

MINUTES

Plainfield Finance Committee
Tuesday, March 1, 2021, 7 p.m.
Remote Meeting

The meeting was called to order at 7:01 p.m. by chairman David Kramer. Present in addition were committee members Robert Baker, Bob Silberberg, Roberta Wooldridge, and Tee O'Sullivan. Present by invitation to present their budgets were Fire and EMT chief David Alvord, Police Department chief Justin Litchfield, and MLP Broadband Enterprise manager Kimberly Longey. Also present were members of the Board of Selectmen Patrick Williams and Rebecca Coletta. A few members of the public were also occasionally present.

David Alvord presented the Fire Department's budget, noting that due to recent experience, he was able to reduce the amounts of a few items on the administrative budget, including maintenance, personal gear, and medical supplies. Regarding personnel expenses, David informed the committee that the addition last year of an administrative assistant had been very useful and had made his work as chief much more manageable. Nonetheless, he stated, the position of chief demands at least fifteen hours of work a week, and since he planned on retiring from his position as chief in a couple of years, he believed that the chief's stipend should be raised over two years to double its current amount of \$5,000 to make the position more attractive. He observed that other towns are facing retirements, personnel shortages, and increasing costs, and that Plainfield should be looking at possible formal cooperation with neighboring towns, particularly those in Hampshire County, which shares an emergency communication system and other standards. The sense of the committee appeared to be in support of Chief Alvord's request, though formal approval will take place at a later meeting.

Justin Litchfield presented the Police Department budget request for FY2022. He noted that the administrative budget for the next fiscal year was almost identical to that of the last fiscal year. It was the personnel budget that presented a large change over last year's. It was recalled that last year, the department had asked for an increase in hourly rate from \$16.09 to \$22.00 for the chief, \$21.00 for the sergeant, and \$19.00 for the officers. The town rejected this request at annual Town Meeting, and the hourly rates were increased only by the cost of living adjustment of 1.9%. In response, Chief Litchfield went from full time to half time and joined the Highway Department. The total of 92 hours per week of department commitment was not, however, reduced, Justin's hours that he had given up being reassigned. Despite this rebuff by the town, the Police Department has come this year to the Finance Committee with a request that their hourly rates be pegged to those of the Highway Department, with a range from about \$19.50 for an officer to about \$25.00 for the chief. In justifying his request, Chief Litchfield began by reporting that last December 31, Governor Baker signed legislation that would require a mandatory certification process for

police officers, with the result that he and his officers would soon be qualified to serve in any police department in the commonwealth, leaving Plainfield's underpaid department at risk of hemorrhaging its officers. He also argued that the requirements on police officers for education and training as well as the danger and uncertain hours that they encounter justify a wage at least that of a member of the Highway Department. (I note in passing that in the recent job description and salary study undertaken by Plainfield, the police were placed by themselves in the highest category of proposed compensation.) As with the Fire Department, the sense of the committee appeared to be supportive of this request, though concern was expressed that it would likely be a heavy political lift if a strong case were not presented to the town, including a clear accounting of the work of the department.

Kimberly Longey, manager of Plainfield's Broadband Enterprise, presented her budget. She emphasized that the enterprise operates as a semi-independent entity, generating revenue from subscribers and spending that revenue on the costs of running the broadband network. The cost of building the infrastructure, which is now complete, she reminded the committee, had been taken on by the town through loans, with a portion of the cost offset by federal and state grants, and that debt repayment was to be borne by the general fund, not the enterprise. Kimberly informed the committee that the enterprise was generating a modest surplus, which she would like, with the Board of Selectmen's and the town's consent, to place in a reserve fund that would be established this spring at Town Meeting. There was some discussion whether in a few years, once that fund was filled at a target amount of \$85,000, any additional revenues should be used to lower subscriber rates, pay down the debt, or in some other way, such as subsidizing subscriptions for those who could not otherwise afford broadband. The sense of the committee seemed to be in support of Kimberly's proposal for a reserve fund.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:33 p.m.