

MONTAGUE FINANCE COMMITTEE
Final Meeting Minutes
Wednesday, March 9, 2022 at 6:00 p.m.

This meeting was held via Zoom and recorded: <https://vimeo.com/686535262>

PRESENT: Chair Jen Audley; Vice-Chair Gregory Garrison; John Hanold, Chris Menegoni, Jennifer Waryas and Francia Wisnewski, members; BettyLou Mallet, Scribe.

OTHERS PRESENT: Town Accountant Carolyn Olsen; Town Administrator, Steve Ellis.

1. CALL MEETING TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order at 6:00 p.m. by Chair Jen Audley. The meeting is being held remotely, is being recorded by Carolyn Olsen as well as aired on MCTV. All members present. JA notified the committee of Fred Bowman's resignation from the Finance Committee effective immediately which leaves an open position for the remaining 2 years of his term. He has also resigned from the CIC (Capital Improvement Committee) and the Planning Board.

2. PUBLIC COMMENT

There were no public attending nor emails and letters received.

3. APPROVAL OF THE MINUTES OF FEBRUARY 23, 2022 FINANCE COMMITTEE MEETING.

The Committee deferred approval of the draft minutes in order to review and submit recommended changes. The approval of the minutes of February 23, 2022 will be placed on the next agenda.

4. DEBRIEF MARCH 3, 2022 SPECIAL TOWN MEETING

JW attended the meeting and stated it was straightforward and successful. She was surprised by the passivity of those attending given the large expenses on a few articles appearing on the warrant.

JH described the Special Town Meeting as one to mostly wrap-up odds and ends and that those attended were mostly aware of the warrant article items due to participating in its discussion. There had been a lot of information given regarding the Vactor truck and therefore, it did not generate additional discussion. He felt that the article on the security cameras received special attention and a fairly clear decision was made not to have them installed.

JW believes a town meeting is not the place for a discussion regarding safety concerns and a discussion should continue with the police department.

JA was pleased with the Special Town Meeting process with a wide variety of participation including new audience members. She mentioned what felt like a criticism from Mike Naughton regarding the continued displeasure of the one-time large contribution to the OPEB trust fund. JA thanked Michael Nelson for filling in as Moderator.

Although FW did not attend, she thanked those who were able to participate in the STM and said that those who were unable to attend worked hard in prior deliberations and brought forth important information that was used at this meeting.

Steve felt the simplicity of the Special Town Meeting was so much better. Although it is not as good as meeting in person, the process of tracking of information such as a quorum as well as votes seemed to be a much smoother process. He also extends his thanks to Michael Nelson for being the Moderator.

Carolyn Olsen noted that the preparation for remote Town Meetings is much more extensive for the Selectboard's office.

5. REVIEW OF FEBRUARY 2022 MONTHLY BUDGET REPORTS

JA stated Carolyn regularly sends budgets for the FinCom members to review and that the February 2022 reports come at a point in the fiscal year (2/3 of the way through) where we can get a sense of where we stand with respect to actual spending against budgeted expenses. CO noted that things seemed to be on track overall. There were no comments from the members regarding the February 2022 monthly budget reports.

6. CONCLUDE FY23 BUDGET INVESTIGATION

Consideration of Finance Committee members' proposals/Discussion of amount to allocate from Taxation at Annual Town Meeting/Recap of discussion at March 7, 2022 Selectboard meeting/ Review of next steps

JA stated this is a time for the FinCom members to float ideas and proposals other than what is in the budget summary as well as to discuss allocations from taxation for the ATM. She stated the Selectboard had a high-level discussion on Monday regarding the budget and asked Steve to summarize for the FinCom.

Steve presented a workbook page which provided a workspace to develop scenarios to reduce taxation as well as maintain a cushion for undefined future FY23 expenses. The Selectboard felt it was wise to maintain a level of cushion however recommended not to adjust any line items regarding personnel. The Selectboard felt that the Vector lease could be covered by ARPA funds or Capital Stabilization with the marijuana revenues as an offset. The Board agreed with the CIC's recommendation to reduce the DPW Discretionary to \$50,000 and they saw fit to reduce the Police Discretionary fund request by half the amount (from \$10,000 to \$5,000). The Selectboard felt the Reserve Fund could be reduced from \$60,000 to \$40,000. Lastly, the Selectboard felt by implementing a new full-time dispatcher, the figure for part-time wages could be reduced.

JW stated she attended Monday's Selectboard meeting and asked for more clarification on how to maneuver through the workbook provided in order to create scenarios for reduction in taxation. Steve went over the workbook and the specific expenses listed, how it was coded by colors for specific departments and explained the surplus and deductions.

JH had several contributions to add to the discussion. He stated in light of the recent international events, the oil and gas budget allotments should be revisited. Next, he stated he agrees with the majority of the staff increases however is still not convinced with the Assistant Town Administrator position.

He does support the half-time Selectboard administrative assistant. His concern with the ATA is the grade level that was chosen and would like more information on how the pay grade was determined. JA supports JH's proposal to re-estimate the budget lines involving fuel and gas for all departments. She is requesting additional research by town staff. GG agrees having departments revisit their fuel budget lines although in reviewing the past figures as to what was budgeted vs. what has been spent in those line items, in some cases the amounts show significantly lower amounts than projected. Steve mentioned that the Town has contracts for fuel/gas, some expire during FY23, and that the Town may hold off on the bidding process until prices stabilize.

JH proposed reducing the Reserve Fund request by \$10,000 (from \$60,000 to \$50,000) and the other Finance Committee members supported that idea.

Regarding the ATA (Assistant Town Administrator) position, the FinCom voiced their opinions on support; JA, supports; GG supports; JW would like more information before supporting; FW supports; CM supports; therefore, the Finance Committee as a whole supports the Assistant Town Administrator position's proposal.

JW has been reviewing historic data from 2015-2022 regarding taxation and would like more information on how the process works. She would like the FinCom to set priorities such as keeping taxes down. GG states it should be her focus moving forward. He stated his focus moving forward will be the Town's infrastructure. Steve stated the Town is working towards a shared vision of prosperity. He explained the process of how the Town works through investments and how they have a tremendous impact on the budget. CO understands the concern about increased taxes however, as the Town Accountant, in order to not increase taxes, cuts need to be made. JW asked about a "0 level budget" and wonders if the departments have ever budget-building using that method. CO stated in her 30 years of working in municipal accounting, a "0 balance" budget has never been tried in Montague and that the process is an extreme amount of work.

JA asked the Committee if there are additional proposals to recommend different amounts in any of the line items, especially in the General Operating Budget and line items paid for through taxation. The FinCom is not opposed to reducing the discretionary funds as suggested on the budget workbook. There was discussion about whether the Finance Committee would support the police discretionary fund request, but not a clear consensus yet. CO asked if there was consensus of moving the Vector truck from the DPW budget to Capital Stabilization to pay for the lease. All FinCom members agreed.

JA noted that the Selectboard meeting included discussion of the Cannabis Stabilization Fund and its use. She stated the FinCom has a role in advising the Town on its financial resources and should weigh in on this topic. JH agreed.

JW asked if someone could provide her with a reference on use of cannabis funds and how they are being spent. JA said that she, Selectboard member Matt Lord and Accountant Carolyn Olsen might be able to help with that.

Steve also noted the contribution to the Franklin County Tech School stabilization account as a possible area of reduction. The policy for allocating funds to this account is driven by enrollment and is intended to create a buffer to blunt the impact in years when enrollment increases sharply, JH and JA indicated that they are inclined not to and should not divert from the current financial policy.

Chris Menegoni shared an idea about deferring the purchase of a new hybrid cruiser for the Police Department for a year, given that the cruiser funded in this year's budget has not been received yet, and that may help with the budget. JA felt that the Chief's answer when he was asked about this was reasonable and she supports the request. She believes the supply chain is out of the Police Department's control. JW was also satisfied with the Police Chief's presentation and agrees with the process. JH agrees with the process; FW wishes for a greener vehicle but supports the process; GG supports the process.

7. UPCOMING CONFERENCES

JA described the opportunities for professional development this spring that were listed on the agenda. The Spring Conference for the Association of Town Finance Committees will be held on April 30, 2022 from 8:30 to noon in Oxford, MA. There is a modest registration fee. The Western Massachusetts Municipal Conference will be held on April 9, 2022 from 8 to noon in Easthampton, MA. There are budget lines for seminars and travel; therefore, if any FinCom members wish to attend, they are asked to communicate with CO and to coordinate transportation. JA will not be attending any of these conferences as her term ends soon and she will not be on the Finance Committee effective July 1, 2022.

JW asked with the vacancy on the Finance Committee with the resignation of Fred Bowman and another upcoming vacancy from JA's position, what is the process to become a member on the committee. JA stated the process is not strictly defined at this time however any Finance Committee member can recruit an individual who they feel may be interested. That individual can attend a meeting, and submit their interest to the Moderator. Although the Moderator is generally responsible for appointing an individual to the Committee, the Finance Committee's bylaws allow them to appoint a committee member to fill a vacated seat. JA stated the FinCom can function with a 4-member committee as that is considered a quorum. This subject will be placed on a future agenda for discussion.

The next scheduled meeting is March 16, 2022 with the Capital Improvements Committee recommendation in discussion. JA asked GG about the meeting and its layout. GG stated the intention is to have he and Steve in attendance and that it will not be posted as a joint meeting with the CIC. GG will send the presentation to the Finance Committee before the meeting and the Committee has been asked to come to this meeting prepared to potentially vote on the capital requests.

8. TOPICS NOT ANTICIPATED

The Committee did not have any other topics for conversation this evening.

9. FUTURE MEETING DATES

March 16, 2022 – Capital Improvements Committee recommendations

March 23, 2022 – FY23 budget reconciliation and balancing

March 30, 2022 – Planning for FinCom report on FY23 budget-b

10. ADJOURNMENT

On a motion by JH and seconded by GG, the Committee adjourned the meeting at 7:42 p.m. FW, aye; GG, aye; CM, aye; JH, aye; JW, aye; JA, aye.

Respectfully submitted,
BettyLou Mallet, Scribe

Finance Committee Vote: 03/16/2022