

TOWN OF IPSWICH
Finance Committee
Meeting of February 3, 2022
Remote

With a quorum present, the Chair called the meeting to order at 7:36.

Finance Committee members present: Janice Clements-Skelton, Walter Hartford, Joseph Bourque, Jamie Fay, Rob White, Michael Dougherty, Emily Smith, Michael Schaaf, Christopher Doucette

1. Citizens Queries – Michael Dougherty

- There is an open chat room for any citizens queries.
- No citizens queries.

2. Acceptance of Finance Committee Minutes – Michael Dougherty

- No minutes to approve

FY23 Budget Reviews: Public Safety – Michael Dougherty

3. Fire Department – Chief Parisi

Chief Paul Parisi presented the Fire Department budget which represents a 2.64% increase, or \$53,000 over last year. The budget will support the mission of the department to serve the community. Chief Parisi started about 4 months ago as the Chief in Ipswich, so he introduced himself and talked about his career. He then went over the makeup of the department, which consists of 19 full time members and 6 part time staff. Paul also went over the fire stations within the town, one of which is not staffed, and the vehicles in use. Chief Parisi said they are typically a “one incident department”, meaning if they have one incident they are responding to, they are not able to respond to a second incident at the same time. The Chief went over the accomplishments of the department over the past year, which included successfully transitioning to a new command staff team, participating in a variety of roles in the Public Safety Committee, procuring and installing a new air compressor system for the self-contained breathing system, and then working collaboratively with the Ipswich School District and the Council on Aging for public education. In the upcoming year the department looks forward to responding to and mitigating emergency responses, actively participating in planning and design processes for the Public Safety Building, and continuing to apply for a variety of grants. They also want to establish a recruitment process for the on-call fire fighters and would like move in the direction of having 4 fire fighters per shift on a more regular basis. They would also like to increase the ability for the public to pay for things online. Chief Parisi then went over the increases and decreases in the budget which have to do with salary increases, part time staff reductions, and vehicle and equipment upgrades.

Michael D. asked about protective equipment for staff when responding to calls in regards to Covid. Paul said between the operating budget and the grant funding they have received, they are in good shape for personal protective equipment. Mike also asked about the replacement of the Chief’s vehicle. Paul said they currently have 3 staff vehicles, two are in good shape. The plan would be to outfit a second vehicle similar to the deputy’s vehicle, and then to also set up a command vehicle for the Chief. They would keep the extra vehicle as a spare. Michael asked about the cost, Paul said they are looking at all of the options and they are cognizant of staying within the parameters of Green Communities. They are looking at a diesel Tahoe, which would meet the standards of Green Communities. If the budget does not support that, they could also look into smaller vehicles, but larger would be ideal.

Joe asked if we should hire two new full-time staff to help bump up the number of people working each shift vs. asking people to work overtime. Paul said when considering the benefits and the costs of onboarding new employees, it is a little cheaper to just do overtime. Walter said it would be helpful to have a spreadsheet with the current fleet so that we can see what vehicles we have. Tony said they are working on that. Rob asked about the amount of time spent on rescue activity, Paul said that it was 48% last year. Out of the 19 full time staff, 14 are EMT’s, 5 are first responders and one is a paramedic. Rob asked about the call fire fighters, Paul said it’s a lot of work for not a lot of pay, and there is a lot of training that’s involved. Anecdotally, it has been difficult for recruitment and retention of call fire fighters nationally. Rob asked about overtime and what that run rate includes. Paul said it is the officer’s meetings, firefighters to staff the department during trainings, and covering shifts. He also said that when you have a department that has more staff, there can be many firefighters responding to a fire and doing the many jobs required. When only a few people respond to a fire,

all of those jobs still need to be done it just takes a lot longer. This is why Paul is asking for the \$20,000 increase to have 4 fire fighters on. Michael asked if the fourth would be there all the time. Paul said they won't have the money to bring a fourth on all the time, they will look at times when they historically have a higher number of incidents. That could be holidays, storms, or times when other off duty fire fighters may not be available. Outside of that, Paul said they need to look at doing this on a more regular basis and it needs to happen incrementally. Jamie said he thinks it's important for FinCom to understand that what is being proposed is a change in policy, which is to hire enough fire fighters to have 4 in the station at all times, but this is not happening. The policy has always been to hire enough for 4, if one calls out just work with 3, and if 2 call out then get overtime. Jamie asked if that is part of collective bargaining. Jamie asked Tony if we could do an outside study on comparable towns and their staffing, Tony said he would look into it. Jamie said he thinks this is important because it's not just about one year, it's a change that we need to decide if we want to make. Janice asked if we have individual caps on overtime from a safety perspective. Paul said typically a fire fighter doesn't work more than 24 hours in a row, which is in the Collective Bargaining Agreement.

4. Police Department – Chief Nikas

Chief Nikas went over the accomplishments for the year. The department worked full time during the pandemic. There were 5 critical incidents this year, 116 mental health calls, and there was also an increase in drug incidents. This has been a common trend throughout the country due to isolation. The department handled all of these incidents with extreme professionalism. The department will receive 2 new hybrid vehicles and that will make the entire front line fleet hybrid which helps with the Green Communities goals. Chief Nikas said the budget is pretty much level-funded, and all of the salary increases are from Collective Bargaining. The overtime budget was decreased slightly and that money was added into "unspecified".

Michael D. asked how the ammunition supply is, given the national shortage and the increase in practice shooting that is required. Chief Nikas said they have never had a problem using one supplier but they are now having to use several suppliers and it is a struggle. Michael also asked about the specials and if they are all going through the Bridge Academy, Chief Nikas said they all plan to as of now. Michael explained that due to Police Reform, all officers are required to go through the same training so the specials that we usually use for extra part time jobs will now be full time officers and will likely move to other towns for full time positions, which could be a cost increase for Ipswich. Chief Nikas said that we will probably have to raise our hourly rate for part time workers. There will only be a handful of people that are not trying to become full time police officers, that are only wanting to do this part time. It will take 3 years for this to take place and once it does the part time police officers will likely be a thing of the past.

Michael S. asked if there are any positives that come with the Police Reform. Chief Nikas said it really defines the role of the S.R.O. with schools, Ipswich schools are already doing most of the requirements and are ahead of the curve but it is a positive change for most communities. They are also requiring all officers to wear body cameras, which Ipswich is also ahead of and luckily were able to receive a \$50,000 grant in 2017 for body cameras, which will now be very competitive to get. It is also always better to have more training vs. less. Michael also asked about reforms to mental health approaches. Chief Nikas said they are renewing and expanding their relationship with the mental health counselor and there will also be more training for recognizing mental health issues and de-escalating situations. Michael asked if there are enough resources for this, Chief Nikas said they do but these types of calls take a lot longer to triage. Instead of a 5-minute call it's a half hour to 1-hour long call. They will manage it for the year and get some better stats, and then see where they are. Michael also asked about the run rate of overtime and said it looks like they will go over budget. Chief Nikas said that was due to officers having to quarantine for Covid exposures so they had to use overtime for other officers.

Rob said everything looks like its going really well and asked why Chief Nikas thinks that is. He said a few years ago they started transitioning the department to a more service-oriented department and that has had a big effect. Jamie asked why the service contracts have gone up. Chief Nikas said the RAVE system used to be divided up between 3 or 4 departments and now it's all under Police. Walter asked how many vehicles are in the fleet. Chief Nikas said they have 5 front line cruisers, 2 that are marked but not used, the Chief cruiser, the detective cruiser, and the lieutenant cruiser. Walter asked if they get any forfeiture money, the Chief said they gate \$23,000 from the state, \$30,000 from federal. Walter also asked about the Public Safety Building and if there is anything that the Department will cover cost wise as we transition to the new facility. Chief Nikas said they will be bringing things with them like computer servers, antennas, and radios.

5. Animal Control – M. Boissonneau

Megan went over the accomplishments of the department, which included adopting out 73 animals and designating 2 police officers for animal cruelty. Goals for this year are to continue the strong association and networking with non-profits and surrounding towns, as well as to identify a space for a dog park. The state changed some requirements for the shelters as well so the department will work to meet those requirements. Chief Nikas went over the budget. He requested to add some time to the on-call person and they have been unable to fulfil the position because it is a commitment to every weekend and is not for much money. They decided to add two 8-hour days so the position would have more visibility within the town. Michael D. asked if we are seeing a lot of abandonment in town, Megan said the Humane Group and Rescue Inc did see a lot of that, where people adopted a pet during the pandemic and it didn't work out. In Ipswich, there were two incidents this year and there have not been any incidents in the past several years.

Rob asked with regard to the part time position, what surrounding towns do from an animal control perspective during those call-out weekends, and if there is something we could do to work with the other towns to share a staff member. Megan said Essex, Rowley, and Topsfield are similar in that they have an on-call employee which is a stipend position. None of those towns have their own facility, which we do. Chief Nikas said it is not uncommon to be short staffed on weekends, so Chief Nikas and the Chief of Police in North Andover just submitted a proposal to the Essex County Chiefs to try to work together to create an MOU to cover each other's off hours, vacation time, and weekend times. There are very few people trained to do animal control at a high level. Rob said he thinks that sounds like a great idea. Michael S. asked how it works when we support other towns. Megan said because she is highly trained, she will be called if there is a public health hazard or a dangerous situation with an animal. The town receives so much grant funding for animal control so typically this does not cost the town anything. Some towns do not have a holding location for animals so have to send them to Ipswich. The town charges \$40 a day for holding pets if they are identified and claimed by the owner. Sometimes animals are adopted out and that \$40 a day is not recouped; however, they tend to receive donations from people they have helped. Recently, a dog was adopted and the new family donated a \$1,200 bath tub.

6. Harbormaster – Chief Nikas

Harbormaster is funded by 50% mooring fees and 50% excise tax on boats alone. This past year there were two drownings, both bodies were recovered to give the families closure. This past year the department was able to work with open space and the Waterways Advisory committee to create the Peatfield Street Landing which is a public access point. They also did a spill drill, which is done every 2 years with the fire station in case there is an oil leak or gas leak on the water. The budget increased slightly due to collective bargaining salary increases and gasoline prices. They cut out the postage line since they have moved to online services. There is a \$150,000 capital request which is to provide new navigation electronics and radar, and to replace the no-slip skid deck. They take in annually about \$140,000 in moorings and excise tax, and they currently have \$82,000. Rob asked what the logic is on allowing one individual to having multiple moorings. The Chief said over the years they are trying to get that down to no more than 2 per household. Moorings can be transferred to family members. This year they found 18 unused moorings that they were able to cancel and re-issue to other people. Michael S. asked about the harbor management plan. Chief Nikas said there are no big changes, it was delayed due to Covid.

7. Civilian Dispatch – Chief Nikas

Chief Nikas said they promoted from within a new Communications Chief, Dan Morris. He worked for the town for over 10 years as a dispatcher and has two different degrees. He has been doing an excellent job and has already received some grants for training and support/ equipment. The budget is level funded because of the grants they were able to get. Michael S. asked why there was a 29% overtime increase, Chief Nikas said it's hard to get people in for per diem positions so that increases overtime. There has been some discussion in being able to share with other towns, but what's tricky is that the personnel need to be trained in a variety of dispatch systems then. Michael asked if the Chief thinks we should join regional dispatch. Chief Nikas said it is about level of coverage and if we would be able to keep the station open. He's going to assess it once we get the new facility to see if perhaps we can be a regional hub. If we didn't have to have a dispatcher in house all the time, we would be able to use that money to hire more police officers. Michael said from Chief Nikas' perspective it seems like 24/7 coverage is important, Chief Nikas said yes. Michael said Ipswich has a lot of waterways and a lot of water activity, and we are also larger than a lot of the other towns in the regional dispatch. It is beneficial to Ipswich to have that coverage. Rob said when they went to Essex one thing that was impressive to him was that the fire door and the police door had a one-way locked door. Chief Nikas said it's a vestibule that locks when you hit the panic button and it is standard in all new buildings. Someone can run into the lobby, hit the panic button, and the door will lock so no one can come in to protect a resident that is in danger.

8. Shellfish – S. Lapreste

Chief Nikas said they trapped over 102,000 lbs. of green crab which was due to funding from three different sources (the general fund, the enhancement fund, and state grant funding). The new grant is not just about the crabs, it's also about protection of The Great Marsh, which enabled the town to receive an extra \$10,000. The budget is pretty level, there are a few increases for boat supplies due to price increases and inflation. Chief Nikas also provided numbers for permits and expenditures. Jamie asked for a breakdown of the permits, which the Chief provided.

9. Emergency Management– Lt. John Hubbard

Lt. Hubbard went over the previous year's accomplishments. This past year the department was busy with the vaccine clinics, they received a grant for a new radio, and worked on the Covid relief grants. For this coming year, MEMA is pushing out the CEMP Plan, they are working with a MEMA rep to get it updated. They also just got approved for a new grant for two new portable radios. There are no increases in the budget. Michael D. asked if they only have the one vehicle, John said they only have one and it is on its last legs now, it won't even pass inspection. Mike asked if they plan to get a used vehicle or would it make more sense to buy something new. John said he has been watching for the last 2 years to see if there are any vehicles from the fleet that are being retired but he hasn't seen anything that would work. He would prefer to see a new vehicle because it will last longer and they do use the vehicle often. Mike also asked if we supply volunteers with basic equipment like a jacket or apparel. John said they have a uniform, polo shirt, and high visibility jacket or vest. John said the only issue he is having now is with the jackets, he got the jackets with a grant originally and he now needs some smaller size jackets.

Jamie asked about the vaccine clinics. John said there were a lot of volunteers and Colleen had some of her staff. Council on Aging also had some staff there, and the Police Department had one person there as well. John said he does not know the total costs in overtime but it should be reimbursed from MEMA and FEMA.

New/Other Business – Michael Dougherty

- Michael said this is the second budget hearing and so far, they have seen some increasing in director positions that have gone beyond the standard 2-3% increase. They have been told that has been to catch those salaries up with other communities, Mike said FinCom would like to see some comparables from other towns so they can see what they use as benchmarks. Tony said he will have that to them tomorrow.
- Mike said they will continue to do virtual meetings for next week.
- Mike said last night they had the ad-hoc FinCom meeting which was structured to address the citizens petition which was presented to town meeting last year. Janice was the non-voting FinCom member and presented this. She said she believes there was good progress made. They unanimously voted to leave the current appointment structure in place but to work on how the appointment process takes place. Jim Engel is going to work on issues regarding more transparency into the process and more due diligence and vetting candidates. For FinCom, there used to be more than one person for each appointment and each candidate gave a presentation during Town Meeting. There was discussion around moving back to that model, even for reappointments to the committee. Rob said the reason to be supportive of Town Meeting electing the Finance Committee is because it realigns interests. The Select Board, which represents less than 50% of the budget, has 3 members, the Moderator that has no budget has 3 members, and the Town, which pays 100% of the bills, has 3 members. Janice said that did not come up. The Moderator's opinion was that only elected officials should appoint FinCom members because that in fact is the true representation of the town and that in fact Town Meeting should not appoint any members because they are not elected officials. Janice said it was confusing, somehow, it's okay for Town Meeting to pass a budget, zoning, and everything else they do, but in the Moderator's eyes they cannot be trusted with nominating a FinCom member. Janice said per the discussion last night, it was a win that they kept it as is vs. changing it to only being nominated by the Moderator. Janice said we can increase the transparency, and really get the word out there so that hopefully more people are interested. Mike said he thinks the reason they don't see high turnover in FinCom is because the majority of the members have been on for over a decade, and there are good people that bring a lot of professionalism and skills for the community. One thing that will be addressed with this hopefully, is that the process is more transparent, particularly for how the Moderator appoints and vets people. The fact that transparency is being addressed is a step in the right direction. Janice said she agrees, this is a step and doesn't do any harm. Let's see what we can do to improve what we currently have. Chris said the committee was comprised of the Moderator and the Select Board which both have appointments and don't want to give them up. Chris said he doesn't think this is a highly sought-after committee to be on. It's a lot of work.

9. Adjourn – Michael Dougherty

- The video cut out and the remainder of the meeting was not recorded.

Respectfully Submitted By

Alyson von der Esch

3-6-22