

Minutes of the Finance Committee meeting of March 29, 2017

The meeting was called to order by the chair at 7:04 p.m. in the Plainfield Town Hall.

Present were committee members Robert Baker, Tim Walter, Sylvane Stockwell, Robert Persing, Lew Robbins (Chair), David Kramer, and Roberta Wooldridge.

The minutes of the meeting of 22 March 2017 were approved.

A motion was made and carried to appoint David Kramer to the office of secretary.

A discussion of ways to economize on town spending ensued. It was noted that the town tax rate has gone up on average 2.2% per year over the past five years, while valuations rose 1.8% per year on average for that period. Over the past ten years, the average increase in the tax rate has been 4.9%. Questions to consider are whether such a rate of increase is forecast for coming years based on current projections and if so, whether such increases are desirable or sustainable.

As one measure for controlling tax levies to some extent by bringing greater rationality to the budgeting process, the chair has questioned the practice of many individuals and committees of submitting their budget requests based simply on previous years' budget allocations (level funded), rather than on previous years' actual expenditures. His argument was that those who are required to justify their budgets will likely think about their needs more carefully.

It was recalled that at the previous meeting of the Finance Committee, Paula King had opined that an advantage of having a "cushion" in certain budget lines was that it obviated the need for the Finance Committee or Select Board or even under some circumstances a town meeting to authorize the transfer of funds whenever a committee or department exceeded its budget allocation.

This discussion was interrupted by the arrival, at 7:16, of David Alvord, who appeared before the committee at its invitation to discuss the Fire Department's budget. An interesting and fruitful discussion ensued as David explained each line item of the department's proposed budget. David noted that state and national requirements for training and equipment meant that there would be large expenses in the next several years for replacing equipment that would have "aged out" of allowable use, including a new fire truck that could cost almost half a million dollars. David also noted that with Plainfield's aging population, there are fewer firefighters and EMTs every year, and the coming years might see a move toward regionalization of firefighting and EMT services.

David Alvord left at 8:07 p.m.

Highway Department Supervisor Merton Taylor, Jr., then presented his department's budget. It was noted that after education, the Highway Department

receives the largest allocation of Plainfield's taxes, making up approximately 20% of the annual budget. In addition to requests for upkeep, road maintenance, and snow removal, a new plow attachment will be needed, funding for which will appear as a special article.

The question arose whether money could be saved by doing less intensive plowing. This led to a discussion of expectations by town residents and occasional complaints to the Highway Department that roads were not cleared quickly enough. It was suggested that the town's residents take responsibility for deciding on the level of snow removal that they want and allocating resources accordingly.

Mert Taylor left at 8:43 p.m.

Discussion then resumed on the issue of how departments and committees should design their budgets. The chair suggested that a reserve fund, which is allowable by statute, budgeted each year with \$3,000 could, if increased to a larger amount, take the place of the "buffers" in individual budget lines.

A motion was then made and passed unanimously that the Finance Committee's recommendations to the Select Board for the town budget be based primarily on past spending, with significant increases over such historical amounts requiring a compelling justification.

The chair was tasked with consulting with town counsel about the feasibility of using the reserve fund for the above-mentioned purpose.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:12 p.m.

Submitted by David Kramer, secretary