

TOWN of RIDGEFIELD – BOARD of SELECTMEN BUDGET MEETING
MARCH 8, 2016 – 7:00 P.M.

TOWN HALL/LARGE CONFERENCE ROOM

REVISED/APPROVED MINUTES

These minutes are a general summary of the meeting and are not intended to be a verbatim transcription.

In attendance: R. Marconi, R. Hebert, M. Kozlark, B. Manners, S. Zemo

Also present: K. Redmond, Director of Finance

Agenda

1. Police Department Budget
2. Fire Department Budget
3. Social Services/ADA Discussion
4. General Budget Discussion
5. Possible Capital/Operating Budget Vote
6. Possible Non-binding Recommendation on Board of Education Budget to Board of Finance

R. Marconi called the BOS Budget Meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.

1. Police Department Budget -

Police Chief John Roche and Major Steve Brown came forward to discuss the proposed budget for the Police Department. Also present was Charles Knoche, member of the Police Commission.

Chief Roche stated they have two positions that have never been filled. The two positions of School Resource Officers have been paid for in full by the BOE since three years ago. What would these officers do in the summer? The summer is mainly filled with vacation time and training. These two officers would be part of the Town Safety Cost Center, 105-25, with the Town of Ridgefield paying their salaries of \$34,000 each.

The budget requests a slight increase in training of an additional \$1,000. The vehicle fuel number is down; utility costs are mostly flat. They have increased the outreach program which serves the youth of the Town, and the budget shows an increase in equipment replacement for the radar units. The Police serve as supplemental responses to 911 calls. All 911 calls go first to the Police Department and they stay on the line if the call is at all health-related. Ridgefield's Police officers are also trained in CPR and First Aid.

S. Zemo stated Animal Control is off our budget. How many dogs are processed through Animal Control in a given year? What does it cost the Town per animal?

Police Build Expansion/Central Dispatch (3) is in the Capital Budget for \$5,000,000 for 2020-21. We do not need to do anything with this capital request at this time. In the Spring of 2018, the Police Department would go out to bid for the work expected to be done then. We do not usually bid out architectural services. All the different disciplines will be looked at – mechanicals, electricals, etc. S. Zemo stated we do have time to decide if we want to modify the existing building. None of this is going to be part of the current budget.

R. Marconi thanked the Police Department for their continued support to the citizens of Ridgefield.

2. Fire Department Budget

Assistant Fire Chief, Jerry Myers, came forward to discuss the proposed budget for the Fire Department. Their numbers are pretty level – expense budget is flat; personnel services are driven by contractual obligations. Two new positions were budgeted last year but not filled. B. Manners commented on how there has been a lot of conversation about a six-man staff for four pieces of equipment. Often two ambulances are out and another call comes in. M. Kozlark stated Ridgefield is a “long” town with lots of area to cover. The Fire Department does everything they can to minimize risk.

The proposed eight-man minimum will be a welcome addition to their staffing. S. Zemo explained a visual that shows the staffing configuration for different nearby towns where the number of available people are always the same. Ridgefield’s department works differently. One of Ridgefield’s dispatchers, Rich Brown, came forward and commented on how sometimes he needs to call for a second ambulance. The second ambulance is in the garage but he has no one is free to take it. Every day we have a different number of calls that we need to staff. He feels that a Central Dispatch will be a problem. If we are housed in with the Police Department, we do not know who is available to go out on a call.

R. Hebert stated that with more assisted living facilities, our 911 calls are only going to increase. Overtime for the Fire Department is way up and beyond what was anticipated. There is 3% growth/year of Ridgefield residents over 65. The new assisted living facility, Maplewood, will drive up the number of calls. 10% of Ridgefield’s 911 call volume is created by Laurel Ridge and other nearby senior housing.

B. Manners stated we maybe should encourage a new builder to contribute toward the purchase of a new fire engine or emergency vehicle for the town or build a structure to house an ambulance.

Both R. Hebert and S. Zemo expressed support for the Fire Department’s budget requests. M. Kozlark stated she wants to wait until she hears the requests from all the departments first before making a decision.

Regarding Fire Department Capital expenditures, refurbishment of Engine #3 for \$225,000 is requested for this upcoming budget year. Capital expenditures for 2016-17 total \$297,426. Next year’s requests (2017-18) show a large increase to \$726,165. They are looking next budget year into investing in the traffic control program and a third ambulance, a Fire Station replacement study for \$100,000 and Headquarters Station renovations for \$170,000. This year’s budget requests include \$31,586 for an additional cardiac monitor. This will be the last one. S. Zemo stated there are a couple of window air conditioner units at Headquarters that do not work.

R. Marconi expressed appreciation for the Fire Department and all that they do for the Town of Ridgefield.

3. Social Services/ADA Discussion – Tony Phillips, Town Agent for the Disabled, came forward to review the Social Services program for the citizens of Ridgefield. Tony indicated how he first started with the Food Pantry program. At that time there were about 30 names of individuals who took advantage of the Food Pantry program and who needed that type of assistance. There are now 1200 households living in Ridgefield below the sustainability level. Tony stated many seniors are “his customers”.

R. Hebert inquired as to what is the driver of the Social Services programs? Has Tony been doing a lot of outreach? B. Manners stated that even with the more recent drop in unemployment

numbers, there are lots of people who are “under-employed”. There are lots of people who now subsist on part-time employment. There is not enough housing available to house these under-employed residents. Mental health is a big area of need. Where did these individuals previously go to for help? Some people have chronic needs for many years. There have been those who have needed help in past years but they did not know where to go. Tony is helping these people be aware of services that are available for them. He has started many new programs for these people – food and cash, energy assistance, Christmas help. S. Zemo asked if there are any non-profits that can help? What can we be doing to help these people? Do we need a different Food Pantry location? We need to look at a five-year plan, a staffing budget, a possible new location, a part-time person to help. Do we need a social worker on staff? What is the skill set we should be looking for? Would we be better staffed with two part-time people? T. Phillips that he is making plans for the future and will report back to the BOS at a later date.

What is the model that is the best for Ridgefield? Tony indicated that he did ask for a full-time social worker - \$65,000 plus benefits. Housing can be a mental health issue. Could we outsource? Is that possible? Could we use the RVNA to fill some of our needs? We do not know if that is possible or not.

ADA Discussion – Don Ciota, Chairman of the Commission for the Disabled, was present to participate in this discussion. The suggestion is to work on a couple of buildings at a time and make them ADA-compliant. What buildings are the most in need of help in this way? \$152,610 is the estimate for a list of eleven buildings, which includes Town Hall and the Fire Department. An ADA playground needs to be located where it can be accessed by the disabled. \$75,000 outside the budget, is the estimate for making this happen.

Tony Phillips stated he can look at a building and knows what needs to be done to make the building ADA-compliant. During the first year, we can do the study and the second year, get some of the work completed. Lounsbury House has capital expenditures on its own. We are currently training personnel from every building as to what to look for and that person is responsible for making that building ADA-compliant.

R. Hebert suggested the setting up of a committee in Town to do this, but we then have to be prepared to allocate dollars to what needs to be done. We need to get a feeling as to the magnitude of the project. The Town needs to be prepared to allocate the funds needed to complete the project. What is the best alternative? A representative from the volunteer committee could then come back in a month’s time to see what is happening- how is the project moving ahead?

Thank you to Tony Phillips and Don Ciota for their help with our ADA-compliance initiative.

4. General Budget Discussion – K. Redmond indicated that we are currently at 2.7% for capital expenditures.

M. Kozlark brought up the question of the Library’s request for \$45,000 for website development. Are we willing to fund any part of this \$45,000 or should it all come out of their endowment? If we add the \$50,000 to help cover their expense budget for the year, then do we remove any help for the \$45,000?

What about the Parks & Recreation pavilion? They feel it will be a welcome addition to the running of their day camp. S. Zemo stated that our contributing to this would be putting dollars into a revenue generator. Parks & Recreation revenue is starting to level off after the recession years.

R. Marconi reminded the BOS that any expenditures under \$100,000 go to a Town Meeting for approval.

Lounsbury House – installation of the elevator which is from the lower floor at the back of the building - \$37,500. It will be helpful for deliveries from the ground level in the rear.

5. Possible Capital/Operating Budget Vote

B. Manners moved and M. Kozlark seconded a motion to approve the proposed Capital/Operating Budget for fiscal year 2017 in the amount of \$2,708,519. Motion passed 5-0.

6. Possible Non-Binding Recommendation on Board of Education Budget to Board of Finance

B. Manners suggested that S. Zemo should recuse himself from the Board of Education discussion and possible vote on a motion because of a conflict of interest. M. Kozlark was in agreement with B. Manners. R. Marconi read the wording in the Charter which deals with possible conflict of interest. He requested that in the future any personal comments about another individual should be made in private and not brought up in a public forum. However, full transparency on any issue should always be a public conversation.

R. Maroni expressed his concern about a recommendation not knowing what the Board of Finance will do. What mill rate are we going to end up with? He wants to suggest a mill rate that the public is going to be comfortable with. We have been at 1.7 for the last seven years. M. Kozlark stated the public should understand that we need to have a year when we put in additional funding for many of our programs. B. Manners stated it is good for the BOS to look at what the mill rate is going to be.

What is our policy on the use of fund balance? People get behind on their taxes and houses go to a tax sale. We have never taken over ownership of a house nor have we made people move out of their home because of their inability to pay the taxes. R. Marconi stated the Town is continuing to have foreclosures. We cannot ignore that there are people in town who are struggling with their finances. But we cannot minimize the importance of a good school system.

B. Manners indicated that she had received a lot of emails in support of the budget. Others stated they cannot afford the taxes. For many people a \$350 tax raise is too much and that isn't true only for seniors. Many feel that a 3% increase is too much. We have had to use fund balance in the past to keep the rate of increase at a lower level. We have to look at the total needs of the town. We have to balance our approach. She is proud of living in Ridgefield with a good school system, but is worried about people's ability to pay.

R. Hebert indicated that he shares a lot of the same sentiment. Is now the right time to launch this next level of learning? Is there a way to transition into this next level and anywhere where we can cut back? He does not believe we are completely out of the 2008 recession. Many people are under-employed. He feels we are still in hard times. Companies are leaving Connecticut one after another. How much more can people that are still here handle? He is concerned about the population of Ridgefield. 30% are families with school children. Anything above a 3 to 3 ½ % increase is too much. He thinks there will be a problem in getting any percent above this 3 to 3 ½

% approved. R. Marconi responded that we have been in this situation before. For the past seven years, we have really tightened the belt.

B. Manners moved and M. Kozlark seconded a motion to forward the Board of Selectmen's Non-Binding Recommendation on the Fiscal 2017 Board of Education Budget to the Board of Finance with the request that the increase in the BOE operating budget not exceed an amount which, when combined with a final determination of the use of Fund Balance by the BOF, shall not cause the Fiscal Year 2017 mill rate increase to exceed 3.5 percent. Motion passed 4-1. S. Zemo voted against.

Ed Tyrrell read a statement he prepared as to why the Board of Education is requesting a budget of more than \$5 million/year and why we cannot go along with such an increase.

One woman commented on how an increase is necessary just to cover our contractual obligations to the educators.

Stephanie Anderson stated she is disappointed in what she is hearing tonight. Special Education does not provide the services these children are supposed to have. We hurt the children by cutting the budget every year.

Rayda Krell expressed support for the Special Education needs.

Lisa Carroll expressed her understanding of the BOE needs as being expressed this evening. She has a daughter at Amherst and another one completing high this year and they have both done very well with the Ridgefield school system.

R. Marconi moved and R. Hebert seconded a motion to adjourn the Board of Selectmen Budget Meeting at 10:35 p.m. Motion passed 4-0. S. Zemo had left the meeting.

Respectfully submitted,
Janet L. Johnson