

Bd of Finance/Selectmen Minutes
Special Meeting May 13, 2020 via Zoom

Board of Finance members present: Susan Haxo, James Richardson, Eric Schoenfeld, Robyn Kasler, David Robinson, Luke Tanner (joined later)

Selectmen present: Tim Angevine, Craig Nelson, Alexandra Papp

Also present: Colleen Frisbie, Town Treasurer, members of the public

The meeting was opened at 7:00 pm by chair Susan Haxo. She took a roll call attendance and noted that the meeting was being recorded.

1. *D. Robinson moved to accept the minutes of May 6, 2020 special meeting.* Second by E. Schoenfeld. Roll call vote was taken, all in favor, the motion carried 5-0-0.

2. Discussion and possible action on compensation comparables: E. Schoenfeld read a statement regarding the board's role in comparing salaries with surrounding towns and moving the budget forward. R. Kasler noted some employees are getting the "short end of the stick" and are we worried about them? Discussion followed. T. Angevine stated that he is willing to forego his 2% increase as salaries need to be adjusted sooner rather than later. D. Robinson noted the \$12,000 in the Compensation Review Fund line is meant to be used to make adjustments after further study. He suggested that it be raised to \$15,000. It is not to pay for a comprehensive study, that should be done further down the road.

R. Kasler moved to make the proposed changes to town salaries and increase the employee compensation line to \$15,000. D. Robinson second. A roll call vote was taken of both the Finance Board and Board of Selectmen. All in favor, the motion carried Bd Finance: 6-0-0, Bd Selectmen: 3-0-0.

3. *D. Robinson moved to send the amended budget to the town for comment.* Second by L. Tanner. Discussion followed regarding the process for the public to comment: email, postcards, survey. It was pointed out that the budget needs to be updated and the board needs to approve the updates before it can be sent out. D. Robinson withdrew his motion.

J. Richardson moved to adjourn at 7:55 pm. Second by E. Schoenfeld. Roll call vote was taken, all in favor.

Respectfully submitted,

Joanne C. Tiedmann

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When we started this exercise, we were trying to answer one question: how does the compensation for town employees stack up to their counterparts in other, similarly situated towns.

Our goal was to see if we could get them around the midpoint, the median, or maybe even a couple of percent better than that. We did not want to put them at the very high end of the salary range, or the very low end.

Because of limitations of time and resources, we had to discount or ignore some factors that could have affected the numbers. For instance, what if the counterparts in other towns typically had BA degrees, but our employees had Masters or other advanced degrees, or more specialized licensing? We simply did not have the time or resources to go into that level of granularity. However, we have built a “compensation review fund” into the budget, so that when we’ll have some flexibility if we CAN get to that granular level.

What if the employees in the other towns averaged, say, ten years of experience, but our folks had more? Those weren’t numbers we could get under our tight budget deadline.

What about performance reviews? Well, from what we can gather, the town hasn’t regularly been doing performance reviews.

Frankly, it’s mind-boggling that the town doesn’t have a Human Resources officer, to make sure performance reviews get done, to bring in someone with expertise in compensation issues, and to deal with issues in the workplace. I, for one, hope the town will consider adding such a position in the future. I also support the idea of creating a compensation committee to do regular reviews.

In any case, what the compensation study showed was that, in general, our employee salaries were not keeping pace with their counterparts in other towns. So we’re proposing moving them to that median level. There are a couple of notable exceptions to that. Our tax collector was originally hired at a low salary, and told that when she received official certification, the salary would be increased to 30-dollars an hour. Now, that would still be quite a bit below the median, but the raise is so dramatic that we didn’t feel it would be appropriate to go all the way to the median.

And in order to fill the Zoning Enforcement Officer position that had been vacant for some time, it was apparently necessary to offer a salary that was substantially above the median. It was far enough above the media, in our determination, that no additional compensation is required, so we're proposing a zero percent raise there.

When you take all our recommendations together, we are reducing the raises in the originally approved budget by 40 percent. That's a pretty significant drop. I think it's a good compromise. There are still employees who feel as if they're being disrespected by this process and they aren't happy. And there are still towns-people who feel no one should get any raise at all...and they aren't happy. I figure if both groups are just about equally unhappy, we're doing something right.

And let me stress this point...I'm going to say it multiple times before I'm done: the town of Warren has the third lowest tax rate in the state. Only Salisbury and Greenwich are lower. And we will NOT be raising taxes.

Some people have said we're not raising taxes only because the school budget is down this year. That's not correct. Even if there had been no change in the school budget, we could do these salary adjustments without raising taxes. And I'll go further...even if the school budget goes up next year, it is highly, highly unlikely that we will need to raise taxes next year, either. These salary adjustments are sustainable.

People point to Bridgewater and Vernon and towns like that as the model we should follow. Really? They are cutting services, freezing salaries, and stopping needed repairs to their town facilities. And the tax rate in Bridgewater is 17.5 mills. The tax rate in Vernon is 39.63. The mill rate in Warren is 14.25 and it is NOT going up. Would you rather live in a town with a mill rate of 39 and reduced services, or would you rather live in Warren, with the third lowest tax rate in the state and the ability to do everything that needs to be done to keep our town running normally?

I've heard people say, "well, we're in the middle of a pandemic. Now is not the right time." Now is absolutely the right time. We're in a VERY solid position financially. Do you think it's going to be worse next year? The whole economy is

shut down, millions of people across the country are unemployed – although, from what I can tell – not the people here who are complaining about salary adjustments – and you have to wear a mask to buy a quart of milk. You honestly think it will be worse a year from now? Believe me, if it is worse a year from now, we're going to have a lot bigger problems than a few bucks worth of raises.

I've heard people say, "well, the tax base will go down." No, it won't. We did a major property revaluation about a year ago. We don't have to do another minor one for four years, or a major one for nine more years. The tax base ain't going anywhere.

I've heard people say, "well, we won't get any money from the federal or state government next year." Let's say we don't. Do you know how much federal and state money is in our budget? Five-thousand-five hundred dollars. In other words, basically nothing. If we don't get a nickel from the feds or from the state, we'll be just fine.