

State of Rhode Island

County of Washington

In Hopkinton on the ninth day of March 2022 A.D. a hybrid budget workshop (in person and remote) was held in the Town Hall Meeting Room, 1 Town House Road, Hopkinton, RI 02833 to discuss the proposed FY 22/23 budget.

PRESENT: Stephen Moffitt, Jr., Sharon Davis, Scott Bill Hirst, Robert Marvel and Michael Geary; Town Manager Brian Rosso; Town Clerk Elizabeth Cook-Martin. Also present: Finance Director Elizabeth Monty.

LAND TRUST

Marilyn Grant, former Chairperson, as well as Sarah Windsor, new Chairperson, of the Land Trust were present. Ms. Grant handed out a paper that showed the history of the funding for the Land Trust. She stated that the enabling legislation was passed in 2000 by an Act of the General Assembly and it was followed by being adopted as an ordinance in the town; she went on to explain their funding history. Ms. Windsor indicated that she is the new Chair of the Land Trust but she has been a member for twenty-one years. She noted that the Land Trust is currently seeking \$14,000 from the real estate transfer tax stamps, noting that they were a municipal Land Trust and all volunteers who are working to preserve the town's rural character and to save the environment and the residents' property values. She noted that they have worked hard to be self-supporting, noting that the late Ed Wood had negotiated a \$20,000 a year contract with a solar company for an easement. She explained that this year they will be working on parking lots, trail blazing, tree work, bridge work and many other things. They anticipate holding work parties and fundraising this year and they have negotiated a three year, \$30,000 contract with Sunset Design which is a company that has done some work for them in the past. They are really serious about working on their older properties, as well as their new purchase of the James property. She felt that after they exhausted the bond that was previously approved for them, they will be looking for more funding.

Councilor Hirst wondered if they might award some of the COVID money to the Land Trust. Council President Moffitt advised that he would not object to the

Land Trust receiving \$14,000 from the real estate transfer tax stamp money.

Councilor Geary thanked both Ms. Windsor and Ms. Grant for volunteering for so many years. Councilors Marvel and Davis also wished to thank Ms. Grant and Ms. Windsor for their time and suggested that they also approved the request of \$14,000.

GRANTS & CONTRIBUTIONS

WOOD RIVER HEALTH SERVICES

Edward Smith, CFO and Sarah Channing, Director of Development and Communications of Wood River Health Services were present. Mr. Smith wished the Council to increase their contribution to \$20,000. He explained that due to COVID they have increased their services, staff and patient base by approximately 10%. Councilor Hirst noted that he was a patient of Wood River and felt that was the best endorsement he could give and Councilor Geary suggested that Wood River Health Services provided outstanding services to the community. Council President Moffitt indicated that he would have to object to their requested increase due to the total proposed nonprofit budgets being twice as much as what was in the Capital Improvement Plan. He did not want to put an increase on the taxpayers but noted that when they did speak about disbursing the ARPA funds they may revisit what they are granting nonprofit agencies; he wished to level fund this budget. Mr. Smith asked when they anticipated discussing what they will do with the ARPA funds and Council President Moffitt indicated that their goal was to wait until after the budget process; probably within the next six weeks. Councilor Hirst asked when the last time Wood River Health Service's budget was increased. Councilor Marvel noted that there are a lot of requested increases this year; the Council has to make sure that the budget that they approve and put forth to the voters will be something that the voters are willing to approve.

ASHAWAY FREE LIBRARY

Heather Field, Library Director of the Ashaway Free Library was present via Zoom. She noted that the library was approximately 84% to 95% of what they were pre-pandemic; with their big news being their 150 year anniversary

celebration. They have asked for level funding this year for they understand the town's financial situation.

Council President Moffitt noted that he was a big supporter of Ashaway Library and he had no objection to her budget. Councilor Hirst wished to note that there is a law that dictates if the Council does not support the libraries at the same dollar amount as the previous year, than the library will be penalized with their state funding. Councilor Davis noted that she loves the Langworthy Library Book Club and Councilor Marvel also advised that he is a huge supporter of the libraries and felt they should continue their funding as requested. Councilor Geary concurred.

LANGWORTHY PUBLIC LIBRARY

Martha Baton, Acting Director of the Langworthy Public Library was present via Zoom, noting that they are actively seeking a new person to lead them. She explained some of the services that the library offers which include: readers' advisory, reference, a local history archive, homework help, internet and Wi-Fi access, as well as many programs including two adult book clubs which are very well attended.

Council President Moffitt indicated that he supported the Langworthy Public Library and approved her request. Councilor Hirst advised that in a lot of towns the libraries were part of the municipal government, unlike Hopkinton, and our libraries are private entities supported by tax dollars. Councilor Davis acknowledged that she was a patron of the Langworthy Library and was a member of the book club. Councilors Geary and Marvel both wished to thank the libraries for their work.

HOPE VALLEY AMBULANCE

Kevin Yeaw, EMT-Cardiac, Registered Nurse and recording secretary of the Board of Directors of the Hope Valley Ambulance Squad was present. Mr. Yeaw advised that they were requesting an increase of \$48,000 which would bring their budgeted amount up to \$100,000. Mr. Yeaw noted that their last increase was in 2016 and indicated that this past year they had responded to 1,540 calls, 481 of which were to the Town of Hopkinton, making 2021 their busiest year on record. While their call volume has risen, their direct billing income was reduced during

this six year time span a total of \$121,809 due to reduced insurance company compliance and reimbursement standards. He explained that in 2020 they were forced to sell one of their critical Frontline ambulances, reduce employee pay, sell medical equipment such as stretchers, and reduce the number of paid positions each day. He noted that there was a misconception that ambulance companies should be able to support themselves through billing, explaining that since 2016 they have seen an 11% increase in calls but a 38% decrease in collected billing from insurance companies. Councilor Hirst suggested a dialogue to see if this ambulance association should be merged in with the fire district or have an improved relationship, financial and governance with the fire department. In the Village of Ashaway, the Ashaway Fire District, out of their district budget, gives money to the Ashaway Ambulance who also receives an allotment from the Town of Hopkinton. Mr. Yeaw stated that the Hope Valley Ambulance did not receive any financial assistance from any fire districts in the area. Councilor Hirst was concerned about the ambulance association's future and felt a workshop with the Town Council, ambulance corps and fire departments would be in order. Sandy Myers, the President of Hope Valley Ambulance was present and advised the Council that one of the incentives that they use to get people to join their organization was to pay for their EMT classes and have them sign a contract for one to two years of service. She asked Councilor Hirst if he had invited the fire departments to their meeting on Friday and he indicated that he had not. Councilor Geary thanked the ambulance for their service and asked if they had a paid day time crew and Ms. Myers noted they have a paid crew 24/7, noting there were two shifts, 5:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and 5:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m. They have been unable to get volunteers and the Labor Board does not allow them to volunteer and work for the same entity. Council President Moffitt asked if they had applied for any federal grants and Ms. Myers indicated they had and they will have to start paying in June. Mr. Yeaw noted that during the COVID pandemic, due to the financial hardship they were under, they had reached out to the fire districts asking for a small contribution but were turned down. Council President Moffitt indicated that he could not support a doubling of their budget and felt there needed to be more discussion. He acknowledged that the Ashaway Fire

District has started a group called the EMS Study Committee and a meeting was scheduled for Wednesday, March 16, 2022 at 10:00 a.m. at the Ashaway Fire Station which he planned on attending. Councilor Davis asked about a handout that Mr. Rosso had provided them from the State concerning money for small businesses that have been hurt by COVID and she felt that the ambulance corps should apply for that. Councilor Hirst recommended that Hope Valley Ambulance contact the Governor's Constituent Affairs Office and explain their situation and maybe they could be of assistance. Mr. Yeaw noted that the ambulance service and fire districts are two very different entities. The ambulance corps responds to triple the calls that the fire department does; the fire department are all volunteers; and, the ambulance is mostly paid individuals. In the bigger cities, the firemen are also EMTs and they can respond to either call. Councilor Hirst asked if they have had any discussion with the Richmond Town Council as far as funding and Ms. Myers indicated that they had not. Councilor Marvel agreed with Council President Moffitt that they could not double their funding but suggested that possibly they could raise their budgeted amount. Councilor Davis noted that the residents of Hopkinton will have to pay more in taxes whether the ambulance corps is funded through the town or the fire district. Council President Moffitt proposed a 10% increase which equated to \$5,000, which was agreed to. Ms. Myers asked Council President Moffitt if he could increase that amount to 20% or \$10,000 and let the taxpayers decide. He noted that his dilemma was that whatever they did for Hope Valley they would have to do for Ashaway. Councilor Hirst suggested putting forth a question to the voters, separate from the budget, as to whether or not they should give more money to the ambulance corps. He requested that they check with the Town Solicitor to see if this was something that could be done. Councilors Marvel and Davis liked that suggestion and noted that a 20% increase was reasonable. Mr. Rosso explained that this would be a warrant item and Clerk Cook-Martin noted that this would appear as a question on the ballot. Mr. Rosso advised that if a warrant item is approved, it would be a one-time source of money. Councilor Davis wished to increase their budget by \$10,000 and also have a warrant item requesting another \$40,000.

ASHAWAY AMBULANCE

Nick Vetelino, Chief of the Ashaway Ambulance Association was present and suggested that they are having the same issues as Hope Valley Ambulance and they were also looking for a \$48,000 increase. Mr. Vetelino advised that they went from a fully volunteer service to an almost fully paid service and their payroll was over \$150,000 per year. He noted that they do receive \$50,000 in funding from the Ashaway Fire District. He went on to explain that 2021 was their busiest year yet; they responded to 600 calls and this does not seem to be slowing down. He noted that it was refreshing to see that the Council was willing to increase their budget. Councilor Geary asked how old their two ambulances were and Mr. Vetelino advised 2005 and 2011. It was agreed that they would increase their budget by 20% and then put a warrant item on the ballot. Mr. Rosso explained to the Council that if the warrant item was approved by the voters, it would come out of the fund balance. Mr. Rosso explained that they usually use warrant items to fund their restricted accounts; however, this would be a warrant item to use general funds directly towards a service. He noted that he has never seen this done before. Council President Moffitt felt they should continue as suggested by increasing their budgets by 20% and then having a warrant item on the ballot. Councilor Davis asked Mr. Rosso to look at where they would get the extra money to pay the ambulance associations if it were to be approved by the voters, and provide them with an answer before the Annual Financial Town Assembly. Mr. Rosso noted that it would come from the fund balance which will be discussed at the next meeting. He noted that if this was approved, the money would be used in lieu of funding the town's own restricted accounts such as legal fees which currently has a negative balance; and winter operations which will be zero. Instead of funding those accounts that money would go to the ambulance associations. He did not think this would fix their problem for this was a one-time source of money and this was not a one-time problem, but an annual budget deficit and if they did not increase revenue annually they would be back next year with the same issue. The Council would be draining the town's fund balance for a one year fix. The problem was that they are running at a deficit and that was what needed to be addressed. Councilor

Davis felt the ambulance associations should be part of the fire districts.

Councilor Marvel agreed with Mr. Rosso and felt they needed to come up with a permanent solution. Mr. Rosso suggested that they educate themselves on what was in the fund balance and then propose how they will use that money.

NEIGHBORS HELPING NEIGHBORS RI

Barbara Gelineas of Neighbors Helping Neighbors was present. Councilor Hirst felt this was a fine organization; however, did not wish to fund any additional nonprofits unless there was a compelling reason. Council President Moffitt agreed with Councilor Hirst that they should not grant any additional funding, which was agreed to by the other Councilors.

COMMUNITY 2000 EDUCATION FOUNDATION

No one was present from this organization. Councilor Hirst did not feel that taxpayers should be funding a private scholarship of any sort. Council President Moffitt noted that this was a very good group who gave out a lot of scholarships and raised a lot of money for Chariho students; however, agreed with Councilor Hirst that they should not fund this request.

Clerk Cook-Martin asked about the award of \$14,000 to the Land Trust from the real estate transfer stamps. Mr. Rosso adjusted the revenue line item in the Town Clerk's budget. It would appear as a CIP project. Mr. Rosso noted that the Council has increased the proposed budget by \$31,000 which equated to another three cents to the tax rate from the proposed 21 cents. There was discussion about granting the ambulance associations additional funds and putting a warrant item on the ballot. Mr. Rosso felt it should be one or the other but not both because it may get the budget rejected and the warrant item may be rejected and then the ambulance associations are back to square one. Mr. Rosso felt that they needed an accountant or someone to go through their books to see why they were running in the red every year. Council President Moffitt felt that the state senators and state representatives should be involved in trying to resolve this problem.

Councilor Davis suggested that if their revenue was down 38% that was part of the problem. Council President Moffitt noted this was not a business to make money and he felt they were fighting a battle they could not win. This is an

organization that is subsidized and the town has no control over it. Mr. Rosso noted that the fire districts and ambulance associations have put in proposals for ARPA funds. Council President Moffitt suggested that he would send an email to Brian Patrick Kennedy and Elaine Morgan requesting that they either attend Monday's meeting or at least look into this matter. Councilor Marvel asked if there had ever been a thought about the two ambulance associations merging and Mr. Rosso advised that this had come up at previous workshops in the past.

The Workshop was closed at 8:10 P.M.

Elizabeth J. Cook-Martin

Town Clerk

Marita D. Murray

Deputy Town Clerk