

**Board of Selectmen
October 4, 2023**

Present: Richard C. Edwards, Chair; Mark P. Duffy; Kenneth G. Fifield; Dino A. Scala, Town Administrator; and Toni Bodah, Secretary.

Mr. Edwards called the posted session to order at 5:02 p.m. The proposed 2024 municipal budget was reviewed as indicated below.

Assessing Operations – Rosemary Stewart; Relf Fogg; Ken Paul; and Cindy Bickford

Ms. Stewart referred to the Technician line (01-41522-110), which is the same as the 2023 request. Mr. Edwards noted that if the job was done at \$57,466 this year, why should we increase it to \$66,872? Why are 40 hours needed? What other towns have fulltime assessing? Several other towns were cited as having fulltime assessing staff. Ms. Bickford stated that our contracted outside assessor is only in the building 4 hours/month, which is much less than occurs in other towns. Mr. Fogg added that the Board of Assessors periodically puts the assessing contract out to bid. Years ago we paid over \$75,000/year for these services.

Ms. Stewart referred to the work/services provided by our contracted assessor. Mr. Edwards questioned why Ms. Bickford does not do the work of the contracted assessor. Ms. Stewart noted we would still need an individual to do data entry. She offered to conduct a comparison of other towns. Mr. Paul added that the contracted assessor does various calculations and will need to deal with disgruntled taxpayers. Mr. Fogg stated that the contracted assessor makes recommendations to the Board of Assessors for their approval. He also has field techs, which is included in his contract.

Mr. Fifield asked whether the contracted assessor is the face of the Town if someone has a complaint. Mr. Fogg stated he would represent the Town in appeals to the Court or to the BLTA. Mr. Paul noted that if a complaint were received about treatment by the assessor, it would go to the Board of Assessors. If it were about the value of a property, it would first go to Ms. Bickford, who might then direct it to the contracted assessor. The contracted assessor is certified to establish values. Ms. Stewart referred to this year's audit by the State (recertification), as well as it being the 5th year of reassessment.

Mr. Edwards hears on a daily basis that we will be sabotaged during the budget process. He is trying to determine how to respond to the taxpayers. Mr. Fogg stressed that Ms. Bickford cannot do everything she is obligated to do in 35 hours/week. He added that the default budget resulted in Ms. Bickford's pay being reduced to the level of several years go. Mr. Fifield stressed that the rate was not reduced; rather, the number of hours per week were reduced, which was done in many other departments. He added the need to put this issue to rest: Not just one employee had their pay decreased. Mr. Edwards noted that we need to be able to explain to the voters who voted against the operating budget.

Mr. Duffy questioned why Ms. Bickford does not become certified. Ms. Bickford noted she attempted to do fieldwork previously, but there was no one to cover the office. Mr. Fifield stated that Town would pay for training, hire an assistant, and do away with the contracted assessor. Ms. Bickford cited what Wolfboro and Ossipee pay for contracted assessing.

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Mr. Edwards is still looking for reasons to tell the voters that the hours need to be increased. Ms. Bickford stated she will not be ready for certification. Mr. Paul added that a list of points can be developed. Ms. Stewart noted that if we do not get it done, DRA will come in and do it at a much higher cost.

Mr. Fifield expects we will stay at 35 hours/week until after the budget passes. This line does not reflect that as it refers to a year at 40 hours/week, assuming that the budget will pass. If we go into another default budget, the funds will not be available for even 35 hours/week. Mr. Scala noted that salary lines for other Town employees are also calculated at 40 hours/week. It really is the same situation as we experienced in the 2023 default budget, when employees had worked 40 hours/week for 3 months, then the lines had to be adjusted.

Mr. Edwards stressed that it is important to encourage the voters to approve the operating budget, even if they do not approve all the warrant articles. Mr. Duffy noted that the expectation is to apply a 5% COLA to all wage lines. Mr. Fogg encouraged the Board to remain cautious. Ms. Stewart believes it would be better to have 3 articles for \$25,000 each rather than one article for \$75,000. Reference was made to voter burn-out. Mr. Scala stated that Department Heads are working to reduce the number of articles. In addition, the operating budget article will come right after any zoning amendments on the 2024 warrant. Mr. Fifield stated that many people came out to vote 'No' on one particular article and to teach the Town a lesson. Mr. Fogg added that some people misunderstood the appropriation for Highway Road Projects, believing it to be for Bonnyman Road. We will need to be prepared for Deliberative Session. Hard questions are being asked now in order to get back to normal. Mr. Fifield stated that not only did we have to make adjustments for the Default Budget, but we also absorbed a large increase for health insurance, for which the Board did not ask the employees to contribute. Discussion continued as to the many obstacles that had to be faced, including the wash-out on Brackett Road. Mr. Scala advised that DRA has advised that the Town will be allowed to utilize \$350,000 from the undesignated fund balance, as originally requested. **Mr. Duffy moved the section total at \$158,044. Mr. Fifield seconded the motion, which passed 3-0.**

Ms. Bickford referred to 2 PSNH appeals being handled by Sancoucy Associates, which will go to mediation in June 2024, and to Court in September 2024. The Court process is expected to last 2 weeks. PSNH is seeking abatement of 50% of values, which could result in the Town refunding them \$100,000 to \$150,000 in 2024. This will need to be addressed in the Overlay account.

Ms. Stewart, Ms. Bickford and Mr. Paul left the session, while Mr. Fogg remained. Mr. Scala referred questions arising regarding the Board's request to DRA to utilize \$350,000 from the undesignated fund balance. He recounted his conversation with DRA during which they approved use of \$232,000. The next day, DRA advised that an official request should be sent to them from Town Counsel. Mr. Scala read a portion of an email received today from DRA confirming those conversations (and advising of DRA's approval this week to allow the Town to utilize the entire \$350,000 requested from undesignated fund balance). Mr. Scala takes exception to having his integrity questioned. Mr. Fogg addressed the Board and noted that actions speak louder than words, adding that the Board ignored the vote of the people. At this point, the session entered a recess. Mr. Edwards called the session back to order at 5:56 p.m.

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Welfare – Amber Marcoux

The overall request is down. Cell phone reimbursement should be paid to Ms. Marcoux (as Director), and should not be paid any longer to her assistant. Ms. Marcoux requested the following additions: \$100 to the Training line (01-44411-330); \$200 to the Office Expense line (01-44411-620); and \$100 to the Mileage line (01-44411-637). This would result in a revised section total of \$48,118. Ms. Marcoux noted that she does not utilize the GAP software program; however, there may be other software available. Mr. Fifield stressed the need for a computerized record system. **Mr. Fifield moved the section total at \$48,118. Mr. Duffy seconded the motion, which passed 3-0.**

Police Department – Chief Michael Fenton

Chief Fenton advised that the Fulltime Salary line (01-42101-100) includes one more officer than we currently have. A brief discussion followed regarding the current difficulty in recruitment. Mr. Fifield advised that the Board expects to apply a 5% COLA to wage lines. **Mr. Fifield moved the section total at \$1,177,779. Mr. Duffy seconded the motion, which passed 3-0.**

Emergency Management – Chief Michael Fenton

Mr. Duffy moved the section total at \$3500. Mr. Fifield seconded the motion, which passed 3-0.

Public Safety Building – Chief Michael Fenton

Chief Fenton referred to an increase in the Computer & Communications line (01-42992-820). **Mr. Fifield moved the section total at \$130,651. Mr. Duffy seconded the motion, which passed 3-0.**

Animal Control – Chief Michael Fenton

Mr. Fifield moved the section total at \$12,900. Mr. Duffy seconded the motion, which passed 3-0.

Gen'l Gov't -General Administration – Mr. Scala

Mr. Fifield moved the section total at \$112,300. Mr. Duffy seconded the motion, which passed 3-0.

Gen'l Gov't – Greater Wakefield Resource Center – Mr. Scala

More funds are available in the CRF for this building. This \$300 is for 'just in case' situations—such as a broken window. **Mr. Fifield moved the section total at \$300. Mr. Duffy seconded the motion, which passed 3-0.**

Patriotic Purposes – Mr. Scala

Next year is the Town's 250th Birthday! **Mr. Fifield moved the section total at \$3000. Mr. Duffy seconded the motion, which passed 3-0.**

Brief discussion regarding the information provided to Mr. Scala today from Alan Denoncour at DRA regarding approval of use of \$350,000 from the undesignated fund balance. We will need to review the accounting process in this circumstance, especially if FEMA relief money is received.

The session adjourned at 6:50 p.m.

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Respectfully submitted,
Toni Bodah, Secretary

Approval of Minutes:



Richard C. Edwards, Chair



Mark P. Duffy

Kenneth G. Fifield