

TOWN COUNCIL SPECIAL MEETING- WEDNESDAY, MARCH 20, 2024

The council met in a workshop session on Monday, March 18, 2024, and called to order at 6:30 p.m. This meeting was held in person at the Town Council Chambers.

PRESENT: Council Chairman, Nathan Calouro
Vice-Chairwoman, Mary Parella,
Councilman, Antonio "Tony" Teixeira
Councilman, Timothy Sweeney
Councilman, Aaron Ley

ALSO PRESENT: Town Administrator, Steven Contente
Town Treasurer, Sara Hassell

704 FIRE

Michael DeMello- Chief

Chief DeMello presented the Fire Department budget, noting key areas of focus. A significant increase in the state pension line was attributed to the small pool of fire department employees and the percentage-based system. The EMS stipend line increased by \$85,000 to sustain incentives and support volunteer retention. Additionally, the contract with Paramedic Systems Incorporated saw a substantial rise due to market conditions and lingering impacts of COVID-19. Chief DeMello outlined the three-year contract structure, emphasizing its long-term value for the town. Minor budget increases were attributed to inflation management and strict inventory control of EMS supplies. He highlighted efforts to scrutinize EMS billing, ensuring accuracy and avoiding out-of-pocket expenses for residents.

Council commended the fire department's dedication and busy operations, acknowledging the critical importance of volunteer incentives and the services provided to the community.

The council raised concerns about the state pension increase and whether it would be re-evaluated during the year. Chief DeMello explained that the increase stems from the small pool of fire department employees in the percentage-based system. The council suggested exploring whether the police pension decrease could offset fire department costs and emphasized the need for a comprehensive review of state pension contributions across departments.

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The council inquired about recruitment efforts, particularly targeting younger residents. Chief DeMello described the ongoing challenges in recruitment and retention within public safety, noting the complexity of managing these efforts. He reported an increase in service calls, with approximately 3,700 calls in 2023, including 3,500 EMS-related incidents. The council praised the department's dedication and volunteerism, emphasizing the critical value of their service to the community.

The Council made no changes to the budget as recommended.

405 BOARDS & COMM.

Substance Abuse Coalition **Coordinator Barbara Palumbo**

Coordinator Palumbo presented the Substance Abuse Coalition budget, which reflects a 3% increase, bringing the total to \$14,997. She outlined various prevention programs, including collaborations with Mothers Against Drunk Driving and the Shop Spin program at the rescue department. New initiatives were introduced, such as CPR and Narcan training for town employees and restaurant staff, along with the installation of emergency overdose cabinets in bars and restaurants.

The council inquired about the stability of opioid settlement funding. The Town Administrator explained that settlement funds are received annually at a flat amount of approximately \$100,000 and are not expected to decrease.

The Council made no changes to the budget as recommended.

801 HUMAN SERVICES

Ed Carusi presented the Human Services budget, emphasizing collaboration with police, fire, and rescue to identify and assist shut-ins and seniors in need. He reported that three families in town are currently homeless, citing high rent costs and a shortage of available apartments as primary causes.

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The council discussed the challenges tenants face, including landlords' reluctance to accept housing vouchers, and highlighted the need for state-level policy changes to better support tenants. Ed Carusi noted his involvement in a statewide organization of public welfare directors working to address common issues, including homelessness. The council requested that options for addressing homelessness and housing affordability be brought forward so they can be submitted to the General Assembly for consideration

The Council made no changes to the budget as recommended

805 HUMAN RESOURCES

Chairman Calouro noted that certain budget items under Human Resources were informed they were not required to be present during the grant budget request discussions and assured them that their absence would not impact their consideration. He clarified that while attendance was not mandatory, anyone wishing to address the council was welcome to do so, but there was no obligation to speak. Noting that the majority of the requests were level funded.

(A) Women's Resource Center

The Council made no changes to the budget as recommended

(B) East Bay Center

The Council made no changes to the budget as recommended

(C) East Bay Community Action

The Council made no changes to the budget as recommended

(D) Visiting Nurse Services

The Council made no changes to the budget as recommended

(E) Community String Project

The Council made no changes to the budget as recommended

(F) King Philip Little League

The Council made no changes to the budget as recommended

(G) Franklin Court Tenants Assoc.

The Council made no changes to the budget as recommended

(H) Boy Scouts of America

The Council made no changes to the budget as recommended

(I) Bristol Art Museum

The Council made no changes to the budget as recommended

(J) St. Elizabeth f.k.a. Cornerstone Adult Services

The Council made no changes to the budget as recommended

(K) The Samaritans

Dennis Panichas addressed the council and made a brief presentation of the grant request, highlighting the suicide prevention initiatives. A request was made to present a resolution for support to bridge barrier initiatives and they were asked to present to the council in an upcoming council meeting.

The Council made no changes to the budget as recommended

(L) Coggeshall Farm Museum

The Council made no changes to the budget as recommended

(M) Meals on Wheels

The Council made no changes to the budget as recommended

(N) Art Night

The Council made no changes to the budget as recommended

(O) Bristol Rotary

Town Administrator Contente clarified for the record that while the recommendations indicate an increase of \$500, bringing the total to \$1,500, the administrator's recommendation should have reflected level funding at \$1,000

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The council accepted the revision, approving the corrected funding amount of \$1,000 as clarified by the Town Administrator.

(P) East Bay Food Pantry

Town Administrator Contente clarified for the record that while the recommendations indicate an increase of \$500, bringing the total to \$1,500, the administrator's recommendation should have reflected level funding at \$1,000

The council accepted the revision, approving the corrected funding amount of \$1,000 as clarified by the Town Administrator.

(Q) Benjamin Church Senior Center

Councilman Teixeira expressed his support for increasing the Senior Center budget, highlighting the importance of their services and the need to address a budget deficit. He supported the allocation of the \$180,000 requested. Vinny Saviano, Treasurer of the Senior Center, provided details on the financial situation and justification for the increase highlighting the costs associated with programs, personnel, and services. Chairman Calouro expressed comfort with limiting the increase to a 3% adjustment, rather than fully allocating. Discussions confirmed that the Benjamin Church Senior Center is not funded through endowment funds, leaving approximately \$1,800 in endowment interest funding available for other uses

Teixeira/Ley- motioned to approve funding from the recommended \$176,130 to the request amount of \$180,000. Voting in favor was Parella, Teixeira, Sweeney, and Ley. Voting against was Calouro. Motion Passed

(R) Bristol Garden Club

The Council made no changes to the budget as recommended

(S) Eastern RI Cons. Dist.

The Council made no changes to the budget as recommended

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(T) B.C Tenants Association

The Council made no changes to the budget as recommended

(U) Friends of Toms Grove

The Council made no changes to the budget as recommended

(V) Bristol Middle Passage Marker Project

Stephan Brigidi addressed the council to request \$800 in grant funding to assist with clearing and preparing the port marker site, noting that full responsibility for the sculpture would be borne by the organization. He proposed that site preparation could be a shared responsibility with the town. The council acknowledged the request and discussed the possibility of the DPW assisting with site preparation instead of providing funding, emphasizing that taxpayer funds were not allocated for this project during its initial approval. Discussions focused on maintaining a low grant budget and level funding, with the town working with the organization to assist with clearing and basic landscaping but noting limitations for tasks like laying pavers or extensive landscaping.

(*) The Council agreed by consensus to place an asterisk at the budget line AA to the end of the meeting

The Council made no changes to the budget as recommended

(W) Special Olympics

The Council made no changes to the budget as recommended

(X) East Bay Softball

The Council made no changes to the budget as recommended

(Y) James D. Rielly Foundation

The Council made no changes to the budget as recommended

(Z) Bristol Land Conservation Trust

The Council made no changes to the budget as recommended

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(AA)Mosaico, CDC

George Lima presented a late item request in the amount of \$2000 and made a brief presentation of the grant request.

(*) The Council agreed by consensus to place an asterisk at the budget line AA to the end of the meeting

The council agreed by consensus to increasing the funding from the recommended amount of \$1,500 to the full requested amount of \$2,000

Recap

Chairman Calouro recapped the following question items to be discussed for consideration at a later time (asterisk items)

601-COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

(*) The Council agreed by consensus to place an asterisk at the budget line 601-43220 Tourism/Promotion to Explore Bristol to provide the council with an update on the services provided, an overview of the strategic plan for 2024/2025, and provide supporting data on advertisements and events.

Jeff Hirsh from Explore Bristol provided an update on tourism promotion efforts, highlighting the success of past public relations initiatives and ongoing projects. The council emphasized the importance of using clear metrics and analytics to justify the tourism budget and assess the effectiveness of marketing efforts. Both the Council and Mr. Hirsh stressed the value of collaboration with the local hospitality community and the need for greater engagement from businesses. Discussions focused on maintaining and enhancing Bristol's reputation as a premier tourist destination through data-driven and strategic marketing efforts.

Mr. Hirsh also highlighted Bristol's growing reach, noting how its marketing strategy has gained traction beyond local levels, with comparisons to cities like Savannah and Charleston. When asked, he listed several target areas, including cities and regions in the U.S. and internationally, where Bristol is promoted as a top destination. He explained how PR companies often pitch Bristol as a more attractive option to major media outlets, such as NBC, and outlined the professionalism behind

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their marketing, including a robust inventory of photos and targeted audience strategies.

The council requested that Explore Bristol provide more detailed information and metrics on the outcomes and impact of its tourism promotion efforts. It was also recommended that the organization schedule an annual meeting with the hospitality community to discuss tourism initiatives and gather feedback. Additional suggestions included adding analytics, a list of published articles, and implementing website adjustments as recommended by Eric Dickervitz. Mr. Hirsh acknowledged these suggestions, expressed gratitude for his team's hard work, and reflected on the challenges of operating without a key team member, Mike Burns, over the past year. He conveyed optimism for improved outcomes moving forward.

703-HARBOR PATROL

(*) The Council agreed by consensus to place an asterisk at the Harbor Patrol budget line to enable the Council to review the justifications for the Deputy Harbor Master position. Requesting the Harbor Master to illustrate the cost-effectiveness of hiring a full-time deputy emphasizing the savings in both construction and patrol expense.

Sweeney/Teixeira - voted unanimously to approve the \$55,000 budget adjustment for line item 703-44382 to fund the full-time Deputy Harbor Master position.

Harbor Master Marsili reviewed the budget, highlighting a request for \$85,000 for dock maintenance and power replacements, comparing it to previous years' expenses. He explained the need to reallocate \$30,000 from the dock maintenance budget to fund a full-time Deputy Harbor Master position, noting the benefits of having additional support for public safety. He also mentioned a \$2,500 reduction in the fiscal year 2024 budget to help balance costs. The revised request allocated \$55,000 for line item 703-44382, originally listed under Dock & Piling Repairs, to support the new position.

Town Administrator Contente supported the request, emphasizing the additional responsibilities the new position would assume and its importance to harbor operations. Harbor Master Marsili further stressed the significance of ensuring the harbor's success through adequate staffing.

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Councilman Ley raised concerns about the potential impact of health care costs and payroll taxes associated with the new position. It was clarified that the employee would not be opting for medical coverage.

Chairman Calouro emphasized that he will closely review future budgets to ensure the budget adjustment for the new Deputy Harbor Master position does not result in the dock maintenance costs being added back in subsequent budgets. He reiterated that the purpose of reallocating funds for the new position was to achieve continued cost savings in dock maintenance, and he wanted to ensure that this intent is upheld.

Councilor Sweeney made a motion to approve the \$55,000 budget adjustment for line item 703-44382 to fund the full-time Deputy Harbor Master position. The motion was seconded by Councilor Teixeira and approved by the council.

(AA) Mosaico, CDC

(*) The Council agreed by consensus to place an asterisk at the budget line AA to the end of the meeting

Clerk Cordeiro noted for the record that this item was marked as "Received at Meeting" and was received by the council on Monday. However, it may not be reflected in the online public budget.

Chairman Calouro proposed reallocating \$500 from the excess funds inadvertently designated for the East Bay Food Pantry and the Rotary to support the additional \$500 requested by Mosaico, bringing their total funding to \$2,000.

Chairman Calouro made a motion to approve increasing the funding from the recommended amount of \$1,500 to the full requested amount of \$2,000. The motion was seconded by Councilman Teixeira and approved by the council. The council agreed by consensus.

V) Bristol Middle Passage Marker Project

(*) The Council agreed by consensus to place an asterisk at the budget line AA to the end of the meeting

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The Council made no changes to the budget as recommended noting that town would work with the organization to assist with clearing and basic landscaping but noting limitations for tasks like laying pavers or extensive landscaping.

Budget Items Requiring Additional Consideration - Discussion of Town Administrator's recommended level of funding for regional School District

Town Administrator Contente explained that he had reviewed the school budget in detail, met with the superintendent, analyzed salaries, budget cuts, and student enrollment figures, and found the budget to be reasonable. Based on this review, he recommended fully funding the school's budget request.

The council raised concerns about the school budget, questioning why the school's separate reserve funds are not being utilized to cover some expenses. Members suggested that the school could contribute more to offset the tax burden while recognizing the challenges involved in the school's budgeting process.

Discussions emphasized the importance of the town maintaining its own reserve funds for emergencies and the potential long-term impact on future budgets. The council highlighted the need for fairness in budgeting, suggesting the school could explore to contribute more of its own reserve funds to help reduce the tax burden on residents.

It was noted that the town is at approximately 12% in reserve, compared to the school's reserves requirements at 4%.

Town Administrator Contente acknowledged the challenging circumstances faced by the school, particularly due to the new high school building bond. He recommended that the school retain its reserve funds for the next year or so to address unforeseen building costs and potentially earmark this fund discussion for the next budget cycle.

Concerns were raised about the school continuing to request additional funding from the town while maintaining some reserve funds, particularly as the town works to budget in a way that ensures residents can afford to remain in their homes and manage property taxes. It was noted that discussions on implementing a

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tax tier system to assist residents are ongoing and should be finalized for the next budget cycle.

Town Administrator Contente expressed gratitude to the council and department heads for their involvement in the budget process, noting his enthusiasm for addressing key issues and improvements. He also mentioned that solar project payments are anticipated to be included in the next year's budget. Chairman Calouro echoed the appreciation, thanking everyone involved for their contributions.

There being no further business, upon a motion by Councilman Ley, seconded by Councilman Sweeney, and voted unanimously, the Chairman declared this meeting to be adjourned at 8:40 PM.

Melissa Cordeiro, Town Clerk