

TOWN OF WILLINGTON

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BOARD OF FINANCE

Budget Meeting
Hybrid — In Person and Online

February 29, 2024
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):

Bruce Lawler Chair	Geoffrey Prusak Vice Chair	Christina Mailhos Secretary	Walter Parsell	Jason Ross	Stephanie Summers	Melissa Miller (ALT)	Britt Rothauser (ALT)
In person	In person	Absent	In person	In person	In person	In person	Absent

Donna Latinsics, Business Manager — In person
Peter Tanaka, 1st Selectman — In person
Troy Sposato, Director, Public Works
Christina Mailhos, Chair, CIP Committee — via Zoom

Residents in person and via Zoom

Call to Order

Bruce Lawler called the meeting to order at 7:00PM.

Seating of Alternates (if needed):

Ms. Summers motioned to seat Melissa Miller for Christina Mailhos.

Mr. Ross seconded the motion.

Discussion: none

All in favor. Motion passed unanimously. (6-0-0)

Approval of Minutes — n/a

Present to Speak:

Jim Marshall, Fisher Hill Road, noted that he is speaking on behalf of himself and not as a representative of the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) Committee. Regarding the Board of Selectmen's budget, he would like the Board to continue the discussion on the Board of Education's Facilities Director position. It is shortsighted not to include it in the Board of Selectmen's budget because given discussions at the CIP meetings, the town is in desperate need. He hopes this is discussed and that the needle can be moved in that direction. Mr. Marshall commented that he was discouraged by some of the comments

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at the end of the Board of Education's presentation particularly from the Chair related to what was proposed as being excessive or extravagant spending with the desire to hit a relative target. The Board of Education's budget, which is not contractual spending, is about as tight as it can be. A Facilities Director is desperately needed by the schools and every building in town. There are a few positions that were requested to have a rate increase above and beyond the necessary increases in the special education budget. These positions are important and critical. He hopes the request is considered with a higher level of urgency. Mr. Marshall commented on the CIP need. He voted for a year 1 budget last night with sincere and strong objection and reservation. From a facilities improvement standpoint, the needs are unbelievable. The capital improvement need is \$30M over the next five years, most of which is critical to maintain the integrity of buildings. In the short term, a fire department is operating out of a trailer. It is shortsighted to say that all is ok with the year 1 budget because it is close to a perceived target number and to shortchange savings for getting ahead. The year 1 budget shows a minimal increase. In year 2 is a bond that would cost over \$1M to taxpayers, over 2 mills, to cover road and fire station improvements. In year 3, the capital improvement bucket is in the hole by almost \$3M. In year 4, it is \$5M and in year 5, it is \$7.5M in the negative. They should be concerned about this. To balance this, a significant tax increase is needed in year 3. If it cannot be funded, the Board needs to discuss which projects it is not going to fund because \$20M will need to be cut. They cannot get ahead of this by short-changing themselves in the short term. They cannot look at it as a year 1 budget and ignore years 2-5. It is irresponsible. He hopes the CIP Committee, the BOF, and the BOS can work together.

Erika Wicewski shared her concern and disappointment that tonight the Board is hearing a Board of Selectmen (BOS) budget that has not been properly publicly discussed by the BOS and has not been voted on or approved by the BOS. The process of government conducting business in public is an important step in transparency and holding elected officials accountable. The continued lack of transparency on the part of administration is concerning and a problem that needs to be addressed. Ms. Wicewski explained that she is sharing her concerns with this Board because the BOS has not had a meeting since February 5th. A meeting was held on February 14th where the BOS spent one hour discussing the budget and did not allow public comment. They also did not address the actual budget figures. The first time the public will hear the information is potentially at this evening's meeting. This is not where people should hear about potential budget impacts. There should be well thought-out discussions and arguments for potential increases and decreases. She knows how challenging a budget season can be, particularly one following an election, but there are ample resources and time to assist, and she hopes this Board addresses this issue.

Old Business – Review and Adopt Revised 2024-2025 Budget Calendar

Ms. Summers noted that the Revised Combined Meeting Schedule, without the calendar, should have CIP listed under March 14th and Discussion moved up to March 7th.

Ms. Summers motioned to accept the calendar as amended.

Mr. Parsell seconded the motion.

Discussion: none

All In favor. Motion passed unanimously.

New Business:

1. Selectmen's Budget – First Selectman Peter Tanaka

Mr. Tanaka addressed Ms. Wicewski. The BOS has not had a meeting due to a lack of a quorum. A Selectman is out of the country, and another is working nights. As soon as they have

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a quorum, they will have another BOS meeting. A workshop was held on the budget that can be viewed on YouTube.

Mr. Tanaka explained that the big items include the Assessor at 20.34% which is primarily due to payroll. At the next BOS meeting, he will ask to be empowered to rework the contract with the Town of Bolton for the payroll. What is presented is their best guess at this time. He explained that payroll and the training section used to be paid separately but Bolton would now like the training to be included in the contract. Bolton would then pay for all of the training. The contract has not yet been finalized. The 20% increase represents moving another line item in for training.

Mr. Tanaka highlighted Assessor Services (0134 330) and Training and Education (0134 645) and noted they are unsure where these line items will land. Part of the training is for the Assistant Assessor. Ms. Summers asked about the Assessor Services 32.9% increase. Mr. Tanaka explained that this includes the salary that has been zeroed out.

The increase in Human Services is due to the additional position. It was added primarily with ARPA funds which have faded to town money.

Mr. Parsell asked what is driving the increase in Public Works. Mr. Tanaka explained that there has been a large increase in Pump Catch Basins (0311 570). Traditionally, half are cleaned annually but Mr. Sposato would like to do all of them due to the two major rainstorms that washed a lot of fill into the storm system. It is easier to clean the catch basins before they become plugged. Tree Removal Service (0311 573) is due to two infestations. Tent caterpillars have destroyed oak trees and the emerald ash borer wiped out ash trees. These trees need to be cut before they fall onto roads. Drug Testing & CDL Physicals (0311 577) has increased due to a state mandate. Testing must now be done on all drivers.

Ms. Summers asked if they could split the fiscal year and do half of the catch basins before July 1st this year and the remainder after this date so they do not have the full impact. Mr. Tanaka explained that they would need to add to this year's budget to do so. Mr. Sposato explained that there were funds from the previous year so all of the catch basins were cleaned. Due to the rainstorms, the money has been used. If the \$50K is approved, 100% of the basins will be cleaned. If only \$25K is approved, only half can be done. Mr. Sposato noted that the company that cleans the catch basins has increased prices as well.

Mr. Tanaka addressed Snow-Sand (0311 682). Last year, it was \$0 because the town had leftover sand from the previous year. The \$6K is to replenish the supply. Mr. Sposato explained that every two years they bid out \$14K worth of sand but now they are using more salt. This year, to replenish the pile, they would use a local vendor and haul the sand themselves rather than go out to bid. Currently, there is enough sand for another year or so. Thus, it would be ok to cut this item.

Ms. Summers asked about the Snow-Salt (0311 687) line. Mr. Sposato explained that the increase is due to the increase in the cost of salt.

Road Maintenance – Asphalt (0311 681) was addressed. Mr. Tanaka explained that Chip Seal (0311 680), Asphalt, and Crack Seal (0311 683) have been combined into the Asphalt line. This allows for ease since percentages would not need to be calculated. Last year, the town spent

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\$20K on an engineering company to survey the roads. If they do not put a little money into infrastructure, it will deteriorate.

Ms. Summers commented that at some point the Board should discuss combining account lines. It would be more trackable, and each line has different costs. She is not sure this is as sound of a budget practice as it could be. Mr. Sposato explained that if they put \$150K into chip seal, the average over recent years, only \$100K would remain and he can barely pave with this amount. Ms. Summers commented that her presumption is that they would balance the material lines of paving overall. Mr. Sposato explained that paving a mile of road is about \$300K. If only \$100K is allocated for asphalt, he cannot pave much. Mr. Tanaka confirmed that overall, the request is for an increase of \$150K.

Mr. Tanaka highlighted Temporary Help (0351 127). He noted that while a smaller amount, the percentage increase is large. This is to true up the line for what is actually being spent for help at the transfer station on Sundays. Waste Oil/Antifreeze (0351 528) is similar. While they burn waste oil to heat the Public Works garage to save on disposal, both are hazardous waste, and they need to dispose of the oil that cannot be burned along with the antifreeze etc.

Mr. Tanaka noted that Employee Health Insurance (0831 231) has decreased but Life Insurance (0831 233) has increased.

The General Government Budget is increasing 7.7%. Some of this is due to increased CIP expenditures to address some of the buildings. The schools and fire departments are in desperate need. A little more is being put into saving and there are expenses. Initially, the increase was 4.8%. The CIP Committee wanted to raise it to 10% but Mr. Tanaka recommended 7%. The Committee landed at 9%.

Ms. Mailhos asked about the additional time at the Transfer Station. The actual is already \$2K over budget. She asked if it should be more and what is driving it. Mr. Tanaka explained that he was reticent about adding more than Mr. Sposato requested. The \$6K is the average of what has been spent. Mr. Sposato added that there has been a change in staff as well and for a period of time, other staff had to be brought in for coverage.

Mr. Parsell asked if there has been any thought to putting the facilities manager position into the Selectmen's budget rather than BOE's budget considering that there are town buildings that need attention as well. Mr. Tanaka responded that he considered it but did not think the town could afford it.

Ms. Summers asked about Bulk Waste Disposal (0351 523). They budgeted \$80K in the past but are only trending at \$60K and asked if they could take half the difference and reduce the request by \$10K. Mr. Tanaka responded that this is a question for the BOF. Ms. Summers asked about General Supplies (0351 610). Similarly, they have not been spending at that level. Mr. Sposato explained that some repairs are needed, including electrical work, and there are still a few months left in the year. Ms. Summers responded that these items would fall under Maintenance.

Correspondence: - none

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Present to Speak

Ralph Tulis, 47 Village Hill Road, asked about the Public Works budget in regard to the Schofield Road drainage project. This was discussed during the CIP Committee meeting. It was asked why given the department's equipment, they could not start at the bottom of Schofield Road rather than having a contractor do the road at one time. Mr. Tulis explained that a comprehensive plan is needed because the system will collect a lot of stormwater and it needs to go somewhere. It is a congested development and there will be problems routing water off the road. The stormwater cannot be sent to Route 32. Mr. Tulis noted that it will be a challenge to get drainage easements across the small lots from a legal and financial perspective. He does not want to see anyone resorting to eminent domain. This is why they need a comprehensive plan. The project could be done incrementally, but they cannot start at the bottom without knowing what happens all the way up.

Jim Marshall, Fisher Hill Road, commented that budget season is difficult this year, and will be for every year going forward or they will continue to degrade the infrastructure. The roads noted in the CIP have been on the plan for 15 years and the fire stations for 20 years. The schools are hundreds of years old. When the school referendum failed last year, the town was pushed into a situation of having significant repair needs. In as much as Mr. Tanaka is hesitant to increase the mill rate by adding a facilities director, the only way to make inroads into the projects is to start saving now so everything is not being financed. All parties want to find responsible ways to improve infrastructure. Now is the time to step up and get the job done. It is going to hurt. No one will like it and neither does he. He does not like being the voice of doomsday, but the situation is dire.

Erika Wicewski echoed Mr. Marshall's sentiments. There needs to be a serious discussion about having a facilities director. The position is needed, and they need to address the problems now. She added that she is disappointed that no one asked Mr. Tanaka if the budget will see a major change once the BOS discusses it and brings the BOF the number it votes on.

Michelle Doucette Cunningham, 21 Liska Road, commented that she agrees with Mr. Marshall. They have had artificially low tax rates for years. The rates have been kept low by neglecting infrastructure. The hens are coming home to roost which is seen in the infrastructure needs across departments. They will need to take a big hit this year to start addressing this. It will be a hard decision for the Board, they are taxpayers too, but it is more important that they fix the failing infrastructure now rather than kick the can down the road. It will only get more expensive in the long run. She would rather see a tax increase this year of a substantive amount that is not huge and have it start the process rather than have a much larger increase over time. The shock absorber process can make the impact less by starting it now. Regardless of the CIP number, they need to start saving because they know items need to be addressed.

Peter Latincsics, 97 Trask Road, commented on the budget process. It is easy to criticize the past, but he submits that over the last half century, the town has done an outstanding job managing its infrastructure. It built a number of additions to its schools, fire houses, and town office building. They arrived at this point just fine, and they will continue, as they have in the past, to move into the future. They do not have to do everything at once. He encouraged the Board to look at how things have been managed in the past. The town does not have large tax increases or take on debt. Fiscal affairs are managed frugally and there is no reason they cannot continue to do so. Early in the process, the Board correctly identified that there are a large number of capital requests this year and is looking for the

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operational budget to be managed to support this. Mr. Latincsics noted that he has not seen this yet but is confident the Board can offset one with the other. The town had an understanding that it would not take on new bonding commitments until the library bond was retired because it is a town that does things in a gradual way. Two years remain on the bond and year 3 may be the time to consider additional bonding for projects. He encouraged the Board to evaluate the projects presented by the CIP Committee, prioritize the town's needs, and coordinate this with the town's operational budgets so they can have a reasonable increase and plan for the future. *Mr. Prusak commented that he appreciates Mr. Latincsics' comments. Mr. Prusak has lived in town his entire life and loves it. They do an incredible amount with few resources. This is because of citizen volunteers and government. They should be thankful for the number of resources in town for not a lot of money. The low taxes are very attractive and anyone who does not agree with that should pack their bags and move to Mansfield.*

Mr. Lawler asked for a motion to adjourn.

Ms. Summers commented that the Board needs to have serious discussions and a lot of comments reflect this. She asked if they were going to adjourn in under an hour and not take advantage of a little time to have discussions. She asked if anyone sees areas of the budget that deserve debate or if they are going to go in on the last night and say to take it down to a 2% overall increase. Mr. Lawler noted that discussions will take place during the next two meetings. The following week will be appropriations. Discussions regarding items with small increases will take place first followed by the BOE, fire houses, BOS, and the library.

Ms. Summers cautioned that budgets that have more assets and smaller percentage increases may have more room for flexibility. If they have classically underspent in areas, this is a place to look for some relief. She is in favor of having a facilities manager in the BOE budget. It is a task-oriented position for the period of time that the schools need heavy repairs which is likely to be for several years. She would like to know what people are thinking.

Mr. Parsell commented that he believes the facilities position is woefully understated with what a good one would cost. The only people who may be interested are retirees or someone young and still learning. The number presented is rather laughable for someone with experience in this role. Ms. Summers responded that she believes that the Superintendent has researched the cost of a generalist. She would not reject the concept even if the number is a little off. Mr. Lawler commented that he spoke to a contractor about the figure. A facilities director could be twice what was proposed plus benefits. Ms. Summers commented that perhaps they need to reduce some larger line items and provide the money. She believes it is a necessity and would not reject the number because it may be a few thousand dollars off. Mr. Ross commented that they could increase the number if other Boards or Committees have large line items that could be reduced. The entire town needs a facilities manager so why not have the departments in town pay for the position? Ms. Summers responded that this could be an idea for staging the position in and suggested starting it with the schools. It will be needed given the school projects. Mr. Prusak commented that he does not want it to become a permanent position across town and does not want to see someone in a union position in an office with nothing to do. Mr. Parsell commented that it cannot be a union job. Ms. Summers commented that the position as presented is a reasonable way to jump in and she trusts the Superintendent to make it work. The BOE has researched the position, presented it, and is motivated. Mr. Lawler noted that the Superintendent's budget did not include the position. It was added by the BOE in addition to others that increased the budget from around 5% to approximately 6.5%. Ms. Summers commented that she believes the

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Superintendent has been pushing this position for a while. In his presentation, he noted that he has been doing the work to a degree albeit not a superintendent's job. Mr. Prusak commented that school facilities have the greatest need right now. Mr. Lawler noted that they will wait until they see the CIP.

Mr. Parsell asked about the Human Services position previously funded by ARPA and if it was planned, knowing it would end up as part of payroll. Mr. Tanaka responded that it was planned. Mr. Parsell noted that it is nearly an extra \$35K. Ms. Summers commented that it was known. The ARPA Commission was aware that it should not fund too many items that would affect the operation budget in perpetuity. She believes this is the only exception. The longtime volunteer at the senior center who was putting in 25 hours/week stepped down and no one stepped up. The decision was to use ARPA funds and grow the position into what it is. Ms. Latincsics explained that when the position was presented to the ARPA Commission it was entry level at 15 hours/week. By the time the person was hired, it became a union position at more than entry level pay and more hours. Thus, there is more of an expense than when it was initially proposed. Ms. Summers commented that her recollection was that it was 25 hours/week. Ms. Latincsics explained that it was 22 hours under ARPA and is now 25. The rate went from \$15/hour to almost \$23/hour. Mr. Lawler asked when the union contract expires. Ms. Latincsics noted the position is in the union contract which expires June 30th. Mr. Lawler commented that it would be nice for the Board at the Senior Center to discuss having a volunteer take over the position. All of the residents are involved in what goes on at the center's events. Ms. Summers commented that it may make more sense to trim the hours. Mr. Parsell commented that it makes more sense to discuss items with significant money behind them. He added that it is interesting after asking a couple of questions to find out how much some things grew. He added that he is not criticizing anything, but it is interesting how things evolve.

John Blessington, 29 Mason Road, asked that the Board consider that if they do have a facilities manager, they will want the BOS to hire someone for the entire town. If hired by the BOE, this will be the primary focus and the rest of the town will be rather ignored. They would want someone open to the entire town. *Ms. Summers commented that this question was asked during the BOE presentation. The answer from the Superintendent was that he would not have a problem growing into a partnership role with the rest of the town for facilities management. Mr. Parsell commented that at the end of the day, it affects the bottom line of the town whether it is in the BOE or the Selectmen's budget. It makes more sense to him to for the position to have more responsibility and pay it appropriately. Mr. Tanaka noted that the MBR also needs to be considered.*

Good and Welfare: none

Adjournment:

Ms. Miller motioned to adjourn at 8:39pm.

Mr. Prusak seconded the motion.

Motion passed (6-0-0).

Respectfully submitted,

Lisa Pascuzzi

Lisa Pascuzzi
Recording Secretary

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[Signature]
TOWN CLERK