**Town of Norwell**



Norwell Town Offices, Room 112

345 Main Street

Norwell, Massachusetts 02061

(781) 659-8000

**Norwell Advisory Board Meeting Minutes**

**February 27, 2024**

The Advisory Board was called to order by Chair Elizabeth Hibbard at 7:30 PM. Also present were Town Administrator Darleen Sullivan, Town Accountant Christine McCarthy, and Board Members Bob Perniola, John McGrath, Matthew Hanson, Thomas Sullivan, and Dane Hutchison. Unable to attend was Brian D’Souza, Ed Maguire, and John LaCara. The meeting was held at the Norwell Town Library.

**AGENDA**

*Motion by Mr. Perniola to approve the agenda as posted. Seconded by Mr. McGrath and unanimously voted.*

**ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS**

**Minutes**

The minutes of the February 6 and 8 meeting were distributed and reviewed. The vote on the February 8 minutes was retracted, as there was not a quorum of members present at that meeting.

*Motion by Mr. Perniola to accept the minutes of the February 6 meeting as submitted. Seconded by Mr. McGrath and unanimously voted.*

*Motion by Mr. Perniola to accept the minutes of the February 8 meeting as submitted. Seconded by Mr. McGrath and unanimously voted.*

*Motion by Mr. Perniola to retract acceptance of the minutes of the February 8 meeting. Seconded by Mr. Hutchison and unanimously voted.*

**Reserve Fund Transfer Requests**

None

**FY 2025 BUDGET OVERVIEW**

**Town Meeting - 113**

This line includes wages for check-in personnel as well as a provider for closed captioning and sound system, which have to be booked for at least two nights plus additional chair rental in case of overflow. Expenses have increased due to the use of General Code to enter bylaw updates into the code book.

Mr. Hutchison asked what the Town got with the sound system rental; the rental includes a technician who operates the projector, addresses audio issues, and makes the meeting run smoother.

*Motion by Mr. Perniola to recommend the budget for Department 113, Town Meeting, in the amount of $15,220.00. Seconded by Mr. McGrath and unanimously voted.*

**Town Clerk - 161**

Town Clerk Patricia Anderson noted that the proposed budget includes contractual salary increases including that of a new assistant, as well as extra hours for a registrar’s agent that assists with elections and early voting periods.

*Motion by Mr. Perniola to recommend the budget for Department 161, Town Clerk, in the amount of $225,660.39. Seconded by Mr. McGrath and unanimously voted.*

**Town Elections - 162**

Ms. Anderson noted there were both local and Presidential elections this year. Early primary voting was ongoing with low turnout so far. A special South Shore Votech election regarding building was pushed out to January 2025 at her request; SSVT will cover the about $4K cost, as they want all towns in the District to vote on the same day/time. An additional planning meeting is set for April and Board members encouraged Ms. Anderson to make sure the Town wasn’t paying a disproportionate share of the total cost.

Ms. Hibbard asked whether the extra hours line in this budget was duplicate of the line in the Town Clerk budget; Ms. Anderson indicated it was and they should be left in the Town Clerk budget.

*Motion by Mr. Perniola to recommend the budget for Department 162, Town Elections, in the amount of $37,319.00. Seconded by Mr. McGrath and unanimously voted.*

**Board of Registrars - 163**

This budget covers postage to mail out the Town census to each household in town, enter all updates, and print out the resident listing which is available to residents for $10 and non-residents for $30. Some businesses purchase the directory for research purposes.

*Motion by Mr. Perniola to recommend the budget for Department 163, Board of Registrars, in the amount of $5,650.00. Seconded by Mr. McGrath and unanimously voted.*

**Building Inspector - 241**

The proposed FY 25 budget includes contractual salary increases, but Ms. Sullivan noted the Department had a new staffer at a different step, making the salary line slightly lower. The budget also included a contractual vacation buyback and funding for an alternate building inspector who covers for regular inspector Tom Barry when needed. The books/periodicals line was increased to fund the purchase of updated reference materials, but mileage/inspection services was cut to reflect actual usage.

*Motion by Mr. Perniola to recommend the budget for Department 241, Building Department, in the amount of $262,622.37. Seconded by Mr. McGrath and unanimously voted.*

**Zoning Board of Appeals - 176**

The proposed budget of $28,936.32 includes a contractually negotiated increase for the Board’s Administrative Assistant, who assists with legal advertising and document preparation.

*Motion by Mr. Perniola to recommend the budget for Department 176, Board of Appeals, in the amount of $28,936.32. Seconded by Mr. McGrath and unanimously voted.*

**Recreation - 630**

Recreation Superintendent George Grey advised that the proposed FY 25 budget was mostly level-funded save for contractual salary increases plus additional funds for minor repairs and maintenance, including playground wood chip replacement. The primary expenses covered by this budget include staffing, which includes a part-time program coordinator who will be retiring at the end of this FY, printing and postage for program brochures mailed to residents, and credit card processing services that are now covered for residents.

The Board discussed whether there would be any savings to the $11K credit card processing cost by (1) centralizing all such services under a townwide provider or (2) passing this cost on to registrants. Mr. Hutchison noted that the processing fees previously passed on to residents were very high, up to $30 per transaction. Mr. Grey added that these fees were nonrefundable in the event of cancellation. Covering the fees encourages online registration and payment.

Mr. Hutchison reviewed the budget with Mr. Grey, noting that most of the budget for programming is self-funded. Registration fee revenues are held in a revolving fund which reverts to the Town at the end of the fiscal year, with sufficient funds left in to start the summer programs. The Department processed about 6000 registrations for programming in 2023, and they have seen an increase in Winter/Spring programming participation.

Recreation is co-sponsoring a CPC article with Conservation for $39K to rehab the Charles Ed White Trail and recreation area at the intersection of Green and Pine streets; this will increase trail connectivity in the area. Gaffield Performance Plaza work is starting up in Spring and will hopefully be completed by the summer; they are working with the Library, Cultural Council, and others on programming. A feasibility study for a community center will be starting soon.

*Motion by Mr. Perniola to recommend the budget for Department 630, Recreation Department, in the amount of $138,674.14. Seconded by Mr. McGrath and unanimously voted.*

**Council on Aging - 541**

Council on Aging Director Sue Curtin started with a brief overview of the COA’s function, which is to provide services and programming for residents over 60, under 60 if disabled, and caretakers; this includes recreational, educational, and social programming, assistance with benefit applications, and some transportation services.

The proposed FY 25 budget includes contractual salary increases for staff as well as an increase in Professional Services to pay for external art and wellness class instructors. Ms. Curtin noted this line had been cut to about $10K last year due to the availability of grant funding, and this budget restores the line to the FY 23 level. The demand for these classes increased during the pandemic. Most programming is free for seniors, and lunches are available at a reduced cost. They used to charge for exercise classes pre-Covid, but Ms. Curtin wants to give seniors, many of whom are on a limited income, value for the taxes they pay; this fuels demand as well - “If you add more classes, more people want to come.” The Town has a significant 60+ population that continues to increase.

Mr. Hutchison asked about the status of the rug in the basement for which CPA grant funding had been voted; they had held off on replacing this carpet due to ongoing drainage issues which will be addressed in a warrant article this year. Ms. Curtin noted that they will have to keep up maintenance of the existing building as a new one may be years away.

Ms. Hibbard noted that Mr. Maguire, acting as Board liaison, sent out a summary supporting the budget as proposed; the Council provides essential services, and Ms. Curtin makes an effort to seek out grant and other funding to support its programming. Mr. McGrath inquired whether grant applications were managed by individual departments or centralized; this was handled individually, as the Town did not employ a grant writer. Ms. Curtin learns of most funding opportunities through her professional networks, and she has written grant applications for the Council for many years.

Mr. Hutchison appreciated the writeup Ms. Curtin provided with her budget and he would like to see the same from other departments, ideally by January, which would facilitate a more thorough review particularly for new asks.

*Motion by Mr. Perniola to recommend the budget for Department 541, Council on Aging, in the amount of $375,871.72. Seconded by Mr. McGrath and unanimously voted.*

**Library - 610**

Director Rachel Breen noted that the FY 25 budget includes increases in staff and their compensation; they have agreed to table a request to pay time and a half for Sunday staffing. Their $60K budget for electricity is based on current usage plus a small cushion; these will be partially offset by the Town’s solar credits. There are slight reductions in gas, advertising, office supplies, and travel based on actual usage, but Dues and Meetings is slightly increased based on usage.

An increase in Maintenance reflects new contracts for landscaping, pest management, and HVAC.

Facilities Director Ted Nichols worked with library staff to set up these contracts, as they want to be proactive on maintenance.

The Books and Periodicals line has been increased by $13,000 in order to meet a state aid requirement that libraries spend 16% of their operating budget on materials, which Ms. Breen noted included Internet access, e-books, audio, and video. Board members asked if moving certain expenses out of the budget or directing all the Town’s solar credits to the Library would reduce the required increase, but Ms. Sullivan advised the former wasn’t allowed under the requirement, and the latter would only increase the electric bills for Town Hall.

Mr. Perniola asked if the Library could charge rental fees to private groups to generate income; Ms. Sullivan indicated they could not, but Ms. Breen did note that fee income was turned over to general fund.

Mr. McGrath noted that the utility costs for the new building jumped out at him; he consulted with several of his professional contacts, all of whom opined that the costs were exorbitant with several recommending an energy audit. Ms. Sullivan thinks this may be due to the electric heat pump system, as all the Town electricity bills are high currently, but she is open to another audit. The Board discussed options to cut costs or lock in rates. Mr. Perniola asked if the electric car charging stations were a major cost, but Ms. Breen indicated they were not and the stations were part of the Library’s LEED certification which qualified the Town for a $160K grant.

Mr. McGrath noted that the Library has typically came in under budget in recent years, and asked if this was likely for FY 25; Ms. Breen pointed out that some of these surpluses were due to staff turnover and less staff overall, but she does expect the budget to level off moving forward.

*Motion by Mr. Perniola to recommend the budget for Department 610, Library, in the amount of $913,756.52. Seconded by Mr. Hanson and unanimously voted.*

**MISCELLANEOUS**

The Board briefly reviewed the upcoming schedule, which includes Police and Fire on Thursday and Schools on March 5. Any Board members who will be absent should notify admin Ellen McKenna by email. Warrant articles will be reviewed after departmental budgets, and Ms. Hibbard suggested that liaisons be designated for major articles.

All present discussed school expenses and other trends that will impact upcoming fiscal years. Ms. Sullivan is working on a plan to address these, but an operational override may be necessary in a near-future fiscal year. Mr. Perniola asked about a possible number but it is too early to say. Mr. Perniola suggested that Ms. Sullivan prepare two budgets, one with an override and one with cuts to balance, in that eventuality. Ms. Sullivan noted that many of the major expenses driving an override would not be discretionary, so a larger share of any cuts would fall to Personnel. Ms. Hibbard requested that budget forecast information be provided to the Board as soon as possible. The Board can reconsider spending recommendations if circumstances change.

Mr. Hutchison expressed concern about the Board being seen as a “rubber stamp,” and would generally like more information sooner, as well as higher level information, so it could look at the true cost of additional facilities and services.

**FUTURE MEETINGS**

2/29, 3/5, 3/7, 3/12, 3/14, 3/19, 3/21, 3/26, 3/28

**ADJOURNMENT**

*There being no further business, a motion was made by Mr. Perniola to adjourn at 9:36 PM. Seconded by Mr. McGrath and unanimously voted.*

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