

Westhampton Finance Committee
Meeting Minutes
March 22, 2023

The meeting was called to order at 7:00 pm

In attendance: Committee members Scott Stanton, Jake Antosz, Steve Holt, Marilyn Witherell, Jeremy Durrin, Tad Weiss and Barbara Pelissier (scribe) joined by Selectboard Members Maureen Dempsey and Scott Johndrow, COA Director Amy Landau and Julia Lennen.

Barbara volunteered to be the note-taker.

The Minutes from the meeting of March 15th were approved by a **vote of 7-0-0**.

Committee Calendar: Tad noted that there will be no meeting next week. April 5 and April 12 are the tentative dates to hear the school budget presentations.

Tad said he hopes to receive an approximate cost for some necessary tree removal in town from Tree Warden Tom Jenkins so that it can appear on the town Warrant.

Tad asked Doug if there are more miscellaneous line items to be discussed prior to the final budget. Doug mentioned he now has numbers for IT Support Expense and is close to having numbers for the Insurance and Bonds.

Review of Salaries:

Maureen confirmed that the Selectboard recommends a Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) to town employees of 3% for FY'24.

It was noted that COLAs are not state-mandated, but an option for municipalities to show their appreciation to their employees. Last year's percentage was also set by the Selectboard at 3%. Inflation, energy cost increases, a health insurance increase of 7%, etc. have added an increased financial burden on our town employees. While offering a 2.5% COLA for the past decade has kept pace with the Consumer Price Index (CPI) up to and including 2022, if inflation continues the town will fall behind. Doug noted that Social Security was offering an 8.2% COLA and the Hampshire County Retirement Board is asking for a retroactive 2% for retirees who had received a 2% COLA in FY'2023.

The Selectboard has recommended a 3% cost of living adjustment for the following town employees: Selectboard members, Assessors, Town Clerk, Fire Chief, EMS Coordinator, School Committee members, Veterans Agent, Moderator, Administrative Assistant, Assessor Assistant, Police Chief, Emergency Management Director, Tree Warden, and Board of Health members.

Discussion ensued regarding offering employees a 4% rather than a 3% COLA. Doug explained that the town does 10-year averaging. While inflation is currently high, that was not always the

case throughout the past decade. It's a gamble to get it 'right.' The goal is for our COLA percentages to align closely with the CPI when averaged over the coming decade, not year by year. The committee did not move at this time to increase the COLA percentage above 3%. Tad suggested taking a second look at an increase once we have a projection for a final budget. Steve offered that the town's accountant would be able to calculate the impact on the tax rate of offering different COLA percentages.

Request from COA Director: The committee heard the budget request from COA Director, Amy Landau, who requested an hourly wage increase from \$20.00 to \$21.50. The Selectboard agreed. She averages 10 hours per week. It was noted that \$4k of her salary has been and will continue to be paid by a state grant. Julia Lennen noted that the grant is calculated at \$14 per senior (age 60 and over) resident and can be used to cover COA programming and/or salaries. Seniors currently comprise 39% of the town's population. Calculation 21.50×50 hrs. added up to more than the figure requested by Ms. Landau (\$10,234) and was approved by the Selectboard. The committee suggested revising the figure up to \$10,750. While two members of the Selectboard were present, they were unable to vote to increase the Director's salary because they were not in a Selectboard meeting. They did, however, express their agreement with the \$10,750 figure.

Accountant, Treasurer & Tax Collector Review: Maureen said there is an applicant who could take both positions. Our current Treasurer has decided not to continue in the job past May. An applicant may be interested in taking on the combined role. There are many moving pieces to this. The Selectboard is expecting a monetary proposal from the applicant at their next meeting.

Maureen explained that there are accounting firms who could do the job, but they are very expensive, would offer no in-town presence, no office hours, would not prepare payroll for the elementary school and town employees nor would they perform Human Resource duties, which our current Treasurer does.

Treasurer Assistant: The Selectboard is also interested in hiring an Assistant as a back-up. The outgoing Treasurer is interested in filling that role. It is assumed she would work minimal hours, covering only when the new Treasurer/Tax Collector was unavailable, so on a "when needed" basis. The outgoing Treasurer currently serves as both Treasurer and Tax Collector in Huntington, so is familiar with the responsibilities of both roles.

Training of Treasurer/Town Clerk: The line item for the training of a treasurer and town clerk may be a moot point if Patty Cotton takes on the new combined position. A figure of 0 dollars has been entered.

Town Accountant: Our Town Accountant did not request an increase in salary, just a 3 hour increase in time per week (from 12 to 15). Therefore, the Selectboard recommends a salary of \$22,571.

Police Chief Salary: The salary for the police chief was unchanged from FY'23, with the added 3% COLA. The salaries for the police department are separate and are based on hours per week. The Sergeant increase from \$26.00 per hr. to \$26.50 was a flat adjustment and does not include a COLA increase. Steve noted that the reasoning behind the police dept. and the highway dept. both keeping a difference in wages for different ranks/positions. Maureen said this is the budget the Chief presented to the Selectboard. He feels that many officers in town will provide more daytime coverage to patrol, make stops, etc. Hours will be staggered. It was noted that this does not include a School Resource Officer position.

Building Commissioner: The Building Commissioner's salary is paid for by building permit fees the town collects. He hasn't asked for an increase in a salary.

Building Inspectors: Building Inspectors salaries increased from \$22K to \$26k. Plumbing Inspector from \$6K to \$7k all due to additional inspections, additional time spent, etc. The two building inspectors split the one salary. Marilyn wondered if our fees need to be looked at again to ensure they were competitive. Tad suggested that the Selectboard ask Tom Quinlin to do a fee scale comparison with surrounding towns to make sure Westhampton is charging adequately. Regardless of salaries being covered by fees, the reasons for asking for an increase are unclear and, as such, are not in alignment with explanations for other town employee salary increases. Lacking such detail, it will be hard to predict future salary increases. For instance, is the work harder? Is the hourly rate too low? The more information we have, the better. Maureen Dempsey noted that the Selectboard has not received any complaints from the public. There are more inspections due to increased solar arrays, etc. Doug will pull the statistics from the program the Inspectors are using. Tad reiterated that his request for salary increase details in no way is a reflection of any dissatisfaction, just not wanting blank space where salary calculations usually occur.

Animal Control Officer and Animal Inspector: Kelly Wainscott currently performs both positions. The Selectboard approved an increase from \$2,060 to \$3,000 to bring the salary in line with surrounding towns. The two positions cannot be combined because the state requires both positions in every town and each requires different duties. ACO would handle licensing of kennels, dog bites, lost dogs, etc. the AIP inspects barns.

Cemetery Caretaker: The Caretaker's salary went from \$15 to \$20/hr. The Cemetery Commission supports this request, as it is the second of a two-step salary increase that was undertaken last year. It's not an easy position to fill, and requires a broad skill set that encompasses dealing with grieving families as well as mowing/maintenance. There is no increase of hours. It was noted by Doug that, at 17 hrs. per week, the position is not eligible for benefits. Two pay periods of 20 hours or more would trigger eligibility.

Highway Dept. Salaries: Superintendent salary being increased \$73,685 to \$75,896.

Grade 1A (Foreperson) increased to \$31.00/hr

Grade 2 (two positions) \$30.00/hr

Supt. Jablonski has developed a schedule to raise the hourly rates of his Highway crew members through FY'2026 in order to remain competitive with Mass Dept. of Transportation. Equipment operators are in critically short supply and can command a high rate of pay. The town does not want to lose current members of the crew because of salary dissatisfaction.

Transfer Station Salaries:

Transfer Station Supervisor \$17.40 x 11.5 hrs/weekly x 52 weeks

Transfer Station Assistant \$15.00 x 8 hrs/weekly x 52

Motion to adjourn was approved **7-0-0** at 8:45pm

Respectfully Submitted,

Barbara Pelissier