



## *Town of Plaistow ♦ Budget Committee*

*145 Main Street ♦ Plaistow ♦ NH ♦ 03865*

### **BUDGET COMMITTEE MEETING**

**Meeting: November 17, 2020**

**Call to Order: 6:32pm**

### **ROLL CALL:**

Maxann Dobson, *Chair*  
Sam Cafiso, *Vice Chair*  
Peter Bracci, *Budget Committee*  
Darrell Britton, *Budget Committee*  
Bob Hamilton, *Budget Committee*  
Dennis Heffernan, *Budget Committee*  
Laurie Milette, *Budget Committee*  
Robert Zukas, *Budget Committee*  
Julian Kiszka, *Selectmen's Representative*  
Jay DeRoche, *Alt. Selectmen's Representative*

Also present were: Chief Chris Knutsen, *Fire Department*  
Deputy Chief John Judson, *Fire Department*  
Doug and Nicole Thompson, *Residents*  
Michael Elcock, *All State Insurance*  
Mark Pearson, *Town Manager*, remotely  
Greg Colby, *Finance Director*, remotely

### **Agenda Item 5: Fire Department Presentation**

Chief Knutsen answered pre-submitted questions from the Budget Committee. He said they are in the preliminary phase of working with the CIC to look replace the tower truck. They are looking at costs and funding models and anticipates 12-24 months before replacement. He noted the truck has significant problems: it is not unsafe but some switches aren't reading properly so that it took 15 minutes to get the ladder into the air on their last call. The department has spent about \$70,000 in the last six years fixing the truck and the issues just keep getting larger.

B. Hamilton noted an outside agency is paid to do an annual inspection, and they should have reported if it needed to be replaced. C. Knutsen said the truck does not need to be replaced due to structural damage or chassis rot which is when the agency would indicate replacing it. The Fire Department looks at its functionality and dependability, and it is not functioning as it should, there are issues that prevent it from being set up and used in a timely fashion, and it is often out of service due to maintenance. C. Knutsen said a brand new ladder truck would cost \$1.2-\$1.3M.

C. Knutsen reported there are no full-time positions needed to staff the 6pm – 6am proposal. They use ‘call-members’ and are not looking full-time help but to use the call members on a per-diem basis and use own in-house staff for this time period.

C. Knutsen said there is an interactive ISO rating of cities and towns in New Hampshire available at <https://ecommerce.commerceinsurance.com>.

C. Knutsen said the department plans to request expenditure from the SCBA fund in 2021 and is working with the CIC and Tim Moore.

For the question of any savings by having two firefighters on the overnight shift versus on-call, C. Knutsen introduced Doug and Nicole Thompson to speak to the impact of a house fire. He noted a 911 call of a house fire at 10:00 AM on April 7, 2020. He said it was seven minutes from the time of dispatch to arrival at the house, which is 3 miles from the station. The Thompsons described the circumstances of the fire and its control. They were thankful for the quick response. C. Knutsen cited another house fire call to 911 at 5:52AM, when staff was just arriving for the six AM shift. This house was 1.1 miles from the station and the response time was 11 minutes and there was significant loss.

C. Knutsen introduced Michael Elcock with All State Insurance who addressed how the Town’s training, staffing and response scores bring the cost of insurance down for the homeowner. B. Hamilton asked about the Town’s ISO rating and was told it is a great score, a 4 on a scale of 1-10, 1 being perfect. P. Bracci asked if the Town went to the overnight shift would it bring the rating down and M. Elcock said staffing and training are major factors and it would be helpful but he could not guarantee a change in the rating. Ch. Dobson asked what would be the effect on homeowners’ insurance if the Town went from a 4 to a 3 ISO rating and M. Elcock estimated a 4-8% decrease.

C. Knutson reported that there is a good chance that the ISO might go from 4 to 5 if the personnel cannot get to the calls in a timely fashion and training requirements are not met. He noted that he came to Plaistow from a fully volunteer-staffed department and told of a fire where the truck didn’t leave the station until 5 minutes after the call and that children died in the fire. He said the department’s budget is not just numbers on paper but about the community and the service provided to them.

S. Cafiso said he did not like the chief’s tactics and the direction he was taking, and said that he felt it was unfair. He said there is no question about the job the department does or the need for safety and that the townspeople appreciate the wonderful job the fire and police departments do for them, but the committee’s job is to justify putting the burden on the taxpayer of another \$200,000 a year. C. Knutsen said the \$200,000 is not just for staffing, that there are other items in the budget that affect the ISO score as well. He said there is a human side to the budget too, that they see suffering and loss, and they see deficiencies and look for ways to fix them. He said he would do everything he can to ensure the decision makers understand how the decisions they make impact people.

C. Knutsen said the schedule for a full-time firefighter is 6AM – 6PM, and that there are four, they have 3 days on and 3 days off and work in two-person shifts. There is nobody on duty 6PM-6AM. He was asked by the Committee how many calls came in between 6PM-6AM and offered that between March 22 and Nov. 14, 2020 the department had 215 calls and 35% of total calls for service came in during the overnight period. He had been asked how many calls between 6PM-6AM did “on duty” solely respond to without having to wait and he said 100% were immediately responded to. He had been asked which apparatus can leave the station with just two overnight “on-duty” personnel and he said all of them as the drivers are trained on all vehicles. The committee asked the difference in time it takes to leave the station on a late-night call between personnel who sleep at the station and those who sleep at home. C. Knutsen replied that before 24-hour staffing it would take an average of 10 minutes to respond apparatus vs 5:38 from notification to scene with 24-hour staffing.

C. Knutsen showed a map of where the on-call firefighters live and said they no longer live as close to the station as had been the case historically. He said they are not trying to get rid of the on-call firefighters, but to continue to utilize them extensively. The committee had asked about daytime staffed fire stations in neighboring towns and C. Knutsen said Kingston, Hampstead and Newton do, and that Kingston has approximately 1,100 calls per year as does Plaistow. D. Britton asked if these towns have comparable budgets but C. Knutsen did not know; D. Britton suggested it would be good to know this dynamic. S. Cafiso asked which towns have daytime staff and which have night staff. C. Knutsen said Newton has daytime staff M-F and a part-time chief with about 400 calls/year.

Addressing the budget, C. Knutsen said the \$200,000 increase is not to pay just for personnel. He noted that the increase to personnel is what is normally seen, cost of living increases, etc. and amounts to \$13,734. P. Bracci asked if this figure included insurance and retirement and was told that is covered in the Human Resources budget. He noted the uniform line covers both the actual uniform and the structural gear worn into the fires and is an increase of \$14,670 in part to replace items that are as much as 14 years old. The \$15,600 increase to fit-for-duty medical physicals had not been budgeted before and was only done when a member came on. This request is for the entire department and is for both the baseline and annual requirements. He indicated a \$3,730 increase in dues to various membership organizations. He noted a \$385 increase for books and periodicals mostly due to subscription to an online National Fire Codes platform.

C. Knutsen then addressed the staffing increase. He said the increase covers calls for service, per-diem coverage at night, officer coverage at night, administrative duties, and training payroll to ensure giving proper services to the Town and to get the ISO rating down. This increase is \$119,952.

C/ Knutsen said the department has underfunded overtime for the last few years. He said it is hard to estimate the calls for service and when full-time staff comes in they get overtime for that. There is also an earned time-off liability that must be taken every year. This also covers increased training payroll since currently six hours are budgeted for each month and this needs to be at least doubled. He said the majority of training will be done while on duty but at times the whole group will need to train together. This is an increase of \$37,813.

C. Knutsen reported that the department's equipment is aging or was acquired used from another fire department and there are items that would improve the department's performance if they could be purchased. The increase is \$21,000.

C. Knutsen said that the General Medical Supplies line has been overspent the last few years and the \$2,000 increase is to bring it in line with reality.

Chief Knutsen said the overall increases would cost a taxpayer \$6.49 per month. He stated he did not know when the Fire Department was last given a budget increase.

D. Britton stated that everyone appreciates the services the department performs and believes the department is deserving of more, but that revenues are down, many people are unemployed and it's a year where he would be looking for budget cuts. He said he hoped that next year would be better and that this year's budget could be level funded. C. Knutsen said he has the same concerns and is also having to deal with increasingly dangerous calls due to COVID. B. Hamilton reported that the overall budget for the department has had a steady increase across the years.

R. Zukas asked if the new water hydrants would help lower the ISO. C. Knutsen said that currently the Town scores 100 on this area so putting in new hydrants would not likely impact the ISO.

Ch. Dobson said she calculated that personnel would be a \$187,952 increase. She noted that last year the Town Manager had recommended a \$187,000 increase and the BOS had decided against it. She asked if there wasn't a pressing need for those increases then, what has changed now. J. Judson replied that he knew changes would need to be initiated and had put that figure in as a place holder for the new chief.

P. Bracci asked if the department went to full-time staffing for 6PM-6AM how many people would need to be hired. C. Knutsen said they would not be hiring full-time staff, the request is to pay the on-call people. R Zukas asked if the 2 fire-fighters on at night would have shortened an 11 minute response and what piece of apparatus is the first to be taken out. C. Knutsen said they could have been out the door in two minutes and it was another minute to reach the fire. He said generally they take Engine 8 out. R. Zukas asked what two guys on one truck could do. J. Judson said the on call officer for the night would meet them at the scene to form a three-person crew. C. Knutsen said the office goes home with a command vehicle and is paid if there is a call.

D. Britton asked if the budget for two full-time people is for people already in the department. C. Knutsen said they have asked for two per-diem people; they are not looking to hire two full-time people but to fund a period of time that can be filled with 27 people paid per-diem. D. Britton asked if there is a credit back for the people who are already being paid. He said that if these people became full time the per diem would go away. C. Knutsen replied that is why this is not a \$200,000 increase; that calls and events had been budgeted for \$206,000 this change would bring that down to \$40,000.

B. Hamilton spoke about training that was conducted on Monday and Wednesday nights. C. Knutsen said the Wednesday night training had been eliminated because people were away from home too much and one Monday night a month was an association meeting. B. Hamilton said that most calls are EMT and that training is important and asked if the training increase was for this. C. Knutsen said that training is now being done in class and on line. S. Cafiso asked how adding money to training makes the time away from home better. C. Knutsen said they preferred to come in longer for more intense training but not as often and also have online training courses. And a class can be offered on Monday or Thursday night to give them an option. He said he got grants and was able to use his skills to put people through training classes that fit their schedules and this enabled him to get more people through their 60 hours of pump training so that the department will get credits it was unable to get before. He also said there needs to be officer training which is about a 40 hour class. He noted these things need to be ongoing and are why there needs to be a training budget increase.

S. Cafiso asked about overnight staffing in comparable towns. C. Knutsen and J. Judson said that Kingston and Hampstead are comparable in staffing and calls. C. Knutsen reported they are seeing more transport in ambulances than ever before. C. Cafiso thought we were getting away from this because it was taking away rescue abilities. J. Hudson said it appears to be increasing. B. Hamilton asked if we are collecting fees for transport and C. Knutsen said that collecting money was very complicated and they were using third party collection service due to Medicare rules and regulations and other insurance policies. However there were so few transfers a year the third party dropped them. But with this increasing trend he has reached out to some other services and is looking to implement this in 2021. C. Knutsen said he is not looking to replace the Rescue 2 soon as it is in good shape, but is more interested in replacing the ladder truck.

D. Heffernan asked about the cost of bringing on a full-time firefighter. C. Knutsen said it was about \$70,000 plus overtime so approximately \$82,000.

R. Zukas said that the CIC had pushed Rescue 2 replacement to 2024, so the next piece needing replacement would be Tower 3. He said this is a used piece and that had been budgeted at \$400,000 which may not be enough since the replacement price is over \$1M. J. Judson said they are looking for bargains in used apparatus. C. Knutson said the bay height limits what they can get, and that looking at used fire trucks is very hit or miss. B. Hamilton asked about the portable radios which are also on the CIC list. C. Knutsen said they are very expensive and they are looking for funding. He said he was pushing for a warrant article for the coming Town Hall.

P. Bracci said that the presentation mentioned replacing the SCBA gear. He understood that the CIC had paid for five of the six years at \$42,000 a year but had cancelled the last payment this past year, and asked where the money would come from to replace it. J. Judson said he was involved in this as the interim chief with G. Colby and M. Pearson but he could not recall why it was cancelled. C. Knutsen is working with another vendor and hopes he will be able to pay for this with existing funds, but will ask for a warrant article if needed.

Ch. Dobson thanked the Chief and Deputy Chief for coming. Chief Knutsen invited any member to visit him at any time at the station.

## **Agenda Item 6: Discussion of Budgets**

### **Executive-**

Line 4130-30-110: The Budget Committee asked for details on the scanning project. Town Manager Mark Pearson said that \$17,000 is budgeted for one experienced records clerk at \$18 per hour for 18 hours a week for 52 weeks. The project involves gathering the paper records that have been stored in the Town Hall tower and elsewhere and digitizing them. There is priority on the land records as the State requires they be kept into perpetuity. Once that is done they will move onto the next priority. This reduces the weight of stored records, saves space and makes them more easily available. He reported the work is being done by a part-time employee, that required taxes and workman's compensation and mandatory contribution are also paid, and the expense is capped at \$17,000. D. Britton asked if there is an end date to the project and M. Pearson replied the expense is just for 2021. D. Britton expressed concern this might go on for several years and if so it might become a full-time employee. M. Pearson said that while there are over 100 years of records, Plaistow is a small town and he did not expect the project would be unending. He noted the project will reduce the number of storage boxes which present a fire hazard and unintentional destruction of records. B. Hamilton asked if the project was funded in March and was told it had been but COVID interrupted the process. He said that in July they were able to find space to continue with the records, but that was also interrupted by quarantine. It has not been a steady process this year. B. Hamilton asked if this was funded through the budget or warrant article and was told the budget. S. Cafiso asked about boxes for the paperwork in a room in the mezzanine at the Highway Garage for storage. M. Pearson said they have bought containers and are ready to use them once the documents have been scanned and duplicates are discarded. He noted the room in the mezzanine is not in use yet but it is ready for use.

### **Town Clerk-**

The Budget Committee asked if revenues, such as vehicle registrations, are down. Finance Director Greg Colby reported that motor vehicle registrations have increased.

Ch. Dobson asked if there is a current budget shortfall due to COVID. G. Colby said overall there may be a slight shortfall. He noted it is hard to say; some revenues are up, others are down and not all losses are COVID related. He said Exeter Medical's building is finished and so those revenues are gone but that is not COVID related. Interest income is down significantly and is COVID related because the Fed rate has dropped to near nothing. He said revenues from meals and room tax have not decreased much and was set at \$392,000 for this year vs \$393,000 last year. Also the highway block grant was \$155,000 this year vs \$159,000 last year.

### **Tax Collector-**

The Budget Committee asked if real estate revenues are down, and if residents or businesses had trouble paying their July 2020 tax bills, possibly due to COVID. G. Colby said that property tax revenues are not down as they are set to balance the appropriations. He noted that that residents/

businesses did not have trouble paying their July tax bill, that a higher percentage paid this July than in the last two years.

**Assessing-**

The Budget Committee asked if Line 4159-30-120 Assessing office clerk is this still a Town employee. M. Pearson said yes. To the question how much does the town get reimbursed from the contracted assessor for this position he answered nothing. He noted there was no contract with Visions for 2021. He said there is a town employee who allocates some time to assessing since the contracted assessor is not on site every day, but the hours allocated to that town employee have been reduced to less than 10 hours a week. J. Kiszka asked where the rest of that employee's hours were allocated. M. Pearson said the employee is full-time and also works Human Resources, Human Services, Payroll, and Accounts Payable.

M. Pearson said that he would provide information on each department's current revenues, as requested.

Ch. Dobson thanked M. Pearson and G. Colby for attending the meeting.

The committee agreed to take these budgets under consideration.

- **D. Britton moved, second by D. Heffernan to approve take the Executive Budget under consideration for \$306,297**

**VOTE: 9-0-0 The motion was approved.**

- **D. Britton moved, second by J. Kiszka to approve take the Town Clerk Budget for \$107,453 under consideration.**

**VOTE: 9-0-0 The motion was approved.**

- **M. Dobson moved, second by R. Zukas to approve take the Elections Budget for \$12,095 under consideration.**

**VOTE: 9-0-0 The motion was approved.**

- **B. Hamilton moved, second by D. Heffernan to approve take the Assessing Budget for \$111,818 under consideration.**

**VOTE: 9-0-0 The motion was approved.**

- **R. Zukas moved, second by ?? to approve take the Tax Collector Budget for \$48,970 under consideration.**

**VOTE: 9-0-0 The motion was approved.**

- **R. Zukas moved, second by M. Dobson to approve take the Cemeteries Budget for \$8,000 under consideration.**

**VOTE: 9-0-0 The motion was approved.**

- **D. Heffernan moved, second by D. Britton to approve take the Conflict of Interest Budget for \$250 under consideration.**

**VOTE: 9-0-0 The motion was approved.**

- **D. Britton moved, second by D. Heffernan to approve take the Fire Department Budget for \$918,285 under consideration**

**VOTE: 9-0-0 The motion was approved.**

### **Agenda Item 7: New Business/Old Business**

Ch. Dobson said she did not know if the minutes of the last meeting would be ready so approval was not on the agenda, but they are in the packet. The minutes of the November 10, 2020 meeting were reviewed.

- **D. Heffernan moved, second by D. Britton to approve the minutes of the November 10, 2020 meeting**

Discussion: S. Cafiso noted he had an exchange with John Sherman that was not recorded in the minutes. C. Glorieux was asked to review the video and include it in the minutes. D. Heffernan withdrew his motion.

Ch. Dobson brought up assessing using the 2019 assessment and she felt that would put a large burden on the taxpayer because the committee does not have the new information including businesses. D. Britton said she hated to kick the can down the road on assessing. B. Hamilton noted the committee was looking forward to a fresh look at assessing so there would not be a repeat of last year's loss of \$1.2M in commercial tax revenue and the residents had to make it up. G. Colby said that he had presented to the BOS a summarization of the MS1 2019-2020 and the overall valuation of taxable property was up \$18.8M. \$4.3M was in the area of residential,



\$5.9M commercial and industrial, and \$8.8M utilities. D. Heffernan asked why they are using 2019 instead of 2020 and Ch. Dobson said it had to do with Visions. She said she wanted the committee to discuss this knowing that costs might be greater than the figures being worked with.

M. Pearson asked if G. Colby could give the breakdown of setting the tax rate, what went up, what went down and particularly the how much of the tax share of the town went down and how much the local and state school share went up and how much the county went down. G. Colby reported that the town portion went down \$0.43, the county portion went down \$0.10, and the combined local and state school portion went up \$0.87. M. Pearson and G. Colby noted that the net change on the tax bill is up \$0.34 primarily due to something the Town cannot control. B. Hamilton noted that last year all the tax rates went down and the tax bills went up significantly. P. Bracci noted that this is the reason why the Town had been looking at the Visions software because when the tax rate goes down and our assessment goes up we will probably pay a little bit more, but if the tax rate goes down and the assessment doesn't change as it did in commercial properties they get a tax break and the residents get a tax increase.

D. Britton asked if anyone knows where the school rate is going. J. Kiszka noted that the school budget went up \$2.9M. \$1.6M was in salary increases, \$1.1M up in teacher retirement, and other union contracts and collective bargaining which can't be touched. He said the State has been shifting the retirement burden to local taxes. D. Britton suggested that going forward wherever money can be saved by the Town it should since there will be no control over the school. He suggested level funding for a year and then work on finding cuts.

Ch. Dobson said the next meeting will be Tuesday, 11/24 and she will put together a list of department budgets to be reviewed and will solicit questions to send to the Town Manager.

#### **Agenda Item 10: Adjournment**

There was no additional business presented and the meeting was adjourned at 8:40pm.

Respectfully Submitted,  
Charlene Glorieux  
Recording Secretary