**Town of Norwell**

Norwell Town Offices, Room 112

345 Main Street

Norwell, Massachusetts 02061

(781) 659-8000

**Norwell Advisory Board Meeting Minutes**

**March 9, 2023**

The Advisory Board was called to order by Chair Jesse McSweeney at 7:04 PM. Also present were Town Administrator Darleen Sullivan, Town Accountant Christine McCarthy, and Board Members Mark Cleveland, Bob Perniola, Brian D’Souza, Elizabeth Hibbard, Peter Leppanen, John LaCara, and Dane Hutchison. Ed Maguire arrived at 7:20 PM.

**AGENDA**

*Motion by Ms. Hibbard to approve the agenda as posted. Seconded by Mr. Leppanen and unanimously voted by roll call: Leppanen aye, Perniola aye, McSweeney aye, Hibbard aye, Hutchison aye, LaCara aye, Cleveland aye, D’Souza aye.*

**ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS**

**Minutes**

The minutes of the February 16 and February 28 meetings were distributed.

*Motion by Mr. Perniola to accept the Minutes of the February 16 meeting as printed. Seconded by Mr. Leppanen and unanimously voted by roll call: Leppanen aye, Perniola aye, McSweeney aye, Hibbard abstain, Hutchison abstain, LaCara aye, Cleveland aye, D’Souza aye.*

*Motion by Ms. Hibbard to accept the Minutes of the February 28 meeting as printed. Seconded by Mr. Leppanen and unanimously voted by roll call: Leppanen aye, Perniola aye, McSweeney aye, Hibbard aye, Hutchison aye, LaCara aye, Cleveland aye, D’Souza aye.*

**Reserve Fund Transfer Requests**

None

**FY 2024 BUDGET OVERVIEW**

**Commission on Disabilities**

Level-funded at $3000, to pay for brochures and other outreach. The Commission ensures that Town facilities and resources are accessible. The Town recently added closed captioning to the Annual Town Meeting and televised committee meetings as a result of their advocacy; the captioning is funded under the Town Meeting line.

Ms. Hibbard commented that actual expenditures have consistently been under budget, but Ms. Sullivan wished to give the Commission some flexibility for additional activity.

**Water Department**

Water Commissioners Steve Ivas, Fred St. Ours, and Peter Dillon present along with Superintendent Jason Federico. The proposed $1,703,671.21 FY 24 budget, a 10.9% increase, includes contractually negotiated salary increases, including a step jump for the Assistant Commissioner, and $75,000 for activated carbon PFAS filtration; to help cover these costs, they have increased rates about 6%. Mr. Federico noted that the Town’s fee system is tiered, with bigger users paying higher fees. They use a rate analysis to guide increase decisions. Ms. Sullivan stated Mr. Federico maintains very good communication with Town Administration, tries to implement regular small increases instead of spikes, and is very good with budgeting; he also coordinates well with Highways Commissioner regarding maintenance. The budget is funded by billing revenues rather than the general fund, and any surpluses go back to the Department. The Department can issue bonds if funds are not available for certain necessities, and emergency funds from the state Department of Revenue are available. The Department services its debt with its own revenues. Mr. Federico described the Town’s water infrastructure as about equivalent to that in neighboring towns and rates as equivalent to slightly lower. Occasional discolored water is due to disturbances in the piping and not the water itself; residents should contact the Department when this occurs and when it dissipates. Ms. Hibbard suggests the Department develop an online fillable form like the ones used by Trees and Grounds.

Mr. Leppanen asked about the outcome of PFAS testing in the Town water; Mr. Dillon advised that testing was done to identify the sources plus additional testing in the schools. Well 1, the well with the higher levels, is currently off. Filtration tanks are coming for this well in April, but DEP permitting will be needed to install them. He hopes to have them operational in August; until then, they will only use Well 1 when needed. The other wells meet the standard. Mr. Perniola noted that his consultation with Mr. Federico before this hearing was very helpful in allaying his concerns about the Town water.

Chair McSweeney asked about the impact of pending 40B developments on the water supply. Mr. Dillon believes they can handle about 700 more housing units, if residents don’t overwater lawns, under their current water management act permit with the state, but “we can’t restrict housing because we’re watering our lawns.” There is a limit to what can be pumped, and the Department is always looking for new water sources; there may be more water underground in the rock, and they currently have the option of turning a well on or off as needed.

Mr. Hutchison asked about revenue projections for FY 24; Mr. Federico advised they were given a figure of $2.258 million, but they anticipate less of a surplus going forward due to planned upgrades and maintenance. Mr. Leppanen asked about overtime costs, which Mr. Federico indicated were incurred by coverage requirements, overnight water flushing, and emergencies which were “the nature of the business.”

Chair McSweeney asked if there was any way to consolidate cell phone service providers to save money; Mr. Federico stated this was done in Cohasset but there was no difference in the rate.

Ms. Hibbard asked about the difference between the Contractor Services and Professional Services lines; Contractor Services is specialized equipment and services such as maintenance and excavation; Professional is engineering and technical services.

**Community Preservation Committee (CPC)**

Ms. Sullivan advised that the $75K proposed budget, which is funded from the Town’s Community Preservation Act surcharge revenues, would be adjusted to $80K so it reflects approximately 10% of these revenues. CPC member Susan Powell stated that in fact 5% of that allocation is optional; Ms. Sullivan indicated they would verify the requirement but noted in any event it has been the practice of the Town to set the budget at 10%, as this makes funds available for article prep work, studies, property appraisals, and possibly a strategic plan. Mr. Cleveland noted that the actual expenditures going back to 2020 are far lower than what was budgeted, but Chair McSweeney and others pointed out that any unused funds in this budget get turned back to the undesignated CPC funds.

**DRAFT CPC ARTICLES**

CPC Chair Bob McMackin gave an overview of the committee and the grant review process; they are trying to focus more on applicant accountability and project sustainability. The Committee reviewed 17 applications this year, 15 of which were approved. An overview was given of the current funds available in the reserve funds for affordable housing, historic preservation, and open space preservation. The Committee has a balance of $3,313,736 in undesignated funds outside these reserves and $1,836,035.20 earmarked for previously approved projects but not yet spent.

Ms. Sullivan anticipates about $1.6 million in FY 24 revenues, 10% of which will be distributed to each of the three reserve funds. Ms. Powell stated the requirement actually was that the Town spend or reserve 10% of the revenues. It is recommended that towns do a straight 10% transfer into the reserves at the beginning of the fiscal year for a “paper trail,” but this can lead to the reserves getting so large that they become hard to spend down, as once the funds are allocated there, they cannot be transferred out into the undesignated funds. Ms. Wollam stated the 10% transfers are done so if Town Meeting votes down a project, the funds in question can go into the reserve; Town Accountant McCarthy recommends the practice to ensure that the Town complies with the requirement.

Ms. Hibbard commented that she would like some sense of prior CPA funding for projects that were seeking additional funds, and asked about clawback provisions for projects not completed. Mr. McMackin noted that any unused funds were returned to CPC. CPC administrator Kristin Ford added they reviewed the status of such funds at the end of each fiscal year in June.

**Jacobs Farmhouse Apartment**

The article requests $66,392 in CPA funds for renovations to the apartment so it can be rented out. Ms. Hibbard commented that the Historic Commission, which submitted the application, had a good track record of implementing their plans when given the proper funding.

**Jacobs Farmhouse**

The article requests $414,512 in CPA funds to fund additional repairs to the Jacobs farmhouse and outbuildings; Mr. Mackin notes the Committee was told this grant would allow the remaining repairs and renovations at the property to be completed. One CPC member voted against approving the grant, citing concerns about how much had already been spent on the project. CPC Member Wollam noted that the requirement to use certain materials and methods when renovating historic properties increased the cost of the renovations.

Mr. Leppanen asked if the grant ask was based on actual bids; Facilities Director Ted Nichols, who prepared the application, indicated it was based on prior bids while accounting for inflation and possible unanticipated expenses. Ms. Hibbard asked about the plan for ongoing maintenance, and hopes this grant will address all remaining “deferred maintenance” issues. Mr. Nichols has evaluated the ongoing maintenance needs with Select Board Chair Bruce Graham and the Historical Commission, and expects that any future asks will be for a much lower amount.

Mr. Perniola asked if the barn generated rental income; Ms. Wollam advised that Cross Street Flower Farm pays $5500 per year to rent the barn; much of this goes into a revolving fund that reverts to the general fund; this provides income to the Town but means the Historical Commission must seek out other funds for maintenance.

President Wendy Bawabe of the Norwell Historical Society noted that one reason Town was able to acquire all 32 acres of the Jacobs property, including the ballfields and conservation land, was that it agreed to a preservation restriction whereby the Town assumed responsibility to maintain the structures, which are iconic to the town.

**Community Housing Trust Funding**

This article from CHT requests a $100K distribution of CPA funds to the Trust on top of the 10% statutory allocation, Select Board CHT representative Andrew Reardon notes these additional funds will allow them to maintain its current inventory of affordable units by purchasing them when they come up for sale, as well as make the necessary outlays, which can be significant, to start up any town-approved housing projects; there is currently about $500K available to them for this purpose.

Mr. Hutchison expressed concern that these funds were not earmarked, and asked what the process was for CHT to receive additional funds if this article was not supported. Ms. Hibbard, a former CHT member, indicated the request would have to be approved by a special town meeting vote; transferring funds into the reserve allows CHT to act more quickly to avoid lost purchase opportunities or possibly “buy down” the number of units in a 40B development.

Mr. Hutchison also asked what the process was to spend the funds once they were allocated to the reserve. Ms. Sullivan indicated the funds could be spent by a majority vote of CHT, with Town Counsel and Town Accountant providing additional oversight. Ms. Hibbard noted that CHT tends to loop in the Select Board and other interested parties on any large projects or transactions.

Mr. Hutchison suggested that the concern over these articles at Town Meeting seemed to come from the perception that the Town was giving a “blank check” to CHT and/or the Conservation Commission. Ms. Hibbard would agree to some additional mechanisms for reporting and oversight but cautioned against taking away the ability of these bodies to fulfill their responsibilities in a timely fashion. Mr. Leppanen suggested that the Board and others needed to arrive at an annual funding amount for these bodies that all could agree on.

**Washington Street Cemetery**

The article requests $11,680 in CPA funds for continued use of radar to determine the exact location of burials without breaking ground; it is likely that some of these monies will be turned back to the Fund.

**Cushing Center**

The article requests $92,500 in CPA funds to rehab the exterior of the building. In response to a query from Ms. Hibbard, Wendy Bawabe of the Norwell Historical Society indicated that the structure was listed on the MACRIS database as a historic property; it was built as a community building in 1932 and served as Town Hall through the late 20th Century.

**Norwell Grange**

This article requests $228,480 in CPA funds to be put towards the “Grange Hall Stabilization project,” which will undertake exterior improvements to the building, including a new roof, windows, siding, exterior paint, entry ramp, and door. Norwell Grange Vice President Mike McDonough read a statement giving a brief history of the building, which was built in 1862 and previously served as a grammar and high school. They would like to upgrade the building’s facilities so it can function as a community meeting place.

Mr. Leppanen asked how many members the chapter had; currently there are 41 signed members, with others interested. Mr. McDonough stated they will not be subject to prevailing wage laws when doing the renovations.

Ms. Hibbard asked what provisions were in place to ensure the Grange didn’t sell the property, at a profit, once the renovations are completed. Mr. McDonough stated the property is deed-restricted, and the Town has Right of First Refusal to purchase the property for $1. President Wendy Bawabe of the Norwell Historical Society added that a historic preservation restriction would be required. Mr. Hutchinson asked how the funds would be disbursed if the grant were approved; the Grange would have to submit receipts to Town Accountant Christine McCarthy for payment. CPC member Patrick Kelly noted that their hearing for this project was well attended by supporters who could be instrumental in ensuring the funds are spent properly.

Mr. Maguire asked about a future vision for the organization. Norwell Grange Historian Erica Grange indicated they hoped to use the renovated building to host classes and other events, and workshops. All broadly discussed the organization’s relationship to the Town, with Mr. Cleveland asking how non-member residents would benefit from the project. Ms. Curtin stated their intent was for the building to become a “community space” with events that were open to all. Mr. McDonough stated the hall would be open for rentals and use by other civic groups. He was unsure whether there would be a charge, but CPC member Susan Powell stated that the Select Board believes the building should become available for public use in exchange for the funds. Mr. Perniola commented that a resident discount, at least, would make sense; Ms. Curtin indicated they were considering that but first the building needed to be fixed.

Ms. Hibbard opined that the article may be a tough sell at Town Meeting and suggested that the proponents document the potential benefits to the Town as a whole as well as what other funding they have obtained for the renovations. Mr. Cleveland agreed, noting he still had concerns over the ask amount “to support a private club.”

**First Parish Cemetery**

The article, from Highways, requests $13,340 in CPA funds for Phase 2 of a headstone restoration project.

**Whiting Fields Rehab**

This article requests $75K in CPA funds to add soil amendments and nitrogen and phosphorus fertilizers in order to improve the soil quality and productivity of the Whiting Fields. Conservation Agent Will Saunders advised that farmers Jon Haskins and John Hornstra both suggested the treatments as the fields had not been properly maintained for agricultural use. They are hoping that just one year of treatments, at $35K, will be sufficient but included the cost of a second year of treatment in the ask. Mr. Saunders noted that the Conservation Commission and Select Board issue licenses to area farmers to grow hay and other crops on this and other fields in town; in exchange for use of the fields, the farmers must maintain the fields and clear the field edges and stone walls.

Mr. Cleveland questioned the need for the treatments: “Why not leave it the way it is?” Mr. McMackin stated the treatments would improve the appearance of the fields and help preserve the Town’s agricultural heritage; Mr. Saunders added that the Carleton Committee had recommended rehabilitation of these fields so they could continue in agricultural use; if they get to the point where no farmer is willing to use them, the Town will have to pay an estimated $10K per year for Trees & Grounds to provide basic maintenance. Members Cleveland and Hibbard maintained that they did not see sufficient return on investment to support the article, but Mr. Perniola countered that the break-even point was no longer than 7.5 years.

**Conservation Fund**

The article requests a $200K distribution of CPA funds to the Conservation Fund to be restricted to land purchases, plus any associated fees, for open space/recreational purposes. Conservation Agent Will Saunders advised that the Fund had a balance of $531,154 as of January 1st, but $300K of this was restricted to land purchases only, with an additional $110K tied to projects including matching funds for construction of a fish ladder at Jacobs Pond and trail improvements at the Carleton Property, leaving about $121K for remaining projects. Mr. Saunders indicated that the Conservation Commission had spent about $60K out of the fund over the past two years. They will be asking for general funds in a separate article in order to manage and maintain lands currently under Commission control.

**Donovan Parking Lot**

The article requests $80K in CPA funds to expand and pave the existing lot.

**Main Street Refurbishment**

The article requests $40,000 in CPA funds to refurbish stone walls on Main Street.

**Practice Wall**

This article from the Recreation Department requests $125,000 in CPA funds for a 60’ by 15’ concrete sports practice wall. Mr. Cleveland asked if a cheaper material could be used; Patrick Kelly of CPC stated they were told that concrete was the preferred material due to its better rebounding and requiring less maintenance. Mr. Maguire suggested that the School Department provide the funding.

**Masthead Rehab**

The article from the Pathways Committee requests $75,000 in CPA funds to remove debris along the riverbank of this Conservation property, and funds ADA-accessibility improvements to the trail system and design, engineering, and permitting of an ADA-compliant dock/kayak launch on the North River, similar to the one at Jacobs Pond. Mr. Maguire notes he had heard the state, which owns adjacent parcels onto which the trail meanders, was not supportive of the idea as the parcels would be needed in upcoming repairs to the Route 3 bridge over the river. Pathways member Brendan Sullivan indicated that the area in which the trail passes is part of a separate parcel from the Route 3 rest area and is currently unused by the state. Pathways Chair Kevin McCafferty agreed that the potential easement area is far from the rest area and bridge; he has preliminarily sounded out Senator O’Connor about the idea.

**Gaffield Performance Plaza**

The article requests $130,000 in CPA funds to pave a flat dirt area, created by fallen trees, and add rudimentary benches for public performances. The application was submitted by the Recreation Department and has the support of the library. Ms. Powell, the lone “no” vote on CPC, explained her reasons for opposing the article, including cost and accessibility concerns.

**MISCELLANEOUS**

Chair McSweeney asked Board members to set aside a date for a possible third meeting. The meetings on the 16th and 21st will start at 6 PM.

**FUTURE MEETINGS**

3/14, 3/16, 3/21, 3/23

**ADJOURNMENT**

*There being no further business, a motion was made by Ms. Hibbard to adjourn at 10:14 PM. Seconded by Mr. Leppanen and unanimously voted by roll call: Leppanen aye, Perniola aye, McSweeney aye, Hibbard aye, Hutchison aye, LaCara aye, Cleveland aye, D’Souza aye.*

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Jesse McSweeney, Chair