

Advisory Committee – Land Use, Zoning, and Sustainability Subcommittee
FY24 Budget Review: Planning and Community Development
Public Hearing (virtual) March 15, 2023

Attendees: Subcommittee members David Pollak (chair), Patty Correa, Anita Johnson, Linda Olson Pelke, Carlos Ridreujo, Lee Selwyn; Director of Planning and Community Development Kara Brewton, Assistant Director for Regulatory Planning Polly Selkoe, Deputy Town Administrator Melissa Goff. Member of the Public Hilary Dolstad.

The recording of the hearing can be viewed here:

https://brooklinema.zoomgov.com/rec/share/MDNdGswtxK78hwVWY7u-QNZR73yKglnd75GdCo_12hGly9grj48C24wWLVLMYdq.mdfXMEN5_kW8cf-a

Presentation

Director Kara Brewton provided a high-level overview of the work of the department which is responsible for positively affecting people that live and work in Brookline today and in the future. This work is pursued through four divisions:

1. **Planning and Administration** oversees and supports land use related functions including zoning, preservation, and regulation;
2. **Housing** works to increase and preserve affordable housing in town;
3. **Economic Development** includes long-term planning initiatives, and focuses on appropriate economic growth, business prosperity, design excellence and neighborhood character;
4. **Sustainability** works toward zero emissions within the town.

FY23 highlights

Director Brewton highlighted four of the fourteen current-year accomplishments detailed in the Budget Book:

- The third round of **Community Aggregation Electricity**, launched in December, delivers 90% renewable electricity at the default level priced well below Eversource's rate. The default product will be 100% renewable as of January 1, 2024.
- Launch of the **Community Preservation Act program**;
- Return of **retail vacancy rate** down close to pre-covid level at 10.9%;
- Release of the draft **Housing Production Plan**.

FY24 Objectives

Director Brewton highlighted three of the sixteen objectives detailed in the Budget Book that are planned for the coming year:

- **Grow our commercial tax base in Chestnut Hill Village**;
- **Analyze the effectiveness of our Special Permit process** which is extremely labor intensive for both staff and volunteer resources.
- **Launch the Comprehensive Plan**.

New initiatives

Director Brewton presented several additional longer-term objectives and highlights that are important to the department:

- **Track new metrics** to:
 - Better understand and align its allocation of resources with the needs of the community. This includes comparing low- and moderate-income customers versus others, tracking by neighborhood, and looking at both staffing and funding (CDBG, federal, town and grant).
 - Clarify resources spent per affordable unit created, renovated, and preserved.
 - Refine reporting in relation to preservation cases to clarify the percentage of cases being resolved without demolitions going forward.
- **Move past state mandates** (40B, MBTA CA) and focus on creating deed-restricted affordable housing.
- Significant **increased Housing Choice grant eligibility** for FY24 + 5 years based on recent actual housing production.
- **Implement local Rapid Recovery projects** for commercial areas.

Year-over-year budget

The departmental base budget is essentially level funded and nearly identical FY24 compared with FY23:

- 20 FTEs – unchanged
- Salary cost is up \$15k, but this includes a \$27k reduction in CDBG salary support so there is actually a small reduction in resource availability
- Advertising services budget that skyrocketed after the loss of the print Brookline Tab is reduced by \$10k based on actual projections.
- Sustainability budget reduced by \$25k back to FY22 level.

ARPA recommended funding

Significant funding of planning initiatives are included in the town's ARPA recommendations. These are in addition to the FY23 ARPA funding of \$277k for Harvard Street form-based zoning consulting:

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|-------------------------------------|--------|
| • Energy Coaches: | \$195k |
| • Expanded townwide EV Master Plan: | \$175k |
| • Cool Roof Program: | \$25k |
| • ADA accessible parklets: | \$50k |

Override budget

- The operating override includes \$233k of supplemental funding in FY24 and FY25, and \$223K from FY26 forward. In FY24, the Department anticipates utilizing the funding on the Comprehensive Plan (in combination with existing funding in the CIP account) as well as funding for the Chestnut Hill Village study. In FY25 and FY26, the override budget will be used in combination with likely all of the Department's available consulting funding in the

regular budget to fund the second year of the Comprehensive Plan and first year of the Zoning Reform project. For FY25 and FY 26, the Department will seek grant funding and the usual budget process to seek funds for other projects such as funding for the Newbury Committee, the Preservation Plan, etc.

Discussion

Q. Would you talk a little more about staffing, both in relation to FY22 and the work of the Comp Plan?

We added two FTE in FY23. One was the restoration of a 0.5 FTE Preservation Planner that had been cut in the early covid budgets, combined with a 0.5 FTE new position to administer the Community Preservation Act program (half of this position is funded by CPA funds). The other position was adding a third Economic Development and Long-Term Planner.

We anticipate that it will take 1.5 FTE to support the Comprehensive Plan process going forward, at least in FY24. We have built that into our staffing plan, dependent on passage of the override with its multi-year funding of the consulting component of that effort.

Q. What is the contingency plan to move forward with the Comp Plan if the override fails?

First, there is already \$150k in the capital account dedicated to the Comp Plan. Second, we are already applying for a Housing Choice grant for the Comp Plan that could fund up to \$100k, and we will find out about that by the end of this year. Third, we can apply for technical assistance from our regional planning agency. That would be in kind services that we could put to work, but not cash.

While this would be a contingency plan, it would be very difficult for the Department to pull off the kind of Comprehensive Plan Update that we believe the community wants to do without an override.

Q. Given that the cost of the Comp Plan is a big one-time expense for consultants, what happens to that money after year three?

Assuming those monies stayed in the Planning Department budget they would go into other initiatives that would depend on consulting funding. Unless consulting is in the CIP it doesn't roll over year-to-year, and timing is very hard to predict because it is very tied to the pace of the public process. So we typically only find money for consulting by taking advantage of staff turnover and reallocating funds while we are working to refill positions. About 90% of the budget is staff cost, and it would be helpful to have a base funding amount for consulting. Neighborhood-by-neighborhood implementation of the Comp Plan could easily stretch into year four and require another \$200-300k of funding, for example. It is also possible that over time, we would want to use the additional funding to change existing positions or add new ones in lieu of some consulting funds.

Q. Would you clarify what has happened with the CIP funds for updating the zoning bylaw that came out of a warrant article a couple years ago?

The funding we set aside in the CIP account for updating the Town's GIS existing conditions is wrapping up. This work will set us up well for launching the Comprehensive Plan. So the remaining funds in that account are now allocated to the Comp Plan.

Q. Would you speak to one of your FY24 objectives – implementation of action items from the Housing Production Plan?

That objective was written back in July, as we routinely do at the outset of the budgeting process. So it is not specific to anything in the plan itself. The HPP is in draft form and will advance through a public process of review and adoption by both the Planning Board and the Select Board. Ultimately our priorities are set through the direction of the Select Board.

It is also important to keep in mind that annual housing production targets in the HPP provide potential protection to the town in the form of the "safe harbor" provision if DHCD approves our HPP. After that if the town's SHI falls below 10% and we get a couple new 40Bs going that bring us into compliance with the HPP, we can get that safe harbor protection. We have successfully done this in the recent past.

Q. Would you please tell us about the Harvard Street consultant contract, what the work will look like, and whether any other solutions were or will be considered to meet the MBTA CA requirements?

This started with the direction we received from the Select Board, which was to find ways to comply that would result in the creation new housing rather than just do the minimum that would achieve compliance but change as little as possible. After a significant amount of internal study this led to the strategy of developing form-based zoning for Harvard Street. And after a lot of research, talking with other communities, and looking at actual results this led to the negotiated contract with Opticos Design, Inc.

Because of the limited time frame within which we need to bring Brookline into compliance, we are starting with Harvard Street, but we may very well end up doing that in combination with other ideas that are out there. We will be doing this together as a community, and we need to work together creatively.

The work of the consultant will be very detailed, and context-specific at both the neighborhood and abutting property level. Most of the work will come back to us looking like architectural drawings, with dimensions, floor heights, percentages of window transparency, that kind of thing.

If the Select Board changes their direction, if they say "move forward with minimum compliance," or instead they say "we want to look at other alternatives but those should reasonably create some housing that is useful to the town," those would be very different directions than the direction that we have been given.

Q. Would you tell us about your new initiative to better inform the public about proposed projects that will be coming before the permitting boards?

This is actually being presented to the ZBA tomorrow night, and involves requiring signage on lawns or walls of properties that might change, where there has been an application for a Special Permit or a Variance. Newton and Boston do this and we'd like to try to do it too. The sign would have a weblink, so people could immediately get all the information about the project.

Q. Would you please provide a progress update on the disparity study that is needed in order to refine the town's procurement standards to make sure we are supporting disadvantaged vendors?

Yes, the RFP for this work is either out or about to go out, thanks to the Chief Procurement Officer David Geanakakis for leading this effort.

Q. Would you please provide more explanation on the \$25k reduction in the base budget for Sustainability?

We had asked for an additional FTE for sustainability in the FY23 budget, and that ended up as a \$25k consulting line item, doubling the consulting funds from FY22. Tom Barrasso has been securing some amazing grants, so we feel that we will be able to keep the work moving forward without this funding if the override doesn't pass. There is a lot of work to do, but we are finding that the staff support doesn't necessarily need to happen solely within the Sustainability Division of the Planning Department. For example, through the leadership of the Town Administrator's office as well as key leadership such as the DPW Commissioner, we are seeing sustainability efforts being created or reallocated across the town.

Q. And the Climate Action Plan?

Tom Barrasso is updating the Climate Action Plan as we speak, working with the consultant. He is working to address resiliency considerations, Maria is working with DPW on some "green zoning" opportunities in concert with Site Plan Review and the MBTA-CA project, and we are also updating the town's Emergency Management Plan which will set us up to apply for grants for resiliency projects.

Q. The table of PERFORMANCE/WORKLOAD INDICATORS has two lines at the bottom for EDAB Projects. These appear to be cumulative. Would it be possible to provide year-by-year data? Or could you identify the percentage of "new growth" that is related to economic development?

That's a good idea. We will add that information in the future so that property tax and room tax from new projects in each fiscal year are separately reported.

[Patty Correa and Carlos Ridruejo had to leave the meeting.]

Q. Were any of the new positions that were added a couple years ago funded with one-time money?

No.

Summary

Committee members expressed strong reservations that made it difficult for them to vote in support of the departmental budget:

- Reservations about the MBTA CA compliance strategy: The Harvard Street form-based zoning study, including the associated \$277k consulting contract, was launched without enough community input and seems too limited and too fully formed. These reservations extend to questioning the need for this work, and the associated expense.
- Objection to the conditional status of some of the funding for the work of the Comprehensive Plan, preferring that all of the funding be in the base budget. In particular, this opinion was based on Town Meeting's prior vote by a substantial majority to support the Comp Plan.
 - Director Brewton explained that she had requested full funding in the base budget, she had requested full funding through ARPA, and that she had requested full funding through the CIP. It was the decision of the Town Administrator to place part of the Comp Plan funding in the operating override, given the severely restricted available funds in the CIP and base budget.
 - Melissa Goff noted that there are a lot of unfunded mandates that get adopted by town meeting, and then we need to prioritize based on the funding that we have available to us.

Recommendation on the Base Budget

The subcommittee voted 2 to 2 on the motion to recommend approval of the departmental budget as submitted: Anita Johnson and David Pollak in favor, Linda Olson Pehlke and Lee Selwyn against. Patty Correa and Carlos Ridruejo were unable to stay until the end of the meeting and were not present for the vote.

Recommendation on the Override Budget

The subcommittee voted 3 to 1 in favor: Anita Johnson, Linda Olson Pehlke and David Pollak in favor; Lee Selwyn against.

END