Rowe Finance Committee
March 31, 2020
6:30 P.M. via Remote Participation

Present: Chair Wayne Zavotka, Vice-Chair Loretta Dionne, Christopher "Selmi" Hyytinen, Paul McLatchy III, Laurie Pike

Board of Selectmen: Chair Charles Sokol, Vice-Chair Jennifer Morse, Selectman Edward Silva, Executive Secretary Janice Boudreau

Audience of Citizens: Joanne Semanie, Assessors Chair Frederick Williams

Note: Due to the national COVID-19 pandemic, this meeting was held via remote participation as authorized by executive order of the governor. All votes are taken via roll-call vote.

Call to Order: Board of Selectmen Chair Sokol called the Board of Selectmen to order at 6:30 P.M., and Chair Zavotka called the Finance Committee meeting to order at 6:32 P.M., with a quorum of both committees present.

Levy and General Budget: Assessor Williams put together his annual levy worksheet that incorporates all funds to be raised, expenditures, levy limits, special projects, and other revenues. In the past the town routinely bumped up against the levy limit and the 2.5% increase permitted each year. Due to the large increase in valuation of the utilities, this is no longer a large concern. Assessors Williams advised that the town now has to be self-restricting in its budgeting process. For FY2020, the town had $362,748 in excess levy capacity (the difference between what was raised and what was permitted to be raised). Based on the most recent budget worksheet the town has $289,073 of excess capacity, though budget figures have not been finalized.

The town had a hearing scheduled for May over the utility litigation, but this is likely to be delayed due to the pandemic. Lawyers are discussing a possible settlement to avoid going to the Appellate Tax Board.

Selectman Morse asked if we want to set a limit on total funding and/or a percentage increase. Chair Sokol felt that we need to figure out why the numbers are much higher than last year. His feelings are that sticking to a 2.5% should perhaps be a goal, but not an absolute. Selectman Silva didn't offer a cutoff point, but suggested that increases of 4% and higher can raise red flags to the voters. Chair Zavotka pointed out that there have been a lot of increases in the budget submissions, and that the Finance Committee's recommendations of cutting some lines have not been incorporated yet. Assessor Williams advised that the levy limit may not require a 2.5% limitation.

Mr. McLatchy asked about raising the total amount of the levy limit, with the difference going into stabilization. Selectman Morse hesitated, saying that in the middle of a pandemic raising taxes more than necessary is not necessarily advisable.

The four largest contributors to the growth in the budget belong to the school, highway department, general government, and fire department. However, these are four of the largest departments in town, which would make their portion of the increase understandable. Members of both committees wanted more information on the school budget.

Town Administrator: The Board of Selectmen is exploring the possibility of a shift in personnel at town hall. This would replace the existing positions of executive secretary and administrative assistant to the boards with a Town Administrator and an as-of-yet untitled assistant. They joined this meeting to discuss the budget and to "make a pitch" to the Finance Committee about their feelings on such a shift. Though a job description has not been finalized yet, the position seems to serve as an intermediary between employees under the Board and the Board itself and will have day-to-day operational supervision of the town.

Ms. Pike asked whether this is going to be on the warrant this year. Chair Sokol responded that there seems to be an appetite amongst the Board for such a position. Selectman Silva felt that there it takes a lot of time to get things done right now, and a town administrator position may be able to help with that.

Ms. Pike referenced the report conducted by the Department of Revenue regarding a town administrator position, which says that a point person is advisable, but not necessarily a town administrator. She then asked whether the Board has considered reorganization between existing staff. Chair Zavotka added that it is within the purview of the Board of Selectmen to decide what they want to do with staffing, including whether or not to appoint an existing staffer as a point person. He further commented that it may be useful to look at the current structure and determine whether it was still beneficial to continue with what we have. He cited that in Ashfield there are two staffers in town hall that are paid $83,506 combined. Colrain has two that are paid $93,631. Rowe's annual amount of $91,878 falls in between these two.

Selectman Silva explained that the plan is to create the job descriptions and try to find the two best people possible to fill them, which could be existing personnel or new employees. The DOR report cited a lot of overlap, which needs to be cleared up. Executive Secretary Boudreau gave her opinion that it has been immensely valuable to have some overlap on duties so that one person can fill in for the other, especially during this COVID-19 crisis. If one person gets sick, the other can fill in. Selectman Silva felt that the town hall is currently disorganized.

Ms. Pike asked if there have been any efforts to make changes to the existing structure. Chair Sokol answered that the issue is that authority is not always clear. No one in town hall has managerial authority to resolve issues, which requires the matter to be sent to the Board of Selectmen to handle. The Board *can* just assign authority as they see fit, but they want to go about making sure it's done in the right way.

Ms. Pike questioned the need due to the size of the town- Ashfield and Colrain have much larger populations. Mr. McLatchy offered an explanation that even though those

towns are larger in population, Rowe has a similar level budget and more personnel as the school is not part of a district. For example, Buckland (which has a population about 4-5 times that of Rowe) has fewer than ten benefited employees.

Chair Sokol asked what else the Finance Committee would need to make a decision before the FY21 budget was finished. Vice-Chair Dionne would like to see the actual job descriptions, and Ms. Pike would like to also see the number of hours and ultimate cost of these positions.

A brief discussion followed about the history surrounding the former town coordinator position and the difference between a coordinator and administrator. Executive Secretary Boudreau explained that there is nothing in state law that defines an administrator, coordinator, executive secretary, or administrative assistant. It's all in what the town chooses to assign to the position. She also informed the Finance Committee that town counsel had made similar remarks and that multiple avenues could be taken to pursue the goal of having a point person in town hall.

Departure: Selectman Morse left the meeting at 7:47.

Budget: The following areas of the budget have been discussed at prior meetings and were being brought up to bring the selectmen up to speed.

IT Budget: The large increase in IT is due to a change to software, which is now a subscription service. There has also been an increase in options being offered (archiving, email, etc.) and a change from five hours a month of IT service to unlimited service.

Insurance/Bonding: There has been an increase due to additional junior firefighters and an increase in coverage for other buildings/equipment.

Treasurer Stipend: The Finance Committee has recommended that this line be level funded as the incumbent hasn't been in office for an entire year yet.

Town Clerk: The Finance Committee voted to lower the stipend to the original amount requested by the Town Clerk.

Police: The Finance Committee had voted to express concern over the number of hours the Police Chief was logging on time sheets and that a response was requested from the Board. The Board of Selectmen discussed this with the members present and suggested that perhaps she's not reporting her full hours, and that she will be encouraged to improve her tracking of time. Mr. McLatchy also spoke about his concern of setting a precedent about future chiefs being a benefited position, but was not opposed to the current individual being elevated to full-time status.

Fire Department: The members had taken a vote not to recommend the new position being requested. They felt that while it would be helpful, it was not necessary.

Planning Board: A vote was taken at a prior meeting to not recommend a stipend at this time. The members did not want to increase stipends without a study. Mr. McLatchy suggested that since the Finance Committee cannot do this (due to conflicts of interest), perhaps an article could be added to the town meeting warrant to authorize the moderator to appoint a committee. Mr. McLatchy said he also spoke with the accountant, who said that it was acceptable to utilize a revolving fund for the Planning Board's legal expense. This could be a compromise to allow the Planning Board to accumulate funds for their line without granting their $10,000 request.

DPW: The Finance Committee felt that the increase in the summer youth program might be excessive. The Board has been looking into possibly combining the program with the park's summer youth program, but nothing has come from that yet. Mr. McLatchy requested that the Board of Selectmen decide on what the purpose of the program is: to employ youths, or get the sides of the roads done. The two may not be completely compatible anymore. Selectman Silva reported that he had received a lot of complaints about the roads not getting done. Ms. Pike asked for a number of how many complaints he had received. He could not come up with a number, but said he would keep track this year.

Town Counsel Budget: This line is running a little low. There are some projects coming up in FY2021 and potentially even before the end of this fiscal year. More money may be needed for both next year and possibly a reserve fund transfer for this year.

End of Meeting: A motion was made by Chair Sokol and seconded by Selectman Silva to adjourn their meeting at 8:25, with the following votes:

Charles Sokol	Yes
Edward Silva	Yes

All other attendees and Vice-Chair Dionne left at 8:27 P.M.

Minutes: The committee members reviewed the minutes of February 27th, March 5th, and March 26th. With no corrections, the minutes were approved as submitted.

Adjourn: A motion was made by Mr. Hyytinen and seconded by Ms. Pike to adjourn at 8:28 P.M. with the following votes:

Laurie Pike	Yes
Christopher Hyytinen	Yes
Paul McLatchy III	Yes
Wayne Zavotka	Yes

Next Meeting: The committee will meet on Tuesday, April 7th, and April 14th at 6:30 to continue the budgeting process. Until further notice, these meetings will be held remotely.

Respectfully Submitted,
Paul McLatchy III, Secretary

Approved: April 21, 2020

Paul McLatchy III, Secretary

Unable to be signed by entire committee due to COVID-19 pandemic.