



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

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Norwell Advisory Board Meeting Minutes 5/21/2020

The Advisory Board was called to order by Chair Peter Smellie at 7:00 P.M. Also present were Town Administrator Peter Morin and Board Members Harry Solis, Susan Darnell, Rick Goulding, Jesse McSweeney, Karen Reynolds, Julie Sim, and Kate Steele. Unable to attend was Mark Cleveland. The meeting was held remotely, as allowed under the Executive Order dated March 12, 2020 suspending certain provisions of the Open Meeting Law, Gen. L. c. 30A §20 et seq. and 940 CMR 29.01 et seq.

ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS

Minutes

The minutes of the April 30 meeting were distributed and reviewed.

Motion made to accept the Minutes of the April 30 meeting as submitted. Seconded and passed 7-0-1 by roll call vote, Member Sim having abstained.

Bills

Mr. Morin noted that he had signed payment vouchers totaling \$282.75 for the stenographer.

Motion made to approve the vouchers signed by the Town Administrator. Seconded and passed 8-0-0 by roll call vote.

Reserve Fund Transfer Requests

Treasurer-Collector

This \$10,000 transfer request is to cover expenses incurred by the Treasurer-Collector related to tax title collection and foreclosures. The office has stepped up its collection efforts and recovered \$724,842.28 so far this fiscal year. Mr. Morin noted that such collections will be a major revenue source in the next few years. Treasurer Darlene Sullivan added that the actual expenses were difficult to budget for, but the returns to the town greatly exceeded the initial outlay.

Motion made to transfer \$10,000 from the Reserve Fund to the Treasurer-Collector line. Seconded and passed 8-0-0 by roll call vote.

Board of Assessors

This transfer request is to fund a FY 19 vacation buyback for an employee who was unable to use her time due to the need to provide office coverage when the Assistant Assessor position was vacant.

Motion made to transfer \$8244 from the Reserve Fund to the Board of Assessors Salary line. Seconded and passed 8-0-0 by roll call vote.

Highway - Expenses

The purpose of this request is to pay an outstanding balance to Beta Engineering for a traffic study related to the Hanover Crossing redevelopment project. Mr. Morin noted that the study helped the town secure a \$300,000 mitigation settlement from the developer.

Motion made to transfer \$4144.00 from the Reserve Fund to the Highway line to pay the BETA Engineering balance. Seconded and passed 8-0-0 by roll call vote.

Highway - Snow & Ice

This transfer request is to cover expenses related to unforeseen FY 20 snow and ice events. Mr. Morin noted it was better to pay such expenses out of the reserve fund than from Free Cash when possible.

Motion made to transfer \$43,679.00 from the Reserve Fund to the Highway Snow and Ice line. Seconded and passed 8-0-0 by roll call vote.

Liability Insurance

Mr. Morin advised that a late school building audit added to the Town's liability insurance premium, creating a discrepancy between the amount appropriated for the premium and the final bill.

Motion made to transfer \$22,189.00 from the Reserve Fund to the Liability Insurance line. Seconded and passed 8-0-0 by roll call vote.

South Shore Regional VoTech Assessment

Mr. Morin advised that there was a very small discrepancy between the amount appropriated by the Town for the South Shore Regional Vocational Technical assessment and the actual assessment amount.

Motion made to transfer \$20.00 from the Reserve Fund to the South Shore Regional Assessment line. Seconded and passed 8-0-0 by roll call vote.

Mr. Smellie hopes the reserve fund can be refreshed at Town Meeting.

Correspondence/Notices – None

Action Items / Discussions – None

1/12 BUDGET DISCUSSION - FY 2021

Mr. Morin advised it was unclear whether the Town Meeting would be able to go forward as scheduled on June 15, as there has been no specific communication from the State allowing for remote participation in such meetings. Further, there has been no guidance from the state as to possible local aid reductions. The latest estimates from the Mass. Taxpayers Foundation suggest a possible 15% reduction. Given these uncertainties, it may be necessary to pass an interim "one-twelfth" budget until more information is forthcoming and a Town Meeting can be safely held. Town Accountant Donna Mangan stated that such an interim budget would be for about \$5.2 million per month.

Mr. Smellie asked about holding the Town Meeting outside on a weekend day. Mr. Morin noted it would have to be held on a playing field in good weather; an alternative would be to hold the

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meeting in the middle school and have “overflow” rooms, which presented logistical challenges in terms of speakers and voting. Mr. Morin indicated that he and the Board of Selectmen would likely make a decision on rescheduling at the June 3 meeting.

2020 TOWN MEETING ARTICLES

Mr. Smellie indicated that petitioner Don Mauch would speak to the CPA surtax repeal article first, and then Selectman Alison Demong would present the Board of Selectmen’s surtax reduction article; then there could be open discussion as to both.

Citizens Petition - Repeal of CPA Surtax & Board of Selectmen Article - CPA Surtax Percentage Reduction from 3% to 1.5%

Petitioner Don Mauch advised that since the last Board meeting, he had revised the article language and resubmitted the article, but the warrant had been sent to the printer without the new article language.

Mr. Mauch advised that he had compiled responses to concerns the Board had raised at the previous meeting. To the concern that a Town Meeting vote to place the question on the ballot could be misinterpreted as a vote to revoke the Community Preservation Act (CPA) directly, Mauch indicated that he had added clarifying language to the article. To the concern that voters might misinterpret an Advisory Board endorsement of the article support or lack thereof for the question, Mauch noted that the Board could provide clarifying comments on the floor.

To the comment that average CPA surcharge savings per household were small and not worth pursuing, Mauch noted that these savings could potentially offset a tax increase. Although CPA provides income-based exemptions, applications must be made annually and residents may choose not to share their financial situation. Although the state provides matching funds, these have been declining year on year, to 11.2% in FY 21, Mr. Mauch felt, in this economic climate, that providing tax relief was preferable.

Selectman Demong disagreed with Mr. Mauch’s claim that the Town Meeting vote was simply to put the question on the ballot, and stated in fact it was the first in a two-step process to revoke or amend the CPA; thus, a Town meeting vote, or Advisory Board recommendation, was in effect an endorsement of revocation or amendment.

Ms. Demong noted that Norwell was among the first towns in the state to adopt the CPA, and it had funded many beneficial projects in town and withstood many challenges; thus far, no town that had adopted the CPA had revoked it. As an alternative to Mauch’s revocation article, the Board of Selectmen was offering an article to reduce the CPA surcharge from 3% to 1.5%. The article would offer residents some tax relief while maintaining the town’s participation in the program. State matches have been declining recently, but could possibly increase given an increase in the Registry fee that funds the program.

In response to queries from the Board, Ms. Demong stated that the reduction or revocation, if approved at the town meeting and election, would take effect in FY 22. If neither question is approved at both steps, the surcharge will remain at 3%. If the surcharge is reduced, the town could vote to increase it again in the future. The average relief per household per year would be \$275 if the CPA were repealed, \$140 if reduced; this would be split over four quarters.

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Selectmen Demong and Allen also stated that Town Counsel and Town Moderator were uncomfortable with having both questions on the town election ballot due to the potential for confusion. However, Mr. Smellie noted that there had been up to three CPA reduction or revocation articles at previous town meetings. Mr. Mauch added that had never, in his experience on various town bodies, heard of Town Counsel being conflicted about competing questions on a ballot, and stated there was nothing legally that prevented both questions from being there.

Ms. Darnell asked if the Board could recommend both questions, or just one or the other. Mr. Smellie felt the Board technically could recommend both, but Ms. Allen felt residents would be looking for a specific recommendation from the Board, and an endorsement of both would be confusing.

All parties discussed the impact of the Board recommendations and Town Meeting votes. Messrs. McSweeney and Mauch held that the TM votes were essentially to place the questions on the town election ballot; however, Selectmen Demong characterized TM as voting to approve the question(s), which is/are then put on the ballot. Selectman Allen in turn felt that the Board was now voting to make a specific recommendation to residents as to whether to (1) eliminate or (2) reduce the surcharge.

Mr. Smellie commented that he was considering recommending both questions, as the voting residents would ultimately decide the matter no matter what the Board or TM did. Mauch commented that if the CPA was in fact a popular law, there was effectively no downside to testing its popularity on the ballot. However, Ms. Demong felt the Board and TM would not be doing its job if it voted to place a question on the ballot that it did not want to see pass.

Mr. Morin acknowledged that residents were hurting financially, but felt any tax relief from a CPA revocation would be very nominal and only come after a long delay. He was anticipating a significant shortfall in local aid/revenues that was unlikely to be resolved soon, and the CPA provided funding for community projects the Town would otherwise be unable to afford.

Ms. Reynolds noted that every year there are articles for CPA projects that are overwhelmingly approved at Town Meeting, and thus it would be very surprising if residents were to vote for revocation. Mauch noted that town meetings can be "packed" with groups of people interested in specific articles, and questioned whether all articles approved at a town meeting would have been approved in an election.

Ms. Steele felt the projects the CPA funds were what bring people to Norwell and make it an attractive town; she did not want to appear to be recommending a revocation, as she felt the role of the Board was to recommend what is best for the town.

Motion made to recommend the CPA revocation article. Motion seconded but did not pass 0-8-0 by roll call vote.

Motion made to recommend the CPA reduction article. Motion seconded but did not pass 2-6-0 by roll call vote.

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FUTURE MEETINGS

Early June

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business, a motion was made to adjourn at 8:20 P.M. Seconded and passed 8-0-0 by roll call vote.

Peter Smellie, Chair

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