

The Springfield Budget Advisory Committee Report and Recommendations to the Selectboard for Fiscal Year 23-24

Budget Advisory Committee Members:

Jim Fog, Chair

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1. Introduction

The Springfield Selectboard (“the Selectboard”) tasked this year’s Budget Advisory Committee (“the BAC”) to review the budget presented by the Town Manager, Jeff Mobus (“the Manager”), and to recommend any changes to this budget we deem necessary or prudent.

The BAC recognizes that the Town of Springfield (“the Town”) faces myriad challenges this budget cycle. Rising inflation increases wages for Town employees, the costs of goods necessary to perform Town functions, and the cost of utilities necessary to operate Town buildings, all of which has a particularly pronounced impact on the Public Works Department’s ability to maintain our roads. The new Police Chief, Jeff Burnham, expects the Police Department to return to sufficient staff levels to renew 24/7 coverage, and the line items for staff and vehicle purchases (which were temporarily decreased last year to ease budgetary constraints) must be fully restored. Moreover, many of the Town’s buildings stand in dire need of renovation, most notably the Town garage (which is not addressed in this report given this year’s overall economic situation). Further, as discussed in previous budget cycles, our critical infrastructure remains in disrepair, and our regular budget cannot supply the funds needed to restore our water lines and roads to their required functionality.

We would like to thank the Manager and the Town’s department heads for presenting the BAC with a budget whose proposed increase of 4.99% is not only less than the current rate of inflation, but also maintains Springfield’s status as a full-service community. This was not an easy task, and each department took great pains to find savings where they could. To each department head: we applaud your ingenuity and thrift, and thank you for your willingness to tighten the belt on already tight budgets. To the Manager: we thank you for your proactive stewardship of the Town and your assistance to the BAC during this process.

With these and many other factors in mind, we recommend that the Selectboard adopt the latest budget presented by the Manager with only minor changes. The proposed changes below are relative to the latest budget (that came in at a 4.99% increase) presented by the Manager.

2. Budget Recommendations

a. Administration

No recommendations at this time.

b. Police

10-21-5-565 - Social Expenses:

Decrease from \$1,500 to \$1000 (\$500 less than proposed).

The BAC understands (and supports) the rationale behind the Chief's desire to host other law enforcement agencies from our region in order to foster better working relationships that lead to more proactive and organized law enforcement, but we believe that this requested amount is excessive given this year's financial constraints and recommend that it match the Fire Department's social expenses line item.

10-22-5-620 - Travel:

Decrease from \$5,000 to \$3,500 (\$1,500 less than proposed).

The BAC understands that the Town is responsible for providing lodging and transportation for officers to attend required training, but believes that the Police Department should have officers use its vehicles for transportation rather than reimbursing officers for mileage incurred from using their personal vehicles.

c. Fire/Ambulance

No recommendations at this time.

d. Public Works

No recommendations at this time.

e. Parks & Recreation

10-62-5-570 - Facility Rental:

Decrease from \$20,000 to \$0 (\$20,000 less than proposed, effective elimination).

The BAC views this expense as unjustifiably excessive and recommends eliminating it. Since the School District uses several Town facilities free of charge, Parks & Recreation director Chris Merrill expressed to the BAC his belief that he could negotiate the free (or dramatically less expensive) use of the gymnasium at either Elm Hill or Union Street Elementary Schools. We understand that this line item's existence has historically been defended on the grounds that it supports economic development in Springfield by providing revenue to the Springfield Regional

Development Corporation (SRDC) that is used to support the Black River Innovation Campus (BRIC). We do not dispute the value of the Town investing in BRIC, but-in the name of transparency-believe that any such funding should be procured through a special appropriation (see Section 2h) rather than an overpayment for an underused and logistically challenged service.

10-63-5-965 - P&R Building Repair:

Increase from \$25,000 to \$45,000 for one (1) year (\$20,000 more than proposed).

OR

Increase from \$25,000 to \$35,000 for two (2) years (\$10,000 more than proposed).

The Parks & Recreation building has two maintenance projects that need to be addressed. Director Merrill told the BAC that the building furnace should have been replaced three years ago. Currently, it kicks off at least once a day. This recurring problem was identified long enough ago that a camera was installed to observe the furnace, which sends an alert to the Director whenever the furnace kicks off. The Director must then manually turn it back on, no matter what time of day or night. Additionally, the women's bathroom in the Parks & Recreation building needs renovation in order to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (which took effect for local governments 31 years ago in 1992). While this bathroom is grandfathered into the ADA, elderly and disabled females cannot access it. The Director believes that each project can be accomplished for \$10,000 each (\$20,000 in total). We recommend, at minimum, that the Selectboard address the furnace in this budget, and the women's bathroom in either this or the next budget (either \$20,000 this year or \$10,000 over the next two years).

f. Senior Center

No recommendations at this time.

g. Library

No recommendations at this time.

h. Special Appropriations

Paving Appropriation

Increase from \$1 million to \$1.1 million (\$100,000 increase).

Having heard arguments for and against any increase from the Selectboard, the BAC took the "For" position for the sake of discussion, and debated whether 50k or 100k would best serve the Town's needs. After a vote on that discussion, the BAC recommends that the paving special appropriation be increased by \$100,000. The Paving Plan calls for the Town to spend \$1.1 million on paving this budget cycle. As it stands, the Town is prepared to spend \$1 million (\$300,000 from the operational budget and \$700,000 from the special appropriation) in FY23-24. The Manager made it clear to the BAC that the Town will not be able to save enough money to finance large paving projects, as the Paving Plan calls for. He instead recommends that the Town bond for such projects (a recommendation which we support). However, given the rising costs

associated with paving (which have risen faster than inflation), in order to continue improving the Town's roads at a similar pace as in previous budget cycles, the Town should increase the paving special appropriation beyond what it had planned. We understand that taxpayers are strained this year, especially those on fixed incomes, which is why we are recommending the increase in the special appropriation instead of the operating budget. If the voters want to pay for more paving, they will vote for it; if not, they will vote down the special appropriation, and the Selectboard can put forward the previous \$700,000 paving special appropriation in a special election. We understand that some on the Selectboard oppose this recommendation in the name of softening the blow to the taxpayers, but suggest that the Selectboard let the voters decide for themselves.

Economic Development Appropriation

Increase SRDC appropriation from \$45,000 to \$65,000 (\$20,000 increase)

OR

Create BRIC appropriation of \$20,000

The BAC supports the Town and Selectboard's previous decisions to invest in economic development in Springfield. However, in the name of transparency, we believe that this support should be direct funding in the form of an appropriation rather than indirect funding via the Park Street School gymnasium rental line item in the Parks & Recreation operating budget. From a framing and public relations standpoint, we believe that Springfield residents would be more willing to pay for an appropriation than an overpriced and underused service.

3. Operational Recommendations

In addition to specific line-item recommendations, the BAC also has several recommendations for the operational conduct of the Town.

a. General Town Operations

In general, we recommend that the Manager continue to work with department heads to develop capital improvement plans in order to finance large, predictable expenses. This has the dual benefits of encouraging Town administrators and elected officials to keep an eye to Springfield's future, while also smoothing the Town budget year-over-year, which is much more palatable to the taxpayers.

In general, we recommend that department heads, when preparing their budgets, group all of the expenses related to a specific activity in the line item most relevant to that activity and present the total cost instead of breaking each element of that activity into several relevant line items (e.g. when the Police Department sends an officer to required trainings the cost of their enrollment, transportation, and lodging be grouped under "Training" instead of being broken into both "Training" and "Travel").

b. Administration

No recommendations at this time.

c. Police

During this year's site visit the BAC was made aware of the presence of a crack from the foundation to the roof of the Police Department building. While this BAC did not specifically address funding for this project because of the already large budget increase this year, we recommend that the Manager and Selectboard formulate a plan that can be presented to next year's BAC.

In the name of transparency, the BAC also recommends that the Police Chief move all training-related travel expenses (in this case, mileage reimbursement and lodging costs) to the Training line item from the Travel line item. We believe that grouping all expenses into the line item of their primary purpose does a better job at showing the full cost of training than breaking down the individual costs into separate line items. To that end, we also believe that the officers should use Town-owned vehicles to transport themselves to and from training rather than their personal vehicles, as this is cheaper than mileage reimbursement.

The Vermont State Police are trying to reduce their dispatching services for other departments, and therefore other departments are searching for dispatch services. Chief Burnham is interested in dispatching for other select departments, but not in becoming a regional dispatch center. Any additional personnel needed to do this would have costs covered by the revenue received from those departments. This would also be an additional revenue source for the police department and the town, offsetting taxes.

Additionally, the BAC is concerned that the Town's decision to not hire a new parking enforcement officer after the current officer retires will result in full-time, on-duty police officers being called upon to enforce parking regulations in downtown. We recommend that the Selectboard weigh the costs and benefits of following this plan versus hiring a new parking enforcement officer.

d. Fire/Ambulance

During the BAC site visit, Fire Chief Paul Stagner expressed his belief that the non-emergency transportation service has enough demand to warrant hiring the requisite full-time staff to make that service a 24/7 operation. The BAC is encouraged by this potential source of revenue and recommends that the Selectboard direct the Manager to investigate the financial and logistical feasibility of expanding the service beyond its current operation of 40 hours per week (five eight-hour days).

e. Public Works

We recommend that the Town adopt a more cost-efficient approach for hiring public works staff. It is unlikely that the Town will be successful in recruiting truck drivers from either Indeed (or any other white collar-oriented website) or the local newspapers. Given the lack of candidate acquisitions, the BAC does not believe that the current recruitment method is worth the cost. We understand that hiring logistics run through HR in the Town Office, but while this recommendation may fall upon administrative staff rather than Public Works staff, this recommendation is specific to hiring practices for Public Works.

While this BAC did not specifically address funding for a new Town garage because of the already high budget increase this year, we strongly recommend that the Selectboard and Manager develop a plan for a new Town garage for next year's BAC to review. The current Town garage simply cannot meet the needs of the Public Works department. The Town garage sits on top of the Town aquifer so everything coming off or out of the trucks has to be captured by the drain and sewer systems inside the building. However, the ceiling in the mechanic's bay is too low for the truck dump bodies to be extended completely. As a result, the Town trucks rust (and must be replaced) quicker than they would if it was possible to properly service them. This project will demand a significant financial investment, and the longer the Town waits to address this, the more expensive it will become.

f. Parks & Recreation

The new Parks & Recreation Director, Chris Merrill, has identified operational inefficiencies in the department and we encourage the Selectboard and Manager to assist him in his efforts to establish written contracts for outside services, develop and adhere to a capital improvement plan for Parks & Recreation facilities, and reallocate wasteful spending into more productive activities.

g. Senior Center

No recommendations at this time.

h. Library

We recommend that the Selectboard support the Director, Sue Dowell's, decision to eliminate the late return fees. This revenue stream was marginal, at best, and the costs of staff time and mailing resources (paper, envelopes, and stamps) most likely exceed any revenue generated. Additionally, this new policy wouldn't change the Library's current operating procedure where the cost of replacing a book considered "lost" is charged to the last person who checked it out. Further, the BAC supports the Director's rationale that this action will improve equity for Springfield residents by eliminating a financial disincentive against checking out books. The ability for a community member to expand their knowledge via the library should not depend upon whether they have a few dollars worth of fines.

4. Conclusion

Even with the increases the BAC recommends, the FY23-24 budget still increases less than inflation. Springfield's status as a full-service community is one of the few advantages we have over our neighbors and we recommend the Selectboard refrain from making additional major cuts to this latest budget proposal. The Town has operated on a shoe-string budget for years, and is at the point where any further cuts will significantly diminish the Town's ability to provide essential services. To that end, the Manager already asked each department head to find additional savings wherever they could, and they did so. We then searched for further efficiencies, as reflected in this report.

We believe that our budget recommendations reflect the responsibility of the Town to balance the concerns of Springfield residents as taxpayers paying for the Town's services, against the concerns of

Springfield residents as citizens of this community who use the Town's services. It is a tough year for everybody, which makes community services such as public safety, walkable sidewalks, drivable roads, a full-time library, enjoyable public spaces, and an efficient administration all the more important.

Respectfully, and on behalf of the Budget Advisory Committee,

Jim Fog
Chair