

TOWN OF WISCASSET
BUDGET COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES
March 6, 2008

The meeting was called to order by Chair Steve Mehrl at 6:35 PM at the Wiscasset Municipal Building.

Budget committee Members in attendance: Chairman Steve Mehrl, Judith Colby, Sherri Dunbar, Pamela Dunning, Richard Hanson and Karl Tarbox. Members absent were George Greene, Robert Fairfield Sr and Tony True.

Chair Steve Mehrl read through the agenda and briefly described the items listed.

Without protest, old business was taken out of order as the agenda had not yet passed. The discussion began with an encouragement from Steve to the committee to follow through and follow up on the good information about the town finances received from Ron Smith and Charmin Wiley of RHR Smith & Company, the company who audits the town of Wiscasset finances.

Steve also stated a hope for the committee to build a list of initiatives to present to town manager Arthur Faucher.

At this point Steve passed out copies of a calendar he developed with a timeline of meetings and election dates for the committee. Steve stated that the town manager has agreed that it would be good idea for the Budget committee to host the Saturday open town meeting since the Selectmen do not have time to do so. It is felt by many members of the budget committee that this Saturday meeting is important to give access to information to the public. Sue Varney produced a list of dates prepared by Town clerk Sandra Johnson that outlines the town meetings and elections. Those dates were checked against the dates on the calendar produced by Steve and the dates matched.

School budget workshops were mentioned. It was discussed as to whether copies of the school budget would be made available to the budget committee prior to the workshops.

Sherri Dunbar moved to accept the minutes. Motion was seconded by Karl Tarbox. Motion passed 6-0.

The meeting was turned over to Assessors' Agent and Human Resource contact Sue Varney. Sue handed out a packet of information that she had prepared for the meeting. The packet contained job descriptions for Assessors' Agent and Human Resources contact, the budget those positions, information about how the mil rate is assessed and information about recent abatements.

Sue gave us a tour of her office and showed us all of the books and folders that she needs to reference in her work. There is a dense amount of reference materials in her office and it was very well organized.

She explained how to find the tax card for a property and how to understand what the information on the card. She also explained that the public could come in and search these files on their own to find the information they need. Sue explained that the information is not yet available online.

Sue explained her duties as Assessors' Agent, which included: checking real estate sales to be sure they are valid, checking property deeds, processing exemption forms, preparing supplemental tax certificates and bills, process abatement paperwork, Represent the town during abatement denials, hold workshops for the selectmen when needed, assisting the public with real estate tax questions, maintain tax database, take pictures of new construction, handle sales of tax information database to realtors, handle sales of tax maps, as well as other clerical duties.

Sue gave a description of the recent abatement hearing and showed a list of abatements that were granted. She further explained that she had found some information in the tax assessments that she considered incorrect and that she intends to pursue abatements for those properties.

There was a brief discussion about Debi Applebee getting ready to leave her position and whether there was a need to fill that opening with a full time person. There was some thought that the position could become part time.

There was some discussion about the accumulation of sick and vacation time. Sue explained that both she and Jim George keep track of the sick and vacation time. Employees may carry up to 80 hours of vacation time. Sue explained that there was no carry over of comp time. Salaried employees for Wiscasset do not use comp time. The unused vacation time is worth about \$113,817 and the unused sick time is worth about \$112,431. These amounts show on the budget as an unfunded liability. Sue pointed out that there is also no money budgeted for buying out the early termination of contracts.

Sue explained that the revenues in her office come from veterans' exemptions, homestead exemptions, and tree growth exemptions as they are paid by the state of Maine. She further explained that the state does not pay back these exemptions in full. Veterans' exemptions are paid at about 90%. Homestead exemptions are paid back at about 50%. She was not sure of the tree growth amount but the committee did not need the exact amount.

Chair Steve Mehrl thanked Sue for her time and for sharing all of this information with us. The committee left Sue's office and proceeded to another room to complete the meeting.

The budget committee met with Bill Phinney, who requested an opportunity to address the committee about a 5 year Capital Improvements Plan and a full time Code Enforcement Officer.

Bill talked about the town's need for a Capital Improvement Plan. In his opinion, the town has no real process or policy in place to help govern the purchasing of capital improvements. Pamela Dunning pointed out that a Capital Improvements Plan should begin with a firm definition of what is considered a Capital Improvement. In past years that have been discussions that replacing and/or repairing town property is not a Capital Improvement and that listing that type of item as such is not a good policy to follow.

There was some discussion about the need for a policy that governs the usage of the towns reserve account. There is currently nothing in place to prohibit the principal or limit the amount of the interest that may be used from the reserve account. If the town continues to dip use all of the interest and dip into the principle, the account could soon be depleted.

Bill broached the subject of a full time Code Enforcement Officer. He said that both Jeffrey and town manager Arthur Faucher had spoken about making this position full time. Jeffrey was not available for this meeting as he had a prior engagement. Pamela Dunning reminded the committee that Jeffrey had said last year that the town did not need a full time person in this position. Steve reminded everyone that Jeffrey had talked at the February 21, 2008 meeting about the possibility of sharing a part time code enforcement officer with the town of Woolwich. At this point, the committee decided that it needed meet with Jeffrey and Arthur Faucher to continue this discussion. Steve said he would look into scheduling another meeting for this topic.

Bill passed out copies of an article "Creating Dialogue: Yarmouth Tries Creative Problem Solving" by Jo Johnson. The article outlines how the town of Yarmouth used dialogue to dynamically change the way differences were over come and problems were solved. He recommended that members read the article.

There was a discussion about an article in the Wiscasset Times newspaper that reported that a new police cruiser was ordered through Wiscasset Ford. The quoted price for the cruiser was around \$18,000 to be taken from the 2008-09 budget. This caused some confusion within the committee as the 2008-09 budget is not yet approved and the voters have not spoken as to the purchase of this equipment. Committee members that had met with Officer Allen a few days earlier recalled that he talked about a new cruiser but that he was only pricing one, not ordering it. It was decided that someone on the committee who had been at the meeting with Officer Allen should ask Arthur Faucher or Officer Allen about the validity of the report that a new cruiser was already ordered.

The previous discussion led to another discussion about the cost of using a Lincoln County Sheriff or a state police officer to patrol Wiscasset instead of maintaining our own police department. When checked last year, Selectmen stated that the cost of a designated officer would be about the same as running a local police department. There might, however, be some savings in not having to pay to replace equipment and run an office.

Having no further business, Judith Colby made the motion to close the meeting. Motion was seconded by Sherri Dunbar. Motion passed 6-0. Meeting closed at 9:20 PM.

Respectfully submitted by Pamela Dunning.