

Town of Plainfield Select Board Special Budget Meeting
November 18, 2024
18 High St., Plainfield, VT and Via Zoom
Minutes - Approved

Agenda:

- Call Meeting to Order
- Changes to Agenda
- Public Comment
- Review of Budget Format (Josh Pitts)
- Review Items in Budget
- Announce date for next Select Board Meeting
- Adjourn

Present: Select Board members Karl Bissex (Chair), Dan Fingas, Frances Rose Subbiondo, and Peter Youngbaer. Select Board member Patti Jamele was not in attendance. Also present were Town Treasurer and Road Commissioner Josh Pitts, Town Clerk Bram Towbin, Wendy and Barry Shapiro, Keith Swann, Charlie Cogbill, Penny Bullard, Michael Billingsley, and Eric Blaisdell of the Times Argus.

Call Meeting to Order:

Select Board Chair Karl Bissex called the meeting to order at 6:01 pm.

Bissex announced that representatives from The Integrity Group are in town to assist with grant writing. He noted that a FEMA representative will be in town on Wednesday to kick off the 60 day period during which the Town will identify the detailed list of flood recovery projects.

Changes to Agenda:

Fingas suggested the addition of the approval of the November 13, 2024 draft minutes.

Youngbaer moved to approve the November 13, 2024 draft minutes. Fingas seconded. The motion carried unanimously.

Public Comment:

Bissex opened the floor to public comment. There was no public comment.

Review of Budget Format (Josh Pitts)

Pitts reviewed the previous four years of budgets. He stated that he would be working with bookkeeper Penny Bullard to tighten up systems and make line items simpler and easier to follow. He pointed out that flood recovery costs brought the Town over budget and notes that the expenses will be reimbursed. He explained the need for a cash receipts module in the Town software to end duplication of work and unverifiable entry of data. Bullard explained how the new system would reduce workload and enhance reconciliation processes. Staff training was recommended to ease the transition to the new system.

There was discussion of how to build a budget and the assumptions that will be made to do so. It was suggested to separate flood-related costs from regular expenditures for clearer financial analysis. A rough estimate indicated that approximately \$500,000 could be subtracted from total expenditures to account for flood recovery. A recommendation was made to start the budget planning with a 7% increase based on historical expenditure trends. Concerns were raised about starting budget assumptions, with some members advocating for a zero-based approach rather than a 7% increase. It was pointed out that the budget approved at Town Meeting differs from the current figures presented, leading to confusion about the sources of funding. The Board aims to ensure the public understands the budget process and the implications of tax rates. The budget includes various revenue sources, such as state aid and fees, which should be clearly communicated to the public. There is a need to reconcile the differences between the budget approved by voters and the current budget figures. The Board is committed to avoiding past chaos in the budget discussions and ensuring clarity in future proposals.

Review Items in Budget:

Youngbaer pointed out that the personnel policy has not been updated to reflect current practices, particularly regarding health insurance coverage for employees. There is recognition that current salaries are not competitive, necessitating adjustments in the budget. The addition of Goddard College to the tax rolls could present an opportunity to address salary increases for Town employees. The minutes from previous meetings lack detail on the adopted personnel policy revisions, prompting a need for clarity. A comprehensive document outlining the current health insurance plan and potential changes will be prepared for the next budget meeting. Input has been solicited from Town employees regarding benefits, including dental benefits that may have been promised but are unrecorded. It was pointed out that the expected tax base from the Goddard property is uncertain due to its recent sale and the impact of recent tax abatements. The property's appraised value is still under discussion, with estimates ranging between the sale price of \$3.4 million and an insured value of \$18 million. The sale of Goddard is not finalized, and its financial implications for the budget may not be realized until spring of 2025.

The town may need to borrow from the Bond Bank to manage cash flow until FEMA reimbursements are received, which could take time. The budget for the upcoming year will need

to account for both expected revenues and expenditures, including administrative costs related to flood recovery.

There is confusion regarding the budget numbers presented at Town Meetings, particularly the distinction between total budget and the amount to be raised by taxes. Clarification is needed on how to communicate budget figures to the public to avoid misunderstandings. Future budgets should clearly outline total expenditures, including outside revenues, to provide a comprehensive financial picture.

Pitts will work with Bullard to clean up the chart of accounts and analyze expenditures against the revenue to determine net changes year over year. A 3.71% average increase in budgeted expenditures was noted, with some expenditures exceeding this average, necessitating a thorough review.

The group discussed identifying one-time expenses from the previous year, such as the \$14,000 allocated to Linda Wells, to potentially remove them from the current budget. It was confirmed that there are no significant debts coming off the books, with only minor loans remaining.

The recommendation was made to reset line items for better clarity in future budget assessments, avoiding fragmentation of expenses across departments. The need for structured discussions around payroll and consultancy fees was emphasized to avoid a disorganized budget process.

The group agreed to meet weekly for budget discussions, with the aim of concluding by the end of December. It was suggested that department heads present their budget needs during regular Select Board meetings to streamline the process.

Concerns were raised about the management of the Cemetery Commission funds which need to be handled according to State statutes. It was confirmed that the budget for the Cemetery Commission will be disclosed in the upcoming Town Meeting.

Announce date for next Select Board Meeting:

The next regular Select Board meeting is scheduled for Monday, November 25, 2024 at 6:00 pm.

Adjourn:

Fingas moved to adjourn. Subbiondo seconded. The motion carried unanimously and the meeting was adjourned at 7:31 pm.

Minutes respectfully submitted by Kristin Brosky, Administrative Assistant. Minutes created with AI assistance from the Sembly app.