whether the investment in this land limits the town's future growth by deciding this is where growth will happen. Chief Snyder replied that the building has been there for 70 years and has been a great place for a fire department in the eyes of many.

Barry stated that WHFD is a volunteer fire department, and doesn't have to go to a call if it comes in, that the other department has to go to every call. He wondered whether it would be wiser to put money into the paid department rather than the land purchase of a volunteer

department, and stated that by investing this money into the volunteer department, the decision is made.

Laurie brought up her concern that the board isn't being asked to approve money for a new fire department facility or some plan that's been approved, it's being asked to invest money into a private organization that does great work, but what's to say that money shouldn't go toward something else in town? She stated that she's not comfortable helping to finance a private organization that made their own decision to purchase land. She stated there are other things that keep being put off in the CIP and doesn't understand why the town would spend this money.

Chief Snyder replied that from the other side, this is a bigger, broader purchase, but he sees it as the same as if something breaks on a fire truck and WHFD comes to the town to ask for money to repair or purchase a new one so they can keep going. The building is deteriorating and they're asking the townspeople to decide. He suggested to bring the issue to the townspeople to let them vote on whether they think it's a good idea to better the services.

Barry stated that again, the purchase of land does not directly improve the fire services, and that you can maintain and repair a building. Chief Snyder replied that they are limited in what they can do to the current building, as it is nonconforming now. They can't expand or add a second story and are over the limits for conforming in terms of parking spaces and ground coverage.

Laurie summarized that her and Barry's concern is that there isn't a plan that the town came up with to build a fire department that we are pitching money into; we are being asked to give money to a private organization for a piece of property with no definitive gain to the town. We don't know yet what will become of that piece of property.

Chief Snyder replied that the timing of things was unfortunate that they weren't able to follow the normal CIP request process, during which it is easier to make decisions. He stated that this purchase has been in their plan and in their CIP request for years. The opportunity came for WHFD to use their money to get one step closer to helping the town by replacing the building that needs to be replaced. Previously, the land wasn't available or the funds weren't available, and this time, those happened at the same time, but not when CIP requests were made.

Laurie replied that if the town were funding a new fire department through CIP, they would sit down and decide where the best place for a fire department would be. Selectwoman Wicewski stated that over the last two years, CIP had two requests from two fire departments; one for land and one for a new firehouse. The realistic conversation was that the town could not afford both of these, so needed to decide where it thought its resources could best be used; that has yet to be determined and is several years out.

Chief Snyder agreed and said that that is why WHFD is not asking for the full \$300,000 for the land purchase, but only a fraction of the money to be able to mark the property and move forward with planning. If it doesn't go that way and ultimately the town says that they don't want a fire department there anymore or a new facility will be built somewhere else, they can sell the property. If they don't get the town's financial assistance, the property will sit there reserved, but they won't be able to use it.

Chairman Bulick remembered that Chief Snyder had also said that funding the entire land purchase would consume a lot of their resources if not all, and are asking for a fraction of it so they are not left on too tight a budget.

Vote: 3 Yes (J. Bulick, M. Makuch, P. Tanaka), 2 No (L. Semprebon, B. Wallett)

Selectwoman Wiczenski shared that the town meeting regarding this issue won't happen as quickly as it typically would, as there are currently several other matters that also need to go to town meeting. The Board of Selectmen are gathering everything necessary to consolidate all of the issues into one town meeting instead of multiple back to back, as there is an expense associated with each town meeting called.

3) Encumbrance Policy

It was discussed that there is no new news.

CORRESPONDENCE

Randy Belair and Bill Rankin sent correspondence stating that they were unable to attend this month's meeting.

GOOD & WELFARE

Members thanked new recording secretary Marysa Semprebon for level of detail in last meeting minutes. Discussion ensued about level of detail necessary for general meeting minutes.

Peter Tanaka moved to adjourn the meeting at 8:13pm.

Mike Makuch seconded the motion.

Vote: 5 Yes (J. Bulick, M. Makuch, B. Wallett, L. Semprebon, P. Tanaka), 0 No

Respectfully submitted,
Marysa Semprebon
Recording Secretary