

## **Town of Freetown Finance Committee**

Minutes of Meeting Held on September 25, 2023  
Freetown Police Station Community Room,  
15 Memorial Drive, East Freetown

**Present:** Chairman Margaret M. French, Robert H. Alderson, Katie L. Calheta, Kara Lees, Kent Wilkins,

**Absent:** Emily A. Dors, George L. Grunwald

**Also present:** Fire Chief Harrie Ashley, Jr. (appearing in-person), Assistant Assessor & Moderator Mike McCue (appearing remotely)

The meeting was called to order at 6:01pm. The meeting was audio recorded by Recordings Clerk Timm McIntosh, with video recording to be posted on the Town's YouTube channel.

*Note:* The Finance Committee took the agenda out of order to hold discussions with Chief Ashley and Mr. McCue first. These minutes are presented in posted agenda order.

### **Discuss & Vote on Minutes – 7/12/2023**

Mr. Wilkins noted that his name is misspelled; Ms. French apologizes and will correct.

Motion to approve the minutes with the noted correction made by Ms. Calheta, seconded by Mr. Wilkins, passes three votes to none, with Mr. Alderson and Ms. Lees abstaining.

### **Discuss & Vote on Recommendation on Guidelines for Raises in FY '25**

Ms. French says she put this item on tonight's agenda in an effort to avoid what happened last year, noting that many department heads requested and received large raises. She would like to present a recommendation to the Board of Selectmen before they get to budget season, to let everyone know the thoughts of the Finance Committee. Ms. Calheta notes it was a market adjustment last year, so she does not anticipate it being the same this year, also noting that the Finance Committee doesn't have control of many department head salaries. Ms. French agrees, saying pay rates set by contract are out of the Finance Committee's hands. She thinks the Board of Selectmen are looking at 2-3% raises for the upcoming union contracts.

Mr. Alderson believes the pay rate increases are not sustainable, that the Town is deficit spending and department heads are only comparing themselves to other communities that feature pay increases. Ms. French notes that the Town Clerk was extremely thorough in her salary comparison. Mr. Alderson says he is not saying the services the taxpayers are getting are not enough, they are sufficient, but the Finance Committee's job is to look out for the taxpayer and at some point there has to be a compromise, noting that the same is also true for teachers, firefighters, police officers and public works employees. He says that when someone is requesting a 10% raise, it is a logical question to ask if they are doing 10% more work.

Ms. French does not want the Finance Committee to decide raises right now, merely set guidelines to tell department heads what they would not be opposed to. Mr. Alderson and Ms. Calheta agree that there are always extraordinary cases; Ms. French says that is when department heads can come to the Finance Committee to explain the request, that this is merely a guideline for budget planning. Mr. Alderson reminds everyone that the Finance Committee's job is to take care of the taxpayer.

Ms. Lees asks how flexible timing is on this, as she is concerned about whether or not the Town will see the full grant numbers. Ms. French reiterates that this would just be a guideline for the budget process, that the Finance Committee would report it to the Board of Selectmen who can disseminate it accordingly, but thinks there is time to think about this before they need to send the recommendation.

Mr. Alderson thinks 2% is a good number, that the taxpayer won't be amenable to much more than that. He believes the economy is dangerously close to tanking, and sooner or later we will be eliminating people. He states 90% of the Town's budget is personnel, which only goes up, never down.

The Finance Committee agrees to hold on this until after the October Town Meeting, but before budgets go out in January. Mr. Alderson would like to meet with the Board of Selectmen to hash this out; Ms. Calheta agrees that a joint meeting would be a good idea. This will be revisited in November.

**Discuss & Make Recommendations on Warrant for Special Town Meeting, scheduled for October 23, 2023**

Ms. French says the preliminary free cash number is \$3.2 million.

**Article regarding Creation Opioid Settlement Stabilization Fund**

**Article regarding authorization for Board of Health to expend opioid settlement funding**

Ms. French says we first saw these articles last year but they were pulled. She explains the Town is required to spend money obtained from the large opioid settlement on health-related things, but right now the \$15,000 is just sitting in free cash; the first article would put it where it needs to go. Mr. Alderson notes that it'll take a two-thirds majority at a Town Meeting to get it out of a stabilization fund; Ms. French says that is correct. Mr. Alderson is concerned that nobody will tell the taxpayers how this money is being spent. Ms. French says there are a number of ideas being floated by the Board of Health, including speakers to high school students and working with Calvary Cares, a local organization that takes care of families dealing with drug use and rehabilitation; Mr. Alderson is opposed to Calvary Cares. He asks if there are any other options beyond authorizing the Board of Health; Ms. French says there are no other options. Mr. Alderson is concerned that the schools don't already have anti-drug programs, that this money should be going to the schools; Ms. French says that is the Board of Health's goal, to put on programs for the schools. Ms. Lees asks if these programs would be open to the community or if they would only be for students; Ms. French says that is something the Board of Health can discuss.

Motion to recommend creating the opioid settlement stabilization fund and to recommend funding the opioid settlement stabilization fund, made by Mr. Alderson and seconded by Ms. Calheta, passes unanimously.

**Article regarding funding OPEB (Other Post-Employment Benefits)**

Ms. French says this is a standard article and is still under-funded.

Motion to recommend the article made by Mr. Alderson, seconded by Ms. Lees, passes unanimously.

**Article regarding capital project funding from free cash**

Ms. French says the Building Commissioner has told her that he drives a 2007 Camry that does not do well in the weather and terrain, which is not at all suitable for a Building Commissioner. He recommends a 4-wheel drive replacement. The same is true with the pickup truck used by the Facilities Department, due to many of the same issues. Mr. Alderson notes these will take a while to obtain if this article passes. Ms. Lees asks if this funding is sufficient for 4-wheel drive vehicles, and what will come of the old vehicles; Ms. French and Mr. Alderson agree they'll find a use or be declared surplus.

Motion to recommend the article made by Mr. Alderson, seconded by Mr. Wilkins, passes unanimously.

**Article regarding an increase to whole estate allowance**

**Article regarding higher asset limits on certain real estate taxes**

**Article regarding an increase in gross receipts limit and whole estate limit qualifications**

**Article regarding allowing an annual increase in the exemption from real estate taxes**

Ms. French invited Mr. McCue to the meeting to get a better picture of what these articles are all about. Mr. McCue says these are a series of articles to allow the Board of Assessors to provide better assistance to elderly residents. The articles help combat inflation, as the Town's current exemptions are at or near state minimums. The first article maximizes what the Assessors are allowed to take into consideration for one of the programs. The second article largely does the same as the first, but in another program, but also ties the increase to inflation, based on an increase in the Consumer Price Index, as reported annually by the Massachusetts Department of Revenue. The third article is largely the same. Finally, the fourth article increases the amount of money taken off taxes under clause 17F, which would also be tied to the increase in the Consumer Price Index.

Ms. Calheta asks about the second article not containing a set number; Mr. McCue explains if the first article passes, that would set the new baseline, and the Assessors would apply the Consumer Price Index figure to the \$40,000/\$55,000 number to create the new amount. Mr. Alderson asks why the Assessors are not aligning with federal numbers; Mr. McCue says the numbers are required by law and set by the Department of Revenue (DOR), who tries to mirror the federal numbers. Ms. Lees says the Consumer Price Index is calculated monthly, asking if the month needs to be named; Mr. McCue says that is not necessary, as it has to be tied to the number set by DOR, who reports it annually. With no further questions by the Finance Committee, Mr. McCue disconnects from the meeting at 6:11pm.

Motion to recommend the four Board of Assessors articles, made by Ms. Lees and seconded by Ms. Calheta, passes four votes to none, with Mr. Alderson abstaining.

**Article regarding designation of the Selectmen as appointing authority for By-Law Review Committee**

Mr. McIntosh is also the Recordings Clerk for the By-Law Review Committee, and explains that the initial article creating the Committee had a variety of appointing authorities; this article would simply that to have just one appointing authority. Mr. McIntosh also reminds the Finance Committee that the Finance Committee does not have a representative on the By-Law Review Committee.

Motion to recommend the article, made by Ms. Calheta and seconded by Ms. Lees, passes unanimously.

**Article regarding the make-up & appointments of the By-Law Review Committee**

Ms. French says this article does not have a financial component, so the Finance Committee does not need to take a position. She also notes the same is true on the previous article.

Motion to take no position on the article, made by Mr. Alderson and seconded by Mr. Wilkins, passes unanimously.

**Article regarding an increase in funding in the Council on Aging personnel budget**

Ms. French guesses the Council on Aging has been busier than expected and is seeking an increase in hours. Mr. Alderson says the Council on Aging is only open 4 days a week. Mr. Wilkins says it is a partial day on Fridays; Mr. Alderson says it is closed on Fridays. He asks if they are creating new positions, or is this person seeking a raise. Ms. Calheta reads the explanation, which states it is for additional hours; Mr. Wilkins says that is his understanding as well, and Ms. French agrees. Mr. Alderson wants to know why they need additional hours, and would like to know why before the Finance Committee votes. The Committee will return to this article at their next meeting.

**Article regarding amending Article 3, Section 3.5 of the Town's general by-laws**

Mr. Alderson says he is as a loss as to why we are discussing bicycle permits, saying they are trying to take control with everything. Mr. Wilkins would like to table this article. The Finance Committee will revisit this at a future meeting.

**Article regarding purchase of new UTV rescue trailer and other equipment for the Fire Department**

**Article regarding the purchase of extrication and rescue equipment for the Fire Department**

**Article regarding purchase of firefighting foam**

Chief Ashley says the first two articles were triggered from a common event, the recent MBTA-related training. He says for the first 38 years of his career, his job was to protect the people, but in his new role, he must also protect the Fire Department. He says that technology is constantly evolving, including technology in firefighting equipment, and that the training exposed some issues and shortfalls that Freetown (and the region as a whole) have. Chief Ashley says he'd be negligent if he didn't try to get prepared for the coming changes. The research he has conducted shows that the most common incident would be train vs. automobile collisions, which would be similar in damage to highway collisions, but would likely require off-road terrain, as collisions could be pushed some distance down the tracks. After further research, Chief Ashley landed on specialty Utility Terrain Vehicles (UTVs) as the type of equipment they need. These UTVs are specially built trailers that are fully enclosed, seat six with room for equipment, and come at a cost of approximately \$20,000-22,000, though he does not have an

exact quote yet. The article also includes other related equipment including specialized stretchers, bringing the total to \$80,000.

On the extrication article, referred to as the Jaws of Life article, Chief Ashley says the department currently has two units, but both are heavy and bulky, involving a gas-powered power head that must be connected to the tools, making them cumbersome to use. They get by when the department is on the side of the road with ample space and help to operate, but those might not exist in a train collision. This equipment has evolved, and there are now battery powered options that are far more functional in certain situations like ones we could be faced with in the future. He says they attempted to get new extrication equipment with the last two fire engines the department purchased, but as those costs rose, they equipment was taken out. Chief Ashley says they attempted to get grants, but have not been successful. The article includes funding for two sets of jaws plus a new airbag system, which would replace one in place since the mid 1980s, and a more complete "mass casualty" kit, which includes equipment that the Department currently lacks and would otherwise rely on mutual aid for. Chief Ashley says he isn't about getting new and shiny things, he's only asking for items that he feels the Department needs.

Finally, the firefighting foam the Department had was full of PFAS, a known carcinogen. Chief Ashley says the Department was fortunate enough to work with DEP to safely dispose of it in an environmentally friendly way, but the department is now left with no foam. The new foam would be environmentally friendly and would not create a hazardous material situation just by using it. He says he attempted to find state funding for this, but there was none to be had.

Ms. French says she's heard that the State would be giving us equipment with the coming MBTA changes; Chief Ashley says what the State tells the press is different than the reality. Ms. French says she learned of this from the Department of Transportation; Chief Ashley says there was a bond bill included in the DOT budget that had earmarks in it for cities like New Bedford, Fall River and Taunton, so if they can get that it would be great, but otherwise that's just mutual aid. He notes that there is a meeting with a representative from the Legislature soon, but there has not been any money so far. He adds that the training was paid for by the communities, as well.

Ms. Calheta asks about the lifespan and costs of the batteries in the new equipment. Chief Ashley says they are all Dewalt batteries and equipment, which feature interchangeable batteries. He does not recall needing to replace any of the Dewalt batteries or equipment the Department currently utilizes, and they are all 5-6 years old; he would expect the lifespan to be about 10 years, and not a major expense to replace them.

Mr. Alderson is concerned about electric vehicles and how those batteries are put out if they catch fire; Chief Ashley says you would not use foam on those sorts of fires, you basically let it burn and take care of the environment around it. There is no practical solution at this point.

Ms. Lees asks about storage of the UTVs and equipment. Chief Ashley says everything would be housed at Station 3, as they will have the space after the renovations and the other stations – Station 1 particularly – are too cramped.

Chief Ashley departs after speaking to the Finance Committee; the Finance Committee votes on their recommendation after they return to discussing the Articles later in the meeting.

Motion to recommend the articles, made by Mr. Alderson and seconded by Mr. Wilkins, passes unanimously.

#### **Article regarding the addition of funds to the Conservation Land Fund**

Ms. French says this is a recurring article regarding the roll-back taxes. She says at the beginning of the year, there was almost \$105,000 in this account, and there was a purchase of land for \$48,500, leaving \$73,109 as of July. If approved, this would bring the fund to \$146,586, which can only be used to conserve land. She explains that the Town has a right of first refusal on certain lands being sold; if the Town refuses and the land is sold, a roll-back tax must be paid, which is where this funding comes from.

Motion to recommend the article, made by Ms. Calheta and seconded by Mr. Wilkins, passes four votes to none, with Mr. Alderson abstaining.

Ms. French informs the Finance Committee that the warrant originally had a second article regarding land deeded to the Conservation Commission by the MBTA, but the MBTA changed their mind. The article needed tweaking and the feeling was that they should be paying for that, not the Town, so the article was pulled.

**Article regarding amending the protective by-laws for stormwater management**

Ms. French notes this is not a financial article.

Motion to take no position on the article, made by Mr. Alderson and seconded by Ms. Lees, passes unanimously.

**Article regarding the repair & maintenance on Town ways**

Ms. French explains the Highway Department was able to do additional road work last winter due to the lack of snow, so they are planning on that again if the weather is the same. This additional funding would be used to do assorted work. She notes the streets are not listed in the article, as to not pigeonhole the department, but that they primarily appear to be focused in the Assonet Bay Shores area. Mr. Alderson asks about unused funds and whether or not this was a one-time ask or something that would be rolled into the budget; Ms. French says the money would be returned, and it is a one-time ask. She also notes the money would only be able to use for the stated purpose. Mr. Alderson agrees that the roads in Assonet Bay Shores need to be addressed, as they will only get worse.

Motion to recommend the article, made by Mr. Alderson and seconded by Ms. Calheta, passes unanimously.

**Article regarding supplementing Police, Fire & Communications IT budgets**

Mr. Alderson asks if anybody has looked at what we are spending on IT services, as every department is being hit with these fees; he suggests hiring "a grandmaster of computers" to take care of this. Mr. Wilkins asks for Mr. McIntosh's thoughts; Mr. McIntosh says the Town contracts with at least one IT consultant. Ms. Calheta asks if we really have a choice on this one; Ms. French says no. Ms. Calheta questions how these were not already included, saying that it seems like something that was forgotten. Ms. French says that she's aware of IT upgrades in these departments, suggesting they are a product of that.

Motion to recommend the article, made by Ms. Calheta and seconded by Mr. Wilkins, passes unanimously.

**Article regarding codification of the Town's General & Zoning By-Laws**

Ms. French asks Mr. McIntosh, who is the Assistant Town Clerk, if she is correct in assuming this would be essentially a database for the Town's bylaws. Mr. McIntosh says that is the case, that codification would provide the Town with a far more modern and interactive view of the bylaws, as opposed to an impossible to update printout. Ms. Lees asks who this would be maintained by; Mr. McIntosh says it would be maintained by the Office of the Town Clerk.

Motion to recommend the article, made by Mr. Wilkins and seconded by Mr. Alderson, passes unanimously.

**Article regarding the establishment of a Commission on Disabilities**

Motion to take no position, made by Mr. Alderson and seconded by Ms. Calheta, passes unanimously.

**Article regarding authorization of the Board of Assessors to enter in a PILOT Agreement**

Ms. French explains that this is a similar article to ones seen at previous Town Meetings; as Ms. Lees was not a member of the Finance Committee, Ms. French briefly explains PILOT agreements. Ms. Lees asks what the term of the agreement is for; Ms. Calheta explains this article allows the agreement to be drawn up and entered into. Ms. French notes the Finance Committee recommended this article previously.

Motion to recommend the article, made by Mr. Wilkins and seconded by Mr. Alderson, passes unanimously.

Articles regarding unpaid bills from Fiscal Year 2021 and Fiscal Year 2023

Motion to recommend the articles, made by Mr. Alderson and seconded by Mr. Wilkins, passes unanimously.

Article regarding the purchase of roll off containers for the Transfer Station

Motion to recommend the article, made by Mr. Alderson and seconded by Mr. Wilkins, passes unanimously.

Article regarding the purchase of electronic voting equipment for Town Meeting

Ms. French explains that these are handheld voting clickers for Town Meeting. Mr. Alderson asks who programs these, as computer systems can be hacked. Ms. French explains the system would be programmed by the Town Clerk, and people can simply vote yes or no, making Town Meeting more efficient. She believes this equipment would get more people to take part in voting at Town Meeting.

Motion to recommend the article, made by Mr. Alderson and seconded by Ms. Calheta, passes unanimously.

Article regarding authorization for the Board of Selectmen to enter into solar power purchase agreements for the Police Station

Article regarding authorization for the Board of Selectmen to enter into solar power purchase agreements for Freetown Elementary School

Motion to recommend the articles, made by Mr. Alderson and seconded by Mr. Wilkins, passes unanimously.

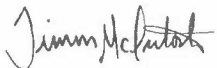
Articles regarding the funding of the Stabilization Fund and the Capital Stabilization Fund

Ms. Lees asks if the dollar amounts noted (\$100,000 and \$1M, respectively) are normal; Ms. French says the dollar amounts are typically whatever is leftover at the end of the meeting, that money is being put away as much as possible to fund a variety of capital projects that are coming down the line. Mr. Alderson says this money depletes free cash, which impacts the tax payer; he thinks this is a lot of money. Ms. French says the money in these accounts are intested and have a big return, which is why we are seeing such a high free cash figure. Mr. Alderson asks how this effects the Fire Station addition, asking where that money is coming from. Ms. French says the Town has already voted on the Fire Station addition at a previous Town Meeting, with money coming from free cash and assorted grant money, so that project is already paid for. Mr. Alderson would like to see how much money is currently in the Stabilization accounts before voting; the Finance Committee will revisit this article.

The Finance Committee decides to meet again Wednesday, October 4<sup>th</sup>. Mr. Alderson would like to see a list of what the Town is paying for in vehicle and equipment leases, as well as a list of what the Town is insuring; he believes the Town is insuring things that do not need to be insured.

At 7:41, motion made by Mr. Alderson, seconded by Mr. Wilkins, to adjourn; motion carries unanimously.

Respectfully submitted by:



Timothy McIntosh, Recordings Clerk

List of Documents Used by the Finance Committee for this meeting

- Draft minutes of meeting on July 12, 2023
- Draft of warrant for October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2023 Special Town Meeting