Town of Chester Budget Committee
January 25, 2021
Approved Minutes
7:00 PM

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Members present (remotely):
Chair Mike Weider
Vice-Chair Ephraim Dobbins
Rhonda Lamphere
Kathy Guilmette
Michael D'Angelo
Jack Cannon
Chester School Board Liaison Dana Theokas
Paul Murphy
Selectmen Liaison Stephen Landau

Guest present:
Town Administrator Debra Doda

I. Meeting to Order
Chair Weider called the meeting to order at 7:00 PM.

II. Attendance

III. Announcements by the Chair – Welcome

IV. School Board Update – Dana Theokas
Ms. Theokas said the superintendent search is ramping up. The School Board has received several applications. They anticipate selecting a committee of stakeholders from the community and the school district by January 29th, which is also the application deadline. There will be a public forum on February 3rd to introduce the idea to the community.

They have received an update from Senator Kahn that the kenogarten money is moving forward. They anticipate they’ll receive between $45,000-$85,000 from this legislative correction.

School is still operating in a hybrid remote model. They have between 150-180 of 470 K-8 students in the building. Chair Weider thought someone from the committee would like to participate in the search, but he hasn't been contacted by the search committee. Ms. Theokas will check into it.

Chair Weider sent the committee members the proposed posting for public hearing. He communicated with Ms. Rich that the hearing should be held as a Zoom meeting. Wet signatures from a majority of the committee members are required on the MS-27, who can contact Ms. Rich and arrange to sign it at the Superintendent's office.

V. BOS Update – Stephen Landau
Selectman Landau sent a note to Chair Weider about the Polaris, who shared that and other information with the committee members.

VI. New Business –

a. Town Annual Budget

Mr. Cannon moved that the Budget Committee support and accept the Town Budget as presented by Board of Selectmen. Selectman Landau seconded.

Chair Weider doesn't believe the committee has had enough time to deliberate on the budget.

Mr. Cannon believes the Board of Selectmen has done a commendable job preparing the budget. He is trying to save the committee time so they can focus on the warrant articles, since that is where taxes will take a significant hit.

Ms. Guilmette believes the motion is premature.

Mr. Dobbins agrees with Mr. Cannon and Selectman Landau that they should spend the time discussing the warrant articles.

Chair Weider forwarded the updated budget summary to the committee members. There is an $11,000 increase from what was originally submitted. The original amount was $5,145,067, the new amount is $5,156,173. The original budget was 2.9%, updated is 3.2%.

Ms. Doda said the $11,000 is for fire department software. The current software will no longer be supported, so they have to buy a new package.

Ms. Lamphere asked if there had been further discussion about the additional employee in the Town Clerk/Tax Collector's office. Chair Weider said there was not.


Ms. Guilmette believes the additional staff in the Town Clerk's office will drive in costs year over year, so she recommends removing that item. Selectman Landau explained that two people work in the office. The Department of Registry has a security limit. If one leaves, they are down to one person. They need to bring in someone for a maximum of 12 hours a week to learn the system, and be vetted and approved by the Registry. They will report to the Town Clerk, who will be responsible for scheduling.

Ms. Lamphere said there are people available as contractors via MRI who are trained and approved if the office needs help. She is concerned because part-time people hired in the Town Hall turn into full-time employees with benefits. She believes there are other items in the town budget that will need discussion as they go through the warrant articles and they won't be able to return to them if they vote to move the budget forward.
Mr. Murphy asked if they could accept the part-time position for 12 months. Ms. Lamphere said that isn’t possible. The Board of Selectmen does not need permission to put employees on the warrant, so the budget committee has no authority to put restrictions on the position.

Selectman Landau said it’s expensive to bring temporary help into the Town Clerk office, and everyone that starts in the Town Hall part-time does not turn into a full-time employee. The Board of Selectmen wanted to make sure the legislative body saw the position in the budget. They are not asking the budget committee to approve the position. Even if the committee removes it from the budget, the Board of Selectmen can hire the position. They want to be transparent.

Mr. Cannon said this discussion was a poor use of time. Mr. Murphy asked if they could remove the item from the budget.

Chair Weider reminded the members to respect each other’s opinions and not to interject while others are speaking.

Ms. Theokas can see the need for someone to be trained. She believes there are sufficient resources in the town office and the Board of Selectmen could upskill someone from another department.

Chair Weider believes the budget should be at 2.5% instead of 3.2%, based on his calculations. He agreed the bigger impact is the warrant, so they should spend time discussing that. He said the biggest cost to the town is the employee base, based on retirement and benefits.

Chair Landau said the Board of Selectmen is planning 12-18 months in advance. It is difficult to predict upcoming expenses. The population of Chester is growing, COVID has caused many changes. He agreed there is a little extra in the budget, but the excess will go into the unassigned fund balance if it isn’t returned. One of warrant articles is to repair Stevens Hall, which they’d like to do for the 300th anniversary. They are putting aside $250,000 from the unassigned fund balance for this expense, not from current tax dollars. If the committee removes money from the budget, it does everyone harm.

Mr. Murphy moved to reconsider the budget and move it forward as proposed. Mr. Cannon seconded.

Ms. Theokas asked what the tax impact is from the 3.5% increase for a home valued at $450,000, to compare it to the warrant articles. Mr. Dobbins said it would normalize to dollars, so the tax impact isn’t needed. Chair Weider said the increase to the operating budget is $157,518.


Chair Weider said the budget committee will meet with the Board of Selectmen and explain they have agreed on the town budget as it is. $5,156,173 at 3.2% increase, or a total of $157,518.
b. Warrant Articles

Chair Weider said the committee doesn't have to vote on the articles tonight; this is just a discussion.

Article #b: $15,000 to be added to the Town Reevaluation Capital Reserve Fund for reevaluation, which will be done by whoever the Board of Selectmen chooses. Selectman Landau said this warrant is to resolve the Claremont school education issue. He votes against it every year. He feels this is an artificial number and it should be looked at over a period of time when there is a change, not every five years. This equals two cents on the tax rate; his argument is purely based on his principle.

Ms. Guilmette said they are mandated by the state to do the reassessment, so they have to put the money aside. Mr. Dobbins clarified that by putting money into the reserve fund, they avoid a $75,000 expense every five years.

Chair Weider took a straw vote. All members voted aye except Selectman Landau, who abstained.

Article #c: This has no impact on the tax rate.

Chair Weider took a straw vote. All members voted aye except Ms. Lamphere, who abstained.

Article #d: These are matching funds for the steeple that holds the clock. Mr. Cannon asked about the funds the church has raised. Selectman Landau said they didn't get the LCHIP grant. They are within $100,000 and expect to be able to come up with that amount. The estimated cost of the project is over $300,000. Mr. Cannon said the church is the centerpiece of the community, so they are trying to balance what they need to do with Stevens Hall and the church. Selectman Landau said they have enough funds to start the job; hopefully they won't ask for any more.

Mr. Dobbins would like to see a snapshot of the project from the congregation or the Board of Selectmen: how much has been raised, total cost, etc. Selectman Landau will ask someone to come next week to give that report.

Article #e: The Board of Selectmen did not vote on this. Selectman Landau said this is a budget committee item, so the Board of Selectmen felt they should rely on the budget committee's vote.

Article #f: This has nothing to do with financials, so the budget committee doesn't vote on it.

Article #g: Chair Weider took a straw vote. All members voted aye.
Article #h: Chair Weider asked why the funding is reduced to $400,000. Ms. Doda said the Board of Selectmen asked for $1.4 million to be split between the highway and the municipal CIP. She split the figure into $1 million for highway and $400,000 into municipal to cover roadwork that's been requested. Chair Weider says they have been funding $600,000-$700,000 on the town side and less on the highway side. They will be short the following year if they only fund $400,000; they won't carry over enough to fund future projects. The CIP has a structure built out; by reducing the town side, it will shortfall the CIP on the municipal side. He wants the Planning Board to understand this.

Mr. Cannon asked if the figure should be higher. Chair Weider said it should be $600,000, and they should reduce the highway side. They haven't built capital reserve funds to fund large pieces of equipment for the fire department. Selectman Landau said in article r, they are putting $400,000 into the fire engine capital reserve fund from the unassigned fund balance with no amount to be raised from taxation. The Board of Selectmen are suggesting $50,000 a year be put into it so they will have funds available to purchase heavy equipment for the fire department.

Chair Weider said $650,000 is being pulled from the unassigned fund balance based on the warrant articles. He would like to build the cost of equipment out over years instead of holding it in a nest egg. He would like to move some of the $400,000 into the CIP to take care of other things coming forward.

Selectman Landau said the pumper needs replacing or refurbishing at a cost of $600,000-$700,000. If they set up a capital reserve fund, it will be for heavy equipment. No plan has been set up for the highway as of yet.

Mr. Cannon asked about the urgency on the pumper. Selectman Landau didn't know. It's being maintained. It's an expensive vehicle to replace, and they don't receive much money for the vehicles when they sell them. Mr. Cannon said the market isn't good for used fire apparatus. He asked if they could consider taking $200,000 from the unassigned fund balance for article r and adding it to the CIP funding article instead, to raise it to $600,000: $400,000 from taxation and $200,000 from unassigned. Chair Weider said that would work and asked the committee members for their opinions.

Mr. Cannon said it didn't make sense to move $400,000 from one account to another. It needs to be utilized right away to feel the impact. People see the impact of the CIP every day. Chair Weider said Mr. Hadik from the Planning Board put together numbers on spending and funding of the CIP since 2009, which articles were passed and where the funding came from. It started at $385,000 in 2009; in 2020, they are passing $3.15 million worth of articles. They are trying to avoid going into bonds and leases.

Mr. Cannon said it's an agreeable level of taxation for the community. Ms. Guilmette asked if the Planning Board needs to review this and if the budget committee had to discuss it with the Board of Selectmen. Chair Weider said the Planning Board recommends what the articles are, not how to fund them. The budget committee and the Board of Selectmen set the warrant articles in place so that they work. Ms. Guilmette suggested tabling this topic until they can discuss it with the Board of Selectmen and Chair Weider agreed.
Ms. Theokas asked how much is in the unassigned fund balance. Ms. Doda said $3.5 million, which is at 19%, which exceeds the DRA recommendation. That figure is the result of the town receiving more revenue than expected as a result of being fiscally responsible.

Ms. Lamphere agrees it's good to have funds stay in one place and not set aside for one specific thing. As the treasurer, when she invests short-term money, it doesn't earn as much interest as the trust funds do.

Article #j: Selectman Landau said the first three items in general government are being taken from impact fees, the rest from the CIP. Ms. Guilmette asked if those items were being purchased now instead of waiting until July. Ms. Doda said the Board of Selectmen has been asked to consider this, but they haven't discussed it. Chair Weider said the budget committee needs this information before they can discuss the article. Ms. Guilmette asked for the balance of special detail revenue fund and Ms. Lamphere said $40,050.72.

Article #j: Chair Weider is fine with the block grant of $144,597. He asked if it was going into the highway CIP; it is. Ms. Doda said there is currently $133,000 in the Highway CIP. The block grant is part of the $1 million funding amount.

Article #k: Chair Weider said this will draw down the same amount as is being appropriated.

Article #l: This has nothing to do with financials, so the budget committee doesn't vote on it.

Article #m: Chair Weider said this is a moot point. They haven't spent through the budget yet for winter maintenance. This is usually tabled if they don't need to use it.

Article #n: Chair Weider took a straw vote. All members voted aye except Ms. Lamphere, who abstained.

Article #o: Ms. Guilmette said this purchase will deplete the special detail fund. This is controversial because of where they want to use it and how. Some of the detail fund should be used to offset the cost of the cruiser instead of adding equipment, maintenance, and insurance with no funding. Chair Weider agreed. Mr. D'Angelo thinks this is an outrageous use of the detail fund.

Mr. Dobbins is willing to defer to the chief's judgment. Selectman Landau explained that the trailer will be used to store the OHRV instead of building a garage, and to move it to specific areas. It has been ordered directly from Polaris, not from a dealership. The cost for the OHRV itself is $20,608.95. It is a military and police department functioning unit built specifically for this type of use, and is expected to last for 10-15 years.

Mr. Murphy said technology exists that's less expensive and they should explore those options, so he is against this purchase.

Selectman Landau is relying on the chief's experience.
Ms. Lamphere asked when the police station upgrade will occur. Selectman Landau said the proposal from the architectural firm was too expensive and they are investigating another firm. It will probably take one to two years to bring it to the town meeting for a vote. Ms. Lamphere thinks $10,000 for a parking space is ridiculous and the police department should build a parking space for the OHVR into their proposal.

Chair Weider said a few people that live on the power lines are complaining. Once the construction is complete, the calls will stop. He doesn't think it's necessary to do policing and spend the money to satisfy a few people, instead of looking out for good of the whole community. They can find better uses for the detail fund.

Chair Weider took a straw vote, three voted aye, six were opposed.

Article #p: No impact to the town.

Article #q: No impact to the town.

Article #r: The committee will get more information from the Board of Selectmen.

Article #t: This fund will be used to offset repairs to Stevens Hall. Ms. Doda said other old, not historic, buildings might need repair as well. They don't need to be historic or on the Register. Chair Weider asked what the original capital reserve account was set up for and what the funding is. Selectman Landau said they don't know how much the repairs to Stevens Hall will cost. He pointed out that the town owns a number of older buildings that will need work at some point: Ruth Ray, the complex in center of town, and the municipal building.

Mr. Murphy said the warrant says historic, so different language should be used. Chair Weider said this fund was clearly established at the town meeting for Stevens Hall. He is fine with funding the Stevens Hall repairs and getting ready for the 300th anniversary. Selectman Landau said if they want to limit this fund to Stevens Hall, they should tell the Board of Selectmen. He asked what happens if the work to Stevens Halls costs more, or there is some left over after the work is done. There is $53,000 in the fund. Chair Weider said clarity is needed as to the real intent of this fund.

Ms. Theokas is happy to move forward with the fund.

Ms. Lamphere said in the minutes from last year's meeting, it said older buildings, not just Stevens Hall. The word historical is misleading. Ms. Doda said Stevens Hall is a priority right now. Mr. Cannon said hopefully $300,000 will cover the cost of work on Stevens Hall. There are a lot of structural issues in the building. Selectman Landau said the town owns these buildings and needs to take care of them.

Ms. Lamphere asked if they were tying hands by only putting that much money into it, so she would like to think about it before voting. She supports it, but is concerned that it might not be enough. Ms. Guilmette abstained and hopes the estimates will come in before finalizing the warrant.
Chair Weider took a straw vote. There were seven ayes and two abstentions.

Article #u: This has nothing to do with financials, so the budget committee doesn't vote on it.

Article #w: This has nothing to do with financials, so the budget committee doesn't vote on it.

Article #x: This has nothing to do with financials, so the budget committee doesn't vote on it.

Chair Weider thanked Selectman Landau and Ms. Doda for the work they've done on the warrants.

VII. Minutes –

a. January 18, 2021

Selectman Landau said on line 128, he said it would set a precedent. He also said other towns would ask for the same. On line 130, it will come out of the detail fund paid by electric company and others.

Ms. Theokas hasn't read the minutes, so would like to wait to approve them. Chair Weider said if they are approved tonight, she could comment on them at the next meeting.

Mr. Murphy moved to accept the minutes of the January 18, 2021 meeting as amended. Mr. Dobbins seconded. A vote was taken. All voted aye except Mr. Dobbins, Ms. Theokas and Selectman Landau abstained.

b. January 19, 2021

The members haven't read the minutes, so the discussion was moved to the next meeting.

VIII. Next Meeting Date – February 1, 2021

IX. Adjourn –

Ms. Guilmette moved to end the meeting and Mr. Murphy seconded. The meeting was adjourned at 9:09 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Beth Hanggeli, Recording Secretary