

**Town of Chester Budget Committee Public Hearing
February 19, 2024
Draft Minutes
7:00 PM**

Budget Committee members present:

Ephraim Dobbins, Chair
Kathy Guilmette, Vice Chair
Charlotte Lister
Jack Cannon
Beth Swanson
Ron McKinnon
Steve Couture, Selectboard Liaison

Budget Committee member attending telephonically:

Rob Varsalone

Budget Committee members absent:

Sabrina Harris, Chester School Board Ex-Officio

Guests and members of the public present:

Stephen O. Landau, Selectman
Chester PACT

I. Meeting to Order

Chair Dobbins called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.

II. Attendance

III. Public Comment

There were no members of the public wishing to comment.

IV. BOS Update

In terms of the budget, Selectman Couture said the Board of Selectmen discussed adding an education and training incentive line for all employees. They will discuss what the policy should be in the coming year and if there should be an incentive relative to education and training that is equitable across departments.

In the **Highway** budget, they discussed roadside clearing and tree cutting, and the associated risks. They discussed how much is needed in the operating budget for salt. In the **Fire** budget, they requested justification for the increase in the on-call line item, which the Chief has provided. In the **Police** budget, the shift differential increase was a priority. The Board is in favor of keeping this increase in the budget.

Chair Dobbins asked for clarification of the changes in salary compensation. Selectman Couture said the BOS approved a 4% COLA. He noted that taking into consideration the amount employees would have to pay increase-wise into their benefits, the actual COLA would be less than 3%, when looking at salary and benefits.

He said they intend to get the warrant article information to the Committee in a timely manner. Ms. Guilmette noted the warrant articles changing a week before the Committee saw them last year was a disaster.

In terms of general salary/labor costs, Chair Dobbins asked if there are incremental positions and any changes in those. Selectman Couture will provide this information.

Mr. Cannon suggested drastic and meaningful impacts could be made in areas that create no risk. He asked about the number of full- and part-time employees in the Maintenance Department and Transfer Station. He said the Town Administrator should obtain justification as to why certain positions are full time and drawing benefits, such as the building inspector, Assessing, and Recreation. He suggested cutting positions to part-time, with no benefits. He said they should fund the Police, Fire, and Highway Departments, and flat line everyone else, or reduce staffing.

Ms. Swanson asked about the percentage of the budget that is salaries and benefits. Selectman Couture said he will provide this.

Chair Dobbins expressed concern over the two large warrant articles. He noted that the Budget Committee does not vote down warrant articles. They vote to recommend or not recommend warrant articles.

Chair Dobbins said he appreciates the Board of Selectmen questioning budget items.

V. School Board Update

Ms. Harris was not present to provide an update.

VI. Other Committee Updates

VII. Minutes

a. January 29, 2024

Chair Dobbins noted the misspelling of his last name in various locations.

Ms. Guilmette moved to approve the minutes from January 29, 2024, as amended. Ms. Swanson seconded the motion. A vote was taken. The motion passed 6-0-1, with Mr. Cannon abstaining.

b. February 5, 2024

Ms. Guilmette moved to approve the minutes from February 5, 2024, as written. Mr. McKinnon seconded the motion. A vote was taken. The motion passed 6-0-1, with Selectman Couture abstaining.

VIII. New Business

a. Chester School District 2024-25 meeting preparation

Chair Dobbins asked if there are any articles that the Committee would like to petition a ballot vote and the Committee discussed this. He asked if any Committee members would like to speak to any of the articles and volunteered to speak to the article on which the Committee did not agree with the School Board.

The Committee discussed what happens if the budget is voted down. Selectman Landau said per the RSAs, the Committee would have to come up with a budget, otherwise it would be a zero budget.

IX. Next Meeting Date

The next meetings will be held on March 4 and March 18, 2024.

X. Adjourn

Ms. Guilmette moved to adjourn the meeting at 7:56 p.m. Ms. Lister seconded the motion. A vote was taken, all were in favor. The motion passed unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,
Beth Hanggeli, Recording Secretary