



TOWN OF NORTHBOROUGH

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FINANCIAL PLANNING COMMITTEE – MEETING MINUTES

Tuesday, March 12, 2024 – 6:00 PM

Select Board Meeting Room

MEMBERS PRESENT: John Rapa, Chair
Susan Sartori, Vice Chair
Ken Picard, Clerk
Scott Stocklin
Robert Babcock
Jonathan Rea

MEMBERS ABSENT: NA

TOWN: Timothy McInerney, Town Administrator
Jason Little, Finance Director
Laurie Connors, Planning Director

OTHER: NA

Meeting Agenda:



Link to recorded meeting:



The meeting was called to order at 6:01 p.m. by Committee Chair, John Rapa.

1. Public Comment

There were no comments from the public.

2. Approval of Minutes – April 24, 2023


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Motion to approve meeting minutes from April 24, 2023, as submitted without modification: Initiated by Ken Picard.

Motion seconded: By Scott Stocklin.

Vote: John Rapa called for a vote to approve the April 24, 2023, Meeting Minutes; it resulted in unanimous approval with all present members voting "aye."

Approval of Minutes – March 5, 2024

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Upon the Chair, John Rapa, inquiring about feedback on the meeting minutes, Ken Picard proposed a revision to the final paragraph on page six. Ken Picard noted that the minutes mistakenly attributed a question about the emergency generators to Jonathan Rea, when in fact, it was Ken Picard who posed that inquiry.

Jonathan Rea requested the inclusion of two items in the meeting minutes: firstly, his question about whether the proposed hook and lift trucks would replace current fleet vehicles, to which Scott Charpentier, Director of Public Works, replied they would not; and secondly, his inquiry regarding the \$95,000 proposed trailer and if it could be used for emergency vaccine distribution, to which Scott Charpentier confirmed it could.

Motion to approve meeting minutes from March 5, 2024, incorporating the amendments discussed: Initiated by Ken Picard.

Motion seconded: By Ken Picard.

Vote: John Rapa called for a vote to approve the March 5, 2024, Meeting Minutes incorporating the amendments discussed; it resulted in unanimous approval with all present members voting "aye."

3. Review of Community Preservation Committee Requests (Presented by Laurie Connors)

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Laurie Connors, the Town Planning Director, attended in place of John Campbell, the Community Preservation Committee (CPC) Chair, due to a scheduling conflict. Laurie Connors reported a significant budget for the year, thanks to new revenue of \$820,000 combined with reserves of \$1,340,577 allowing for the following eight project considerations.

- **432 Whitney Street Land Acquisition Project (\$1,700,000)**

The first project discussed was the acquisition of a 23.77-acre parcel at 432 Whitney Street for open space, recreation, and a small-scale affordable housing project of about four to eight units, aiming to maintain compliance with Chapter 40B and keep the town's affordable housing percentage above the compliance threshold.

Funding for the land acquisition includes unreserved funds (\$817,000+), conservation funds (\$664,000), and new revenues (\$218,000+), with an additional potential \$200,000 donation from the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR).

Robert Babcock asked how the value of \$1.7 million was determined.

Laurie Connors explained that this figure matches the purchase price set forth by the property's enrollment in the Chapter 61A program, which offers the town the right of first refusal should the property be sold and withdrawn from the program. In this scenario, the asking price is \$1.7 million.

Robert Babcock followed up, asking if this valuation aligns with the market value, especially considering any existing offers and the perspective of an independent appraisal.

Laurie Connors responded that an appraiser has been engaged to conduct a valuation, with the appraisal expected by the week of March 18th. This appraisal is crucial, especially for justifying expenditures from the conservation fund, ensuring that the investment corresponds to or surpasses the \$1.7 million mark.

John Rapa asked about the town's position regarding the right of first refusal and its implications if the town decides to proceed with the purchase post-town meeting, questioning whether the seller could choose another buyer with a higher offer.

Laurie Connors clarified that once the town matches the asking price, the seller is obligated to proceed with the town, highlighting that a purchase and sale agreement would likely be signed in the new fiscal year, after July 1st.

John Rapa inquired if it was possible for another bidder to increase their offer, to which Laurie Connors responded that the process doesn't work that way; once an offer is made, that's the figure both parties must consider.

Susan Sartori pointed out that there's essentially a countdown once the offer is made and the town exercises its right of first refusal, with a specific number of days to act, preventing any action until that period ends.

Laurie Connors added that they had a 120-day window from receiving the paperwork to act and had to request an extension to avoid a special town meeting in early April, with the seller granting this extension. The deadline for signing the purchase and sale agreement was set for May 20th, placing the onus on the seller, effectively sidelining the buyer in this scenario.

Jonathan Rea inquired about the potential for developing 4 to 8 multi-family dwellings on the property, suggesting a developer, possibly Habitat for Humanity, might purchase it at a lower net cost.

Laurie Connors responded that working with Habitat for Humanity is a likely path, given their established relationship with NAHC, but emphasized that any development would be a long-term project due to existing commitments.

Regarding the question of whether the land would be sold or donated to Habitat for Humanity, Laurie Connors clarified it would be gifted, contingent on subdivision and septic system capacities. The envisioned development could include two buildings, either duplexes or four-unit structures, influenced by septic system constraints.

Scott Stocklin asked if town meeting decisions would be final regarding the project's specifics. Laurie Connors confirmed that the vote was primarily about land acquisition, with

possibilities for affordable housing, open space, and passive recreation, like trails and a scenic overlook, being communicated.

John Rapa queried about the placement of potential housing, with Laurie Connors indicating it would be towards the parcel's northern end, near Whitney Street, due to frontage requirements. She also mentioned the property already has access via a gravel driveway, which would serve both housing and recreational uses.

Ken Picard expressed concerns about the proximity of proposed housing to railroad tracks, citing previous experiences with similar situations. Laurie Connors reassured that the housing would be situated a considerable distance from the tracks, with discussions ongoing regarding the railroad's influence and potential eminent domain issues.

Laurie Connors also addressed inquiries about MBTA compliance and the strategic importance of the project for maintaining affordable housing stock, emphasizing that small-scale projects are essential for compliance and that the MBTA zoning might not significantly impact the town's housing goals.

In summary, the discussion covered the strategic planning and considerations for developing the property for affordable housing, open space, and recreational use, with a focus on long-term planning and compliance with housing regulations.

- **Pickleball Soundproofing (\$54,500)**

A few years back, the Community Preservation Committee (CPC) funded the development of pickleball courts. However, it was soon realized that the sport generates a considerable amount of noise, notably the constant "ping" sounds echoing in the gym, disturbing both workers during the day and residents living close to the six courts. To address this, the project proposes attaching soundproofing materials to the existing fences. These dark green, visually appealing barriers have received positive feedback from other communities for their sound dampening qualities. The funding for this initiative would come from new revenue.

Jonathan Rea inquired about the durability of the soundproofing material, wondering if it would last indefinitely. Laurie Connors admitted the lifespan is uncertain but speculated it might align with the fencing's longevity, promising to gather more specific product details for further clarification.

- **Affordable Housing Funds to the Northborough Affordable Housing Corporation (\$126,856)**

Laurie Connors introduced the next item, detailing the proposal to allocate \$126,856 to the Northborough Affordable Housing Corporation. Laurie Connors highlighted that the organization is currently preparing for various projects, particularly emphasizing a significant one on Boundary Street. The goal is to accumulate funds to enable progress on this project. Laurie Connors explained that there are funds previously allocated by the town meeting for housing, which remain unspent across four or five fiscal years.

Jason Little added that there are four or five articles from past allocations still open within the CPA fund transfers. These funds are available but require projects to be presented for their use.

Laurie Connors concluded that these funds could be accessed through a joint approval process involving both the Community Preservation Committee and the Select Board.

- **First Parish Church Steeple Repairs (\$210,000)**

The First Parish Church is seeking \$210,000 for steeple repairs. Past efforts to paint the steeple proved insufficient due to significant weather damage, necessitating the replacement of wood stairs, flooring, trusses, and cradle. Currently, the church cannot use its bell for fear of causing structural damage. The Community Preservation Committee (CPC) views this project as crucial for the community, given the church's historical and communal value.

There were inquiries about the property being privately owned and the financial responsibilities for the repairs. Laurie Connors confirmed that while the property is privately owned, the majority of repair costs would be funded by the community through the CPC, with additional funding sought from a grant application to the Massachusetts Historical Commission.

Discussion also covered how the town can fund repairs for private properties. Laurie Connors mentioned that the CPC could enforce a preservation restriction, similar to measures taken with other historical properties like White Cliffs. This ensures that privately owned properties of historical significance receive the necessary support while maintaining their character for public benefit.

Concerns were raised about the implications of historical preservation restrictions, particularly in terms of renovation limitations and the overall value of investing public funds into private properties with such constraints. Laurie Connors highlighted that properties must be deemed significant by the historic district commission to qualify for such projects, emphasizing the balance between preserving historical integrity and addressing modern needs.

- **Wachusett Aqueduct Historic Marker (\$4,729)**

The Aqueduct historic marker needs to be replaced after the original was stolen in October. The plan is to install a new marker, with the Community Preservation Committee (CPC) being informed that it will be attached to the pole in a more secure manner to deter theft in the future.

- **White Cliffs Bond Payment (\$164,641)**

Laurie Connors introduced the topic of White Cliffs Bond payments, highlighting that the upcoming payment would be the seventh installment, totaling \$164,641.

- **CPA Administrative Expense Account (\$41,000)**

Laurie Connors discussed the CPA Administration expenses, which total \$41,000, representing 5% of the new revenue. This fund covers various costs, including appraisals, consultant fees, and legal expenses. This year, the funds were allocated for appraisal, soil testing for contamination at 432 Whitney Street, and legal fees.

John Rapa inquired whether this account would be depleted within the fiscal year. Laurie Connors explained the uncertainty surrounding the exact legal costs, indicating that there might be funds remaining, but it was unclear at the moment.

Laurie Connors mentioned that any surplus would return to the CPA unreserved fund. Jason Little elaborated on the CPA's unique structure, where project Articles remain active indefinitely until the CPC decides to close a project. However, the administrative fund is an exception, as it resets at the end of each fiscal year, with any remaining balance reverting to the CPA unreserved fund.

- **Conservation Fund (\$350,000)**

Laurie Connors explained that the last project under discussion involved the conservation fund. The open space committee had initially applied for \$350,000 to be used for open space conservation. However, the 432 Whitney Street project emerged unexpectedly after their application, leading to the committee withdrawing their initial approval and redirecting the funds towards the Whitney Street project instead. Consequently, if all proposed expenditures are sanctioned at the town meeting, new revenue would be fully allocated, leaving an unreserved fund balance of \$243,061. This balance could increase by \$200,000 should funding from DCR for the 432 Whitney Street project be secured.

Jonathan Rea sought clarification on the overall financial impact of these actions, noting that from a CPA Reserve of 1.35 million, the available funds would reduce to \$243,000, indicating a substantial draw from reserve funds rather than relying on new revenue and state matching funds. Laurie confirmed this assessment.

4. Discussion of Financial Planning Committee Recommendations and Draft Report

AND

5. Review of Capital Budget

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and Town Meeting Articles

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Jason Little highlighted the main objective: to create a report for the upcoming town meeting, which will be included in the meeting booklet. Jason Little shared last year's Financial Planning Committee report to kickstart discussions and mentioned the necessity to finalize and approve this year's report soon, considering the timeline and upcoming votes on articles.

John Rapa confirmed the item-by-item review approach, querying when a draft might be available for review to ensure thorough discussion.

Jason Little noted the need for coordination and mentioned that the focus of this year's report might differ from the previous year, especially in discussing the allocation of funds, with an emphasis on capital articles and long-term financial strategies.

Upcoming discussions include presentations from the police and fire chiefs, with expectations of brief requests from the police and more extensive discussions on capital needs from the fire department, including an update on the fire station building project.

Susan Sartori inquired about the voting schedule, emphasizing the necessity of timing the vote to coincide with or precede a joint meeting with the Select Board.

Jason Little affirmed the need for a vote on the articles by the committee, possibly delegating authority to finalize the report to the chair in collaboration with him.

John Rapa mentioned receiving a summary of articles, including capital projects and community preservation requests, which are scheduled for review and voting.

Ken Picard suggested the possibility of starting the next meeting earlier to allow sufficient time for discussion and votes. He also questioned the categorization of certain expenses as capital costs, prompting a discussion on what constitutes a capital expense within the committee's purview.

Jason Little clarified that the committee is tasked with offering recommendations on long-term financial issues, typically involving capital projects. Jason Little noted that the committee has traditionally provided input on CPA articles, and some items, though not capital in nature, are considered for their long-term financial implications.

Susan Sartori added historical context, explaining that the involvement of finance boards in CPC projects ensures comprehensive awareness and oversight of town expenditures, even if not directly related to the committee's long-range capital plans.

Jason Little concluded by clarifying the committee's capital definition policy, which involves a threshold of \$25,000 and a five-year useful life, underscoring the committee's broad scope of review and recommendation responsibilities.

6. Review Meeting Schedule

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Given the extensive agenda for the upcoming meeting, it was agreed to start at 5:00 pm.

7. Next Meeting Date – March 19, 2024

The committee unanimously agreed on the next meeting date of March 19, 2024, confirming the adjusted start time of 5:00 p.m.

8. Any Other Business to Come Before the Committee

There was no further business presented to the committee.

Adjournment

Motion to Adjourn Meeting: Initiated by Robert Babcock.

Motion Seconded: By Jonathan Rea.

Vote: John Rapa called for a vote to adjourn; it resulted in unanimous approval with all present members voting "aye."

Meeting adjourned at 7:05 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Angie Sowden". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Angie" and last name "Sowden" clearly distinguishable.

Angie Sowden
Executive Assistant to the
Town Administrator / Select Board