



**TOWN OF NORWELL**  
Norwell Town Offices, Room 112  
345 Main Street  
Norwell, Massachusetts 02061  
(781) 659-8000

## **Norwell Advisory Board Meeting Minutes February 7, 2023**

The Advisory Board was called to order by Chair Jesse McSweeney at 7:30 P.M. Also present were Town Administrator Darleen Sullivan, Town Accountant Christine McCarthy, and Board Members Bob Perniola, Brian D'Souza, Peter Leppanen, Mark Cleveland, Ed Maguire, John LaCara, and Dane Hutchison. Unable to attend was Elizabeth Hibbard.

### **AGENDA**

*Motion by Mr. Perniola to approve the agenda as submitted. Seconded by Mr. Leppanen and unanimously voted by roll call: LaCara aye, Leppanen aye, Perniola aye, McSweeney aye, Hutchison aye, D'Souza aye, Maguire aye, Cleveland aye,*

### **ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS**

#### **Minutes**

The minutes of the January 23, 2023 meetings were distributed and reviewed.

*Motion by Mr. Perniola to accept the minutes of the January 23, 2023 meeting as submitted. Seconded by Mr. Leppanen and unanimously voted by roll call: LaCara aye, Leppanen aye, Perniola aye, McSweeney aye, Hutchison aye, D'Souza aye, Maguire aye, Cleveland aye,*

#### **Reserve Fund Transfer Requests**

None; two are expected for February 9: one for the fire truck purchase previously discussed with Chief Kean and approved at the January 23 Town Meeting, and one for tree removal behind the library.

### **FY 2023 STATUS YEAR TO DATE**

Ms. Sullivan estimated that currently about 60% of local receipts had been collected overall, which is about normal for this time of year. The Legal and IT lines running are slightly over budget. Worker's Comp and liability insurance expenses are also higher than forecast.

Ms. Sullivan also gave an overview of Capital expenditures approved last year. Second-story floors at the Washington Street Fire station have been done and school kitchen equipment is mostly completed. The Cole School parking lot has been resurfaced. Several vehicles approved have not yet been delivered due to supply issues; these funds will roll over until expended. If the projects/purchases are completed at lower cost than expected, the projects can be closed out and the leftover funds returned to Free Cash. Construction on the Clipper Complex bathrooms has not yet started and Ms. Sullivan is following up with the School Department and Trees & Grounds. The track and artificial turf field at the high school need to be replaced. A RFP has gone out to hire an external OPM for completion of the Highway Barn project. Highway Commissioner Glenn Ferguson is hoping to complete the building's construction by late fall of 2024.

Mr. Hutchison asked about visibility around the distribution of CPC funds to the Affordable Housing Trust and Conservation Commission. Ms. Sullivan indicated that Accounting keeps tabs on the monies available in these funds; the funds themselves and the allocations thereto are required under the Community Preservation Act. Expenditures from the funds are subject to vote by the Conservation Commission and Community Housing Trust, respectively. Ms. Sullivan will inquire about the possibility of additional reporting on expenditures. A reserve fund transfer may be needed before the Annual Town Meeting due to the multiple union contracts just negotiated. Mr. McSweeney suggests that these contracts be staggered so they don't all expire at once.

Ms. Sullivan indicated to Mr. Perniola that some school debt was being retired this FY, which will help the FY 24 tax rate.

### **FY 2024 BUDGET OVERVIEW**

Town Administrator Darleen Sullivan gave a high-level review of revenues and expenditures that impact the Town budget. The majority of the budget is funded from property taxes, and they try to make a reasonable estimate as to the growth in revenues. Other revenue sources include state aid; with the new administration, this figure will be delayed by a few weeks but will hopefully be in hand by March 1. The FY 24 budget will not be finalized until these two figures are known better, so the Board will not take approval votes on departmental budgets until late in March. State aid fluctuates from year to year, but has strong political support and generally comprises about 8% of the budget.

Local aid includes Chapter 70 aid to schools, charter school tuition reimbursement, and unrestricted aid plus small reimbursements for veterans and elder services and an offset for library funding. Local receipts, which include fees, meals, and excise tax revenues, comprise about 6% of the budget. Ms. Sullivan is encouraging department heads to make sure their fees and fines are in line with those of other towns. The Water Department raises its own revenues and essentially is self-sufficient; the Town is liable for any Water debt not covered by its revenues, but this situation has not occurred recently. Water transfers a certain percentage of its revenues to the Town to cover Water debt and employee benefit costs. The Town must also hold back a certain amount of revenues to cover abatements and exemptions.

Mr. Perniola asked about the status of Covid aid. This has greatly helped the Town over the past few years, and retired Town Accountant Donna Mangan was very effective at tracking and seeking reimbursement for all qualified expenses. American Rescue Plan Act funds are still available but are more limited in nature.

Ms. Sullivan called out unclassified employee benefits, including pension liability and health insurance, as a major expense that requires planning to fund. Plymouth County has a funding schedule that Ms. Sullivan is hoping they will extend somewhat to help with the expense at the Town level.

Mr. Leppanen asks about Water Department and Community Preservation Act funds. Water is essentially self-funding and not taken into account in forming the Town budget, but the Water budget is reported along with all other budgets in the warrant. CPA funds are likewise not part of the Town budget. There are several revolving funds for the Recreation Department, Stetson Ford House, and Recycling Center.

Ms. Sullivan intends to share and discuss the “department-requested” budgets with the understanding that they may need to be scaled back; this will allow the Board to know what the department heads are asking for. She will advise regarding any large cutbacks. Mr. McSweeney would like departmental budgets, especially the larger ones to be provided sufficiently in advance for the Board to review.

Ms. Sullivan noted that Marshfield is interested in joining the VoTech school district; all discussed possible impacts on the school building capacity and Norwell’s assessment.

### **2023 ANNUAL TOWN MEETING ARTICLES / MAJOR PROJECTS**

Ms. Sullivan indicated that the warrant for the May Town Meeting would close on February 15. There have been no citizens petitions submitted to her as of this date, but she anticipates multiple articles from the Planning Board and CPC, and several from the Conservation Commission and School Department. Mr. Hutchison would like to know when an article requires greater than a simple majority to pass. Mr. McSweeney would like the Board to receive a draft copy of the warrant before it goes to the printer.

### **JANUARY 2023 SPECIAL TOWN MEETING DISCUSSION**

All present discussed the results of the Special Town Meeting, in which an article to purchase 83 Longwater Drive for a new town office building did not receive the required two-thirds majority vote. Ms. Sullivan indicated she has been in communication with the sellers to see if they are able to wait until the Annual Town Meeting; she will likely hear back from them this week. She thinks better communication with residents is needed as to why the new venue is being pursued, including a possible open house and more detailed information and financials. Ms. Sullivan notes there have been multiple studies on options for town offices, but these may not be widely known to the public.

Mr. Hutchison noted he had heard from multiple residents that “there was no sell” on why 83 Longwater was the best option. Ms. Sullivan thinks benefits of the space for town offices and the potential uses of the additional space for meetings and activities should be better communicated. The significant expense to demolish and rebuild at 345 Main should also be conveyed, as well as the possibility that 83 Longwater could be sold and the proceeds ultimately used to construct a new Town Hall elsewhere.

Mr. Maguire suggested that the lack of visual aids was an additional impediment to passage of the article; Chair McSweeney agreed, and Ms. Sullivan noted that visual aids were instrumental to passage of the Police and Fire station on Washington Street. Mr. Maguire also notes he heard that the meeting included a contingent of residents “perturbed at the Selectmen over St. Helens” who may have voted down the question because the Select Board were in favor. Since the meeting was sparsely attended, this group may have had a disproportionate influence on the outcome. “We need to have a larger representation of the town.” Ms. Sullivan agrees she would like to give a more detailed presentation to a larger contingent of residents, and if the question still doesn’t pass, she is willing to consider other options.

Mr. McSweeney wants the Board to be able to speak to all the questions that were posed at the January meeting. Mr. Leppanen agrees that the proponents of the Town Hall question lacked a coordinated proposal and answers to potential objections, and hopes they prepare better if the question is to be reconsidered in May. Mr. Maguire suggests that this Board emphasize the potential for appreciation of 83 Longwater. Ms. Sullivan thinks a statement by the Board at Town Meeting would be helpful.

Mr. Hutchison thinks the proponents also need to address the perception that 83 Longwater is much larger than needed; Ms. Sullivan is actually concerned that space may be at a premium, but Mr. Hutchison thinks residents will be better able to make a judgment about the suitability of the space if they can see it, either through visuals or an open house. Mr. Perniola thinks the proponents took passage of the question for granted and weren't prepared for the questions that were raised. Mr. McSweeney also suggests the proponents need to convey that "the end of the life of this building is approaching" and is closer than some residents think.

#### **MISCELLANEOUS**

The Board offered Mr. Maguire condolences over the passing of his wife.

Preliminary liaison assignments were distributed to the Board; Mr. McSweeney notes these can be traded off according to members' time and interest. Board members should meet with their respective department heads prior to them presenting their budget. Mr. Leppanen suggested that each member take additional assignments from the "general government" category, but Mr. McSweeney is not sure there is sufficient time, and notes that Board members are free to reach out to any department or attend any meeting(s) of interest. Public Safety, Highways, and Schools comprise the overwhelming majority of the budget, with the other departments making up a much smaller piece.

All agree to a 7 PM start time for meetings starting on February 13.

#### **FUTURE MEETINGS**

2/9, 2/13, 2/16, 2/28, 3/2, 3/7, 3/9, 3/14, 3/16, 3/21, 3/23

#### **ADJOURNMENT**

*There being no further business, a motion was made by Mr. Perniola to adjourn at 9:05 PM. Seconded by Mr. Leppanen and unanimously voted by roll call: LaCara aye, Leppanen aye, Perniola aye, McSweeney aye, Hutchison aye, D'Souza aye, Maguire aye, Cleveland aye,*

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Jesse McSweeney, Chair