Minutes of Regular Meeting  
Select Board  
Tuesday, May 12, 2020  
Remote Online Meeting (Zoom ID 872 0986 4171)  
Called to Order at 7:00 p.m.

Remotely participating were Select Board members Laurie Bent, Harvey Boshart, and Christopher Houston, Chair. Also present were Town Manager Leon A. Gaumond, Jr., Assistant Town Manager/Human Resources Director Lisa Yanakakis, and Recording Secretary Kara Fleming.

Executive Session: Exemption 3 – Discussion with Respect to Collective Bargaining (Fire)

MOTION: Mr. Houston moved that the Select Board vote to go into executive session for the following purpose: Exemption 3 – to discuss strategy with respect to collective bargaining. Mr. Houston declared that an open meeting will have a detrimental effect on the negotiating position of the Board. And further, that the Board WILL resume in open session.

Roll call vote: Ms. Bent, Mr. Boshart and Mr. Houston voted in the affirmative. Approved unanimously

The public portion of the meeting resumed at 7:11 p.m. and Mr. Houston read the following statement:

Pursuant to Governor Baker’s March 12, 2020 Order Suspending Certain provisions of the Open Meeting Law, G.L. c. 30A, §18, and the Governor’s March 15, 2020 Order concerning imposition on strict limitations on the number of people that may gather in one place, meetings in the Town of Weston will be conducted via remote participation to the greatest extent possible. We will strive to provide access to such meetings via a link to call in, or other similar option. In the event we are unable to accommodate the same, despite best efforts, we will post recorded sessions of the meeting as soon as possible following the same. No in-person attendance of members of the public will be permitted, but every effort will be made to ensure that the public can adequately access the proceedings.

Resident Comments
There were none.

Continued Discussion on the Fiscal Year 2021 Recommended Operating Budget
Mr. Houston explained the Select Board’s previous meeting was devoted to public comments and had limited Board discussion nor time for Finance Committee Chair Lisa Reitano’s comments due to the meeting running over the stated end time. Mr. Houston asked Ms. Reitano to speak first and then for the Select Board to discuss next, followed by public comment and further discussion thereafter.

Ms. Reitano described the evolution of the Finance Committee’s budget recommendations from its March 26th to April 30th meetings. She indicated that her committee had originally recommended a more modest increase of 3.8 percent for the operating budget rather than the 6.6 percent the Select Board had recommended; however, the committee is now recommending a level spending budget of $52.7 million on the Town side with no changes to the proposed increases in the school budget. Ms. Reitano said the Finance Committee’s thinking had been influenced by the trajectory of the looming economic crisis along with a Massachusetts Municipal Association webinar in which hiring freezes, delaying capital spending, scaling back OPEB contributions, and delaying vehicle and equipment replacements had been
recommended. She continued to explain that the Finance Committee now believes the most prudent course of action is to keep spending at current levels subject to maintaining public safety and infrastructure while honoring all legal and contractual obligations, such as existing union contracts and debt service while offsetting any required increases with other efficiencies. Ms. Reitano argued against all proposed new hires and expanded hours for existing employees. These include the Sustainability Coordinator, two firefighters, staff support for the Historical Commission, the Conservation Assistant, and the Council on Aging Coordinator. In light of uncertain income projections for the Town, Ms. Reitano recommended that all capital expenses be deferred, such as the new police and ambulance vehicles, public works equipment, and the proposed networking project. Lastly, Ms. Reitano referenced long-standing issues of Weston’s financial metrics relative to other comparable towns but suggested that these issues should be addressed when the current crisis subsides.

Both Mr. Houston and Ms. Bent questioned the Finance Committee’s recommendation for deferrals without understanding what that would mean for the following year’s budget and asked if the Finance Committee would oppose an even higher budget increase next year due to the deferrals from this year.

Mr. Houston referenced the letter from Mr. Frank Caine of Highland Meadows in which Mr. Caine asked if the Select Board agreed with the statements made by the Finance Committee, and, if so, did the Select Board agree with the committee’s recommendations. Mr. Houston remarked that he agreed with some of the statements made; however, they did not depict the full picture of Weston’s finances because the measurements used were not defined nor were they consistent across the study. Mr. Houston explained the problem with trying to interpret Weston’s financial outlook in the way the Finance Committee did does not present a clear picture because the parameters were not established. He cited the difference between using Weston’s average home value vs the median home value when compared to other towns results in two opposing data points. Likewise, he questioned what made another town comparable and by what means, asking how do you define the quality of life and infrastructure expenses across towns. Because of these inconsistencies and the volume of information put out by the Finance Committee, Mr. Houston requested the Finance Committee distill its findings utilizing defined parameters. Lastly, Mr. Houston challenged the notion that high relative tax bills would decrease Weston’s desirability since the Finance Committee had asserted this situation has been in existence for a long time.

Mr. Houston referred to a request from Mr. Caine for more benchmarking and his assertion that anything worth doing is worth measuring. Using recent appropriations for the Josiah Smith Tavern and the Old Library as examples, Mr. Houston noted that many quality of life considerations could not be measured by a return on investment analysis, as Weston’s quality of life attributes were more determinative of people’s desire to live here than its per capita spending figures. He noted that his request to residents to point out unnecessary spending had identified only $100,000 in savings. Likewise, Mr. Houston reported that the Town Manager and department heads had been asked to identify expenses that could be cut or deferred but suggested that instead of bickering over individual statistics, the goal should be to produce a responsible budget in the context of the quality of life that Weston residents have and expect.

Referencing the topic of bottom-up vs. top-down budgeting that had been asked at the previous Select Board meeting, Mr. Houston indicated that, absent input from the community otherwise, the Town typically began with a level service budget and then considered whether additions requested by departments, committees and residents were worthwhile and could be covered by revenues without undue tax increases. Mr. Houston indicated that real-life top-down planning also took place, although it was not expressed as such since historically, Weston’s Town Managers have not proposed budgets with large increases. Mr. Houston also noted that Town Meeting was the ultimate arbiter of the budget.

Ms. Bent echoed Mr. Houston’s sentiments concerning the quality of life issues and said voters had chosen to undertake large capital projects in a democratic process that are now included in the Town’s
Mr. Houston opened the meeting up for resident comments. Ms. Rochelle Nemrow of Beaver Road thanked the Select Board for holding multiple meetings to receive comments from concerned citizens. She asked the Select Board to do budget scenario planning early and with the understanding that these are not normal times. She explained that the impact of reduced funding on the Town’s budget and the duration of that reduction was an unknown; however, it would be wrong to assume taxpayers could make up budget shortfalls, particularly any arising from discretionary spending or budget items that could be deferred. Ms. Bent acknowledged the need to be flexible and to consider the whole financial situation during these unprecedented times.

Mr. Houston returned to the assertion that taxes for a typical house in Weston exceed those for a typical house in Wayland and suggested that the discrepancy might not have to do with Weston doing unnecessary things or doing the same things less efficiently but rather because Weston is doing different things than Wayland. Mr. Caine agreed with Mr. Houston’s comments about the quality of life issues but asked that the Select Board look at the quality of life spending separately from the delivery of service spending in the budget. Mr. Caine hoped that delivery of service spending was not greater in Weston than in Wayland, for example, just because a comparable home in Weston was worth more than one in Wayland. Mr. Houston agreed that targeted benchmarking, such as for the delivery of fire services, was useful and noted that the Town Manager has experience with the practice. Mr. Caine asked for the schools to be included in any benchmarking exercise.

Ms. Catherine Bassick of Westerly Road reported that Wayland’s taxes were greater than Weston taxes for a comparable home but suggested that Weston might still have room for improvement. Mr. Boshart noted that Wayland’s mill rate is 40 percent higher than Weston’s and though Wayland’s median home value is substantially lower than Weston’s, Wayland taxpayers pay 40 percent more than Weston taxpayers for similarly-valued homes. Ms. Bassick contended that unless Weston took steps to curb its tax rate, it would become like Wayland, where high taxes impeded the ability of property values to rise.

Mr. Norman Weinstock of Highland Meadows asked what the Select Board’s timeline was for budget recommendations now that it had gathered input from residents and the Finance Committee. Mr. Houston indicated that the Select Board’s budget recommendations would depend on when the Annual Town Meeting and Election were held, which would be discussed next.

**Discuss Setting Dates for Annual Town Meeting and Annual Town Election**

Noting that he was not legally required to do so and because he is running for reelection, Mr. Boshart recused himself from discussions regarding the scheduling of the Town Election to avoid any perception of a conflict of interest. Mr. Gaumond relayed Town Counsel’s opinion that Mr. Boshart was within his rights to participate in scheduling discussion as he deemed appropriate and that he could invoke the “rule of necessity” if necessary.

Mr. Houston asked to discuss Annual Town Meeting first since it ultimately impacted the date of the Election. He reported that he spoke with Town Counsel about this because there was no guidance from the state regarding when and how to hold Open Town Meetings during the pandemic, noting that an online meeting is not permissible. Mr. Houston indicated that after exploring parameters with Town
Counsel, he was hoping to get feedback from the Board on potentially holding Annual Town Meeting in September. He outlined his thought process, as:

- The Town would maintain current spending levels given the 12-month budgeting allowed by the state
- More insight would be gained around fiscal issues that could impact the operating budget
- It would avoid summer when a bulk of residents leave town, which may be more than usual given that school is closed
- It would allow time to get guidance from the state on how to hold a public gathering during a pandemic
- The figures for the debt exclusion question on the election ballot and Town Meeting warrant may change as the budget evolves
- Per the Town’s General By-laws, the Town Election is to be held on the Saturday before Annual Town Meeting and newly-elected officials begin their terms when Town Meeting is adjourned
- Some peer towns, such as Sudbury and Wayland, were delaying their Annual Town Meetings and elections until September

Ms. Bent said September sounds reasonable and asked if other alternatives had been explored. Mr. Gaumond noted that Governor Baker is expected to address the public gathering advisory on Monday but thought it very unlikely that any Open Town Meetings would be held in May or June. He raised the possibility of holding an outdoor Town Meeting, noting that State Legislature had recently voted to allow Town Meetings to be held outside of town boundaries and to allow Select Boards to lower quorum requirements for Open Town Meetings. Ms. Bent said holding Town Meeting where a large part of Weston’s older population would feel uncomfortable attending and lowering the requirements for a quorum seemed undemocratic. She said she preferred to set a target date for September rather than set an unrealistic early date that could continuously be postponed. Mr. Houston noted that he had spoken with the Town Clerk who had agreed that there was merit in holding a later Town Meeting and Election. He suggested September 19th for the Town Election and September 21st for Annual Town Meeting, which would give candidates time to campaign after Labor Day. Ms. Bent thought it was important to get input from people on the ballot.

After agreeing that scheduling decisions should not be made at the current meeting, particularly in light of guidance expected from the Governor and State Legislature in the following week, Ms. Mary Ellen Sikes of Conant Road voiced concern over the belief that many people would be leaving town this particular summer and advocated for holding the annual events at the end of June.

Several residents spoke in favor of September, given the uncertainties with the current status of the public health emergency and public gatherings, but also noted the Jewish holidays in September. Mr. Houston committed to scheduling around the holidays.

Ms. Bent noted that the Select Board members would typically rotate chair and clerk after Annual Town Meeting and asked how Mr. Houston wanted to handle the situation. Mr. Houston indicated that he would defer to Ms. Bent’s wishes since she is next to chair per the Board’s custom. Ms. Bent expressed a preference for Mr. Houston to continue in the role of Chair until September, to which Mr. Houston agreed.

**Approve Fire and Public Works Union Contracts**

Mr. Houston reported that Fire and Public Works union contracts had been discussed during the executive session and invited Assistant Town Manager/Human Resources Director Lisa Yanakakis to comment. Ms. Yanakakis indicated that the contract negotiations were straightforward and invited questions. Mr.
Houston indicated that while he was in favor of benchmarking delivery of service categories, contracts in this area contained concessions that were not measurable in financial terms but still important and beneficial to the Town.

**MOTION:** Mr. Boshart moved to accept the provisions of the Memorandum of Agreements and to authorize the Select Board to sign them. 2nd by Ms. Bent.  
**Roll call vote:** Ms. Bent, Mr. Boshart and Mr. Houston voted in the affirmative. **Approved unanimously**

**Consent Agenda**

**MOTION:** Mr. Bent moved to approve the consent agenda, as follows:

Approve Select Board Minutes: March 11, 2020, regular session

2nd by Mr. Boshart.  
**Roll call vote:** Mr. Boshart, Ms. Bent and Mr. Houston voted in the affirmative. **Approved unanimously**

**MOTION:** Ms. Boshart moved to adjourn. 2nd by Mr. Bent  
**Roll call vote:** Ms. Bent, Mr. Boshart and Mr. Houston voted in the affirmative. **Approved unanimously**

Meeting adjourned at 8:34 p.m.

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Laurie A. Bent  
Clerk

*Note: A copy of all documents, explanatory material, and exhibits presented to and used by the Select Board as part of this meeting are attached to the approved minutes*