

Budget Hearing February 12, 2020

Members Present: Lynn Sweet, Chairman and Scott Young

In Attendance: JoAnn Brown, Greg Messenger, Matt Messenger, David Ekstrom, Michael Richard, Mary Leavitt, Juliet Perdichizzi, Sheila Rainey, Paige Holman, Sharon Omand, Marilyn Rivera, Eric Almanzan, Jeffrey Sante, Cheryl Sanborn, James Andersen, John Hall, Jessie Copeland, Ariella Koroy, Mike Harrington, Scott Whitehouse, Carolyn Clarke, Donald Coker, Christine Stover, Paul Stover, Brian Monahan.

The 2020 Budget Hearing was called to order at 6:00PM. Ms. Sweet welcomed all those in attendance. She announced that the hearing had be publicized in the Community Calendar, on the Town Website, and posted at the Post Office. Ms. Sweet introduced herself and fellow Selectman, Scott Young along with Fire Chief Scott Whitehouse, Police Chief Mike Richard, Road Agent Greg Messenger, and Paige Holman and Jessie Copeland representing Hill Library.

Ms. Sweet began by explaining that Articles 1 through 6 will be decided by ballot vote on Election Day, March 10th. Several questions were raised concerning the proposed zoning amendments. The Selectmen briefly explained that the wording presented in the Warrant is just a summary of the intent. The adoption of the amendments will assist with enforcement of particular zoning issues. A question was raised about Article 5 of the Warrant which, if passed, would permit groups to conduct games of bingo and the sale of Lucky 7 tickets. Martha English, representing the BLCOA addressed the questions stating that the plan was to conduct games of bingo.

Ms. Sweet then read the Warrant Articles one at a time. Ms. Sweet, Mr. Young or a Department Head spoke to each article.

Warrant Article 6, which seeks to appropriate \$385,000 for Capital Improvements of roads within the Town boundaries at the discretion of the Road Agent, was read. Greg Messenger stated that his intention is to grind up and pave a portion of Province Road.

Warrant Article 7 was read. It seeks to place \$2,500 into the Capital Reserve Fund known as the Reflective Road Signage Fund which was established for the purpose of purchasing reflective road signage. Ms. Sweet stated that we have used all the funds in the CRF. A question was raised as to whether the whole Town is in compliance with reflective signs. Greg stated that he believed so, and agreed this would be just for maintenance.

Warrant Article 8 which seeks to establish a new Capital Reserve Fund, known as the Highway Department Vehicles and/or Equipment Fund, was read. This fund would be for the purpose of purchasing a vehicles and/or equipment to be used by the Highway Department/Road Agent. The Selectmen propose to place \$5000 into this fund. Ms. Sweet addressed this, stating that she is looking to the future. With all the neighboring towns having a Highway Department and the expense of the equipment, the board believes we should start thinking about and preparing for this. While there are no immediate plans to use this fund, the Town's unique relationship with Messenger, Inc. may not last forever, and the Town should prepare for the possibility of a future Highway Department. The Town would be the owner of any equipment purchased from this fund.

Warrant Article 9 to fund the operations and maintenance of the Strafford Police Department was read. Chief Richard addressed this. He explained several reasons for the increase over last year. Insurance and dispatch reflect small increases, but the biggest increase is in salaries. Chief Richard explained the difficulty small towns are having in hiring and keeping good officers. For salaries in the past, we would compare ourselves to neighboring towns, but now we must compare ourselves to larger towns, because the larger towns are “stealing” officers with attractive salaries and sign on bonuses. He feels he has a cohesive team with good officers and he has not lost anyone. Four of the 6 officers, including himself, live in Town, with another intending to move here soon. Chief Richard would like to keep the officers he has, so he is recommending significant increases. Two of the officers are being promoted which accounts for further salary increases. The overall increase from last year to this year, percentage wise is 13%.

Warrant Article 10 which addresses the purchase of a new Police vehicle was read. The estimated cost will be \$41,195. It will be funded by a \$15,000 withdrawal from the Capital Reserve Fund known as the Police Vehicles and Equipment Capital Reserve Fund with the balance of \$26,195 to be funded the Police Special Details Fund. Chief Richard spoke to this. Responding to a question about the use of the Special Detail Fund, Chief Richard stated that vehicle purchase is one of the purposes of the fund. He stated that the department has 5 cruisers; he plans to replace the oldest one. When questioned as to whether they are on the road 24/7, Chief Richard explained that 3 of the officers who live in Town take the vehicle home with them, as they are on call during the night. The “spare” car is in the garage for Special Detail or for use when a car unavailable due to repairs or maintenance. He further explained that manufacturers have stopped making the cars they usually buy, and now their only option is an SUV; towns are waiting at least 22 weeks for delivery.

Warrant Article 11 to place \$5,000 into the fund known as the Police Vehicles and Equipment Capital Reserve Fund was read. The current balance in the fund is \$15,118.04. If Warrant Article 10 passes, just over \$118 will be left. Ms. Sweet stated this was just to add to the balance. Chief Richard had asked for \$15,000, and the Board dropped the appropriation to \$5,000.

Warrant Article 12 which appropriates funds for the operation of the Strafford Fire and Rescue Department was read. They are requesting \$502,751. Chief Whitehouse addressed the article, stating he had made cuts and adjustments where he could. With COLA increases, it’s up about \$9700 from last year. Chief Whitehouse was questioned about the progress of the 24/7 coverage. He stated he felt it’s actually going quite well; the payroll adjustments that were approved in past years have made him comparable to surrounding towns. There was a short discussion about retired firefighters being able to work for the department.

Warrant Article 13 was discussed. It seeks to withdraw \$10,000 from the Rescue Vehicle and Equipment Fund aka Ambulance Fund for the purpose of purchasing equipment and supplies for the ambulance. Chief Whitehouse stated that this covers consumable ambulance expenses.

Warrant Article 14 was discussed. It seeks to withdraw \$1,318 from the Rescue Vehicle and Equipment Fund aka Ambulance Fund for the purpose of extended warranty coverage and maintenance contract on the Zoll X-Series Defibrillator. Chief Whitehouse addressed this article, explaining the good service provided under this contract.

Warrant Article 15 was read. It seeks to appropriate \$76,775 to be placed in the Crown Point Fire Station Capital Reserve Fund for the purpose of rehab or replacement of the Crown Point Fire Station. Chief Whitehouse addressed this. These funds are for Phase 2 to finish up the project; Phase 1 is nearly complete. Phase 2 will address the older side of the Station and includes an extractor and dryer to decontaminate turnout gear.

Warrant Article 16 to appropriate \$25,000 to be placed in the Fire Engine Capital Reserve Fund for the future purchase of a fire truck was read. Ms. Sweet stated that the current balance in the fund is \$107,706.49, and added that Chief Whitehouse had requested \$50,000 additional this year and graciously agreed to cut that in half. Chief Whitehouse stated that their oldest fire truck is a 1992 and nearing the end of its life. The department is a little behind on their 20 year replacement plan; he would like to try to buy this truck in 2022. Manufacturers are roughly 260-280 days out for delivery. The old truck has little value, maybe \$10,000 - \$12,000.

Warrant Article 17. To see if the Town will vote to raise and appropriate the sum of \$3,258 for the purpose of purchasing new forestry equipment with \$1,629. to come from the State Volunteer Fire Assistance Grant that was approved in October 2019 and the balance of \$1,629 to come from general taxation. The Selectmen recommend this article. Chief Whitehouse explained how the grant works. He hopes to purchase chainsaws, handsaws, GPS units, harnessing, and neck gators to decrease inhalation of gases.

Warrant Article 18 was read. It outlines the Fire and Rescue Department's plan to purchase a new ambulance under a 5 year lease agreement. It would authorize the Selectmen to enter into a five year lease agreement for \$327,149 for the purpose of leasing to own a new ambulance and to appropriate \$69,328 for the first year's payment with the withdrawal of \$69,328 from the Rescue Vehicle Fund. Chief Whitehouse addressed the article, explaining he would be using the funds in the Rescue Vehicle Fund aka Ambulance Fund whose balance is about \$255,000. He prefers the lease arrangement (with about a 3% interest charge) so that he does not deplete the fund, which is replenished each year by about \$50,000/year from ambulance calls. He also uses this fund for supplies and will be requesting supplies for the new ambulance. When asked about the old ambulance, Chief Whitehouse stated that they plan on keeping it and housing it at the Crown Point Station. The last ambulance was purchased in 2011 with a lease/purchase agreement.

Warrant Article 19 which seeks to purchase equipment for the new ambulance was read. It requests an appropriation of \$57,000 which will be taken from the Ambulance Fund. No funding will come from general taxation. The Selectmen recommend this article. Chief Whitehouse spoke to the issue of maintaining and equipping a second ambulance. More and more, the department overlapping calls to which they could respond by keeping the second ambulance. Admittedly, it would be on weekends and evenings when he has more personnel available. The question was raised as to whether the 2nd ambulance would/could generate more revenue for the Ambulance Fund. Chief Whitehouse responded that it is possible.

A question was posed to Chief Whitehouse about the Dry Hydrant CRF that the Town funded for several years. He responded that he is working on the pond across Rte 202A from the School. It must be drained and restored to its original size in order to work on it. He is working with the State on that. The Department has worked on some bridge dry hydrants.

Warrant Article 20 for the creation of a full time position at the Hill Library with an appropriation of \$44,210 to cover this position and benefits was read. Jessie Copeland,

Trustee/Treasurer and Paige Holman, Librarian addressed those gathered. They stated that the use of the Library has seen exponential growth in all ways they are able to measure. They feel this merits creating a full time position. The plan is for the Children's Librarian who works 28 hours/week to increase to full time – 40 hours/week, with associated benefits. They also have experienced difficulty with employee retention, due to only offering part time positions. To address a question about other funds available to the library, Ms. Holman stated that the Trustees to have funds which are used for programming and some books, but they are trying to hold on to some of those funds with the hopes of putting it toward a future new building.

Warrant Article 21 was read. It seeks to appropriate the sum of \$108,886 for the operation and maintenance of the Hill Library. Ms. Holman explained that if Article 20 passes, this budget would be amended on the floor at Town Meeting to remove the full time person's part time wages. A question was raised as to "the Selectmen recommend this article" language in some articles. Ms. Sweet explained that the Selectmen only "recommend" CRF and Special Revenue Account appropriations. All budgets go through the Selectmen's Office and are presented to the town for vote only after some discussion between the Board and department heads.

Warrant Article 22 seeking an appropriation of \$5,000. to be added to the fund known as the Library Expansion/Improvement Capital Reserve Fund was read. The Selectmen recommend this article. Ms. Sweet announced the current balance of \$33,002.87 in this account. There was no discussion.

Warrant Article 23 was read. An appropriation of \$5,000 to be added to the fund known as the Repair/Replace Recycling Center Equipment Capital Reserve is sought. Ms. Sweet and Mr. Young addressed the article, stating the current balance in this Fund is \$10,092.34. This fund is in place to handle larger, and perhaps, unexpected equipment expenses, such as a burned out motor in one of the compactors, which we may be facing this year. We own 2 of the 4 compactors and Waste Management owns the other 2. The discussion turned to the recycling market and the increased expense incurred by towns. State Rep Mike Harrington recommended a NHMA webinar on the current recycling situation. We are currently under contract with Waste Management for our household refuse and recycling. It was suggested explore recycling contracts with other companies.

Warrant Article 24 for an appropriation of \$25,000 to be placed in the Non-Capital Reserve Fund known as the Bridge C&R Fund was read. The Selectmen recommend this article. Ms. Sweet addressed this article. The Board did not request money for this fund last year. This, along with other monies in hand, would be for the renovation of the Barn Door Gap Bridge. They have a quote from who does our bridges. Greg and Ms. Sweet are getting a firmer figure; they are hopeful this would be contingency.

Warrant Article 25 to add \$5,000 to the Town Hall Building Maintenance, Improvements and/or Expansion for was read. Ms. Sweet announced the current balance of \$20,317.55 in the CRF and added that with this proposal and all the CRF funding proposals the Board had originally planned twice what they have asked for. In consideration of other budget requests, department heads had agreed to reduce their requests by at least half.

Warrant Article 26 recommending a \$2500 donation to the Strafford Historical Society to help defray expenses associated with Strafford's Bicentennial Celebration in 2020 was read. There was no discussion.

Warrant Article 27 which seeks to fund general Town operations was read.

Executive.....	\$ 90,510.
Election & Registration.....	36,291.
Financial Administration.....	102,593.
Appraisal of Property & Tax Maps.....	41,888.
Legal Expenses.....	30,000.
Employee Benefits, FICA, Medi & Unemp. Comp.....	39,680.
Planning and Zoning.....	14,200.
General Government Building.....	45,900.
Auto Permits/Town Clerk Fees.....	38,310.
Insurance.....	60,847.
Advertising and Regional Association.....	4,203.
Strafford Regional Planning Comm. Dues.....	5,168.
Contingency Fund.....	16,000.
Annual CPA Audit.....	13,000.
Emergency Management.....	5,500.
Building Inspection.....	17,453.
General Highway Expenses and Town Maintenance.....	534,500.
Street Lighting.....	5,000.
Solid Waste Disposal.....	325,511.
Animal Control.....	1,800.
Cemeteries.....	9,000.
Cornerstone VNA (formerly Roch Dstr VNA).....	3,991.
General Assistance and Welfare.....	15,180.
Community Action.....	2,000.
Haven Sexual Assault Support Services.....	992.
My Friend's Place.....	200.
The Homemakers Health Services.....	3,200.
Ready Rides.....	1,500.
CASA.....	500.
Strafford Nutrition & Meals on Wheels.....	1,000.
Parks and Recreation.....	21,759.
Patriotic Purposes and Fireworks	6,800.
Conservation Commission.....	2,500.
Interest Expense & Tax Anticipation Notes.....	2,000.
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TOTAL.....	\$1,498,976.

(The intent of this article is to raise the sum of \$1,498,976. exclusive of all other Articles addressed.) Solid waste and recycling was increased as well as general highway expenses. Overall the "Sweep Article" shows an increase of 4.7% over last year.

Ms. Sweet stated that if everything in this budget passes, it represents a 40 cent/thousand dollar of valuation increase - about a 12.7% increase over 2019.

Warrant Article 28. To see if the Town will vote to discontinue the following capital reserve funds;

Account #104870014 known as the Records Storage Fund (balance \$6.53), and Account #104870016 known as the Office Equipment Fund (balance \$.83). Any balance with

accumulated interest to date of withdrawal to be transferred to the Town's general fund. The Selectmen recommend this article. Ms. Sweet stated that this is just a housekeeping article. There was no discussion.

Warrant Article 29 provides opportunity to transact any other business that may legally come before this meeting. No further Town business was discussed; however, the general group discussion moved to the necessity of attending the School District Meeting on the 7th of March due to the size of the School District Budget. Also to be decided at that meeting is the question of withdrawal from SAU #44. Eric Almanzan, who is on the committee recommending the action, stated that the committee is available to meet with groups to explain their findings. He urged everyone to become informed.

There being no further business to conduct, it was moved and seconded to adjourn the public hearing. The public hearing adjourned at 7:24PM.