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Town of Shaftsbury

Municipal Offices at Cole Hall

Meeting Minutes

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Select Board Special Meeting

Shaftsbury Select Board Meeting Minutes

Date: January 6, 2025

Time: 6:00 PM

Location: Cole Hall

Chairperson: Naomi Miller

Members Present:

- Naomi Miller (Chair)
- Martha Cornwell (Vice Chair)
- Michael Cichanowski
- Tony Krulikowski

Also Present: Paula Iken, Town Administrator

Call to Order

The meeting was called to order by Naomi Miller, Chair, at 6:00 PM.

Conflict of Interest

Ms. Miller asked if any members had a conflict of interest with items on the agenda. None was noted.

Agenda

Review of Proposed Fiscal Year 2026 Budget

The primary focus of the meeting was to review the proposed fiscal year 2026 budget, led by Ms. Iken.

1. Overview of Proposed Budget

- The budget proposes a 5.7% increase over FY 2025 due to:
 - Health insurance cost increases, with two options (10% or 24% increase).
 - Rising costs of truck parts and fuel (6% increase).
 - General wage and cost-of-living adjustments (5% increase).

2. Budget Structure

- Ms. Iken noted that the budget remains a planning tool, rather than a fixed projection and that unexpected expenses are bound to come up, in any given year.

3. Key Budget Sections

- **General Government:** Up 21%, attributed to changes in staffing and the addition of an Operations Coordinator, whose salary will be 70% Administration and 25% Cemetery Superintendent. Operations Coordinator does take the Town's health insurance coverage, but the Town Administrator does.
- **Municipal Offices:** Renamed from "Cole Hall" and up 19% due to heating fuel costs and potential relocation to a new municipal building.
- **Town Clerk:** Up 3%, with corrections to health insurance allocations.
- **Finance:** Up 5%, reflecting the move of payroll processing in-house.
- **Emergency Management:** Reduced by 43%, with reliance on reserve funds and grants for emergency supplies.
- **Libraries:** Now part of the budget, representing a 100% increase over previous community appropriations.
- **Fire Department:** Up 13%, including a \$10,000 allocation for a new boiler.
- **Constables and Animal Control:** Minimal or no changes noted.

Law Enforcement

- Discussion on Bennington County Sheriff services:
 - The hourly rate for the Sheriff's services will increase from \$72.50 to \$80.
 - Sheriff Gulley and Ms. Iken have agreed to maintain standard operations while adjusting for priority circumstances.
 - The increased rate will reduce patrol hours, necessitating further discussions about balancing law enforcement coverage and budget constraints.
 - The State Police will continue to provide supplemental patrol services.
 - The budget allocation for the Sheriff's services remains conservative at \$80,000, prioritizing fiscal restraint, and Ms. Iken's suggestion is to discuss this further.

Emergency Medical Services

- Rescue squad budgets remain unchanged from the prior year.

Highway Department

- Accounts for 38.7% of the budget, slightly reduced from 39%.
- Budget increase limited to 6% despite rising costs, achieved by reallocating and streamlining expenses.
 - **Staffing Adjustments:**
 - Part-time summer positions (\$10,000) eliminated due to hiring difficulties.
 - Funds reallocated to subcontractor services (\$30,000) for tasks such as mowing and plowing.
 - **Cost Increases:**
 - Health insurance costs increased from \$97,000 to \$117,000 (10% increase, not the potential 24% option).
 - Cost-of-living raises maintained.
 - **Allowances:**
 - Full-time employees (6 staff members) receive stipends for steel-toe footwear, CDL physicals, and clothing allowances.

Highway Construction and Maintenance

- Budget increased by 13%, largely due to subcontractor costs and aging equipment, such as the town mower.
 - Funding adjustments ensure coverage for paving projects and ongoing town maintenance.
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Highway Department

- **Subcontractor Costs:**
 - Questions arose regarding historical coding of subcontractor costs, as prior budgets indicated \$0 allocated.
 - The budget now explicitly includes \$30,000 for subcontractor support to address tasks such as mowing and plowing.
- **Culverts and Sidewalks:**
 - Additional funds allocated for culvert repairs and sidewalk maintenance, due to identified needs.
- **Highway Administration:**
 - Trucks:
 - Budget reflects maintenance prioritization for two aging trucks (Trucks 3 and 4), one of which has already been ordered for replacement.
 - Newer equipment requires less maintenance, contributing to cost balance.
 - Fuel Costs:
 - A slight increase was included to account for rising gas, diesel, and oil prices.
 - Professional Services:
 - Reduced to reflect minimal use, as much of the maintenance is handled in-house.

Solid Waste Facility

- Budget increased by 5% due to:
 - Wage increases.
 - Additional costs for Casella services, which now total approximately \$9,000 monthly for waste hauling.
 - Rental of a new compactor and increased pickups, which are critical to operations.
- The facility operates at an annual deficit, and the Town should continue discussions on whether to keep it open or not.

Streetlights

- Budget remains unchanged, with potential minor reductions considered in specific areas.

Parks and Recreation

- Budget decreased by 4%, reflecting reduced need of reliance on professional services.
- Updates include:
 - A grant to revamp tennis courts, adding two new pickleball courts, benches, and storage facilities.
 - The grant is a 50-50 matching initiative, supported by the reserve fund (\$8,000 annually).
 - Ms. Iken acknowledged and thanked the Recreation Committee, DPW, and volunteers for their contributions.

Cemetery Expenditures

- Reduced by 13% due to lower-than-expected Cemify maintenance costs.
- Adjustments include:
 - The cemetery assistant role remains unfilled, with 25% of the Operations Coordinator's salary allocated to Cemetery Superintendent, as she does both jobs.

Other Notable Budget Adjustments

- **Development Review Board and Planning Commission:** No changes; stipends remain the same.
- **County Taxes:** Increased by 6%, consistent with historical trends.
- **Transfers to Reserves:** Increased by 4%.

Capital Plan for Equipment

- The capital plan for equipment was increased by \$10,000 to account for rising costs of vehicles.
- The new truck ordered for the highway department is now more expensive than initially budgeted.
- Fire truck funding remains on track but will require additional padding to avoid potential shortfalls. Payments for the chassis is due next year, with the remaining balance to follow.

Debts

- Debt service increased by 22% due to the addition of a new Ford F-550 truck, financed with a 5-year loan. The first payment has already been made.

Community Appropriations

- Budget decreased by 41% following the removal of library funding, now included in the general budget.
- The only entity requesting additional funding was the Park-McCullough House.
 - Board discussed whether to include this increase in the proposed budget.
 - Some board members raised questions about the funding sources for the house and its associated programs.
- Libraries requested minimal additional funding, which was noted for voter review, during a previous Selectboard meeting.

Law Enforcement Budget

- The law enforcement budget remained at \$80,000, despite the Bennington County Sheriff's rate increase from \$72.50 to \$80 per hour.
- Board emphasized the need for flexibility to address community concerns, including speeding and other issues.
- A potential increase in law enforcement budget may be considered if necessary to address coverage gaps.
- Discussion included collaboration with Vermont State Police to understand their role in local traffic enforcement and coverage.

Other Budget Adjustments

- **Administrative Savings:**
 - Cost-saving measures included identifying unnecessary expenses, such as an unused town cell phone line.
 - Negotiations resulted in reduced costs for communication and phone systems.

General Budget Commentary

- Despite rising costs and inflation, the total budget increase was limited to 5.7%.
- The board commended the team's efforts to identify cost savings while maintaining essential services.

Law Enforcement Budget

- Discussion included balancing the law enforcement budget while addressing community concerns, such as speeding.
- Reports from the Bennington County Sheriff's Office include detailed breakdowns with every invoice, ensuring transparency.
- Further public discussion and potential adjustments will occur during the next hearing.

Emergency Management

- A proposal was made to form an Emergency Management Committee to inventory available resources in the community.
- This topic was noted for future discussion.

Budget Hearings and Town Meeting Preparations

- This meeting served as the first detailed review of the proposed budget.
- A second public hearing will be held next week to allow for additional public comments.
- If adjustments are necessary, the board will reconvene to finalize the budget before submitting it for the Town Meeting Day warning and annual report.

Action Items

- Review invoices and reports related to Bennington County Regional Commission (BCRC) dues and confirm proper budget allocation.
- Prepare for the second budget hearing and gather additional data for potential adjustments.
- Schedule further discussions on law enforcement coverage and budget adjustments.

Executive Session

The board entered executive session to discuss personnel issues. Upon returning:

- **Motion Passed:** Adopt MVP health insurance for FY 2026 to minimize cost increases to 10%, over Blue Cross/Blue Shield, which would increase costs 24%.
- Vote: 4-0-0.

Adjournment

A motion to adjourn was made and seconded. The meeting adjourned at 6:49PM.