



OFFICE OF THE
WATER DEPARTMENT
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Water Commission Minutes
Wednesday, May 18, 2022

Approved: 6/29/22

John O'Brien called the meeting to order at 6:01 pm
Other member(s) present: Mat Morton
Meeting held: At the Dunstable Town Hall, 511 Main Street, lower level
In attendance: Margery Kimpton, David Kimpton, Ronald Wood, Cara Howe

Reviewed & Signed:

- All Bills Outstanding Since Last Meeting
- All Payroll Outstanding Since Last Meeting

Department Operations Update

Mr. Kimpton asked the Commission about the question of quarterly billing versus the semiannual billing cycle. He noted that most ratepayers are seniors and it will help soften the blow of higher rates. Mr. O'Brien reported on work done to adopt it. The Commission has long been committed to the idea, but the concern was Pepperell. We didn't want to scare them off right away by essentially doubling the work for meter reads. Inquiries were made, they considered it, and they decided they could accommodate the switch without an increase in cost. So the Commission plans to implement quarterly billing. Mr. Kimpton then asked about financing of the Water Infrastructure Project. The split was 75/25 and now it is 50/50 as of the last Tax Classification Hearing. The Board of Selectmen adjusted that split. Mr. O'Brien briefly recounted the history of the split and how we got to this point. The Commission had always sought to have it be at most 50/50. But the Advisory Board of that era and the Board of Selectmen were concerned about town meeting passage. Hence the 75/25 split. But changes to the Advisory Board's composition in later elections resulted in a different consensus which caused it to return the matter to the Board of Selectmen which resulted in a change in the split. Mr. O'Brien then reminded those present that there are plans for the Affordable Housing Project, which if it occurs, could add as many as 40-50 units which would each go on as a ratepayer on the system. This would lessen the burden for ratepayers significantly as it would be shared among all ratepayers. Ms. Kimpton responded that project has been discussed for years and hasn't yet reached fruition. Mr. O'Brien conceded that but noted that there is an RFP out and developers who are seeking to bid. Discussion shifted to the burden of the costs of the system on the broader town versus expecting so much from ratepayers. All taxpayers pay for schools whether they use them or not. Mr. O'Brien expressed sympathy for that position but explained that the residents not on the water system tend to vote down attempts to do that. The water system is ultimately viewed as a utility and it is expected by many that the burden for maintaining it will fall to the ratepayers.

Ms. Kimpton changed the focus to how the department can help provide assistance to those who are struggling to pay. If not all ratepayers, what about those who are indigent or on highly fixed incomes? Mr. O'Brien suggested that the department is willing to consider something like that. He had no problem with establishing a senior or hardship discount or both if it's legally feasible. Mr. Kimpton thought that a good idea noting that there are two very elderly ratepayers with nothing beyond social security. He then noted a few ratepayers he knows have managed to leave the system. At least 3 appear poised to do so to his knowledge. Discussion shifted back to how the

department is structured and how it is funded. Mr. O'Brien elaborated that as a municipal utility being an Enterprise Fund is not uncommon. As for the project, we had no choice but to do it. The hydropneumatic tanks were at the end of their life cycle and DEP required that the town replace them with the water tower. By official order. Had we refused we would have been fined and compelled. Discussion was had at town meeting and the project occurred. Mr. Wood noted that he completely doesn't understand the present situation. Why a public utility can be funded by 100 ratepayers was beyond him. Mr. O'Brien noted that water is a commodity. He also stressed that the town is now paying 50 percent of the cost of the tower and the municipal government is also a ratepayer and is paying the higher rates. Mr. O'Brien compared the system to municipal electrical utilities like Groton Power & Light. That is paid for via electric bills. He noted that for many ratepayers there is little choice as they don't have the land to drill a well. Those who can, can. But the rest are held hostage. Mr. Wood asked why the town didn't simply let the system fail in such a case. Mr. O'Brien explained that we can't shut the system down, DEP won't allow it. He stressed the municipal government and the school district are paying the same rates.

Mr. Wood had a hard time understanding why the department has to be run this way as opposed to how other departments like Police, Highway, and Fire are funded. Mr. O'Brien responded that it really comes down to it being a commodity sold by a utility. There was some discussion regarding Tyngsborough and how it runs its system. Mr. Voelker noted that Tyngsborough is under a water district and it is run like a business including routine rate increases. Mr. O'Brien in concurring reminded that until the need for the Water Infrastructure Project the rates weren't increased for many years. They remained the same. Mr. Wood noted his taxes are increasing and yet with his water bill, it's arguable the value should be less. Mr. O'Brien empathized with that viewpoint, but noted that house values are market based and anyway the Commission doesn't determine tax values. Mr. Morton echoed that. It's the Board of Assessors in conjunction with DOR who do that. There was then a question about expansion of the system and the potential for that. Mr. O'Brien stressed that there are opportunities and the Commission is seeking all of them. Discussion shifted back to well drilling. Mr. Voelker reminded that many may say they are going to drill, but they still have to obtain approval from Board of Health. Mr. Kimpton conceded that point noting that many are trying, but it is true that Board of Health has more or less denied in most cases. Ms. Kimpton felt it a bad policy for the town to be hitting this specific set of the population for this. Ms. Howe noted she moved in December 2019. The increase she's seen is soaring. She asked what the options are to address the burden. Mr. O'Brien briefly recapped the history again. He explained we are the smallest public water system in the Commonwealth. Mr. Voelker interjected to remind those present that the Board of Selectmen have committed to spending about half of the towns ARPA funding on water related projects including looping Hillcrest Street back down to Main Street via Westford Street.

Mr. Morton noted that was accomplished at great effort by Roads Commissioner Martin. Mr. Kimpton conceded that might help with pressure, but asserted it wouldn't help with cost. Ms. Kimpton and Ms. Howe both concurred. Ms. Kimpton then asked how soon the quarterly billing can be implemented. Mr. O'Brien responded it'll be as soon as it is possible, probably midsummer. Water ratepayers should still pay their spring bills. There was some concern about what would happen once Groton students depart from Swallow-Union. This is scheduled. With fewer students there, the water use would go down. Ms. Howe returned to the rate. She recalled paying less in other towns she lived in, unless she had sewer. And even then she was relatively certain her bills were less. Mr. O'Brien noted that our rates are in the middle. We researched the other communities and systems in the Commonwealth. Mr. Voelker concurred noting that the Tyngsborough Water District's board noted that to the Commission during talks prior to the Water Infrastructure Project. They routinely increase their rates and invest in new infrastructure. Dunstable went about 18 years without increasing rates prior to the project. Mr. Morton reminded all present that all taxpayers contribute for this project. Again the split is 50/50 and all taxpayers pay. Everyone in town's taxes went up for this project. Ms. Howe asked if there is a long term strategy to grow the system or is this it? Mr. O'Brien responded that we are seeking expansion. There's the Affordable Housing Project which could possibly double

our number of ratepayers. We may also be able to extend the waterlines using betterments. Possibly a tie up to Pepperell could happen in the future where we could sell water. There are many things being sought. There was then a question about the service fee on the bill and what it is for. Mr. O'Brien elaborated that this bill pays for operation costs such as personnel and billing. Mr. Kimpton then asked about the relationship with Pepperell. Mr. O'Brien explained they're our licensed water operator. We have to have one. Previously we had a private company, now we have Pepperell. They now maintain the system including the reports and testing that are required by DEP. Ms. Kimpton asked about situations where people need more time to pay. Mr. Morton reminded we have not shut anyone off the system in quite some time. Mr. O'Brien concurred submitting that every effort is being made. Mr. Morton reminded that the Commission meets monthly. If ratepayers or even just taxpayers have questions or concerns they can come to the meetings. The Commission is always happy to engage. It was agreed by all that communication is key. If people understand that the Commission is truly working on their behalf to control costs and ameliorate the rates whenever possible, the relationship will be much improved.

Town of Pepperell Water Operator Services Review

The relationship is going well. Pepperell is willing to change to a quarterly billing system for no additional cost. Mr. Morton noted a letter that was received regarding rates. Mr. O'Brien recalled that he saw the letter and that it comes down to reasonable measures. We're doing what we can.

Next Meeting/Regular Meetings

The next meeting is expected to be scheduled June 22.

Authorization of Accounts Payable & Payroll

The Commission considered and signed off on all of its outstanding bills. The Commission then reviewed and approved payment of the bills and also signed all outstanding department payroll. Mr. O'Brien then briefly reported on all bills he'd reviewed and approved since the last meeting in his capacity as chair. He noted these are the usual ones, utilities, alarm, and the like.

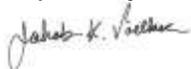
Minutes

The Commission considered the minutes from its meeting held on April 6, 2022. Seeing no reason to modify the minutes the Commission determined to accept the minute.

A motion was made by Mr. Morton to approve the minutes of April 6, 2022 as written. The motion was seconded by Mr. O'Brien and passed by majority vote.

A motion to adjourn was made by Mr. Morton at 7:57 pm. The motion was seconded by Mr. O'Brien and passed by majority vote.

Respectfully submitted by



Jakob K. Voelker
Assistant Town Administrator