

**Montague Finance Committee
Final Meeting Minutes
Wednesday, January 26, 2022 at 6:00 p.m.**

This meeting was held via Zoom and recorded: <https://vimeo.com/670508987>

PRESENT: Jen Audley, Chair; Gregory Garrison, Vice Chair; Jennifer Waryas, Fred Bowman, John Hanold, Francia Wisniewski (left at 6:57 p.m.) and Christopher Menegoni, members; BettyLou Mallet, Scribe.

OTHERS PRESENT: Carolyn Olsen, Town Accountant; Steve Ellis, Town Administrator (arrived at 7:21 p.m.); Julian Mendoza of the Greenfield Recorder.

- 1. The meeting was called to order by Chair, Jen Audley. All members present. This meeting is being recorded by Carolyn Olsen, Accountant as well as aired on MCTV.**
- 2. PUBLIC COMMENT** – Public comment will be placed on the agenda for the next 5 meetings allowing the public to comment on topics which appear on the agenda. There were no public comments at this time.
- 3. APPROVAL OF THE MINUTES – January 12, 2022** – The members received the minutes for their review. No discussion. **On a motion by JH and seconded by FB, the minutes of January 12, 2022 were approved as written. JH, aye; FB, aye; GG, aye; JW, aye; FW, aye; CM aye;, JA, aye. Approved unanimously.**
- 4. Town Administrator and Town Accountant present the results of the Selectboard’s review of the proposed FY23 budget.**

Accountant Carolyn Olsen spoke with the FinCom this evening and presented the FY23 budget on the screen for all members to review. The excel spreadsheet displayed the current proposed estimates including the State’s cherry sheet numbers which were released today. She reviewed line-by-line the proposed revenue estimates describing the tax levy and the Governor’s budget (State Aid) and local receipts which show the biggest changes since last year. Estimates of some local receipts were adjusted to be less conservative in response to concerns expressed about whether the amount of Free Cash being certified at the close of the year was too high. New on this budget is the addition of costs for a student to attend Smith VoTech for which the town is responsible (as well as the transportation costs). The Director of Assessing does not expect to have updated New Growth before March 1 and CO does not see any other notable changes to the revenue estimate and so feels that the FinCom can comfortably approve the Affordable Assessment revenue estimate on February 23rd. She has already shared the updated estimate with GMRSD. GG mentioned that there may be a few additions to Capital requests. CO also explained to the FinCom how the COLA decisions that result from current negotiations could be incorporated into the budget. She showed the potential impact on the budget via COLA calculations of 1-4% based on regular wages only; overtime is not included. The average COLA for the last several years, when inflation was low, has been 1-2%. One option is to propose a budget to Town Meeting that underspends estimated revenue by an amount that could be then appropriated for the COLAs at a future Special Town Meeting. Another is to use Free Cash certified at the end of the year, but this is not advised because it would not integrate the COLAs into the operating budget for the next year. Another

option is to plan to use Excess Levy Capacity for COLAs. Using Excess Capacity would be a more expensive way to do it and would raise taxes more, as the revenue raised through the Levy would be split with the GMRSD.

JH proposed that we budget a little surplus for when the time comes to settle the COLA's and not have to weigh as many options. GG agrees with his line of thinking. JA agrees as well.

CO stated that at last night's Selectboard meeting, all staffing changes in the budget were accepted except for the increase in hours for the Public Health Nurse and the re-grading of the clerk. Also, the Assessor's special article request has been moved to the Special Town Meeting. Hampshire County Group Insurance Trust met and a vote was taken to not increase health insurance rates for the next two years and this has been reflected in the budget file.

FW spoke of her concerns about the process of preparing for this budget and not having enough information to make an informed decision especially on the staffing proposals. JA acknowledged that because important discussions are happening outside of Finance Committee meetings, Finance Committee members have to devote time outside of meetings to seeking information independently. She offered a summary of the Selectboard's discussion of the Board of Health requests at their meeting last evening. JA will follow-up with the Board of Health before their February 9th meeting and will also check the availability of the Selectboard's meeting minutes of last evening so that the FinCom can review for additional information.

JW asked the committee about the process of the budget. It was explained to the Selectboard that the Finance Committee will review and make recommendations on the FinCom's decision will be on the Town Meeting motions. If the FinCom votes yes/no, they have the opportunity to clarify their decision on Town Meeting floor before the residents vote each warrant article.

CO also showed the bottom line of the FY23 budget and how the expenditures match up with the revenues. JW asked about the "penalties and interest" line in the revenue estimate and CO explained it is almost all on property taxes. JW also asked how one obtains information on property taxes and she was directed to speak with the Tax Collector/Treasurer as the percentage of interest on delinquent property taxes is set by statute at 14%.

Next week, the FinCom will begin investigating the expenditures side of the budget by reviewing the requests of the Human Services, Culture and Recreation, Public Works and the ATM and STM articles that are not capital. In preparation for the meeting, CO will give a draft of the motions and information for the upcoming STM to the FinCom members. JA also stated she encouraged the DPW Superintendent, Parks and Recreation and Cemetery Commission to come as there may be conversations to weigh-in on regarding their requests. Other departments' requests may not require additional conversation nor require the department heads to attend a meeting.

5. Prepare for Gill-Montague Regional School District FY23 Budget Presentation – This presentation will be held on Monday, January 31, 2022 at 5:30 p.m. This will be a 1-hour presentation to give the public information on their FY23 budget. It will also prepare the public to bring questions or concerns during the Public Hearing scheduled on February 8.

JA noted that if the committee had positions they wish to take as a board, they should clarify that now. She said there are a couple of topics that might come up that have to do specifically with Montague finances. One is that there is a School Resource Officer that is a Montague employee through the Police Department so the Town is responsible for the full cost of the officer's employment and the school district's reimbursement to the Town does not cover the full cost. The police chief's request for an additional patrol officer is based in part on the argument that he is down a patrol officer because that person is not available to patrol. The MOU between the GMRSD and the Police Dept. is being renegotiated and there were references at last night's Selectboard meeting and tonight's meeting to "news" that the GMRSD was considering dropping the position.

JH has thoughts and concerns of putting a police officer in a school setting but states it is a positive step to hear that the percent reimbursed is in negotiation as well as the possibility of the school's not continuing with a resource officer.

JW stated that a survey was circulated and the results were generally favorable. She feels it is a rumor to eliminate the resource officer from the school.

FB feels people have a misunderstanding of what police officers do and feels it is important to have a resource officer in the school. The students can feel secure as well as create a rapport with that individual. He feels it does not matter one way or the other as the Town is paying for that individual in the long run.

GG stated that the school district asked for a resource office due to issues happening within the district but now improvements have been made such as new doors, protective glass etc. The role of the resource officer has changed over the years. Some see it as protection and others see it as patrolling, so he feels a conversation is necessary now whether it is a town or a school position.

CM agrees with GG that if the school wants the position, the school should fund the position and vice versa for the Town. He feels that a counselor or a security guard may be something to discuss; being someone who works for the school and part of the school should be in this position.

Steve Ellis spoke to the FinCom with additional information regarding last night's Selectboard meeting. There was a collaboration between the Tech School and GMRSD for a licensed counselor position utilizing the cannabis funds where the schools worked and hired a clinician who works between both schools as a licensed alcohol and drug counselor. Steve was notified that Carolyn Olsen had already discussed with the FinCom information on what will be anticipated at the STM and that she will send out materials for their review tomorrow.

6. Updates on March 3, 2022 Special Town Meeting -

Steve also stated all the developments for the STM are positive however contingency plans need to be made due to the Town Moderator being unable to attend on March 3 and therefore he is working with the Town Clerk and Town Counsel for a replacement.

7. Topics not anticipated - - JA stated the FinCom will have time to spend on non-capital and capital requests in future meetings. The FinCom did not have any other items for discussion.

On a motion by FB and seconded by JH, the meeting adjourned at 7:40 p.m. The next meetings will be on Monday with the GMRSD and next Wednesday as the FinCom. CM, aye; JW, aye; GG, aye; JH, aye; FB, aye; JA, aye.

Respectfully submitted,

BettyLou Mallet
Scribe

Approved by Montague Finance Committee - 02/02/2022