Town of Brookline
Advisory Committee Minutes
March 3, 2020


Absent: Pam Lodish, Chair Michael Sandman, Christine Westphal

Also present: Chief of Police Andrew Lipson, Paul Cullinane (BPD), Joan Corey (Teamsters Local 25 – Public Safety Dispatcher), Assistant Town Administrator Justin Casanova-Davis

AGENDA

8:00 OpenGov Interactive Budget Demonstration by Justin Casanova-Davis

8:15 Review and Possible Vote on FY 21 Operating Budget and Capital Improvement Project Request-Police Department

Janice Kahn, chair of the Public Safety Subcommittee gave an overview of their deliberations on the Police Department FY 21 budget, the details of which are thoroughly covered in the attached report.

Highlights:
Crime down, new budget item – veterinary services for Bear, the Police Department’s “Comfort” Dog; moving to hybrid vehicles.

Issues:
Dispatch staffing – lack of personnel to handle the calls, people working double and triple shifts. See materials prepared by the dispatchers for reference. Currently there are only 10 available dispatchers and no supervisor. Issues with retention and hiring – pay scale low, demands for people to fill such positions are very high.

Longer Term Solutions – restructuring the department, create a career ladder, improve health and morale.

NETA – change in hours has helped and there will be a 3 month assessment; some public urination problems; parking has not been an issue as Home Suites Hotel now allows parking until 7 p.m. Sanctuary opening in Coolidge Corner and there are parking meters to be used by Sanctuary clients. Two potential marijuana establishments opening on Commonwealth Ave, hoping they will be by appointment only; on Boston border but Brookline will still monitor activity and support. Janice reviewed the positions funded by NETA impact fees – the problem with making them permanent positions is that NETA impact fees are available for only five years.

The subcommittee unanimously recommended the budget and recommended expansion fund requests.

The dispatch problem is serious and a critical problem right now. Takes up to 2 months to train dispatchers and get them online. Hoping 6th floor will come up with something soon.

David Marc shared that at the last meeting, we discussed the TAB article regarding unpaid parking tickets – according to the Police Department Budget Book, page IV-42 actual parking tickets issues in 2019 were 115,945. In State collection rate was 85% and out of state was 62%.
Chief Lipson noted performance indicators for the fiscal year and calendar year – for both, crime going down to historic lows.

The Community Policing department was reorganized after retirement. Accreditation and Crisis Intervention training hired lieutenant who is also doing accreditation – focusing on training.

He further provided some background regarding hiring challenges for public safety positions. Staffing currently 126 officers but budgeted for 133; 6 in police academy and a pending authorization to hire 4.

For Dispatch they have a budget for a Supervisor and 15 dispatchers but only have 12 currently and no supervisor.

Hiring Police Officers in the country is in crisis and there is difficultly attracting and hiring quality candidates.

Questions and Comments

Q: Is this a long-term trend? Would it make a difference if the Town provided more money? A: We need to prioritize this and focus on this. We are up against it in many ways, some unique to Brookline but also in other parts of the country. It is like a free agent situation. With better salaries we could make stronger hires and retain officers.

Q: Has this been brought to the Town Administrator in the past? A: New to the position and assume he is aware of the issue.

Ann Braga, HR Director – our pay scale is on the low end but not the lowest. Town is coming into 3rd year of collective bargaining so we have that going on. Looking at a variety of solutions – an evergreen posting with no deadline and you can apply all the time any time for any position. Up and down sides to this. Need to ask “Does Not Qualify” questions – minimum thresholds before you end up in the qualified bin for review so we are using best use of time – this is across a variety of jobs. We started meeting on this particular issue (Dispatch) as early as last October, especially the stressors and the interactions between them. Look at organization wholistically and recognize it is busier than it was years ago. Short term is to staff up with folks with minimal requirements and cut back the overly long shifts.

Joan Corey, of the Teamsters Local 25 represented the Dispatchers. Liz, a dispatcher of 32 years, and Jacqueline a dispatcher with 18 years in Brookline. They have been doing an outstanding job – hardcore, hardworking people. There are 10 positions 2 with restrictions so really working with 8 full time. They are the first line of defense. They have been working 24 hour shifts and it is a very unsafe situation. She gave comparisons of starting salaries in surrounding towns. This is a safety issue and need to get wages up to recruit new people and not lose the hard working people we have.

Q: I assume this is the base wage that doesn’t include benefits. Do you have a full cost comparison? How many people should the department have? A: Current budget allows for 16 people – 15 staffs and 1 supervisor and this would be the goal. Model would be preferred to have Director Communications and two additional supervisors so you have 18 total. We have not yet put together a budget for that but would be working on this with HR and Town Administrator as well as some creative funding strategies in cooperation with the Fire Department.
Q: How much overtime is being paid currently – is there less overtime for other communities? A: Yes if you were fully staffed there would be less overtime. Every day there are two or three forced open shifts that need to be picked up.

Q: Amount of overtime – what could it pay for if the department was staffed up? A: HR Director will look into this.

Supervisor left at the end of December. There have been 15 positions filled several months ago. But there is regular turnover and this does seem to be an ongoing issue.

Q: If fully staffed is there overtime? A: Could be, people call in sick and vacations so there would be overtime.

If we knew net increase of two supervisors it would be helpful to understand what helps retain people.

We can make recommendations about funding and additional resources but I don’t know how productive this discussion is going further.

Restructuring proposal is one thing, but short term issue is that it isn’t working and considering short term solutions that are being negotiated... i.e. rerouting calls, help dealing with stress levels.

We have an obligation to support the people who work for us, not just crunch numbers. I don’t know what the answer is to help relieve the pressure immediately.

What is the best forum so the Townspeople understand the conditions the dispatchers are working in?

The Committee recognizes and agrees with the issue and concerns.

Jacqueline Carol, dispatcher 70% of our overtime is forced. We don’t want the extra money, we want to go home.

This is not unforeseen; it has been going on since October, The issues were known and we have asked time and time again in negotiations and outside of negotiations and we are about 2 weeks away from collapse. We have offered some short term solutions and hope they can be considered, implemented.

Comment – AC member: This committee has rarely been shy about expressing our opinion to the executive and perhaps we should on this point. If you want to reduce overtime and turnover, you have a need to have a pay scale that looks like Cambridge, Needham or Newton. Turnover costs a lot. And that is part of the problem.

Comment- Chief Lipson: Gotten support to look at whatever we have to do – the two issues are the shape of the center and the current crisis. We can put a police officer in the dispatch chair if we need to do that but we still need to train someone.

The support is there and that is what we have to work towards. No reserve fund transfer that we can throw at it to make it go away. Need to get bodies in the seats.

Comment: There have been very few occasions when we have put police officers in the seats. Police are not certified in police and emergency – they can only do 5% of the work and it provides more work for others.

The most important thing a town can do is insure the public safety of its citizens. What can we do that this doesn’t get lost in the shuffle.

Q: What can be done now to deal with an acute situation?
Q: Can Boston pick up for us? A: Bringing a dispatcher in from another community there are different CAD entry systems so they would still need to be trained. We have a dire situation for our employees but we have not missed calls.

Q: How long is the training and how long before in seat and working? A: Depends on the individual and experience, could be 3-6 months. Need to get some of our police certified – 911 is a 2-day class.

Q: Will resources from NETA cover mitigation at Sanctuary? A: There will be an adjustment period but we have flexible resources. In the short term we could use mitigation funds from NETA to deal with Sanctuary; but then perhaps asking for more.

Q: Adjustment of gasoline with electric and maintenance is reflected in the budget? A: It will be since they just came in.

Q: Problem of pedestrian crossing at High Street and Route 9 – 2 people hit in the past year – request for crossing guard on school days.

Paul Cullinane addressed questions about neighborhood concerns and NETA. He noted that he is a Member of NETA Neighborhood Google group so is aware of everything that neighbors are expressing that is of concern to them.

Urination issue – NETA has agreed to upgrade bathrooms and bring in a trailer with running water and electricity. NETA has funded 2 walking beats – not out of impact funds. They have given us everything we have asked for.

No Trespassing signs being posted by Day Care Center and a pole camera on White Place so dispatchers can keep an eye out. Act accordingly – warning or arrests.

Maintain communication and address complaints as they come in and respond right away, everyone should be happy.

Lines have increased on Sundays since the hours are shorter. 8 to 10pm hour medical is on a three month study and they may close at 8 like everyone else.

Commonwealth Avenue businesses – Mission has agreed to start out as appointment-only.

Complaints of resale but we haven’t found any evidence of this.

Cars idling – drivers are cited by police officers walking the beat for idling cars, smoking in public, in cars, etc.

Q: Is there a hot line where people can get information out quickly? A: We are having direct communication almost on a daily basis.

Spoke with BU Chief of Police about identifying persons 21 and above and they are satisfied.

Q: Urban Area Security Initiative – is there a certain funding cycle? A: It is yearly, several subject based subcommittees (with some local representation), and local jurisdictions (with jurisdictional points of contact) can submit abstracts for projects - for example, Emergency Management Assistant for example for $40K, Emergency Assistance Buddies for $60K – prioritization meetings and each jurisdiction could elevate the
projects. We are no longer going to prioritize – just send to Washington – and then they will decide. Going to see what happens.

A MOTION was made and seconded to approve the FY 21 Police Department operating budget of $18,031,107. By a VOTE of 23 in favor, none opposed, and no abstention the budget is approved.

A MOTION was made and seconded to table discussion for an expansion request $27,338 for a tenth hybrid auto purchase. By a VOTE of 22 in favor, none opposed and 1 abstention the motion carries.

A MOTION was made and seconded to approve $900,000 in CIP money for upgraded Radio Infrastructure. By a VOTE of 23 in favor, none opposed and no abstentions, the CIP request is approved.

8:55 Review and Possible Vote on FY 21 Operating Budget - Planning Department

Carol Levin reviewed the subcommittee deliberations on the Planning and Community Development budget. She took advantage of OpenGov visualization and provided representative and easily readable bar and pie charts. Housing section had a smaller section than previous year – wouldn’t have noticed if hadn’t seen it visually – and it turns out it was a mis-categorization.

Again there is a bit of turnover in the department and HR is working to investigate reclassifying mid-level positions and conducting pay benchmarking studies.

Use of consulting services was highlighted and questions were raised – how much spent and on what activities? Need realistic accounting of consulting services we are consuming and where the money is coming from if we are to budget.

Recodification of Zoning By-Laws was also discussed, possibly emulating the City of Boston’s process.

This department administers CDBG program and personal costs are covered by that $415,000 and we don’t see a revenue and expense statement for that. We would like to know how much money is coming into the department other than fees.

In the presentation in the budget book the discussion and objectives don’t align the way the budget is presented. Would like to see that there is an alignment – budget parallels the budget discussion.

Four recommendations listed in the report – FOR FURTHER ACTION IN FY21 OR INCORPORATION INTO THE FY22 BUDGET

1. Develop precise definitions for “Professional/Technical Services” and “Planning and Consulting Services.”
2. Identify the amounts spent in each of the above categories, the related project, and the sources of funds.
3. Fully account for sources of funds (revenues) in the Department budget. This should include Reserve Fund Transfers and CDBG funds.
4. Align the FY22 discussion of Objectives with the Budget Categories. Distinguish between ongoing work responsibilities and specific objectives.

The subcommittee voted to approve the budget but wanted to know how much was being spent on outside consultants tonight.
Alison is not concerned about getting enough consultant money – town administrator has been able to identify resources.

Our concern is not that the money won’t be found but rather create the discipline from where the money is coming from. The Annual Report is also written from the way the Director presents the budget - 3 divisions, 3 division heads, and the budget needs to be changed to align with the actuality of the department.

Next year this will be revisited and we will make it possible.

Another source of funds Chapter 44 Section 40B – Peer Review – (p. 6-10 discusses special revenue funds) basically in and out – paid for by the developers.

Q: So peer review done by outside consultants; is there a management fee? A: No it is separate account for peer review funds. Do you want peer review identified also?

Questions and Comments

Q: Salary from CDBG – but we were moving away from that because the certainty of the funds were in question? A: We get $1.3 million in Block Grants and can use 20% on personnel. We use that and more – we assign it to the housing program and pull funding out of that for staff – pushing envelope but legitimate use.

Salaries won’t go away if block grants do. To protect ourselves we weren’t going to put a recurring expense on grant funds like that. Staff will go away when the grant goes away. Town needs to determine if we want to keep the staff if the funding goes away.

In this budget you see CDBG funds for salaries – didn’t see it before; used to do a net. Currently it is classified as “off set.” Next year we will probably identify them as “CDBG funded salaries” and are bringing it down over the years.

It would be good to know if any position is funded with soft money.

No money from permits – advertising and applications.

Q: Missing long term planning phase of the planning department – for the Council on Aging there are several new developments and developers used senior center as selling point for their buildings but Center is already maxed out and perplexed how they will serve this new growing population. How can we have foreseen this and provided a concomitant plan? A: Still in the planning stage with Planning Department and the Council. Can’t make requirements only suggestions – potential applicants are interested in working with the Council and we will work with them.

Will this include more space, better transportation, etc.? That is a larger issue and will require more people involved.

Q: Beacon Street Bridle Path update? A: No grant applications by Planning but by Transportation and Engineering.

Q: How much will the Warrant Article analysis will take out of your staffing and budget so you can focus on economic development and other initiatives? A: We had to drop everything last year. Trying to take a different
approach this year (mentioned during a responsive meeting talking about what we all do). She expressed concern about lack of Warrant Article process. We will have petitioners come last minute or even a month before to get feedback and it tends to be complex if involving zoning. Not good planning to quickly review and pass it on. Considering a different strategy of declining to address and review articles. Can’t work on the priorities of the Town when we have to take time away to do this.

Fear with the approach – go to Town Meeting and say we haven’t had not enough time, too many articles but Town meeting will pass it anyway.

Have been threatened that it will pass anyway and we will be stuck with a bad law if someone doesn’t take steps to review and fix it.

In support of this position, BFAC recommended that we need to do something about the Warrant Article process. If by-law change, then recommend we go through a specific process. There is no process now.

Advisory Committee for Public Health has set up criteria for petitioners to satisfy before they submit an article. Recommend calling a meeting of department heads and committee members to identify some of the problems with the process, how to identify what is needed and by when.

Would hate to see it turn into something that by-passes legislative process if you pass a few milestones - not opposed to streamlining but wary of a dark side.

If the article is half-baked, then it is hard to review it in the time you have available. Seven meetings for fossil fuel one so you have to have some requirements.

List of topics that merit special Advisory Committee Meetings and Carla will share it another time.

Signage – discussion about improving notifications for public hearings. We notify abutting property owners within 300 feet – we don’t notify tenants. It has been suggested that the applicant who is seeking relief from Zoning by-law or Preservation put a ZBA or Preservation Commission posting on his property. When applicant has denial letter from building department is when they apply for relief and they be given a sign and some other details and incorporate a requirement in rules and regs that applicant is required to put it on his property and failure to do so would have repercussions. No enforcement but would just rely on complaints.

A MOTION was made and seconded to approve the FY 21 Planning & Community Development Department budget of $1,250,449. By a VOTE of 19 in favor, none opposed, and no abstentions the budget is approved.

Appreciated the visual aids in the report – really very helpful. Carol noted that she forgot to link to the interactive budget but it is recommended for next time.

________________________________________________

A MOTION to adjourn was made, seconded and voted unanimously and the meeting was adjourned at 10:32 pm.

Documents Presented:

- Public Safety Subcommittee Report on FY21 Police Department Budget and other supporting documents
- Planning and Regulation Report on FY21 Planning and Community Development Budget