**Sturbridge Finance Committee**

**Meeting Minutes of January 4, 2024**

**Center Office Building**

**Call to Order**

Finance Committee (FC) Chair Kevin Smith called the FC meeting to order at 7:00 p.m and read the agenda:

1. Call to order
2. Reserve Fund Transfer(s)
3. Special Town Meeting Warrant Articles
4. Meeting Minutes
   1. April 21, 2022
   2. April 20, 2023
   3. April 27, 2023
   4. May 18, 2023
   5. October 26, 2023
5. Old Business
6. New Business
   1. Discuss Form of Motions
7. Public Access
8. Adjournment

Committee members present: Leigh Darrin (LD), Larry Morrison (LM), Kevin Smith (KS), Ken Talentino (KT), James Waddick (JW) and Sean Wawrzkiewicz (SW).

Absent: Michael Hager (MH), Michael McGlone (MM) and Kathy Neal (KN),

Guests: *Remote*: Barbara Barry, Finance Director (BB); Robin Grimm, Town Administrator (RG).

*In person*: Heather Blakeley, DPW Director (HB); Joseph Coan, of JCLA Design; Christopher McClure, of McClure Engineering; Kadion Phillips, Recreation Committee member (KP); and Annie Roscioli, Recreation Director (AR). IT Specialist Jeremy Jalbert joined the meeting briefly to assist with remote-connection problems.

**Reserve Fund Transfers**

None.

**Special Town Meeting Warrant Articles**

The FC members were working off the version of the Warrant distributed to them on January 4, 2024 which reflects articles and Board of Selectmen recommendations as of its December 18, 2023 meeting.

**Article 52: Sewer Reserve Fund Transfer**

This article seeks $152,000 for the purpose of purchasing additional E-1 sewage pumps. HB explained that the E-1 pumps are part of a system that is more than 20 years old, and many of the pumps have been changed or repaired over that time. The Town, and not sewer users, is responsible for maintenance and repair of the pumps. The pumps pose a challenge for various reasons, including that repairs can cost as much as a new pump; many pumps are too old to be repaired; the town goes through 9 to 10 pumps a month; in cases of brown-outs or black-outs, all of the pumps can be lost at once; and there is only one supplier that carries the pumps. The plan is to replace 100 of the 600 pumps a year.

While the pumps are necessary on lakefront property, they have in the past been installed in places where there were alternatives available. HB suggested that in the future alternatives be used whenever possible, and that when a necessary pump system is added, the developer, not the town, be responsible for maintaining the pumps.

LM made a motion to recommend that the Town vote to approve Article 52 as written; JW seconded the motion. Motion approved 6-0-0.

**Article 53, Sewer Reserve Fund Transfer**

HB explained that the Sewer Department has had several unexpected expenses, including two that resulted from extremely heavy rain storms in the past three months. During one of those storms a pumper truck was required to transport sewage from a pump station to the sewage plant to avoid overflow, which has happened only twice in 15 years. There were various other unanticipated expenses, resulting in $13,000 remaining of the budgeted $75,000. The additional $80,000 requested in this article is expected to cover the rest of the fiscal year.

HB noted two factors that have made projected budget costs difficult: contractors are busy right now and not hungry for work, so their bids tend to be high; and projected costs are based on estimates made when departments prepare budgets, six months before the budget year begins. KS noted the second reason is one of the arguments against having the Town Meeting in April instead of June, as it would back the projections up two more months.

KS asked about the Sewer Department’s financial policy, and how the town plans to increase the Sewer Fund balance, which is down to $245,000, a level he considered unacceptable. RG stated that the Board of Selectmen, acting as Sewer Commissioners, will look into options.

LM made a motion to recommend that the Town vote to approve Article 53 as written; JW seconded the motion. Motion approved 6-0-0.

**Article 49: Community Preservation ADA Accessibility, 60 Cedar Street**

This article seeks $546,061 from CPA funding for ADA-compliance upgrades at the Town’s recreation facility. AR stressed how important it is to make the town’s Recreation Area at 60 Cedar Street accessible to anyone with any handicap. RG agreed, saying she had been surprised to learn the area is not accessible. The current plans are scaled back and considered “Phase 1,” although nothing is dependent on a second phase. The plan adds accessible paths and access to the pavilion, bathrooms, playground and waterfront. The rubber-chip playground floor will be replaced with poured-in-place flooring like at the playground in Burgess and will have a “wheel-go-round” that is inclusive to both handicapped and typical fun-seekers. The shed, porta potties and dumpster will be moved to make room for two handicapped parking spaces. Fencing, currently held together with zip-ties, will be updated. The seasonal roll-out mat that will provide access to the waterfront will be stored inside during the winter. Planners were able to increase the size of the playground without encroaching on the current grassy area. The goal is to have the renovation completed by the beginning of this Summer Recreation program.

The FC was happy to hear the same company and material used at the Burgess playground will be used in the Recreation Area.

RG noted there are existing funds available in the CPC’s “Recreation” budget.

LM made a motion to recommend that the Town vote to approve Article 49 as written; JW seconded the motion. Motion approved 6-0-0.

**Article 48: Unpaid Bills of a Previous Year (9/10ths vote required)**

KS noted that the sum of $1,202.95 was needed to pay a Board of Health invoice for recyclables hauling which was submitted late.

JW made a motion to recommend that the Town vote to transfer the sum of $1,202.95 from Free Cash for the purpose of paying unpaid bills of a prior fiscal year; LD seconded the motion. Motion approved 6-0-0.

**Article 50: Free-Cash Transfer for Ineligible Grant Expenditure**

This $43.28 bill was expected to be covered by a training grant but was ineligible.

LM made a motion to recommend that the Town vote to approve Article 50 as written; JW seconded the motion. Motion approved 6-0-0.

**Article 51: Free-Cash Transfers**

The $50,000 requested in this article would replenish the Reserve Fund, which was at $184,000 at the beginning of the fiscal year and is now at $98,000. The Reserve Fund provides funding for unforeseen situations encountered during the fiscal year.

LM made a motion to recommend that the Town vote to approve Article 51 as written; JW seconded the motion. Motion approved 6-0-0.

**Article 54: Water Reserve Fund Balance Transfer**

This is for the Filter Media Replacement Project that was approved at the June 2022 Town Meeting for $481,000. Bids received in May 2023 were significantly higher than expected. The additional $160,000 requested in this article will allow for a rebid.

LM made a motion to recommend that the Town vote to approve Article 54 as written; JW seconded the motion. Motion approved 6-0-0.

**Article 55**: **River Road Easements**

KS suggested that the action being sought be changed by striking the words “acquire by gift, purchase or eminent domain…” with “acquire by gift…” out of concern that including “purchase or eminent domain” gives the Conservation Commission a blank check. The Finance Committee supports the proposal itself, but not the way it can be obtained. RG clarified that the property is being transferred for free but still needs Town Meeting approval.

KS made a motion to recommend that the Town vote to amend the article by striking the words “purchase or eminent domain” and otherwise approve Article 55 as written; JW seconded the motion. Motion approved 6-0-0.

**Meeting Minutes**

**Minutes of April 21, 2022**. No changes.

JW made a motion to accept the minutes of April 21, 2022 as written; LM seconded the motion. Motion approved 5-0-1 (SW abstained).

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**Minutes of April 20, 2023**.Two corrections were made.

LM made a motion to accept the minutes of April 20, 2023 as amended; JW seconded the motion. Motion approved 5-0-1 (SW abstained).

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**Minutes of April 27, 2023**. Four corrections were made.

LM made a motion to accept the minutes of April 27, 2023 as amended; JW seconded the motion. Motion approved 5-0-1 (SW abstained).

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**Minutes of May 18, 2023**: One correction was made.

LM made a motion to accept the minutes of May 18, 2023 as amended; JW seconded the motion. Motion approved 5-0-1 (SW abstained).

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**Minutes of Oct. 26, 2023**: No changes.

JW made a motion to accept the minutes of Oct. 26, 2023 as written; LM seconded the motion. Motion approved 6-0-0.

**Old Business**:

After not hearing anything about the open-meeting-law complaint for months, the Finance Committee received a request from the Attorney General to submit a series of meeting minutes. KS noted that the Town Clerk will compile them as soon as possible.

LM recalled that there was an August date for any appeal and presumes that because the Finance Committee was not notified of any such appeal, the date passed with no appeal.

**New Business:**

It appears early Saturday mornings are the best time for Committee members to tour the Wastewater Treatment plant. KS will look into whether the meeting needs to be posted and whether minutes should be taken. The assumption is that as long as no discussion takes place, the meeting is not an official one, KS will confirm whether that is accurate, whether the meeting needs to be posted, and whether minutes need to be taken.

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Discussion arose regarding Free-Cash balance, spawned by a letter written by BB at the Board of Selectmen’s request regarding how much Free Cash the town should have. Discussions included Water and Sewer Reserve Funds as well.

Discussion included:

— Then-DPW Director Greg Morse was adamant that Sewer and Water balances remain above $1 million; the Sewer fund is now at $245,000. A plan to increase that amount needs to be made and shared. The FC would love to talk to the Board of Selectmen, in their role as Water and Sewer Commissioners, about such a plan.

— KT would like parameters more specific than “the amount of Free Cash ‘may affect’ or ‘could affect’ the town’s credit rating.” RG said the reason is it is not specific is because it is not an exact calculation.

— The town has been building up its Free Cash for over 25 years and having healthy Free Cash has allowed the town to weather things like the tornado of 2011.

— The Town’s fiscal policy which states how much Free Cash to have is made by the Board of Selectmen, not the Finance Committee.

**Public Access**

None.

**Adjournment**

LM made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 8:12 p.m.; LD seconded the motion. Motion approved 6-0-0.