

TOWN OF FREETOWN

Finance Committee combined with the Board of Selectmen  
Minutes of meeting: Wednesday, May 3, 2023  
Police Station Community Room  
15 Memorial Drive, East Freetown, MA

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Meeting called to order: 6:05 PM

Finance members present: Margaret French, Christine Dupras, George Grunwald, Katie Calheta, Emily Anne Dors, and Bob Alderson

Excused: Kent Wilkins

Also present: Jared Zager, Carlos Lopes, and Trevor Matthews (BOS), Deb Pettey (Interim Town Administrator), Matthew Parent (Town Accountant), Nicole Davignon (Library Director), Cheryl Estrella (Town Clerk), Chuck Macomber (Highway Surveyor), Keven Desmarais (Health Agent), Lu-Ann Souza (Executive Assistant), and Lola Furtado (Administrative Assistant)

Omnibus Fiscal Year 24 Budget Review with Finance Committee. It is anticipated that Departments listed below will be reviewed. Others may be discussed as may come up or as they relate.

a. Library

Library Director Nicole Davignon

Mr. Bob Alderson asked about the books and magazines. Ms. Davignon stated these books and magazines are in our locations but are lending out in the network. Ms. French asked about applications for the Senior Librarian position. Ms. Davignon stated there has been six applications.

b. Town Clerk

Town Clerk Cheryl Estrella

Ms. Estrella started off by saying this was a difficult budget. Due to mandates with The Voters Act and the state mandates. She is in charge of 3 departments 161 Town Clerk, 162 Elections, and 163 Registrars. At the RMV when you register for a Real ID you are automatically registered to vote. Any changes made, I receive and send out a notification via mail and a vote by mail application whether or not an election is scheduled. Any changes from Social Security Office, Transitional Assistance, Welfare, SSI. Any State agencies you are automatically enrolled. Public is notified by mail for any reason so that they are aware of changes that have been made so that there is no fraud. Postage and paper have gone up. We have 4 scheduled elections in 2024. In 2024, out of the 52 weeks, 44 weeks will be strictly dedicated to doing election work. We have 6912 registered voters in town. It is a state mandate to send out notices if you do not answer a town census, you are put on an inactive list. If you do not vote or sign a petition, come

June of that year, all registered voters receive a state mandated confirmation card which we have to provide postage to and from the voter. Once you reply on the confirmation card you will get reactivated. If there is no activity on your name or your account for two Federal elections, approximately four years you automatically get dropped off.

Town Clerk clerical wages decreased due to the part time person leaving. Timm McIntosh promoted to Assistant Town Clerk. Clerical hours were also raised to 40 hours a week if necessary. Mr. Alderson asked about the 8% increase of pay. Compared to other Towns, we are number 29 out of 32 towns. Selectmen Lopes mentioned how much we appreciate Ms. Estrella and questioned the 8% increase as well. Selectman Matthews stated salaries in town, are union and contractual, COLA's every year, increases and fringe benefits. Ms. Estrella stated she does not participate in the town health insurance, or eligible for the stipend. Selectmen Zager stated what if the Town Clerk walks out tomorrow, what are we going to have to pay to replace her. He would like to see employees in the middle of the road for salaries. Ms. Christina Dupras asked if he thinks other employees are in the middle of the road, and how can you do it for one employee and not another? Everybody here is underpaid. Selectmen Lopes stated he is looking for guidance from the Finance Department. Ms. Katie Calheta asked about staffing, assistant town clerk is 36 hours bumping him up to 40 hours a week, and a part-time clerk for 16 hours a week. She asked for other towns comparable staffing for comparison. Lakeville is hoping to get a third person in and waiting for it to be passed at their town meeting. Lakeville's population is 10,300 and the town clerk gets paid Seventy-Three Thousand, Seven Hundred and Forty-One Dollars and has been there for 25 years. Rehoboth has 3 full time and 1 part time with 10,300 people. Rehoboth Town Clerk salary is Eighty-Four Thousand, Four Hundred and Ninety-Six Dollars, she has been there for 8 years. Dighton has 8101 people and 3 full time staff. Their clerk is not certified. He is paid Seventy-Five Thousand. Town and Assistant Town Clerks are leaving in droves and if elected they will be starting at those salaries. Ms. Calheta stated there was a significant bump from 2021 to 2022, roughly 11% increase. The basis for that was just trying to play catch up. Last year she did not ask for a huge increase. She wanted to prove herself worthy of it. Mr. Grunwald and Selectmen Matthews stated this is not an unreasonable request. Ms. Calheta thinks this is justified due to other towns and salaries for this year. Ms. Pettey stated Ms. Estrella is an elected official she is paid that salary whether she works 10 hours a week or 55 hours a week which is normal. The other department heads get time and a half over 40 hours. Ms. Estrella does not, so this is it for her. Selectmen Matthews was ok with elections increases. Ms. Estrella noted the elections for next year are the March presidential primary, the April town election, the September state primary and the November presidential. Vote by mail is mandatory for state and federal elections. Paper and postage have gone up. Ms. French asked about the election coordinator. Ms. Estrella stated it takes a tremendous amount of time to prepare and maintain elections. Other towns have hired a temporary seasonal employee who is trained on the state system administrative functions for 18 hours, 22 weeks. Ms. Pettey asked if this person will be able to oversee the in person early voting at the Police Station

Community Room because the early voting at town hall is extremely difficult giving our space constraints. Ms. Estrella said yes.

c. Highway

Highway Surveyor Chuck Macomber

Mr. Macomber started off personnel is all contractual. For repairs and maintenance of roadways he is asking for an additional Forty-Five Thousand Dollars. Last year with the drought and not needing to mow they were able to rebuild sidewalks. This year with a mild winter and no plowing, they were able to rebuild catch basins and putting in drainage systems. He has requested a Fifteen Thousand Dollar transfer from personal to carry us through the rest of this fiscal year. A Fifteen Thousand Dollar increase for repair and maintenance to vehicles. Our fleet is not old but through the generosity of the town and different grants its crazy how much it costs to fix new vehicles. Asking for a Two Hundred and Fifty Dollar increase for rental and leases. Five Hundred Dollar increase for tires. Two Thousand Dollars for oil including the COA building. One Thousand Dollars increase for parts and accessories. Two Thousand for other supplies. Ms. French asked about the Thirty-Six Thousand Dollars highway signs and lines which was the same amount as last year. Mr. Macomber stated this has kept us afloat for the last two years. We had used all the money for road repairs, and the money we would normally spend to stripe the roads and signs, we have used in other places. The company to stripe the roads has us on a waiting list. Selectmen Lopes asked about updates on the new truck. The dump truck was order about a year ago is supposed to be delivered to the upfitter who actually builds the truck at the end of June, we will be lucky if we see that truck in January. The pickup truck was ordered the same time and the company we have the contract with won't answer the phones. Last he heard is Ford issued a VIN number for the truck but no build date. It could be here tomorrow or next January. He is requesting a 6% raise. He would like to see his men get a 6% raise. He praised his workers as the best and a top-notch crew.

d. Health Inspection Services

Board of Heath Agent Keven Desmarais

Trash Contracts- Whether it is the solid waste stream or the recycling stream. There is an increase in the rate per ton. Our recycling costs more to get rid of per ton than it does for solid waste. We encourage people to recycle more. The contract is up next year 2024 for the trash hauling. Borges Brothers has helped us get a better rate on our recycling. One Hundred and Ten Dollars (\$110.00) a ton. We have a good relation with Crapo Hill. SEMASS is One Hundred and Twenty-Five Dollars a ton (\$125.00). Right now, we are going up to Seventy-Six Dollars (\$76.00) and Eighty-One Dollars (\$81.00) a ton. Selectmen Lopes asked about having Amazon carry our town bags for delivery to homes. Mr. Desmarais stated he will have Senior Clerk Humberta St. Louis look into it with Waste Zero.

Health Inspection Services-Contractual increases for Ms. St. Louis salary. No increase to Dale Barrows, 2% increase for the Public Health Nurse, and Mr. Desmarais increase of Five

Thousand Dollars (\$5,000.00). A 7.5% increase. Ms. Calheta asked about the assistant position at 15 hours a week and that the plan was to phase that position out. Mr. Desmarais stated the position is still needed with all the certification classes, health issues, 5 weeks of vacation and having someone in the office while he does inspections or vice versa. Advertising budget is for public hearings, notifying abutters in the newspaper. Health Professional Tech is for technical, engineering oversight of the industrial zone with Excel.

2. Discussion, and vote on The Board of Selectmen's and Finance Committee recommendations on each warrant article for the Annual and Special Town Meeting on 6/5/23.

Article: 1 Transferring Funds into the Conservation Land Fund - Ms. French stated Conservation Commission has One Hundred and Four Thousand in their land fund. Last year it was on town meeting to transfer money from the rollback taxes. Land that is under chapter 61a, get a discount on their taxes until it comes out if they want to sell their land or no longer want to have it under that protection. They have to pay back 7 or 10 years of taxes and that is called rollback taxes. The Conservation Commission requests that money goes into their land fund, so they have the funds if something comes up like the town or Conservation Commission has first right of refusal on any property that is being taken out of the protection. Currently there is a piece of property that they are looking to buy for Forty-Eight Thousand Five Hundred (\$48,500.00). That can come out of the land fund. Seventy-Three Thousand, One Hundred-Nine Dollars and Fifty-Nine Cents (\$73,109.59) is the amount of rollback taxes that are on the books currently.

- Motion to recommend made by Katie Calheta and seconded Christine Dupras
- Vote: 5 yes, 0 nay, 1 abstain

Article: 2 Authorizing Board of Assessors to Enter into Pilot Agreements – Ms. Pettey stated we have been in litigation with some of the companies that operate the solar farms for 5 or more years. We are at a point that we are going to settle them and part of the settlement is to enter into these pilot agreements. A pilot agreement is a payment in lieu of taxes. Mike McCue and the Assessors have an issue that we do not have the same remedy if they do not pay. If you don't pay your real estate taxes, we can take your property away. But with the pilot we do not have that. Hopefully the language that Town Counsel has been working on gives us a remedy if they do not pay. It evens out the taxes. They put in a solar farm and the value is very high in the beginning and with depreciation it drops off. Entering into a pilot gives us more of an even income for a 20-year period. The town and the solar farm can budget accordingly. It sets a precedent for the town and it is a good figure.

- Motion to recommend made by Katie Calheta and seconded by Christine Dupras
- Vote: was approved in a unanimous roll call vote

Article: 3 Authorizing Board of Assessors Contract Term in Excess of 3 Years – Ms. Pettey stated we are not allowed to exceed a three-year contract; this is requesting we go to a five-

year contract. The company that does the property appraisal and revalue cycle will be in sync with the state.

- Motion to take no position made by Bob Alderson and seconded by Emily Dors
- All in favor of not taking action
- Vote: was approved in a unanimous roll call vote

Article: 4 Funding for the Fire Station Renovation/Addition – Ms. Pettey stated the funding of the Fire Station addition renovation is approximately Three Million Dollars (\$3,000,000.00). We are pulling it for two different funding sources, this one is coming out of free cash. Which needs a level of vote approval of fifty percent (50%) majority vote.

Article: 5 Additional Funding for Fire Station Renovation/Addition – same as above but from the Capital Stabilization Fund you need three quarters majority vote.

- Motion made to recommend Articles 4 and 5 made by Emily Dors and seconded by Katie Calheta
- Vote: was approved in a unanimous roll call vote

Article: 6 Sale of South Main Street with Deed Restrictions – Selectmen Matthews stated we are selling the red building at the 4 Corners with deed restrictions so it maintains the character of the town and the Historical Committee criteria.

- Motion made to recommend made by Emily Dors and seconded by Katie Calheta
- Vote: was approved in a unanimous roll call vote

Article: 7 Purchase Temporary Office Space (Pods) for additional space at the Council on Aging Building Selectmen Zager stated this is an immediate fix for the Seniors who need more space. This is reallocating money from a prior vote.

Article 8: prior year fiscal bill

- Motion made to recommend Articles 7 and 8 made by Bob Alderson and seconded by George Grunwald
- Vote: was approved in a unanimous roll call vote

Article: 9 Funding to the Capital Stabilization Fund

Discussion to fill in an amount on the floor in the event an article fails this number would be adjusted during the meeting.

- Motion to recommend a base on the amount to be filled in on Town Meeting floor made by Katie Calheta and seconded by Christine Dupras
- Vote: was approved in a unanimous roll call vote
- Motion to recommend Articles 1 thru 9 made by Selectmen Zager and seconded by Selectmen Lopes
- Vote: was approved in a unanimous roll call vote

Motion to adjourn: Bob Alderson; seconded: Emily Anne Dors

Vote: was approved in a unanimous vote  
Meeting adjourned: 8:42 PM