**Finance Committee Meeting Minutes**

**Town Hall ~ October 14, 2021**

**Sturbridge, MA**

**Call to Order**

The Finance Committee Chair called the Finance Committee meeting to order at 7:00 pm. The following committee members were present: Kevin Smith (KS), Larry Morrison (LM), James Waddick (JW), Kathy Neal (KN), Bruce Boyson (BB), Michael Hager (MH), Ken Talentino (KT), and Joe Freitas (JF).

Guests: Jeff Bridges (JB), Town Administrator; Barbara Barry (BBa), Finance Director; Karen Davis (KD) and Bob George (BG), George and Davis, P.C.; Charlie Blanchard (CB) and Wally Hersee (WH), Planning Board; Annie Roscioli (AR), Recreation Director; Steve Sexton (SS), Sturbridge resident.

Pursuant to Chapter 20 of the Acts of 2021, this meeting was conducted in person and via remote means, in accordance with applicable law. This means that members of the Finance Committee as well as members of the public were able to access this meeting in person or via virtual means. The meeting was held via the GoToMeeting application and available for public access via the Town’s on demand video broadcast, on cable television, or by telephone access during the meeting.

KS read the agenda.

**No Reserve Fund Transfers**

KS explained the procedure for the presentation of Article 47 and for related questions.

**Review of Special Town Meeting Warrant Articles**

Article 47 – Amend Chapter 300 – Zoning Bylaw of the Town of Sturbridge by Inserting a New Article XXI (2/3 Vote Required) – JF moved the motion to recommend Article 47 as amended to read “*storage and sale of livestock and grain”* in Section 300-21.4 B (13); MH Seconds. Motion accepted 7-0-1 (BB abstained).

KD explained the history of the equine center and detailed the activities proposed for the site. She explained the various areas of the equine center including: the equine center – where approximately thirty horses will live year-round, festival grounds, racetrack, sports bar, seating, parking area, walking trails, athletic center, community gardens and green space for a senior citizens’ exercise area. KD explained that the Overlay Zone will require all activities at the location to be approved by special permit. She stated that some activities will never be allowed, including a casino, table gaming, slots, body piercing, and payday lending. She said that the project will create five hundred jobs during construction and one hundred permanent jobs; she added that it is expected that the equine center will produce upwards of one million dollars annually into the Town’s budget. She said that the architects have worked to visually maintain the “Sturbridge look.”

The following questions were raised for proponent and answered by KD and BG:

*Is the Host Community Agreement the final word on number of race days?* Yes.

*What will the traffic impact be on local roads for patrons visiting hotels, restaurants, and shops in Town?* There will only be three weekends of races per year – shoulder weekends (not during flea market or Old Sturbridge Village events) but during quieter times. KD estimated that fifty-nine million cars travel on Interstate 84 annually and will be three thousand additional cars on race weekends. Eight thousand people come to candlelight events in December at Old Sturbridge Village compared with seven thousand five hundred expected at the race track. The impact of the three race weekends will be similar to large Old Sturbridge Village events as compared with the fifty thousand who visit the Brimfield Flea Market.

*Security for kids at fields or trails or gardens on race days – what if they wander to the race track area?* KD said it will be difficult to get to the festival facility from the other parts of the property due to the natural ground between the two. There will be on-site security at no cost to the Town, state and federal police during festival days at the cost of equine center, and the potential for a substation for local police and fire at the facility.

*Explain the “will, maybe and never categories.”* The facility must include racetrack and equine center. There are twenty uses that are in the maybe category including the gaming license, online and onsite betting, farmers’ market, trails, biodigester, and ballfields. The never category includes casinos, slot machines, tattoo parlor, and payday lending. Each use must be by special permit, which guarantees oversight by the Town.

*What would cause you to want to include these things at the facility?* The Town wanted to be sure the site plan includes a racetrack and an equine center. The facility will be contractually obligated to have the athletic fields, community gardens, senior playground, simulcast betting, eating and drinking establishments, and a sports bar but may only have what is on the list of possible uses. The prohibited activities (nevers) may not be slid in at a later date. Any new amendment to the bylaw would require a 2/3 vote.

*Must there be a Zoning Bylaw in place to allow activities*? CB indicated yes.

*What if Town Meeting voters like the activities that benefit the Town but they never materialize?* The Host Community Agreement will be voted at the Board of Selectmen meeting on Monday night. The items listed in the agreement such as the recreation fields, gardens, and trails will be contractually agreed to. The Overlay Zone allows for these promises.

*Are there penalty clauses in Host Community Agreement?*  Yes, Town Counsel and the proponents have agreed to penalty clauses.

*Will the teardrop shape of the race track will affect viability?* The teardrop shape is due to the topography of land and horsemen love it.

*Will steeplechase be allowed?* The Host Community Agreement does have a clause for encouraging and supporting other types of equine events such as dressage and jumping. The proponents will work with the community to come up with events the community wants.

*What is the composition of the track?* Turf with a turf farm on site. The proponent is committed to helping the Recreation Department with maintaining the fields on the property.

*Athletic fields will be turned over to town. Will the trails?* No, the proponent will own and maintain the trails.

*Will the on-site biodigester be available to other entities for their refuse?* Yes, and the proponent will pick it up.

*How will the Town generate revenue from this project?* The Host Community Agreement outlines the revenue sources such as property taxes, meal taxes, hotel taxes, and revenue sharing.

*What are the revenue sources for the facility?* On-line betting is the predominate revenue source.

*What is needed to make this project move forward?* Gaming legislation must be passed by the state. Permitting on a new Interstate 84 interchange by the state and federal governments is needed.

Questions for Planning Board:

CB stated that the Board of Selectmen is in favor of the bylaw and that Jean Bubon (Town Planner), the proponent’s lawyers, and JB worked on the bylaw that allows the anticipated activities.

*What happens if Town doesn’t get back what is promised or if the facility is taking more out than the Town is getting back?* JB said there are ten race dates per year. The owners will be paying detail rates for police, fire, and paramedics on those days. KD added that there will be security on site.

*What is the impact on the Town’s bond rating*? JB stated that diversifying the tax base and revenue streams is a positive.

General Questions:

*Who pays for and who owns the required infrastructure?*  Water and sewer will be owned and operated by the proponent. The proponent will need to contact National Grid for electrical service.

*The ballfields will be turned over to the Town’s ownership. Is everything else the proponent’s property?* Yes.

*Where will the revenue stream go?* It will be general fund revenue.

*What will be the effect on town down the road if this project doesn’t materialize?* The overlay zone is really for the equine/agriculture center. The land can only be used for allowed and required uses and is subject to special permits. Another project would have to be the same type of project within the overlay district.

*If this project falls through, is the land still classified as rural residential for zoning purposes?* Yes.

KS stated that the following amended wording of article has been approved by Jean Bubon for clarity: under 300-21.4 B (13) change to: storage and sale of livestock and grain. CB said it is fine to change.

Article 48 – Amend Chapter 300, Article II, Section 300.2-2 of the Zoning Bylaw (2/3 Vote Required) – JW moved the motion to recommend Article 48 as written; KT seconds. Motion accepted 7-0-1 (BB abstained).

Article 49 – Amend the Zoning Map of the Town of Sturbridge (2/3 Vote Required) – JW moved the motion to recommend Article 49 as written; MH seconds. Motion accepted 7-0-1 (BB abstained).

Article 50 – Multiuse Recreational Field Design and Construction Cedar Lake Recreation Area (2/3 Vote Required) – MH moved the motion to recommend Article 50 as amended to read *That the Town appropriates FIVE MILLION FOUR HUNDRED TEN THOUSAND AND 00/100 DOLLARS ($5,410,000.00) to pay costs of designing, engineering, constructing and equipping a multiuse field and accessory structures and improvements at the Cedar Lake Recreation Area located at 58 Cedar Street, 60 Cedar Street, and 70 Cedar Street and for the payment of any and all incidental and related costs, and that to meet this appropriation, the Treasurer, with the approval of the Selectmen, is authorized to borrow: FOUR MILLION FOUR HUNDRED TEN THOUSAND AND 00/100 DOLLARS ($4,410,000.00) under and pursuant to G.L. c. 44, §7(1), or any other enabling authority, and ONE MILLION AND 00/100 DOLLARS ($1,000,000.00) under and pursuant to G.L. c 44B (Community Preservation Act), or any other enabling authority, and to issue bonds or notes of the Town therefor. No amounts shall be borrowed or expended hereunder unless the Town shall have voted to exclude the amounts required to repay any borrowing authorized by this vote from the limitations on total property taxes in accordance with G.L. c. 59, §21C(k) (also known as Proposition 2 ½). The Board of Selectmen and any other appropriate officials of the Town are authorized to apply for federal, state and/or private grants, enter into any agreements and execute all documents including contracts for a term in excess of three years as may be necessary to effectuate the purposes of this article, and to accept any gifts or grants provided to the Town for such purposes. Any premium received upon the sale of any bonds or notes approved by this vote, less any such premium applied to the payment of the costs of issuance of such bonds or notes, may be applied to the payment of costs approved by this vote in accordance with G.L. c. 44, §20, thereby reducing the amount authorized to be borrowed to pay such costs by a like amount;* JF seconds. Motion failed 4-4-0 (KN, JW, KS, KT against).

JW moved the motion to take no action on Article 50; KN seconds. Motion failed 4-4-0 (BB, JF, LM, MH against).

AR explained that this project includes the multiuse field and a parking area, American with Disabilities Act enhancements including sidewalks, crosswalks and pathways. KS mentioned that the location is not specified by parcel and location. AR said that at this time 70 Cedar Street isn’t being developed; JB stated that the intention is not to develop 70 Cedar Street at this time, just thirty feet is needed for this plan. AR distributed copies of the map of the location. KS said that it is best to let Town Meeting voters know exactly what they’re acting on. JW stated that there has been no attempt to hide the fact that there are thirty feet needed from 70 Cedar Street. AR explained the map and said that the majority of parking will be in the former skate park area. KS asked how many months during the year the field will be used. AR said that the field will be used for spring, summer and fall leagues and not used by leagues in the winter months. JW asked how late at night the field would be used and lit. AR answered that based on what the football and soccer leagues are currently asking for, she thinks that they will be finished up with the fields by 8:45 pm.

The Burgess School Committee’s control over the fields at Burgess School was discussed and the question raised whether any of those fields could be lined for use as a multipurpose field. AR explained that the Burgess fields are overused and maintenance has been an issue; she added that the softball league has helped out with the maintenance issue. AR stated that she is in discussions with Burgess regarding future scheduling at full capacity for softball and baseball with football using the outfields.

The issue was raised whether noise from the multipurpose field would bother those using the tennis courts. AR stated that the current Recreation Area is not quiet and a large number of activities take place there. JB raised the question of whether the space the Town currently has is able to meet the size regulations for football, soccer and lacrosse. JW noted that the Legion ballfield does not meet the requirements for a major league field. MH added that the Town has been talking for 20-25 years about the need for fields; he said that the Town Barn project that was previously brought forward had a $6,000,000.00 price tag and this new project is close to that price. He asked if this field is needed in addition to the fields included in the proposed equestrian center. AR said the Town needs all of the proposed fields to meet the current needs; she added that the fields at the equine center would be state of the art, but the Town has no control over that project and when it might be completed.

JB explained that Cedar Street would have a traffic study and Cedar Pond Road would need an overhaul including sidewalks and drainage. He added this overhaul must be done separately and distinctly from the multiuse field project and that funds are available to overhaul the road. He stated that the location of the field on these properties does not prevent the Town from using the parcels for other uses in the future. JF noted that the experts have stated that this field is needed in addition to the proposed fields at the equestrian center. AR explained that softball and baseball fields are the only fields at Burgess and, if they were converted into multiuse fields, the current ballfields would need to be replaced. She said that without the proposed fields at the equestrian center, the Town will continue to have inadequate fields to meet the needs of youth, teen and adult leagues. JB suggested that if all the proposed fields are built, then the Town might want to consider a recreational study to make a plan to maximize the fields and determine whether any additional fields would be needed for unmet needs. JW stated that the Plimpton property had twenty acres set aside for active recreation when it was purchased, but it was unusable due to an endangered species. JB said the Town has tremendous environmental assets in its lakes and rivers but is challenged to find thirty to sixty acres not encumbered by those assets on which to build fields.

Steve Sexton, 51 Seneca Lane, listed his concerns regarding the Cedar Lake Recreation Area, including: no formal conservation review; the costs for the environmental reviews and plans; building a field at the Town Barn location instead; operational costs at Cedar Lake Recreation Area; parking at the new facility on game day; insufficient design; and traffic and safety concerns.

JW reviewed the previously proposed Town Barn project - explaining there was cost of $2,000,000.00 just to remove ledge, environmental impacts due to the conservation zone, potential damage the water supply for the Sturbridge Hills condominium complex; he summarized by saying that it was not an ideal site. AR concurred adding that there was a huge cost to not impact the environment and the issues with the access road. MH stated that the site currently under consideration has issues but added that there are no ideal sites in Town or they would have been identified by now.

Discussion followed the failed motions concerning the wording for the motions, the lack of recommendation for the Town and the need for a substitute motion from the floor of Town Meeting.

**No Meeting Minutes**

**No New Business**

**Old Business**

KS stated that the schools have formally recognized LM as their liaison but assignments for the other members are coming.

**No Public Access**

JW moved the motion to adjourn; JF seconds. Motion accepted 8-0-0. Meeting adjourned at 9:16 pm.

/jme