

1 **BENNINGTON SELECT BOARD BUDGET MEETING**

2 **MEETING HELD REMOTELY VIA ZOOM**

3 **BENNINGTON, VERMONT 05201**

4 **JANUARY 9, 2021**

5 **MINUTES**

6 **SELECT BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT:** Donald Campbell-Chair; Jeannie Jenkins-Vice Chair; Jim
7 Carroll; Bruce Lee-Clark; Sarah Perrin, and Jeanne Conner.

8 **SELECT BOARD MEMBERS ABSENT:** None.

9 **ALSO PRESENT:** Stuart Hurd-Town Manager; Dan Monks-Zoning Administrator and Assistant
10 Town Manager; Melissa Currier-Finance Director; Shannon Barsotti-Community Development
11 Director (8:55); Paul Doucette-Chief of Police; Lorna Mattern-Executive Director, United
12 Counseling Service; Art Groux-Executive Director; Brian Peat-Board Chair and Brian Murphy-
13 Board Vice Chair-Bennington Rescue Squad; Josh Boucher-CAT-TV and Nancy H. Lively-
14 Secretary.

15 At 8:04am, Chair Donald Campbell called the meeting to order.

16 **Bruce Lee-Clark moved and Jeanne Conner seconded to amend the Agenda as follows:**

17 **Add "2. Executive Session, Personnel and Salaries"**

18 **The motion carried with Jim Carroll's vote note heard due to technology issues.**

19 **1. F.Y. 22 BUDGET WORK SESSION**

20 Mr. Hurd stated that the Police Budget is up .7% due to contracts and health insurance
21 increases. The two school Resource Officers were removed and a Crisis Intervention Team has
22 been added, as well as, necessary equipment purchases.

23 **A. POLICE BUDGET**

24 *Paul Doucette, Chief of Police, did the following presentation:*

- 25 • We are looking at forming a Crisis Response Team with United Counseling Service (UCS)
26 and SVMC, as well as, a Crisis Intervention Officer specifically trained to deal with
27 mental health issues. This will involve training for the entire department.
- 28 • We have already been working with UCS, SVMC, Bennington Project Independence, The
29 Collaborative, Bennington Rescue Squad, Turning Point Recovery Center, Bennington
30 Opioid Response Team, Bennington Fire Department, Vermont Center for Independent
31 Living, and others.

32 *Lorna Mattern, UCS Executive Director added:*

- 33 • UCS does have a “robust” 24/7 Emergency Services Response Team that is mobile and
34 able to join the police as necessary.
- 35 • During the pandemic we have had a 70% increase in our crisis calls and have worked to
36 get our emergency staff out of the emergency department and more mobile.
- 37 • As the community becomes more informed, UCS will need to address funding and
38 staffing issues to meet the demands.
- 39 • We already have a great relationship with the Police Department and this is a “first
40 step” to augmenting that. Much discussion still needs to take place to establish the
41 logistics of how it will work with trainings, staffing, etc.

42 *Board questions/comments:*

43 Ms. Jenkins: Acknowledged that this is a great first step but also a “band aid” to the long term
44 goal of educating the community as to where they should turn for assistance, which may not be
45 the police.

46 Ms. Conner: Hopes the community realizes that this is the first step in a process and it is great
47 to hear the strength of the relationship among the agencies. By not being first to do this, we
48 are in a position to learn from the successes and failures that other communities have
49 experienced. Let the Select Board know if we can be helpful in any way.

50 Mr. Lee-Clark: The Board will be receiving the police Policy on Responding to Mental Health
51 Issues for review where a lot of what has been said today is reflected. Reiterated that this is a
52 larger community conversation to be had to educate everyone that 911 does not always have
53 to be called.

54 Mr. Campbell: Our Police Department operates on a 20%-30% lower budget than Burlington or
55 Rutland and often times having the police show up by themselves where there are mental
56 health and/or addiction crisis's is not always the best solution.

57 Mr. Campbell: Prefers the reference to the upcoming process to be an “on ramp” rather than a
58 one-time “band aid”.

59 *Chief Doucette continued his budget presentation:*

- 60 • Guardian Tracking Program to track employees in a positive way and replace file folders.
61 Total cost = \$2,100; request to add \$1,100 back into the budget to ensure this purchase.
62 Mr. Hurd explained that this amount - although cut at the first round of budget reviews -
63 has already been added back in.
- 64 • Body cams will be maintained in FY22 but will need to be replaced in FY23. They are a
65 useful tool and required by the State.
- 66 • We will be trying out a police utility hybrid vehicle that is EPA friendly, has more “zip”,
67 will turn itself off and run off the battery when police vehicles need to idle, and uses less

- 68 fuel. The cost is \$3,200 more than a non-hybrid vehicle at \$49,100 but savings will be
69 had with less fuel use and cutting down on emissions.
- 70 • We are also proposing a hybrid vehicle for a detective BCI vehicle; request to add \$1,800
71 back into the budget to ensure this purchase. Mr. Hurd recommended that the Board
72 allow this to be added.
 - 73 • We will be adding 2 pedal assist electric bikes to upgrade our bicycle fleet, as well.
 - 74 • Thank you to the Board and Staff for their support of the Police Department.

75 *Board questions/comments:*

76 Ms. Conner: The color of a police vehicle can change the “optics” of police presentation. Chief
77 Doucette agrees with that and stated that the vehicles used to be blue and have been white
78 and silver. Going forward they will probably be silver.

79 Ms. Perrin: How does the increase of \$1,800 change the .7% budget increase? Chief Doucette
80 didn’t know but would still be less than 1% and less than the cost of living.

81 Ms. Jenkins: Kudos to Chief Doucette for exploring hybrid vehicles.

82 Ms. Jenkins: Is there enough in the FY22 budget to replace a failed body camera? Chief
83 Doucette responded that each officer has their own body camera. In year 5 of the 5 years of
84 use, they no longer hold a charge for an 8 hour shift so the officers have been equipped with
85 charging them in the cars. They cost \$600/each so a conversation for adding a bit more to the
86 budget can be had with Mr. Hurd.

87

88 **B. BENNINGTON RESCUE SQUAD BUDGET**

89 *Art Groux, Bennington Rescue Squad (BRS) Executive Director, Brian Peat, BRS Board*
90 *President, and Brian Murphy, BRS Board Vice-President did the following presentation:*

- 91 ➤ Due to COVID, 911 calls for our services have gone down 11% and transfers are
92 down 9%. However, the requirements of our staff have gone up.
- 93 ➤ We have been doing COVID testing at our facility, as well as, going to people’s
94 homes when they can’t come out to be tested.
- 95 ➤ We will also start doing vaccines when they are rolled out to the public.
- 96 ➤ The need to wear PPE protection 100% of the time has caused our costs of that
97 equipment to go up. The cost of gloves alone has increased 75% and they are
98 difficult to get.
- 99 ➤ Nationwide there has been a 50% reduction in staffing. We have had a
100 reduction in staffing - not that high - that has been made up for through our
101 apprenticeship program.

102 Mr. Campbell: A few years ago the BRS came to the Board “hemorrhaging”. The Board declined
103 to approve the large amount requested, but has been doing incremental increases of 10% since

104 then. He is pleased to see a request for a 5% increase when expenses are high and Opioid calls
105 are high. "It isn't a time to be cutting this service."

106 Mr. Campbell: The fact that they have a \$3.6M endowment is always raised and that
107 endowment exists for future capital purchases so the BRS isn't coming to the community with
108 an enormous bill all at once. "The longer this remains a free standing entity, the better the tax
109 payers should like it."

110 Ms. Conner: Kudos to the BRS for doing the pop-up COVID testing at their facility and in homes.

111 Ms. Conner: How does the decrease in 911 calls affect your income since you weren't being
112 paid for some of those calls in the past? Mr. Groux answered that the 11% of calls decrease
113 translates to a 6% decrease in revenue. And transfers are down because other hospitals are at
114 capacity not accepting patients thus making our hospital also at capacity which reflects in
115 reduced 911 calls. Mr. Murphy added that we have taken advantage of all funding sources
116 available to make up for these losses and not ask the taxpayers to pay for them.

117 Ms. Conner: Can the staff of BRS benefit from other health care programs to help them deal
118 with their stress? Mr. Groux answered that we always have counseling services available to our
119 staff and encourage them to utilize them. We are also looking into programs on how staff can
120 identify stress among their peers.

121 Ms. Conner: Noted that R.J. Joly experienced reductions in electricity (6%) and fuel costs (10%)
122 and may be a good source for helping to reduce facility expenses. Mr. Groux said they will
123 reach out to him.

124 Mr. Lee-Clark: Are/will you be adequately compensated for doing the COVID testing and
125 vaccines? Mr. Groux responded that the budget doesn't reflect the extension of the State's
126 Testing and Vaccination Contract, however, we are reimbursed for expenses at a \$0.00 gain.

127 Mr. Lee-Clark: You have withdrawn \$165,000 from the endowment and earned \$110,000
128 meaning you have reduced the endowment by \$55,000. Mr. Murphy stated that this reflects
129 our Spending Policy. Also, we have diversified our portfolio so we were down 9%-10% instead
130 of the 35% that the stock market was down.

131 Mr. Lee-Clark: Do you anticipate not needing town funding within the next 10-15 years, or are
132 we in a "glide pattern to something else"? Mr. Murphy answered that all EMS agencies are on
133 a glide path to eventually be a public supported service - some more than others. "It's just a
134 matter of time." Mr. Peat added that we have slowed that glide down because we haven't
135 made any capital purchases recently which is not sustainable. We are eventually going to have
136 to have capital expenditures for patient care and trainings. We have been selected by the State
137 as the Preferred Provider for training throughout the State. Mr. Lee-Clark noted that it is
138 important for the community to "know where we're at".

139 Ms. Jenkins: Do you anticipate having to dip into your reserves more than the Spending Policy if
140 you need a new truck or other capital expenditure? Mr. Murphy responded that we have been
141 financing capital expenditures, like our new ambulance, so that we can have level funding to
142 the tax payers and have purchased other expenses outright. However, the necessity will be
143 there soon for substantial capital purchases. The money coming out of reserves funds
144 operations and any capital expenditure that is not financed.

145 Ms. Jenkins: This is a tough decision because we want you to have what you need and it feels
146 like there's more stability than a couple of years ago. We are making critical cuts in the Town's
147 reserves and all of the other agencies are level funded this year. Mr. Murphy added that any
148 excess that we would need would have to come out of the reserves.

149 Mr. Carroll: Has there not been significant returns on your investments since June 2020? Mr.
150 Murphy answered that the market has gone up since June. Our portfolio has gone up 9%, or
151 around \$300K-\$400K, and we're looking at the need for ~\$200K distribution this year.

152 Mr. Carroll: Pointed out that all other agencies are level funded, the Board has asked the Town
153 to cut their budget, and questioned that BRS can't find \$10,000 in the budget so as not to put
154 that burden on the taxpayers. Mr. Murphy noted that yes, they can this year, but this is more
155 in regards to the glide path of the future. Mr. Peat concurred.

156 Mr. Carroll: Thanked the BRS for their service.

157 Chief Doucette: Noted that ambulances are covered under a new FEMA Grant and the Police
158 Department has been getting PPE from the State at no charge. Mr. Groux stated that they have
159 all of that information and, though they get some free PPE from the State, the State can't
160 supply the BRS with all that they need.

161 Chief Doucette: Wants to have Mr. Groux reach out to him concerning a recent grant that the
162 police have received related to the mental health of their staff so that the BRS can be included
163 in that.

164 Ms. Perrin: Has there been a conversation for reimbursement for Opioid related incidents that
165 don't involve a transport? Mr. Groux responded that most insurances won't pay if you don't go
166 to the hospital and any services that tie back to COVID cannot go to collections. There is work
167 with insurance companies on a national level by associations that we are members of to pay for
168 treatment when there is no transport but that was very slow before COVID and even slower
169 after. We are not paid for 26% of our runs.

170

171 **C. THE REMAINDER OF THE BUDGET**

172 Mr. Hurd was charged with reducing the budget to no more than a 2% increase in the
173 tax rate and he is proposing the following:

174	Department	Proposed Change	Balance	Reason
175	Community Development	(\$20,000)	\$30,000	Reduce Marketing
176	Solid Waste-Recycle	(\$4,000)	\$78,460	Costs decrease
177	Recreation-Parks	(\$50,000)	\$0.00	Look to ballot
178	Highway Administration	\$10,250	\$1,109,500	Transportation error
179	Highway Bridges	(\$100,000)	\$100,000	Reduce reserve
180	Fire Equipment	(15,000)	\$25,000	Reduce reserve
181	TOTAL	(\$178,750)		

- 182 ✓ All of the cuts in reserves would be replenished next year.
- 183 ✓ The net effect of these reductions with the Grand List growth at \$7.5M is a combined
- 184 tax rate increase of 2.15% to \$1.2691.
- 185 ✓ Should the Grand List grow by \$10M, the high end of the range of growth, the combined
- 186 tax rate increases by 1.87% to \$1.2656.

187 *Board questions/comments:*

188 Mr. Carroll: What is a reserve? Mr. Hurd explained that a reserve is a way to raise money for
 189 earmarked projects.

190 Mr. Carroll: If Cannabis were approved that would be 2% in taxes that would make up for a lot
 191 of shortfalls. Where are we at with getting that on the ballot? Mr. Hurd answered that he is
 192 not recommending it at this time because the sale of Cannabis won't be allowed until March
 193 2022. Mr. Campbell added that we can discuss this further in regular session.

194 *The following discussion ensued concerning the Proposed Budget Cuts:*

- 195 ✓ The marketing reserve is all that we have and we have been able to maintain a lean
- 196 budget thanks to all of the volunteer work that was done.
- 197 ✓ We need to drive people to our website through photographs and creative writing.
- 198 ✓ Cutting the marketing budget by \$20,000 limits the content that we would bring in and
- 199 the digital advertising, but we could try to make it work.
- 200 ✓ Only cutting by \$10,000 would allow us to "hit the ground running" when things open
- 201 back up in the summer and fall - with more timely, pointed targeting of our digital ads
- 202 and creative writing.
- 203 ✓ It is critical not to lose the momentum in marketing and must be sure to maintain the
- 204 website.
- 205 ✓ We cannot back away from economic recovery and medical necessities during COVID
- 206 for our community.

- 207 ✓ The \$4,800 increase for the Police Department (\$1,800-hybrid vehicle and \$3,000-body
- 208 cam replacements) is necessary; \$50,000 Marketing was the bare minimum, however,
- 209 Ms. Barsotti has said she can manage \$40,000; the Penny for Parks is a good idea; the
- 210 Highway Bridges reserve cuts will have to be paid at a later date, the Fire Equipment
- 211 reserve cuts are a good place to cut as we know we would fund equipment if needed,
- 212 and the \$10,350 increase for the BRS is not warranted at this time.
- 213 ✓ The Senior Center didn't use all of their budget in FY21 and it looks like there are
- 214 savings that could be had for them in FY22 for ~\$10,000.
- 215 ✓ The Senior Center decrease in expenses is also a decrease in revenue so that is a wash.
- 216 ✓ By adding \$4,800 for police and adding back in the \$20,000 cut in marketing increases
- 217 the tax rate to 3.04% at \$7.5M Grand List and 2.75% at \$10M Grand List.
- 218 ✓ By adding \$4,800 for police and adding back in \$10,000 cut in marketing increases the
- 219 tax rate to 2.4% at \$7.5M Grand List and 2.1% at \$10M Grand List.
- 220 ✓ Will agree with the \$40,000 for marketing, is concerned about the number of people on
- 221 a fixed income (1 in 4), and feels that the Bennington Free Library \$498,000 - even
- 222 though level funded - is a "substantial number" and should be looked at for budget
- 223 savings, especially since they're not open.
- 224 ✓ 60% of new members at the J. McCullough Library are Bennington residents.
- 225 ✓ Perhaps we should ask all of the agencies to see if they could lower their amount as
- 226 long as it doesn't hurt them in future years.
- 227 ✓ Asking all agencies to lower their requests is not a good idea.

228 ***Sarah Perrin moved to revisit the Bennington Free Library budget. There was no***
 229 ***second so the motion died.***

- 230 ✓ We have lowered agencies requests in the past and we can do that this year because
- 231 we have told them they don't have to petition. If they had petitioned, we could not do
- 232 that. All of the agencies came in level funded voluntarily except the BRS so asking for
- 233 them to reduce is not a good idea.
- 234 ✓ Perhaps we should ask both libraries to come back next week.
- 235 ✓ We can't do everything and the BRS increase should not be approved. We all need to
- 236 bear some sacrifice in this strange year.
- 237 ✓ There is a projected 9% increase in the education fund.
- 238 ✓ When we talk tax rates now we don't know what the Grand List will actually be or will
- 239 there be grants that could further reduce expenses. We don't set the rate until June,
- 240 however, the voters are voting on the rate in March.
- 241 ✓ The State will cover a portion of an individual's taxes based on income.

242 *Public questions/comments:*

243 Nancy White: Why should the taxpayers pay more and more every year for the YMCA? Mr.
 244 Hurd responded that the Senior Center and the Rec Center are already regional in that we serve
 245 other than Bennington residents. There is no fee schedule for the Senior Center but there is a

246 non-resident fee paid for the Rec Center. The Recreation budget does increase 21.7%, part of
247 which is to support the lease at the old Benn Hi so the YMCA can increase their programming
248 and increase their revenue, which will over the long term decrease the money that they need
249 from the Town.

250 Nancy White: We need to know what the fees are. Mr. Hurd answered that the membership
251 rates are posted and have not changed last year. The YMCA is proposing to increase the non-
252 resident rates to the rates that the YMCA membership would cost which will benefit the
253 taxpayers.

254 Nancy White: Feels that the taxpayers are, and always have paid for everything, at the Rec
255 Center. Mr. Campbell explained that this is a minimal increase to provide the Town with
256 additional recreation opportunities that the community has asked for.

257 Nancy White: You're turning the Rec Center into a regional facility. Mr. Carroll noted it always
258 has been a regional facility, and Ms. Jenkins noted the economic importance of non-residents
259 utilizing the Rec Center because they will also support other businesses in Town. We have
260 always had a two-tiered fee schedule of residents and non-residents.

261 *It was the consensus of the Board to make the following FY22 Budget Adjustments to the*
262 *proposed changes as follows:*

263 *Community Development, reduce Proposed Change from (\$20,000) to (\$10,000)*

264 *Police Department, add \$4,800 to the Police Budget*

265
266

267 **D. SET SALARIES: TOWN MANAGER, TOWN CLERK AND TREASURER**

268 This will be discussed in Executive Session.

269

270 **2. EXECUTIVE SESSION, PERSONNEL AND SALARIES**

271 *At 11:56am, Bruce Lee-Clark moved and Jeanne Conner seconded that the meeting*
272 *was adjourned finding that an Executive Session be held on Personnel and Salaries as*
273 *premature public knowledge would place a person involved in the subject matter at a*
274 *substantial disadvantage. No action will be taken on these items this morning. The motion*
275 *carried unanimously.*

276
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278

279 Respectfully submitted,

280 Nancy H. Lively

281 Secretary

**SELECT BOARD
MINUTES ADDENDUM**

January 9, 2021


Present: Donald Campbell, Chair, Jeanne Conner, Jeannie Jenkins, V. Chair, Sarah Perrin, Jim Carroll, and Bruce Lee-Clark.

The Board came out of executive session at 12:29 pm.

The Board took no action.

There being no other business, the meeting adjourned at 12:29 pm.

Respectfully submitted,



Stuart A. Hurd

