

**Town of Brookline
Advisory Committee Minutes
Tuesday, March 28, 2023**

Meeting Recording:

<https://brooklinema.zoomgov.com/rec/share/oxd9YffnL1LOfoDuQDhauLuLwTUw373dmnOHzbfgFTxUfmB6s2tfq1awmTCHBWFU.nTleRjilge5Mt6HI>

Present: Ben Birnbaum, Harry Bohrs, Clifford Brown, Patricia Correa, John Doggett, Dennis Doughty, Katherine Florio, Harry Friedman, David-Marc Goldstein, Susan Granoff, Kelly Hardebeck, Amy Hummel, Anita Johnson, Alisa Jonas, Pamela Lodish, Joslin Murphy, Donelle O’Neal, Linda Olson Pehlke, Markus L. Penzel, David Pollak, Stephen Reeders, Carlos Ridruejo, Alok Somani, Carolyn R. Thall, Christine Westphal

Absent: Carol Levin, Janice Kahn, Neil Gordon, Lee Selwyn

Also Attending: Director of Human Resources Ann Hess Braga, Deputy Town Administrator for Policy and Fiscal Affairs Melissa Goff, Finance Director Lincoln Heineman, Town Assessor Rachid Belochine, and Lisa Portscher Secretary for the Advisory Committee.

The meeting was called to order at 7:00 PM.

Announcements: Pursuant to this Board’s Authority under 940 CMR 29.10 (8), all the committee members will be participating remotely via telephone or video conferencing due to emergency regulations regarding the Corona virus. The Chair has reviewed the requirements of the regulations. There is a quorum physically present and all votes taken will be recorded by roll call so all above listed Advisory Committee members will be allowed to vote.

7:00 pm Public Comment

There was none.

PUBLIC HEARING

7:15 pm The Advisory Committee will hold a public hearing to review, discuss and possibly vote on the following Warrant Articles:

WA 1 Wood and Bark – Melissa Goff noted that this is an annual article that asks the Select Board to appoint 2 measurers of Wood and Bark.

Q: Are we limited to only 2? A: The article just requests that the Select Board make this appointment annually. In the future, more appointees are possible. Carolyn Thall noted, essentially the question is, can this body “branch out?”

A **MOTION** was made and seconded for Favorable Action. By a **VOTE** of 19 in favor, none opposed and no abstentions.

WA 5 Unpaid Bills – Melissa Goff noted there are no unpaid bills and the recommendation is for No Action. A **MOTION** was made and seconded for NO ACTION. By a **VOTE** of 19 in favor, none opposed and no abstentions the Advisory Committee recommends No Action on WA 5.

WA 3 Compensating Balances – Standard article that State law requires that if the Town has Compensating Balance Agreements (with Banks) in exchange the services that are provided by the bank are not charged for. Town Meeting must annually grant its authority to the Finance Director to pay them.

Q: If we chose to engage in these types of agreements often deposited in noninterest bearing accounts. A: We don't have any compensating balance agreements at this time and we don't intend to do but would be good to have the option.

Q: With bank failures what protection do we have? A: Different banks approach this in different ways. Eastern Bank which is one of the banks with which the Town does business, while our accounts are with them they go through a process where they deposit out segments of those deposits to other banks so as to be below \$250K to provide further protection beyond the FDIC \$250K insurance. There are other insurance funds whereby other amounts above \$250K are insured through a voluntary entity. Different banks handle this in different ways. He is confident that there is not a large exposure to the high-tech world but there is always risk.

A **MOTION** was made and seconded for Favorable Action on WA 3. By a **VOTE** of 19 in favor, none opposed and 1 abstention the Advisory Committee recommends Favorable Action on WA 3.

WA 6 Property Tax Exemptions – Town Assessor Rachid Belochine noted that this is also a standard annual article that grants additional property tax payer exemptions up to a maximum. The estimated cost is \$41,025 and funded through tax amendment overlay account.

Q: Is this year a reassessment year for taxes? And does that result in an increase in tax bills? A: Yes, a revaluation year and no, not necessarily an increase.

Q: How many people in each category are we expecting to ask for exemptions? A: Same number as last year, on average 88 last year, same this year with a few others pending.

Clause	Description	Base Amount	No. FY23	Total	Additional
17D	Surviving Spouses	175	3	525	525
22	Veterans	400	41	16,400	16,400
22E	Veterans with 100% disability	1,000	6	6,000	6,000
37A	Blind Persons	500	30	15,000	15,000
41C	Elderly	500	8	4,000	4,000
			88	41,925	41,925

Clause	Description	Base Amount	No. FY22	Total	Additional
17D	Surviving Spouses	175	2	350	350
22	Veterans	400	40	16,000	16,000
22E	Veterans with 100% disability	1,000	8	8,000	8,000
37A	Blind Persons	500	28	14,000	14,000
41C	Elderly	500	10	5,000	5,000
			88	43,350	43,350

The pending applications are as follows:

41A (Deferrals): 7

41C (Elderly): 3

17D (Surviving spouses): 1

Q: Who sets the level for these subsidies? This seems like a relatively small amount. A: These are state exemptions and they set the limit. The Town has doubled the exemptions since the first was provided in 1989 and Town Meeting has approved that every year since then.

Q: Whether or not revaluation results in an increase. In view of robust real estate market, do you anticipate the revaluations will result in increase in taxes? A: Real estate market doesn't dictate that taxes will be raised. Values go up but taxes do not necessarily go up the same way. The levy will determine the increase or not.

Q: How do we make people aware of this exemption so people can take advantage of it? A: Our website explains the exemptions and offers tax assistance services. We have held meetings and information sessions with the Senior Center making them aware of the exemptions. We also did a mailing last year and though it is too late this year, we may consider doing it again next year. Lincoln added they are also considering participating at a booth at the Farmers Market and attempt to get the word out in other ways.

Information about the Tax Exemption programs and qualifications can be found here
<https://www.brooklinema.gov/1283/Tax-Assistance-and-Deferral-Programs>

Comment: Many seniors cannot qualify for these exemptions.

A **MOTION** was made and seconded for Favorable Action on WA 6. By a **VOTE** of 22 in favor, 0 opposed and 1 abstention, the Advisory Committee recommends Favorable Action on WA 6.

PUBLIC MEETING

8:15 PM Report from the Personnel Subcommittee, Discussion and Possible Votes on FY 24 Human Resources Budget and Personnel Benefit

Human Resources Director Ann Hess Braga shared a presentation on the Human Resources Department FY24 Budget which is linked at the end of these minutes. Some accomplishments highlighted included the return of \$97K to Brookline from State COVID time usage; updated and implemented permanent Work from Home Program for eligible positions; successfully Negotiated Libraries, Engineers as well as ASCME Main contracts; and, initiated HR policy review of FMLA & Parental Leave, CORI, and technology policies w/HR Board and Code of Conduct. She elaborated on current activities and plans for beyond FY24.

Christine Westphal, Chair of the Subcommittee gave the report on the budget hearing on the Human Resources Department Operating FY24 budget. The subcommittee voted to approve the budget of \$628,450 by a unanimous vote of 3-0-0. In the event of a successful override vote the subcommittee voted to approve a budget of \$646,527 by a vote of 2-1-0.

Comments, Questions, Discussion

Q: Town-wide we have unfilled positions and difficulty recruiting – with additional funds could you improve recruitment or conditions of service or something else? A: The value proposition for employees coming out of COVID is different than beforehand. Work Life Integration. Opportunities for hybrid work. Yes, there are some compensation issues, but need to look at total compensation. Very few places where employees pay only 17% of your own health insurance is a pretty good deal. Paid time off in various pots as part of the total conversation. No way in Prop 2.5 community that we can match rate of inflation. People don't quit jobs for money, they quit jobs because of the work environment or their

managers. Brookline is not an easy place to get to and we recruit from all over eastern Massachusetts. Helpful not to drive in 5 days a week with the price of gas. Variety of factors but we are trying to meet people where they are at, not a one size fits all solution and money only does not keep employees.

Q: Code of Conduct – SJC struck down a civility code in Southborough. Folks don't need to be civil. Does the code that was adopted need to be amended? A: No, our code is aspirational. No discipline for employees or Select Board members, or Boards and Commissions. We are just looking for people to be respectful.

Q: Salary Study that was done by a consultant of mid manager, technical professionals (non-union professional staff) and other non-union positions and there was some dissatisfaction with the results. A: Collins Center was contracted to a study on non-union positions. When they came back with comparable communities it didn't reflect communities from which we sourced employees, and many positions we didn't have sufficient data points to do a thorough analysis. Communities that were reviewed were smaller than Brookline, further away from large cities so not truly comparable. They didn't get data back from Newton so we reached out to HR in Newton, Boston and other communities that would have positions like ours that weren't included in the survey to add to it. So, we may end up with different comparative groups depending on the job titles.

Q: Statement about Town Counsel and reducing the budget for outside counsel – grievances budget. Is Town Counsel going to take over civil service and grievance piece? A: Larger long-term cases related to federal district court and significantly further down the line are being handled by outside counsel. Two cases may continue to take up the resources of the outside counsel budget. Several federal cases are pending.

Q: Union contracts what is the status? Any that have expired? A: Aside from Library and Engineers all others have expired. Police is a year behind so we are working on FY 21-23. Police (FY21-FY23) and Fire (FY22-FY24) at Joint Labor Management Committee (JLMC). Dispatch and School Traffic Supervisors - AFSCME FY22-FY24 in process

Q: What percentage of Town Employees live in Brookline? Any consideration given to supporting employees with housing in Brookline? Subsidies for Town Employees? A: Ann offered to run a report and get that detail about number of Town Employees that live in Brookline to the AC. Regarding subsidies for housing, the subsidy is more prevalent with communities that have a residency requirement.

Q: What percentage of staff don't work sufficient hours to qualify for benefits? A: State and federal laws require that if you work 20 or more hours a week, you have to be offered benefits and it has to be a benefit eligible position. Aside from temporary, seasonal recreational staff, library and poll workers, are non-benefit eligible staff. But most employees qualify for benefits.

The HR Director answered other questions about vacation time and prescription benefits.

A **MOTION** was made and seconded for Favorable Action on the Human Resources Department base budget of \$628,450. By a **VOTE** of 24 in favor, none opposed, and no abstentions, the Advisory Committee recommends Favorable Action on the Human Resources Department base budget of \$628,450.

A **MOTION** was made and seconded for Favorable Action that in the event of a successful override the Human Resources Department budget increase to \$646,527. By a **VOTE** of 20 in favor, 2 opposed, and 2 abstentions, the Advisory Committee recommends Favorable Action in the event of a successful override the Human Resources Department budget for a total of \$646,527.

Christine Westphal shared that the most significant changes the rate of return on pensions was dropped to 6% and an increase in Workers' Comp budget based on last year's claims.

Melissa Goff reviewed the numbers.

The Pension Board reduced the rate of return of the pension funds to 6.9% while keeping the 2030 target for full funding of the Town's pension liability. The Town's contribution increases 8.0% in FY24 budget.

The Town's health insurance costs have continued to rise since the Town joined the GIC, but we believe that the increases would be even higher if we had not joined the GIC. Although we do not currently have the final numbers from the GIC, the budget currently reflects an 8% growth in health insurance costs. The GIC has made significant changes in the configuration of the available health insurance plans in their program and we are not sure how those changes will impact our employees' choices among the plans, so the final costs that are included in the budget are the best estimate at this time. After the open enrollment period we will have more confidence in the numbers. Medicare is level funded.

Workers Compensation is self-funded. The Town tries to keep approximately one year of costs in the fund. After a review of the last year it was felt that the fund needed to be increased to keep up with the cost of claims so an 18.6% increase is included in this budget. Overall, the budget includes a 6.5% increase in the Personnel Benefits budget.

PROGRAM COSTS				
CLASS OF EXPENDITURES	BUDGET FY2023	BUDGET FY2024	FY24 vs. FY23	
			\$ CHANGE	% CHANGE
Pensions - Contributory *	30,557,924	33,015,439	2,457,515	8.0%
Pensions - Non-Contributory	0	0	0	-
Group Health Insurance	34,799,370	36,921,062	2,121,692	6.1%
Retiree Group Health Fund (OPEB's) *	4,431,980	4,681,980	250,000	5.6%
Group Life Insurance	145,000	145,000	0	0.0%
Disability Insurance	46,000	46,000	0	0.0%
Worker's Compensation *	1,850,000	2,193,656	343,656	18.6%
Public Safety IOD Medical Expenses *	275,000	275,000	0	-
Unemployment Compensation *	250,000	0	(250,000)	-100.0%
Public Safety Medical Disability	40,000	40,000	0	0.0%
Medicare Payroll Tax	2,970,776	2,970,776	(0)	0.0%
TOTAL EXPENDITURE	75,366,050	80,288,913	4,922,863	6.5%

The subcommittee voted to approve the budget of \$80,288,913 by a unanimous vote of 3-0-0.

QUESTIONS, COMMENTS, DISCUSSION

Q: When do we have to fully fund retirement fund? A: Retirement Board is 2030. State is 2040. When we become fully funded by 2030 we move money to the OPEB fund to cover liability. 2040 fully funding date.

Q: With respect to pension and health, are we locked into those as to what we pay? Governed by formulas beyond our control? A: Essentially, yes. Pension based on actuarial assessment and set for next two years. New funding schedule in

2 years. In terms of health insurance, it is how enrolment shakes out and if we amend the employee/Town split to be able to change.

HR Director Braga added that every few years we have a consultant who runs GIC increases instead of going out to market to see what increases would look like if we came out of GIC. Increases from GIC is lower than anything we could get by going out to market.

Comment: Assuming 8% increase which is hopefully on the high side but defensive budgeting. Using an assume number and really about where enrolment falls given changes in plans.

Q: What is the current funded ratio of the pension plan? A: Pension system's funded ratio is 68.82% at the most recent actuarial assessment.

Q: Split between amount we pay and the amount the employees pays and how that compares to how applicants look at salaries as opposed to benefits? Would it make sense to increase salaries and decrease benefits? Also, regarding the Police contract, police union has done comparative studies with larger communities, salary study with smaller towns and can you comment on how much you agree with the studies they presented? A: Initially we needed a high percentage of employees to agree to join the GIC and cost of doing that was the split we presently have at the time we made the split it saved us substantial money to join the GIC. Getting all employees to increase their share of that split now is virtually impossible. We could withdraw from the GIC but that is not economically viable. Biggest determiner for salary vs benefits is what phase of life people are in or health conditions. As HR, we can't tell them what is the most subscribed or what we would do, they opt in based on their own needs. Regarding the information presented for JLMC, we cannot comment.

A **MOTION** was made and seconded for Favorable Action on a Personnel Benefits budget of \$80,288,913. By a **VOTE** of 23 in favor, none opposed and 1 abstention, the Advisory Committee recommends for Favorable Action on a Personnel Benefits budget of \$80,288,913.

8:45 pm Other Business

David Pollock noted that a motion made by a subcommittee does not require a second. He also shared a short cut to unmute, hold down the space bar. No need to find your mouse.

It was noted that we don't know that the Advisory Committee has ever adopted Robert's Rules.

Upon a **MOTION** made and seconded to adjourn, and voted unanimously, the meeting was adjourned at 8:45 p.m.

Documents Presented <https://www.brooklinema.gov/DocumentCenter/Index/3979>

- 2023 03 15 Personnel Subcommittee Report on Personnel Benefits FY24
- 2023 03 15 Personnel Subcommittee Report on HR FY24 Budget
- https://brooklinema-my.sharepoint.com/:p:/g/personal/abraga_brooklinema_gov/Eal4H3LDZmdPhupDR_k3zCgBL-K2CdqTmtz-iCeOk50rnw?rttime=rPLeqOUv20g

VOTES

Vote Tally Sheet - 03/28/2023							
	Vote 1	Vote 2	Vote 3	Vote 4	Vote 5	Vote 6	Vote 7
# Votes Yes	19	19	19	22	24	20	23
# Votes No	0	0	0	0	0	2	0
# Votes Abstain	0	0	1	1	0	2	1
Vote Description:	MAIN MOTION: FAVORABLE ACTION ON WA1	MAIN MOTION: NO ACTION ON WA5	MAIN MOTION: FAVORABLE ACTION ON WA3	MAIN MOTION: FAVORABLE ACTION ON WA6	MAIN MOTION: FAVORABLE ACTION ON FY24 'base' budget for HR Department: \$628,450	MAIN MOTION: In the event of an override, FAVORABLE ACTION ON FY24 'override' budget for HR Department: \$646,527	MAIN MOTION: Favorable action on Personnel Benefits FY24 Budget of \$80,288,913
Ben Birnbaum	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Harry Bohrs	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Cliff Brown	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Patty Correa	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
John Doggett	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Katherine Florio	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Harry Friedman	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y
David-Marc Goldstein	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Neil Gordon							
Susan Granoff	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Kelly Hardebeck				Y	Y	Y	Y
Amy Hummel	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Anita Johnson					Y	Y	Y
Alisa Jonas				A	Y	Y	Y
Janice Kahn							
Carol Levin							
Pam Lodish	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Joslin Murphy	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	A
Donelle O'Neal, Sr.			A	Y	Y	A	Y
Linda Olson Pehlke	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Markus Penzel	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
David Pollak				Y	Y	Y	Y
Stephen Reeders	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Carlos Ridruejo	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	A	Y
Lee Selwyn							
Alok Somani	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Carolyn Thall	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Christine Westphal	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Dennis Doughty							