

**Hill Budget Committee
Meeting Minutes
November 17, 2021**

Accepted December 1st, 2021

Present: Carol Asher, Marshall Bennett, Betty Hanks, Joann Irving, Paul Meyerhoefer, Paula McDonough, Don Moyer, Thomas Pavelka, Wendy Rosa, Thomas Seymour, Chris Vlitas.

Public: Chief Jamie Moulton, Captain Nathan Mills (Representatives Fire Department)
Road Agent Dean Stevenson (Presenter for Highway Department)
Shaun Bresnahan Jr, Stephen Thomson, Donald Reese

Meeting Minutes:

Called to order 6:59 PM

Chair Moyer gave a short introduction to materials that would be included later during both presentations. He addressed how it was a team effort to produce data that would assist in making an assessment of what is right for the Town, and what is right for the Taxpayer. It would not be an absolute indication of how to vote on budgets, rather a means to round out context in order to reach a conclusion.

Joann Irving asked about the nature of voting to date. Mr. Moyer reinforced that the purpose of a non-binding vote was to give feedback to the department considered. She asked if it was appropriate to propose cuts during the session in which a department presents. Mr. Moyer confirmed it was the time to introduce cuts, and even additions, as occurred the previous session with Parks and Recreation. It conforms to giving department heads an indication of how the committee is inclined to recommend. This transparency would only help for each department to arrive at a budget that was fair to all involved. In the end, the committee can only recommend. The Select Board and departments can then, after consideration, amend completely, in part, or present to the public at Town Meeting their number as initially presented. Overall, the Taxpayer is truly served, as no longer could the Budget Committee be described as a Rubber Stamp having championed transparency. In addition, such attention to detail could only help department heads to finalise their budgets along with the Select Board.

At this point, handing out the spreadsheet of Year to Date spending was the easiest thing Chief Moulton would do all night. In no way did he make it easy for himself, the deck was stacked inheriting the department as it was. To his credit, he handled the scrutiny with aplomb and dignity. He steadfastly avoided the judgmental and kept his comments objective, no matter how many times it was made clear that the department has been in need of new leadership.

The first gauntlet was the jaw dropping subscription to Ambulance service, provided by Bristol, next year. As covered in previous minutes, each year that price is based upon an equation that factors in documented use from the previous year. Predominately the result of an increase in calls responded to, that number is going to increase by 73%. Ouch. Chief Moulton went on to inform that the Select Board is not being a wallflower on this one. In fact, they have an appointment to go over the details with the Chief from Bristol forthwith.

The reality is that unless a plateau is reached, there is little any official can do about this line. It all gets down to the actuality of cost in providing a service. In fact, Bristol was going to have to increase their ask of Taxpayers by 128,000.00 this budget season. To that end, Mr. Pavelka asked about who Bristol served and the economics of Hill going into the Ambulance service.

As it stands, Bristol operates one Ambulance 24/7/365. It also has a part time on call Ambulance and staff. In addition to responding to calls within Bristol Town lines, they also serve Alexandria, Danbury, and Hill; while also being committed to mutual aid in New Hampton and Bridgewater.

The hurdle of infrastructure itself makes a Hill Ambulance an impossibility. To buy and stock an Ambulance would eat up 400K. Then you would have to procure insurance. Ambulances do not drive nor attend to patients themselves. Yes, Ambulance services do bill. As does Bristol. However the fine print is a harsh reality. If billings actually recouped from insurance the true cost of a particular Ambulance service, they would not need to have Taxpayer input. Such is the complexity and perhaps dysfunction of our Health Care System. Further complicating this is a not so minor change in the equation that results in our share.

This year, things changed. No longer could any department suffer the response that did not result in an insurance claim. If the Ambulance got a call for a person that could not get themselves off the floor, and after responding that person was not in need of further service, that call was not eligible for a claim. Yet, one would have to admit, that person hours and resources were expended. Then there is the further complication when an Ambulance responds, attends, then recommends transportation for additional evaluation, only to have the caller refuse. Again time and resources spent, yet no way to recoup. Almost 26% of the calls now fall into that category. The piper has come calling.

Chief Moulton was then free to address our Fire Department directly. The needs came quickly. There are broken windows, a heating system from the 1960s, and a distinct lack of fire detectors. It was then indicated a warrant article for roof repair was a probability in March. The heating system would have to be another, but two in one year seemed too much. Currently the heating system is 100% air and poses health threats to those serving on the Fire Department. The needed system would have a split system where air was used to heat the equipment bays on a separate thermostat, to allow squelching of that area in times of open doors, and a water based radiator system for those areas regularly used by humans.

Otherwise, Chief Moulton had in mind to purchase insulation and seal off as much of the windows and doors as possible and do a bunch of painting with the rest of the building maintenance line. In order to keep diesel costs down, he is pursuing a contract with the State which would require the Fire Equipment to re-fuel in either Bristol or Franklin. As longevity of equipment is based on regular use, this could help in extending the life of our Fire Trucks. It would also provide for a means to track fuel consumption, as a card is required and use is reported back to the Town Offices.

Fire Departments are required by law to certify their equipment. That costs money. In the past we have allocated monies, only to have none of it spent. That has translated into non-compliance. In order to rectify that, our Chief has gone through all the equipment and identified the costs associated in certifying each annually. Some of that certification is done by renting equipment and testing in-situ. Other pieces must go out of house to a third party. Still others, could be done by co-ordinating with surrounding departments and sharing third party services that visit a station. Regardless, in order to be certified, we are going to have to spend more than we used to.

It was proffered for a \$100.00 more than the usual \$100.00, our department could offer training of how to avoid, remove oneself from and perhaps mitigate a fire, beyond that of just instructing students at the JDB. Chief Moulton hopes to offer classes in fire extinguisher techniques and other aspects to adult members of the community.

There is a need for training. Currently only three of the twelve department members are certified to enter a structure on fire. Axiomatically, a department is only as good as the training imparted. Since the State is offering reduced rates to encourage people to consider being a first responder in the day and age of Covid, now is an opportune time to do so. Yes, the Town pays 100% of costs. However, cognisant to the opportunist that would use a small town to get training, then trade up to a new better paying job, Chief Moulton is in the process to have a contract signed by all members that undertake training, committing them to repaying the Town should they depart thereafter; time frame of service required to be determined.

Discussion then turned to a list of equipment needed to be replaced. Items listed included a large gas powered circular saw that used various blades to attack specific tasks. The current saw is older than the Chief, and has a throttle that is more cantankerous than a poked hive of hornets. Re-chargeable flashlights are sought. As are pagers and a new computer, since the one currently in use is running Windows 7. Therein began a discussion of quotes and totals.

Mr. Vlitas thought it unlikely that a computer and new internet router should cost Three Grand, considering Mr. Moulton was going to re-use the monitor in existence. There was a re-examination of the costs of flashlights and the total number needed. Finally, it was admitted that the quote for the computer was not realistic, and that the Budget Committee would be best served if all of the sought purchases were detailed in cost and indeed came to a total of \$14,000.00. At this point, Paula McDonough introduced that there were a couple of persons in town that were computer savvy and might be able to help hone the quote on the computer. It was accepted that they might be sought out for a second opinion.

Talk then centered on the line that would purchase protective gear for members. Again it was highlighted that gear had not been maintained accordingly, which has resulted in the equipment becoming non-compliant, therefore, unsafe. That necessitated a bump in spending to catch up. It was hoped, by Chief Moulton, that in the future, this line would return to its nominal funding that would provide for normal wear and tear. It was acknowledged that so far this year, the 5K that usually is appropriated has yet to be expended. However, it would be completely drawn down, as Chief Moulton was going to purchase some of the absolutely needed gear with that money. The next year's appropriation was also expected to be fully consumed in order to bring us to a modicum of protective gear for our now 12 member department. For context, it was offered that a single member would require \$3500.00 in basic gear, as provided in this line, to participate in fighting a fire.

Next realised was the replacement of some radios through a matching Grant. The Town ponied up 5K and the grant provided the remainder to get 5 new radios.

The department has jettisoned a cable subscription. Yet, in order to keep abreast and be modern, they still need to maintain a land/fax line, cell phone for Chief, and internet connection in our firehouse.

Talk then moved to the philanthropic. Like other departments, the Fire has a non-profit alliance that roots for them. The Hill Fire Fighters Association both fund raises and accepts donations. Their next

goal is to raise the almost 15K needed to purchase a new Jaws of Life apparatus. We do have one. It is in need of multiple repairs. As there is so much in need of addressing, Chief Moulton is trying to offset taxation by seeking funds elsewhere. Again dialogue switched the reality that the department was on track to expend fewer funds than appropriated. Select Board member Sean Bresnahan Jr. said that the option existed for a warrant article be offered to voters that would move that under-run from the Unreserved Capitol Fund to our Fire Department Heavy Equipment Fund.

Paul Meyerhoefer posed a question about the uniform budget that tripled from \$400.00 to \$1200.00 dollars. From this funding, two types of clothing are purveyed. T-shirts and Sweat Shirts that have collars, zippered neck and pockets. Whether all members are actually wearing them on every call is not known. However, it seems that this uniform is utilised enough that members do ask for new ones as their current article is threadbare. In essence, the clothing purchased is worn in multiple roles. One is during training. More predominately is the use of them during known public events, Old Home day being one. It was also documented that they are worn as an article of pride during off hours by members and serves to promote department health through participation.

Mr Meyerhoefer also revisited the 4.5 k in equipment repairs, of which only 158.00 were spent YTD. He was re-assured that the under-run was the result of lackadaisical management in the past, and that this line would be spent accordingly in the future.

Mr. Meyerhoefer doubled down in asking that the increase in spending that was on tap be sought over two progressive years of budgeting. Talk then revisited the two avenues of encumbering funds or an outright warrant article to shift funds from unreserved to dedicated.

Mr. Vlitas, asked to have more clarification be provided with the exact numbers involved in each equipment purchase sought, in order to assuage any hesitation to increase spending.

Wendy Rosa entered into a hypothetical calculus seeking to understand the true demand being placed upon the Fire Department. It was recognised that within the existing conditions, wherein there is no Police force to respond at all, our Fire Department is winding up dealing with calls that would be better responded to by the Police. He has also been on certain calls where he has had to call for Bristol or Franklin PD to respond to have witness; thereby relieving him of indemnity that would surely come into play should things have gone south and he not been diligent. What a world we live in.

At this point, Chair Moyer underscored that we as a community should support the equipping of our first responders. In addition, it was a no brainer that their equipment should be certified, every year. It was then the Committee turned to wages.

Rev. Asher asked if wages were paid on just calls or do additional services get remunerated? Chief Moulton detailed that calls are the predominate tally to wages. Training, however was completely on a voluntary basis. As were most other ancillary pursuits. Basically, if a member was not tasked to a call official, hours are not billed. The Chief has billed some hours of administrative work, but it is far from all of them.

At this point, Mr. Moyer handed out the first detailed breakout of wages over time for the Fire Department. Chief Moulton indicated that over time, he wanted to delineated pay based upon certifications. Each member would receive a pay rate commensurate with the totality and level of certifications held.

'Ms. Irving asked if there would be any warrant articles in addition to the budget formal this year? Chief Moulton responded it would all depend upon the quotes he received with respect to the roof.

Mr. Meyerhoefer asked about the upper limit of members in the department. Mr . Moulton replied that total participation was a dynamic number. While he could conceive of 20 individuals being regular respondents, should there be a condition where one, or more, where only answering a trace of calls per year, they would be under review. While review would not equate to dismissal, it would place significant amounts of scrutiny, whereby future membership would be incumbent upon increased involvement.

It was at this point that the Budget Committee took a non-binding vote on the budget as presented. 10 voted in favor, with Paul Meyerhoefer abstaining.

It was at this point, recorded as 8:55 PM, the Committee took a brief break.

At 9:05 PM the Road Department Began to present, and immediately Joann Irving asked about the first line enumerated, or Building Maintenance; it being a 200% increase. The increase seems to be based on an unforeseen need to replace a number of springs in Town Equipment Shed doors. Paul Meyerhoefer seconded concern that nominal budgeting should get adjusted as the new norm, despite the true nature of expenditure.

The next item was the yearly for diesel expenditure. Because of a 50% under-run, Ms. Irving questioned the projected need. A counter position was offered that this line was highly speculative given year to year pricing and use, not the least of which was total hours spent plowing and sanding. Ms. Irving countered with the previous year's under run of 9K. It was agreed though discussion involving members of the Select Board and the Road Agent, that a more thorough analysis of that line would be forthcoming. It would involve a multiple year assessment of the sheer volume of diesel used. In addition to a more accurate measure of what was used, along with a better prognostication of what might be a reasonable margin of error, a more firm assessment of need, including projected inflation in cost of diesel, would be calculated and re-submitted to the committee for consideration.

Ms.Irving then asked about the 5k perennially budgeted for equipment rental, but the year previous, unbilled. It was admitted this was primarily based upon the need every three years of a rental to do roadside mowing. Indeed, to pursue this requires a complicated set of basic and attachment in order to do correctly. While we do not do this every year, or rather every three or so, it was agreed this next year would actually see a full use of this appropriated line to rent the equipment that would result in this task being done. It was additionally indicated that one person of the road crew might spend an entire month on this task, while the two others attend to supplementary endeavours.

Ms. Irving then asked about the nature of General Maintenance vs. Building Maintenance. As the explanation was so similar, she commented that, "There seems to be a lot of duplication in this budget."

This spawned a discussion and dissection of the lines designated New Clothing and Safety Equipment. As in previous session of the Committee dialogue and revelations detailed the where it comes from for certain items of personal accoutrement. In general, footwear, gloves, helmets, goggles and vests are paid for out of the Safety Equipment line. Not always does that line get spent down at the beginning of the season. In fact, boots are in the pipeline, only to be paid in the last month of the year. Not for nothing, the general debate of our providing for clothing did ensue.

It was entered that other Towns do provide for actual uniforms, as opposed to our offsetting clothing costs. At this point Paul Meyerhoefer re-iterated that uniforms proper, with a drop off laundry service, would cost the Town umpteen more than the allowance currently brokered.

Conversation briefly centered on the nature of Professional Services that was once again funded at the level of 4.5K per annum. It was offered that most years required some tree remediation that exceeded the skill level of the road department. Once a crane was needed, this was almost exceeded. While last year was crane free, we did incur a move the snow off the roof situation that chewed up a good amount, so that line seemed to be an insurance policy more than just fluff.

Things there moved to our annual Salt consumption. This line drew scrutiny from Mr. Vlitas, who opined that some more attention could be brought to yearly extrapolations as to what should be expected. It was agreed by the Select Board members present, that a historical analysis of tonnage used, along with a price history and inflationary variable could be brought anew into the calculation of this line.

The next back and forth was had over the yearly cost of exactly what it takes to replace the consumables on all the equipment used to remediate snow fall. This runs from the somewhat obvious of edges that wear on plows, to the fixation points on those plows; ie. bolts and washers and such. All of which are, in reality, consumables. Believe it or not, your Budget Committee wrangled over whether this line needed to be a full Nine Thousand per year.

Your Budget Committee then bothered to scrutinize the appropriation for soap, paper and shop towels. It was assured to us that all purchases were submitted to our Town Administrative Assistant to make sure that your tax dollar did not go to paying lunches or what not. Rather, it went to real needs to keep our shop supplied.

At this point it was revealed that the cost associated with the line 'telephone' should go down. The department only has a land line and internet connection, since the Road Agent no longer has a Town provided cell phone. It was professed that our Administrative Assistant would calculate a new yearly expenditure for services subscribed.

Ms. Irving then took to task the line of Training, which was 100% unused this year. Like many lines, it was needed as a place holder, lest we need it and not have it according to rules and regulations which outline budgeting. Some conversation was had to the theoretical implications of this practice, that would flesh out clearer in subsequent deliberations in the evening.

Discussion then focused on the nature of the closure of the Bridge on Shop Road. Is there nothing this committee will not question? Mr Bresnahan Jr. provided images of the bridge. It was also highlighted that since this bridge was more convenience than necessity, its placement on the list of priorities was low. Then came the practical considerations of how funding might be approached to replace it. Recent Appropriations, which are on the heels of Taxation, by the Federal Government were ruminated upon. IT was realised that those funds are so well earmarked that the chance of this bridge being replaced with Federal Funds was ridiculous.

There was then a considered discussion of what the Town was doing with its side walks. It started with a declaration by the Road Agent that no road improvements had been undertaken this year, as it was his understanding that a good deal of sidewalks were to be remediated. That did not completely happen. Although, some 900 of the 6000 plus total linear feet of sidewalk was removed and replaced with loam

and grass seed. Among the mix of points of discussion was the reality, or in reality not, using grant monies to continue the process. The problem with available grants is there bare minimum of 400K being spent in that endeavour. Then there is the fine print of the Town having to appropriate 100k for matching funds to be in the mix, let alone won in the grant application and award process.

Focus was given on the fact that 900 feet was done, therefore, we will have a real ability to project costs for the rest being replaced with grass. Additionally, it was thought that maybe, next year, Crescent street should be a focus, with more of a mindset being pursued in replacing sidewalks with sidewalks, not just grass.

Wendy Rosa returned to the topic of the Shop Road Bridge. It was further revealed that DOT matching funds were going to be hard to come by as the bridge was not essential. If it was going to be approached, the first step would have to be assessing the foundations that made up either side. Once we are better apprised of their longevity, we could then move forward into considering the many iterations of road bed that could be laid between the two sides.

A non-binding vote was then held on the Road Department Budget as presented thus far.

Four members agreed, and they were Asher, Moyer, Rosa and Seymour. The rest voted against.

Carol Asher then declared that so much of the Road Department's budget was estimation, that it was a hard task to complete in order to provide an agreeable number to all. She was not agreeable at all to the nature of so much of the deliberations hinging upon the supposed ability of the department to correctly intuit the totality of snow fall, and therefore resources required to fully keep our roads accessible. This continues into a nuanced consideration of a need to balance how the department could eliminate divination, and hone a data based assessment of the next year's needs. This brought back a re-iteration that we should avoid penalising a department for not completely spending every year's appropriation. Some speculative funding levels are necessary to insure a department is never behind the eight ball.

Mr. Vlitas countered with his usual context of how those in our community, which are not few in number, that are on fixed incomes need to be considered. Ideal funding may not be achievable, when those in your community have not the increased access to income that is required to surmount an increase in Taxation that might be perceived necessary.

Discussion then moved to focus on the spending expected to keep our Transfer Station open. Paula McDonough asked about the income received from certain items dropped off as in microwaves, or other appliances, etc. Mr. Seymour offered that revenues will be addressed in a meeting of its own. At present the Committee was to focus on appropriations.

Mr. Vlitas then focused on the under-run that was expected, including projecting for two months of operations. In his back of the envelope calculations, the department was on track for an under-run of 10%. He would like that percentage reduced so that the Budget Committee could claim integrity in analysing expenditures. He wondered if that reality could not be held to the 5% or less level from here on out.

Mr. Meyerhoefer interjected that it was his recollection that over the past three years, the Budget Committee had a tendency to pad the Transfer Station from deliberations, but now admitted that train of thought had not borne itself out. It was, perhaps time to reverse course and reconsider. Mr. Moyer then

went into an analysis of week to week spending at the Transfer Station. To him, the projected cost of this year's operations would produce an under-run, which warranted a reassessment of bottom line request.

Put to a non-binding vote, only Member Seymour voted inclination to approve Transfer Station funding as presented. The rest said No.

Having reached the hour of 10:47PM, the Committee then turned their attention to reviewing minutes from the last meeting. A few tweaks were proffered, but no substantive edits were made. The minutes were then unanimously ratified for publication.

Having no other business to conduct, Wendy Rosa moved to adjourn. It was seconded by Marshall Bennett. The Committee adjourned at 10:55 PM.