

Budget Practices Review Ad-Hoc Subcommittee
of the Advisory Committee
January 6, 2023 via Zoom

In attendance: committee members, Neil Gordon, Susan Granoff, Amy Hummel (chair), and Lee Selwyn. Also present were Select Board member Michael Sandman, Carla Benka, TMM; Carolyn Thall, TMM/AC; Ben Birnbaum, TMM/AC; and Hugh Mattison, TMM. Absent were Harry Bohors, Katherine Florio, Stephen Reeders.

During the January 6, 2023 meeting of the ad-hoc subcommittee on Budget Practices Review, a quorum of the committee briefly discussed the items on the agenda, noted below. Although it was a public meeting and not a hearing, members of the public were offered a chance to comment as well.

Agenda items

1. Possible pilot scenarios,
2. Making an initial report to the full Advisory Committee before the 2024 Budget Review commences.

Meeting Summary with notes

The ad-hoc sub-committee first discussed what a **possible pilot program** might look like. Ideas and concerns expressed in previous meetings were revisited, and there were questions about logistics and expected outcomes.

To re-iterate, the purpose of the Budget Practices Review ad-hoc subcommittee is to explore how the Advisory Committee might engage in the budgeting process earlier in the cycle in order to:

- more effectively and efficiently carry out its duties;
- better serve the Town; and
- better serve Town Meeting, without improperly overstepping the Advisory Committee's charge.

It is a broad charge. It is not the sub-committee's charge to determine a specific new practice for the Advisory Committee to undertake. It is to present ideas and options for the full committee to consider.

The very nature of a pilot: a small-scale, short-term experiment that helps an organization learn how change might work in practice, underscores the fact that this entire undertaking is an experiment, and there are several possible ways to move forward. Testing possibilities and reviewing outcomes will be instructive.

By piloting new practices, the Advisory Committee can better determine the likelihood of success of different options or their subsequent iterations, if they are rolled out on a larger scale. And, the outcome may not be immediately clear, but the hope is that there is a way for the Advisory Committee to use the newly articulated Select Board priorities, leverage the AC's own

institutional knowledge, and determine whether or not spending aligns with budget priorities across Town departments.

Immediate Pilot Option

Because it is late in budget cycle this year, in so far as the Town Administrator has already begun meeting with department heads (a process that begins in early fall), and the budget will be available for Advisory Committee review as soon as mid-February, the chair **proposed piloting a meeting with one or two department heads within the next few weeks**, in order to get a sense of what a candid, operations focused conversation with the department head (new or experienced) might yield.

Added Notes:

Ideally, the department head would meet informally, with the advisory subcommittee chair who reviews the departmental budget, and a member or two of the BPR ad-hoc subcommittee (a designated working group). The department head would have the opportunity to review and consider questions previously identified by the BPR subcommittee, with no expectation of a written response. The sub-committee seeks to avoid overburdening department heads but does want to provide questions in advance to ensure a productive discussion, and out of courtesy.

Written responses are dissuaded in order to promote a more informal and candid conversation about departmental operations. The BPR representative and the advisory subcommittee chair would collaborate in articulating take-aways that reflect departmental progress and concerns, measured against articulated Select Board priorities and previously identified Advisory Committee concerns.

This work will most likely be undertaken by a working group(s), and not the entire subcommittee, simply to begin to test questions and the concept generally.

Additional ideas include

1. **Review past AC departmental budget reports and look for concerning themes and consistently underfunded or unfunded needs;** this may best be done by asking AC subcommittee chairs to refer back to their own work, confer with their members and the report out to the ad-hoc subcommittee, the AC chair – when appropriate, communicating relevant findings to the TA and SB. The information will be of use during the fall pilots or future roll-outs and serve as a base line to measure effective budgeting progress overtime.
2. **Mine previous Advisory Committee Chair reports to Town Meeting,** which over the years have reflected overarching concerns, spending needs and patterns identified by the Advisory Committee. These clear and concise reports often reflect budgetary realities that are first heard by Town Meeting in total just before voting on the budget. Like the information gleaned from reviewing past advisory subcommittee reports, previously shared insights by

the Advisory chair may also be of use during the fall pilots and serve as a base line to measure progress.

3. **In the fall of 2023, pilot meetings with department heads on a wider scale**, either by:
 - a. selecting a few departments with budgetary needs that have consistently been cause for concern based on Select Board priorities or on-going funding concerns the Advisory Committee has identified;
 - b. meeting with all department heads in order to establish rapport and collect basic information.

Added Notes:

This work need not be onerous, and need not include the entire subcommittee that reviews the departmental budget in question (there are pros and cons to a full subcommittee or part subcommittee approach which the BPR ad-hoc subcommittee and the full AC should consider in future meetings). A member of the BPR ad-hoc committee should also be present during the piloting program.

Because at least every Advisory Committee subcommittee currently has at least one BPR member on it, identifying the appropriate individual should be easy and not overly burdensome to any particular individual or subcommittee.

4. **Schedule a follow-up meeting with the Town Administrator** after the Select Board and Town Administrator meet once again to discuss priorities at the end of January. The Town Administrator and the Select Board have begun the important work of articulating and prioritizing goals. Using those goals, the Advisory Committee can better focus on how well stated priorities are being met, looking at spending across departments.

There was also a suggestion, that the Advisory Committee **share a slide at Town Meeting (perhaps the first slide)** that shows what we are obligated to pay for as a portion of the budget (all but 7%), anticipated growth, and the cost if we pass the WAs before us.

New and Restated Concerns of Note

- It is important to the majority of the committee that whatever form this pilot process takes, the questions **focus on operating concerns and departmental needs**, and **avoid** becoming some form of **budget review or a lobbying forum**.
- The School Department Budget is the elephant in the room regarding the Town's budget overall. **The School Committee is responsible for the school budget**, and while the Advisory Committee can and does review the budget and ask questions, the School Superintendent and the School Committee are responsible for setting school priorities and spending.
NB: There is a temporary deputy superintendent of finance for the schools.

Actions/Next Steps

1. Ask Advisory Committee sub-committee chairs to review past departmental budget reports and look for concerning themes and consistently underfunded or unfunded needs;
2. Review AC Chair notes to Annual TM over the last few years and identify themes or continued overarching concerns
3. Finalize key questions to discuss with department heads, to be provided in advance of any meeting (with no expectation of a written response).
4. Pilot/Meet informally with department head and one or two from Ad-hoc and reg subcommittee chairs before the FY24 budget review begins in earnest.
5. Attempt to establish a baseline of needs (need to have v. nice to have) measured against SB priorities and AC identified concerns.
6. Continue refining questions and refine pilot process.
7. Schedule a meeting to report subcommittee discussions to the full Advisory Committee before the AC budget review begins in mid-February.