

FARMINGTON BOARD OF SELECTMEN
Thursday, February 24, 2022

The conduct of the meeting included remote access by telephonic, video, and electronic means. The public could attend in person or by viewing the live stream at <http://mtbluetv.org/program-live-stream-farmington-selectmen.html> or Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/MBTV11/> and/or calling 778-5874.

Chairman Matthew Smith called the meeting to order at 6:30 P.M. with the following members present: Stephan Bunker, Michael Fogg, Joshua Bell, and Scott Landry. Town Manager Christian Waller, Executive Assistant Nancy Martin, Budget Committee Member Michael Guerrette, Planning Committee Member Clayton King, MBTV Camera Operator Trinity Smith, and members of the press and public were also present. Treasurer/Town Clerk Leanne Dickey, members of the media, and the public participated remotely.

ITEM 1: Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag

Chairman Matthew Smith led those present in the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag.

ITEM 2: To Review and Approve the Warrant for April 25, 2022, Annual Town Meeting

Chairman Matthew Smith acknowledged there were several things those present did not agree on. Chairman Smith asked all who spoke to remain cordial and respectful. After a brief discussion, the Board agreed to review each article in the warrant individually versus voting on the overall warrant.

Resident Bill Crandall asked what the overall budget increase would be if approved. Mr. Crandall stated he watched the budgets very closely in the early 2000s and he was upset over the increases over ten years. He distributed a worksheet from the March 2008 Town Meeting listing the appropriations from 1998 – 2008, which indicated a 50.67% increase for that period. He stated he was living with the solar farm panels because he thought they were going to reduce his taxes. Chairman Smith stated that the overall increase for 2022 was 24.6%. Mr. Crandall said that was five years in one year, and that is his concern. Chairman Smith interjected as they went through the warrant articles, and they would justify all the increases.

Article 2 General Administration the amount requested is \$992,898. *(The following discussion overtook any discussion on Article 2).*

Joshua Bell asked if the Board should go back through the budget versus voting on the appropriated dollar amount. Michael Fogg responded the warrant numbers were transferred from the Board-approved 2022 budget to the warrant; the numbers were already approved. This is what the Board is voting on, the numbers on the warrant are no different than the approved budget. Mr. Fogg stated the warrant would go to Town Meeting and would be passed, or not. Resident Ryan Morgan asked that the Board listen to the voters who were in attendance. Chairman Smith stated the voters would be allowed to speak. Clayton King said there were an awful lot of rumors floating around, and he was here to find out why certain line items were expanded out so much. Mr. King asked why there was such a big difference between the Budget

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Committees' recommendations and those the Board approved. He said the warrant articles should be broken down line by line. Chairman Smith remarked the purpose of tonight's meeting was to sign the warrant; the Board spent two nights reviewing the budget line by line. Mr. Fogg opined it is the Town Manager's job to present a budget and he went to work and presented a budget; this is what we hired him to do. The budget was presented to the Board for review, and it was up to us to cut it, pass it, or add to it - whatever the Board felt we needed to do to bless it and pass it on to the Town's people. We have done this on two different occasions, and at neither of those budget meetings did anyone suggest that one of these items be dropped, lessened, or changed. Therefore, the Board called for a vote, and the Selectmen passed the budget. Mr. Fogg stated we have done our job, approving the warrant is a formality. The warrant needs to go to the printers, it is the budget that was approved. The warrant will go to the Town's people who will peruse it and decide whether they like it or not and then they will vote. At the Town Meeting, the people will have every opportunity to speak. But this is not the purpose of tonight's meeting. Stephan Bunker stated in fairness to the citizens here tonight they do deserve an explanation.

Mr. Bunker explained the four pressures applied to the Board, Town Manager, Department Heads, and the Budget Committee:

1. Municipal employees – few citizens are cognizant of what it takes to recruit and maintain qualified employees. More than any property owned or any apparatus, employees are the ones that make municipal services work here. It is tough for the Town to maintain a skilled, loyal, and motivated workforce, especially in these times of COVID, and to keep folks from leaving for better offers from competing communities or back out into the private sector. Mr. Bunker said speaking only for himself and any other who has been on the Board over the years, we should have paid more due diligence to what our workforce was like and the changing market conditions. Mr. Bunker reported that not since 2008 have we done a market survey of like employees in like positions in similar communities and compared ourselves to see if we were paying reasonable market value. After the 2008 survey, we made some adjustments. Since that time, we have made the cost of living adjustments (COLA) and naively thought COLA was enough to keep us up to par with the communities around us. Mr. Bunker said at the Board's direction, the Town Manager brought to their attention how sadly out of sync our compensation packages are. Some positions are only a modest difference, while in others there is an extreme difference. Currently, our police department is shy of four officers. The police department is in a perpetual recruiting state and has been unable to find qualified candidates. We lost our Finance Director who went to a similar community and received much higher compensation than what the Town offers. Our initial attempts to replace the Finance Director for what we were paying her have been unsuccessful. A heavy equipment operator that plows our roads could leave today and receive up to \$8.00 an hour more than what we are paying. Construction companies are always seeking skilled employees, and we would be very hard-pressed at our current salary amounts to replace any of these folks. To say, if they don't like what they are compensated let them leave would be a mistake. The Town would be very hard-pressed to replace them. Mr. Bunker said that is the burden he and the Board carry on their shoulders because our citizens deserve quality people to be working for us. And the expense of losing skilled employees and replacing them with another warm body would be very costly. The Town made considerable adjustments in compensation in each department because it is primarily

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people who make up the budget.

2. **Community Center roof** – In engineering studies of the roof structure, the engineers found the roof timbers to be undersized. In some instances, the timbers were extremely undersized. Engineers advised us not to ignore the roof issues any longer due to the potential liability issues the Town might suffer if the roof collapsed. The Community Center has served the Town well for many years. The price tag for replacing the roof could be as high as \$800,000.
3. **Road Conditions** – the number one complaint from our citizens is the status of our roads. Mr. Bunker stated he lives with the road conditions every day, if you select a road or a hill you travel every day, you know road conditions are an issue too. The Town raised an additional \$300,000 supplementation to speed up and gain on our roads. Even that has not been enough to keep up with deteriorating roads. With that consideration in mind and with the public's comments, we went from \$300,000 to \$600,000 for supplemental road improvements. This still will not allow us to repair all the roads that are on the list, but the funds will make a significant difference. Mr. Bunker stated folks can debate on the amount, but that is the Board's recommended amount based on the long-term plan.
4. **Fire Department Apparatus** – the Town had a good method for rotating and trading out apparatus' because fire engines can go from \$500,000 to \$1,000,000, so we wanted to spread that cost out. Historically, our fire trucks last twenty-five years and we do not have to pay off debt on more than one truck in any given year. Last year, due to nobody's fault, one of our engines experienced extreme degradation caused by rust and it could not pass inspection. The engine was auctioned off for a pittance three years ahead of its estimated time. That was going to allow us enough time to replace Engine 2 (which has passed its twenty-five-year life expectancy). Now we must replace the engine we had to junk out and our oldest engine which is two years past its rotation age. Engine 2 is used the most and is in the worst mechanical condition now. You will see as part of our indebtedness on the 2022 Budget, that we are considering bonding for the replacement apparatus while we are still paying on Engine One.

Mr. Bunker reiterated that the above items were the pressures that applied most to him when putting the 2022 Budget together. These items make it different than past years; the budget was not done on a whim; it was done after long deliberation. Due to the Solar Farm revenues, the Town is in a good financial position to address all four issues without having an adverse effect on the mill rate.

Joshua Bell addressed Michael Fogg and Stephan Bunker, stating the Department Heads presented their budgets (Tuesday, January 18, 2022) and then Christian Waller presented the final proposed budget to the Board (Tuesday, January 25, 2022) and some of the Department Heads were unaware of the differences, creating some confusion. (The Board voted and approved the 2022 Budget on January 25th and the Budget Committee met for the third and final time on Wednesday, January 26th). Mr. Bell stated that the whole budget process has been up in the air, and he has no faith in sending the current budget to the people. He said the Board never sat down and discussed pay scales for any department other than the Police. And the Board formulated a plan for the Police department because they were leaving rapidly. He stated the Board talked about adjustments for other personnel because some had fallen behind. These are

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the things the Board discusses in Executive Session so that we can ask why the Town is paying Matt Foster \$25,000 more. Mr. Bell asked if he was wrong in saying that? He asked why are we adjusting Matt Foster's pay from \$50,000 to \$75,000? Mr. Bell reiterated the Board should address these things. Mr. Bell asked Christian Waller what the percentage of pay is over COLA and are the increased amounts random? Mr. Bell stated that the Board agreed to pay for the new Community Center roof with ARPA funds and could strike that amount from the budget if they chose to; if the Town needed money for the roof, they could hold a special town meeting. Regarding the Fire Department apparatus, Mr. Bell stated the current truck is still functioning, so the Town technically does not need to replace it now. Mr. Bell explained that he pushed to postpone the Town Meeting so that the Board could dive into the wage adjustments. Scott Landry reiterated the four points Stephan Bunker gave earlier. He said looking at the number, that is quite an increase, but we have that money coming in. Inflation is hitting us hard and that must be figured into the increase, with everything going up. Mr. Landry stated that the Town is in a good financial position; the mill rate is not changing much. Mr. Landry said we are spending what we have and he does not have a problem with the budget. About Joshua Bell's statement, Michael Fogg stated he looks at this as the Town Manager oversees hiring, firing, and setting wages. That is what he has done. Mr. Fogg said, personally, sometimes he might be curious, but he does not need to know how much each employee makes and what an individual employee's raise might be is not a concern for him. The fact that the employees need to be compensated and the Town Manager put into place a program to do that; he does not feel anyone needs to micro-manage him. Mr. Fogg continued, when this budget was presented, it was not spelled out who was getting the increases and what the percentages were, but no one questioned it at the time. Who felt it needed to be questioned; who let it go from one meeting to the next meeting? Mr. Fogg stated he did not recall anyone questioning the increases. Mr. Bell responded that Board determines the Budget, they hold the purse strings. Mr. Fogg stated he understands completely, and the Board submitted the Budget. A vigorous discussion regarding the budget process ensued. Chairman Smith stated he has been satisfied with this budget for about a month. He understands that some people will not be satisfied, that is why we present the budget to the people at Town Meeting to argue it out. This is something the Town has always done. Chairman Smith stated it is very clear that the Board would not have a 5-0 vote, and not all the Selectmen are going to agree on this. Chairman Smith stated it is time to turn this budget over to the people and let them vote on it. He said the Board could have ten more meetings on the Budget and none of them would change their minds.

Chairman Smith opened the floor to the citizens for comments.

Budget Committee member Michael Guerrette shared his perspective of the budget process. Unlike any other years, he did not feel the process was very thought out, it seemed there were errors. The Department Heads were not in sync with Christian Waller's, and they would ask him to explain the line item. Mr. Guerrette stated that the Department Heads were not asking for certain increases. Mr. Guerrette stated that everything was emotional and anecdotal; it was not business-like. Mr. Guerrette said that the Budget Committee never received an error-free budget report. He claimed the whole process was broken and the committee never had the chance to look at individual line items. Mr. Guerrette stated that the Budget Committee felt powerless. Regarding the budget process, Chairman Smith stated the Town did have the advantage of a twenty-year veteran with Richard Davis. This year it was a new system, and some of that comes

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back to the Selectmen for not providing enough guidance to the Town Manager. Stephan Bunker said he is concerned when he hears comments like that from a Budget Committee member. He questioned why Mr. Guerrette did not speak up during the budget process. Continued discussion included: delaying the budget/town meeting, increase valuation due to the solar farm (\$71,000,000), state revenue sharing, vetting of wage increases, gradual wage increases over 2 – 5 years, Parks and Recreation increased program participation, road repair metrics, ever-increasing road construction supply costs, anticipated mill rate, and ARPA premium pay for employees.

Chairman Smith reported that the Town Manager and the Board will hold informational meetings for the citizens.

Michael Fogg moved to approve the Warrant for April 25, 2022, Annual Town Meeting as is; Scott Landry seconded.

Stephan Bunker moved to amend the motion and to postpone the Town Meeting by two weeks; Joshua Bell seconded. Michael Fogg did not agree with the amendment.

The Board proceeded to vote on the original motion.

VOTE AFFIRMATIVE 2 Opposed 3 MOTION FAILED
(Bunker, Bell, Landry)

Treasurer/Town Clerk Leanne Dickey said the Town Meeting date would need to change because a sixty-day notification is required.

Stephan Bunker moved to postpone finalizing the Warrant for two weeks and meet in Executive Session on Wednesday, March 2, 2022, to discuss personnel issues; Joshua Bell seconded.

VOTE AFFIRMATIVE 3 Opposed 2 MOTION CARRIED
(Fogg, Smith)

Scott Landry moved to postpone the Annual Town Meeting until May 9, 2022; Joshua Bell seconded.

VOTE AFFIRMATIVE 5 MOTION CARRIED

ITEM 3: To Discuss Other Business

A.) Chairman Smith thanked those who attended for their courtesy; he understands emotions run high, especially with budgets. He encouraged the citizens to call or email the Select Board with their questions and concerns.

There being no further business to come before the Board, **Scott Landry moved to adjourn at 8:00 P.M.; Joshua Bell seconded.**

VOTE AFFIRMATIVE 5

MOTION CARRIED

Minutes respectfully submitted by Nancy L. Martin.

Michael J. Fogg - Secretary