

TOWN OF IPSWICH
Finance Committee Minutes
February 28th, 2023
Ipswich Town Hall, Meeting Room A
25 Green St. Ipswich, MA

With a quorum present, the Chair called the meeting to order at 7:30pm.

Finance Committee members present: Michael Dougherty, Emily Smith, Walter Hartford, Michael Schaaf, Ken Swenson, Joseph Bourque, Robert Chambers, Jamie Fay

Not Present: Rob White

1. Welcome – Michael Dougherty

- Michael went over the upcoming schedule for budget hearings.

2. Citizens Queries – Michael Dougherty

- None

3. Meeting Minutes to Approve – Michael Dougherty

- Motion to approve minutes from 1/31/23, 2/2/23, 2/9/23, and 2/16/23, with edits, made by Emily, seconded by Bob.
- Ken said he had a question on the January 31st notes on Joe's comment, Joe said he will make those changes.

→ *Motion passed unanimously, 8-0*

**Fiscal Year 2024 Budget Hearing:
Community and Cultural Services (Assessing and Buildings)**

4. Council on Aging and Adult Services – S. Taylor

Sheila Taylor, Director of Senior Services, went over accomplishments from all three departments. The van runs smoothly and they have also increased the out of town medical appointment transportation with Cape Ann Transportation Authority (CATA). There are a lot of "junior seniors" moving into town, and there are a lot of people coming to them with greater needs. Needs include significant mental health issues, support with the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), caregiver support, and health insurance through the SHINE (Serving the Health Insurance Needs of Everyone) program. Programs and activities have seen a 35% increase in participation. Travel, both day trips and overnight trips, have seen huge increases as well. There has also been a big increase in exercise programs including pickle ball, chair volleyball, aerobics, and a men's exercise program.

Goals for the department are to continue and manage the growth. They are getting to the point where they are at the top of how they can grow with both the space and the staffing that they have. They want to be able to spend as much time as is needed with each person, and don't want them to feel rushed out the door because they are understaffed. Affordability of housing is at the forefront of the issues and goals. People want to stay in their homes if it's a viable option for them, but are feeling pushed out based on affordability. The state is now looking for opportunities for tax benefits and tax cuts, including the Circuit Breaker tax credits. Currently it is \$1,200 if you qualify, and they are considering doubling that. Someone from the Department of Revenue is coming in a few weeks to discuss the Circuit Breaker tax credits, and the town also helps people apply for the credits in the income tax preparation program. Walter asked if they are going to raise the cap for the assessed value, right now the value is \$912k. The average house is around \$700k. Walter asked what the participation rate is of people that are eligible. Sheila said 36%. They are also looking at senior housing for more affordable options. They will continue growing the transportation services, as medical transportation is a huge need.

Sheila also said they would like to construct outdoor pickleball courts. It's a multigenerational game and easy to pick up. They are able to find funding if they are able to find the space, although finding a space has been difficult due to competing groups looking for similarly sized spaces (community garden and dog park). They have also met some resistance from people in the neighborhoods due to noise. Budget changes are small for the senior tax work program. It went up o 5.26% because it is based on minimum wage, which has gone up.

Michael said Ipswich has always been a leader in senior services and they do a great job. He asked how it is going now that the outreach coordinator position increased, Sheila said it has been helpful. Michael asked how they are doing with the van. Sheila said they have 3 drivers and 2 subs, but they are looking for more subs. Sheila said she will be retiring in May, and the board thanked her for all of her years of excellent work in town. Walter asked about them outgrowing their space. Sheila said in many ways they need more space. They also need more parking. Michael S. asked if the growth reflects more people gaining services, or the same people gaining more services. Sheila said it is more people getting services. Michael S. also said he will reach out to Sheila about housing issues. Bob said what they do is so important and is being done so well.

5. Veteran Services – K. Tyler

Veteran's services will be one Thursday.

6. Library – N. Blake

Nora Blake, Director of the Library, went over accomplishments for the department. The overall circulation rate was 14.3% higher than their highest rate in 2019. They have had a great partnership with the DPW and received some grant money for the library of things. They also partnered with the utilities department for a summer sustainability showcase, and offered a big vehicles day as well. They hosted two major author events in May and September which were very well received. Almost 6,300 people attended events this past year, almost 25,000 eBooks were downloaded, the 5 public computers were used almost 1900 times, and an average of about 400 people per month accessed the wireless internet in the library. The archivist position is posted and the assistant library director left and is being replaced. Nora is currently working on a strategic long-range plan, and the library staff is working really well together. The budget is pretty much contracted increases; they added \$5,000 to add more books to meet the state spending requirement for materials each year. If you fall short of spending this money, you lose state aid and the library network.

Michael asked about permanent part time wages. Nora said she was requesting additional part time library staff which would have been a little over \$26k if they were able to hire someone, but Stephen said they are trying to avoid hiring new positions unless they are compelling. Joe asked what the amount is that Ipswich has to spend on materials per year. Nora said it is \$140k. Jamie asked about the archivist/ local history librarian. Nora said when she started a year and a half ago it had been advertised, but by the time she looked at the resumes they were no longer interested. They ended up hiring someone after a while but it wasn't a good fit so they let him go. Nora said she reposted the job to make it more attractive and has received a few applicants. Jamie said he has never been convinced that that has been a core function of the library. Jamie said perhaps they could think about creating a different position for the library as this doesn't seem like it is necessary. Ken asked if they have a digitizing program, Nora said they scanned things into databases and then they can access it through searches. Michael S. asked about the condition of the documents. Nora said the old archivist submitted a grant to preserve documents, but when the grant came through she had left so they didn't get the grant. Michael said he thinks that would be worthwhile to preserve the towns history. Michael also asked about the program to teach people about internet trustworthiness. Nora said it will be a series of lectures. Bob asked if there are any technology advances they want to make. Nora said they are looking at a video and music streaming service and want to see if they can fit that in the budget. She said she has also been working with the town IT department to deploy software to control the public computers and clean them up more efficiently. Emily asked about registered borrowers. Nora said that is the library cards.

7. ReCreation and Culture – K. Bates

Kerry Bates, Director of Ipswich ReCreation and Culture, went over the department's accomplishments for the year, as outlined in the budget book. In 2022 they erected a stage at the takeout terrace truss, so they were able to host the

downtown Tuesday's events there. Last year they also introduced a program called Lyceum Thursdays which were conversations and lectures about important moments in history. Different commercial enterprises were able to use the stage as well, for example Cape Ann Botanicals used it to celebrate their anniversary. Kerry said Stephen has been meeting with EBSCO to discuss their concerns about the truss and the stage, so hopefully they will be able to put the grant funded resources back into place to allow people to gather in that public area. Last year they got two grants to support the Switch Rideable Artscape, and the focus has been to continue to advance the art. Last year they were able to show a series of water colors, and intend to raise some canvas art in the spring that was produced by local students. They also hope to be able to increase the footprint of the concrete canvas. Depth of Field was a new component of Illumination this past year, and was at the athletic fields. They were able to create an all-day arts extravaganza with food trucks, beer trucks, local artisans, and all-day musical programming. Personally, Kerry was excited to be invited by Creative County Initiative to be a part of the change makers 2022 cohort, which is a professional development and social networking opportunity in the arts and culture sector. Kerry also said she is proud of the current show at the town hall gallery.

Goals and objectives for the upcoming year were informed by the Ipswich Community Development Plan implementation metrics. They will work with the soon-to-be appointed ReCreation Committee. The group's task will be to survey recreational programs in the area to identify gaps in service. Kerry said she looks forward to having a regular opportunity to have broad community input on the priorities and programs they focus their energy on. Kerry has also started a conversation with colleagues and representatives at the MAPC to produce a cultural asset plan and cultural mapping. They will continue to coordinate across a myriad of non-profits, and will continue to plan for Earth Day and help with the renaming of Jenny Slew Park. They also partner with Campus Ipswich which is one of the most affordable summer care options, and they are working to find a program for a March spring theater program for elementary school children. The full summer drop-in season pass for Campus Ipswich summer program is \$900 per child which is about \$20 per day. There is a family max of \$1,900 for the summer. It runs from the last day of school to the last day of summer vacation and can be used as a drop-in service, there is no commitment.

Kerry said Stephen made a significant change in the budget which was to zero out the temporary part time role. Judy had done the job for a long time but she moved out of the area, and at the same time they needed to add a line item to deal with extras that happen from special events and cultural spaces, such as trash removal, portable toilets, etc. Stephen said he values cultural events and spaces and its important to give Kerry some money for those things. They took away the temporary part time position, and then moved that \$13k to outsource for special events funds. Stephen also said they moved detail money to the Town Manager's budget to help provide coordination, Kerry said she thinks that will be an effective change.

Michael asked about the appointed salary for the director position, and said it was increased last year by 14% and again at 5%. That's almost 20% in 2 years and asked if it is that far behind. Stephen said going forward, the grounds for adjustments are for additional duties and market. Joe complimented Kerry on the creativity and energy. Jamie said he always enjoys the programs they have created. He asked what the new committee will be and asked how it relates to what they are already doing. Kerry said the first task is to do the comprehensive assessment of the programming that's out there. The committee will be an advisory to the town manager. The reason the Select Board asked for this was there was a perception that the needs are not being met for youth programming. Michael S. asked about the relationship with EBSCO. Stephen said he met with them early on because he recognized that is an important relationship for the community. They have been working with the insurance company and getting EBSCO's requirements for the takeout terrace. It costs a little more to do it that way but they give us the space for free. Spending a little more to keep them happy is worth the money. Stephen also said it could be worth it to take a look to see if there is a more permanent location. Bob asked about the comment that Kerry made about the high number of refugee families. Kerry said she doesn't know much about it, but she was called because Coach Mike had already planned to have a number of kids who we knew were in the system that would be a part of summer programming for no cost. Kerry then got a call from an ESL teacher asking if they could take in an additional 15 students at no cost, so they worked with the town manager to find that money to welcome them into Campus Ipswich. Other than that, Kerry does not know.

8. Assessing – M. Ireland

Marylou Ireland, Assessor for Ipswich, went over the accomplishments for the department. Accomplishments include completing an automatic feed to important building permits into the system, hiring two new employees and a new

board member, and conducting in-house revaluations vs. hiring this out. The department is a team of two assessors, an assistant assessor, and a clerk. Having a larger team allowed them to move revaluations in house which resulted in a lot more new growth. They ended up capturing just under \$68M in value and \$872K in tax dollars. Marylou has also been working with Sheila on helping seniors to afford their tax bills through program development with the state.

Goals and objectives are to establish fair and market values for all properties, invest in professional development of staff, continue to provide the highest quality customer service, and focus on whatever we can do to help seniors on a fixed income. Marylou said they are seeing a lot of seniors that are struggling to stay in their homes because of tax rates. Michael asked where in town they are seeing this happen, Marylou said its mostly on the Neck where people are paying a lot for property and also making larger, more expensive houses.

Marylou said for the budget, she moved the savings for the Board of Assessor's salary over to the assistant assessor's salary. The mileage line increased due to increasing gas costs. There was also a small increase to professional development dues, and a small increase for the building permit tool maintenance fee. The adjustment for the assistant assessor is in part a market adjustment and in part due to additional duties. Jamie asked about the Board of Assessors pay. Marylou said they just reduced the pay as they got reappointed so that they could pay the people in the department. The assessors are paid now \$6,000 each, and were previously paid \$16,000. They are not doing any less work, but they are meeting fewer times. Jamie asked if that compensation is comparable to what other towns are paying, Marylou said it is actually more unless you are in a city. Some towns don't pay at all. The board still certifies the assessment and does the appeals. This year so far, they have seen 157 appeals, compared to 40 total last year. Stephen said moving the money to pay a more experienced assessor helps the Board of Assessors to have less workload. Michael S. asked what the policy is to assess the restricted rental properties. Marylou said each affordable unit has its own formula and its written into the deed. Bob asked if consultants assess NE Biolab. Marylou said they used to hire out, but they are doing it more in house now. For something that is a major project like that, they have to go out to look at other properties in other communities and look at the sales on those. There is also a database where you can look at sales of similarly sized buildings. Michael S. asked if they have an average percentage of assessed value. Single family homes is 14% and condos is 15%, Marylou will send exact numbers.

9. Building – J. Bone

James Bone, Building Commissioner, said this past year they moved into the former Zoning Appeals Office and they rearranged it, creating two new work stations. They are now able to accommodate the new part time clerical person, who came on board in August, and also the council on aging worker that comes in to help with digitizing the files. James has been here for 4 years and saw with the quantity of permits, they needed the assistant building inspector to move to a full-time position. Jim said staffing levels had gone unchanged for 20 years in the department. 20 years ago, there were 1,000 permits per year and now there are 2,200. Due to this, he was granted the full-time building inspector, and now they were also granted the part time clerical person. This was very helpful because in past years any time there was an absence for sick leave or vacation, they wouldn't be able to keep up with the workload. Having the proper staffing level has made a huge difference and it has been very helpful. Last year they brought in \$830k in permits which was an increase over the prior fiscal year, not counting NE biolabs. James said in the budget, his salary is higher this year.

Jamie asked how the online permitting system is working for customers, James said its working well. They upgraded the system last year. Ken asked who inspects and permits pellet stoves. James said their department does. Michael S. said they adopted the Stretch Code a few years ago and he asked about the Super Stretch Code and if it would significantly impact development in town. James said not really, the differences between the two aren't that much. He said he is neutral. Bob asked if they are in charge of permits for the NE Biolabs. James said that is a specialty building and it's tough to do a complete and thorough inspection because it's so involved. They have a tremendous amount of engineering oversight so they're getting reports from design professionals that they look at, and they also go out and physically look at the stages of construction and do required inspections. Michael asked about the increase in permitting during the pandemic and working from home. He asked if they are noticing the permits being pulled at a steady rate or will we start to notice a fall off. James said it has continued to remain steady. However, permit fees are consistently going up because of inflation and the cost of the work. Stephen said in the staffing table the part time inspector is there and it says "appointed as needed". Emily asked if there is any analysis on whether per diem is more cost effective, Stephen said he's seen it done a few ways but they really should be part time town employees.

10. New/Old Business – Michael Dougherty

- Michael said Stephen sent three reserve fund requests for the Fire Department, Mile Lane, and copiers. He asked the committee if anyone had questions for Stephen regarding these requests before they vote on them tomorrow night.
- Jamie asked if we know if the Fire Department rescue vessel is on the plan to be replaced. Stephen said no, it was recently rehabbed and is in good shape. Jamie also said he was surprised at the Mile Lane request and asked why the number was chosen. Stephen said because it's not really a road, it's just intended to be a path to Marini farm. Ethan Parsons recommended that amount so that's what Stephen went with in order to meet the order of conditions and have it completed by the deadline. Ken asked what we got in exchange for this and why the town has to fund it. Stephen said he isn't planning to go back and investigate this. He is just fulfilling the obligation in time to meet the deadline. In the future they can go about things like this differently.
- Michael asked if it is just those three requests, the fire request, the mile lane request, and the copier. He said he has one of the copiers in the budget under IT. If we fund that, we may not fund take it out of the reserve fund right now because it isn't too much money. Stephen said as far as other requests, they may need to ask for money for the Energy Savings Company (ESCO) energy savings plan. The vendor has been chosen but they need a commitment to a \$50K breakup fee if the town decides not to move forward with the vendor after the audit. The ESCO presentation will be at the beginning of the tri-board meeting.

11. Adjourn – Michael Dougherty

- Motion to adjourn made by Ken, seconded by Jamie.

→ *Motion passed unanimously, 8-0*

Respectfully Submitted By
Alyson von der Esch
3-1-23