

**Town of Charlemont**  
**Joint Finance Committee and Select Board Meeting Minutes**  
**March 13th, 2024**  
**Town Hall and via Conference Call**

Board Members Present: Lynn Hathaway, Rich Filoramo, Ron Smith, Valentine Reid, Jay Healy

On phone: Amy Wales

Others present: Sarah Reynolds, Star Atkeson

Rich called the meeting to order at 4:00PM

**4:30 Bob Handsaker, Broadband Budget**

- Broadband did long term Financing in November which will be \$83,000 / year payment, there was also leftover construction money in the budget.
- 5 towns making up the Northern Ring share 3 big back hauls. \$20,000 is budgeted under projected cost this FY to finish construction in spring.
- Federal money, CAF 2 \$ was \$30,000 for last 3 years, It will be \$10,000 a year for the next 7 years. It's still at \$30,000 this FY.
- Bob is Projecting \$61,000 surplus this year's budget.
- No price increase is on the horizon. Federal taxes were put on the phone service which is an add on service. Phone service at cost is 13\$ a month, the charge to customer is \$19.99.
- Val wondered about a cost model if all the ACP participants dropped their service after the program ended. 9% of customers receive the subsidy. Losing 10% of customers would be a \$30,000 loss on the budget, the network would survive.
- The Board wondered if the State would step in. There have been discussions, Natalie Blais talking to MBI, asking them not to divert federal funds. Alternatively, funds may be re channeled into education or public outreach.
- There are about 500 subscribers, and there is a steady increase, some people miss a payment here and there.
- The board asked why 30% of residents are not subscribers. There is no real data, but Bob thinks some people only use cell phones and others are opting out because of the cost. There is a sizeable upfront cost for installation, now that there is no bulk discount. It starts at \$1100, if there is digging it starts at \$2000. Bob asked the state to subsidize installation.
- Val asked what the goal amount for retained earnings was, what year does it get healthy, the close of this year estimated at \$308,000, FY25 estimated \$370,000.
- Bob would like to use the retained earnings for future growth along new roads, hopefully with a policy developed to get new homeowners to install broadband.
- FY23, outstanding debt was \$800,000. Retained earnings were \$218,000.
- Bob would like to get more subscribers. If the state can give 20%, the town can match 7%.
- There are federal qualifications for who can qualify for a discount. (Which would be difficult to figure out otherwise)
- Bob thinks affordability is the biggest issue going forward, the upfront and monthly cost.
- As far as tree trimming and storms are concerned, Bob is more reactive than proactive with trimming and it has been ok. Fire is the thing that destroys fiber.
- The mini split in the town hall basement should probably be replaced, they are unable to find a part. Climates by Pomeroy is helping them, they can ask them what they recommend. The generator is good.

- Bob thinks he can find a small grant to beef up automatic monitoring of the downstairs room.

#### ADMINISTRATOR'S REPORT:

##### 1) Leasing/ Financing

- Sarah let the Board know of research she has done on the leasing options. What they had been looking at was in fact a lease to own, not a true lease. There are private dealerships for heavy trucks in Westfield that will finance leasing and will take trade-ins every 5 years. The used truck market is huge. Sarah suggested doing it themselves and figuring out the procurement. Rich sees that as the only way to get another police vehicle. The HWY equipment is old too.
- Sarah mentioned that Senator Markey's office put a Firetruck earmark under the rural account, also there is the assistance to firefighter's grant, and a USDA program.
- Rich hopes they will help to provide money for a standard sized fire station to save money on custom sized vehicles.

##### 2) Stabilization / Revolving Accounts

- Sarah will get info on the true lease and find out how it works with the procurement requirements.

##### 1) Item not foreseen in the last 48 hours— West County Fin Comm Consortium

- Jay Healy let everyone know that Larry Langford, Buckland Finance Committee, contacted him to try and get a sense of interest in possibly coming together and forming a consortium of FinComms that can meet and advise each other, come up with strategies, support Select Boards, and become a coordinated front to advocate on behalf of rural communities that face similar issues. He will talk to 10-12 FinComms in West County.
- Jay spoke about home values. Sarah pointed out that the sales data is killing the assessment data. Ranches are being sold at 2-3x their worth. A few mansions are okay, but more than that can skew valuation formula for the whole town, as in Conway. The state income is not designed to deal with the wealth gap.
- The chapter 90 formula was talked about as another important issue faced by rural communities with a lot of road miles but with lower median incomes.

#### ACTION ITEMS:

1. Review / Approve minutes from 2/28/2024.

**Rich Filoramo motioned to approve the Minutes, seconded by Ron Smith. All in favor.**

##### 2. Budget review

- Select Board would like to collapse line items into single votes that make sense. They will propose certain lines to be collapsed at the next meeting.
- Re: Town Employee Salaries, the Select Board went through the budget and trimmed so that the cost of living adjustment could be offset. The recommended 5% increase would have been a \$35,000 increase. With the trimming, it will be an \$11,000 increase.

##### 3. Reserve Fund requests

- Agricultural commission, put their FY2025 budget at \$2000.
- If Fincomm would approve a reserve fund request to buy and install Right to Farm signs (\$1400) their FY25 budget can be lowered to \$500.
- There are requirements for Right to Farm communities: a letter included with taxes, and to inform home buyers that it is a Right to Farm community.

**Rich Filoramo motioned to approve and sign Ag Comm's reserve fund request for \$1400. Lynn Hathaway seconded the motion. All in favor.**

- Regarding the Fire Chief's reserve fund request. Dennis requested \$6000 for Line Item 220-5245 Vehicle Maintenance which would cover some overspending and to have @\$2000, to finish vehicle maintenance, to get thru to the end of the FY. He has a lot of old equipment and spends more money on an emergency basis. It will be taken care of at the end of the year.
- Val noted that the Fire equipment replacement line was underspent. There is price gouging now, but Fire has overspent from 2017-2023.

**Rich Filoramo made a motion to not approve the reserve fund transfer. Lynn Hathaway seconded. Amy Wales abstained, as she didn't have the numbers in front of her. All others in favor.**

**Rich Filoramo motioned to adjourn the meeting at 5:26 seconded by Ron Smith. All in favor.**

Next regularly scheduled meeting will be held on Wednesday, March 27 at 4:00 PM.

Documents viewed at meeting:

Minutes of 2/28/2024

FinComm and Select Board Agenda for March 13, 2024

Broadband operating budget 13-March-2024

Draft 2 FY 2025 Budget Worksheet

Letter to Select Board/ Fincomm from Dennis Annear

Reserve Fund Transfer Requests