

## Joint Selectboard/Finance Committee Meeting

Town Hall, 3 East Main Rd. Peru, MA

Thursday, August 24, 2023 @ 6:00 P.M.

1. **Call to order:** Finance Committee Chairman Hickling called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m.
2. **Roll Call Selectboard:** Selectman Leach present, Selectman Munch present
3. **Roll Call Finance Committee:** Finance Committee Chairman Hickling present, Finance Committee member Haskins present, Finance Committee Member Sam Haupt present, Finance Committee Member Robin Wadsworth present, Finance Committee Member Jesse Pelkey present.
4. **State recording status:** Robin Wadsworth recording
5. **Pledge of Allegiance:** Led by Fin Com Chairman Hickling
6. **Discuss re-establishing Assessor pay:** Selectman Leach recused himself. Fin Comm Chairman Hickling stated: "The first discussion was going to be reinstatement of assessor salary from fiscal year to look at level funding it from fiscal year 23 to 24"... "So, the salary is currently at 2500 and we are looking at reinstating the 3,471." Hickling continued to make statements regarding discussion had at prior Fin Comm meeting, specific to a member of the Board of Assessor and her desire to get paid what she made when she worked for the Board last, due to the alleged requirement that she work every Monday night with the new head assessor. Hickling stated that this reinstatement could be accomplished either by Special Town Meeting or by using the funds of the third board member, since that position is vacant. Fin Comm member Robin Wadsworth stated: "I don't agree with that". Fin Comm Chairman Hickling stated his opinion on why this salary had to be increased: "And I think that in looking at the options, we had discussed having a joint finance select board meeting because there was some information that was not known." Hickling went on to open the issue for "rational discussion". Fin Comm member Robin Wadsworth began by stating that she, with 27 years of experience in Assessing, has been denied a position on the Board of Assessors and went on to question "why does the signing board member need to be here on Monday nights?", "when we are paying \$25,000 a year to Patriot and almost \$19,000 for what is now assessor number one." Fin Comm member Jesse Pelkey stated that the issue of reducing the salary of two of the board members was "heavily discussed prior to going to annual town meeting last year", because the (Assessor) "Sue that was coming in was going to be doing all the work." Pelkey also stated that he believed the select board "recommended that we drop that salary because we were giving Sue more money." Pelkey was also concerned about setting a precedent of changing salaries that were discussed, agreed upon and then voted at the annual town meeting. Select Board member Ed Munch inserted that "we need two assessors". Doug Haskins stated: "Well, I'll speak on both sides for a minute, if I can. When we were at the finance committee meeting, and the board of

selectmen, when I was on the board of selectmen at that day, it was lengthy discussion on lowering it to \$2,500 a year because of the hours were going to be cut, from four days a month to two days a month. Now, you know, like Robin said, I don't know how we can justify just changing it without having more input from the assessors to begin with." Fin Com member Sam Haupt agreed with Pelkey and Haskins regarding the "context of the discussion" of the prior year's meeting. Haupt also stated "It seems like it's basically come down to not really requiring more hours, except that she refused to work for the \$2,500" ...Ed Munch interrupted, insisting that we need her and questioned: "what are we talking about for the difference in money?" (amount of \$971 supplied by Hickling). Haskins then stated: "But to me, it's not the money. It's what was voted on at the annual phone meeting. That means you're changing what the people on the floor voted for that day." Further discussion caused Hickling to state: "I've given some consideration to having Sue be here tonight, but I figured that the discussion would be pretty spirited. So, I thought that would put her in an awkward situation. One of the reasons for this meeting is so that we can have a discussion of the situation and try and at least try to align some of our thoughts so that if we, you know, in terms of a special town meeting, that we can sound like that we've kind of discussed things and have recommendations as a group." Further discussion ensued along the same lines with comments about whether this issue needed to be addressed at a Special Town meeting and its recommendation. Hickling made motion for Fin Comm to recommend level funding from fiscal year 23 to 24, vote carried with 3 Yays (Hickling, Haskins and Haupt) and 2 Nays (Wadsworth and Pelkey). Fin Comm member Wadsworth questioned Doug Haskin's vote since he is also on the Select Board. Hickling defended the dual positions of member Haskins.

**7. Discuss Rescue Vehicle:** Fire Captain Brooks contacted JC Madigan for a quote on a utility body. The sales rep suggested meeting in person to see what the town wants. The general overview price of the utility body was \$25,600. Fin Com Member Haskins mentioned that the truck will need a roof that is 60 inches high. The truck estimate is \$86,565 truck and utility body estimate is \$25,600. Captain Brooks mentioned that the next step is to meet with the rep in person and at that point he will have more firm numbers. Selectman Munch felt that the discussion with the Fin Com is similar to the BOS because all they have is preliminary numbers. Financing was briefly discussed, and the Rescue Vehicle will be partially funded with the New Equipment Account and the balance from ARPA. This purchase will not affect the tax rate. ARPA has a balance of \$122,000 and the Treasurer will be providing a balance in the New Equipment Account. Selectman Munch mentioned that the Highway Department 550 engine needs to be replaced and the quote to replace the engine is around \$27,000.

**8. Discuss Special Town Meeting:** Selectman Leach and Selectman Munch felt that this is premature to discuss. Everyone agreed that the STM should be during the week or on a Saturday morning. Fin Com Member Haupt felt that it could take place in October. TA Walker mentioned that the

Town Clerk needs ample time for voter registration and the STM articles must be sent to Town Counsel for review.

- 9. **Review and Approve 8/10/2023 Finance Committee Minutes:** Fin Com Member Haupt motion to approve pending changes, Fin Com Chairman Hickling second, unanimous vote 5-0
  
- 10. **Public Input** Fin Com member Wadsworth has a problem with Mr. Haskins speaking on both boards. TA Walker mentioned an email from our accountant regarding revolving accounts ( Chapter 53E ½) which states revolving accounts must be voted at Annual Town Meeting.
  
- 11. **Adjourn:** Fin Com Chairman Hickling motion to adjourn at 7:03 p.m. Fin Com Member Haupt second, unanimous vote to adjourn 5-0

Items used:

Finance Committee Draft minutes from 8/10/2023

Fire rescue vehicle utility body

Accountant email

Sign in sheet

Respectively submitted,

Douglas Haskins, Fin Com Member \_\_\_\_\_

Samuel Haupt, Fin Com Member \_\_\_\_\_

Paul Hickling, Fin Com Chairman \_\_\_\_\_

Jesse Pelkey, Fin Com Member \_\_\_\_\_

Robin Wadsworth, Fin Com Member \_\_\_\_\_

Verne Leach, Chairman Board of Selectman \_\_\_\_\_

Ed Munch, Selectman \_\_\_\_\_

Date Approved: 3/27/24

Received April 22, 2024, Kim Leach , Town Clerk

PH: The first discussion was going to be reinstatement of assessor salary from fiscal year to look at level funding that from fiscal year 23 to 24.

VL: I'd like to refuse.

PH: So the salary is currently at 2500 and we are looking at reinstating the 3,471.

And at the previous finance meeting there had been a discussion that Miss Lecours was working every Monday night.

And she's working extra time.

We had talked about her experience of 10 years.

There had been a discussion about several of the assessment positions.

I think that there had been a discussion about how some towns actually tier the assessor positions.

And one possibility, there are two options.

We could either take this to a special town meeting.

But one option is actually to take the increase that would result from that one vacant assessor position that's not been filled.

RW: I don't agree with that.

PH: Like I said, we have a few different options.

Now we can do that without having to go to the special town meeting.

But the other thing that I should just throw out there is that if my understanding of the situation is if there is not an increase, we risk losing this individual with this 10 years of experience.

My understanding of the situation is that Miss Lecours is going to help to set the tax rate.

And you know it's very difficult to find people with the kind of experience that we would need to work for small towns like this.

And I think that in looking at the options, we had discussed having a joint finance select board meeting because there was some information that was not known.

And so that's part of the genesis of this meeting is why we're together here tonight.

So, you know, I just think there are a few rules first is that we need to have a rational discussion of this.

If it becomes not rational, then I'll give a couple warnings and then if necessary, the person will need to leave the room.

So we're going to keep it rational. We're going to be plain spoken, but respectful.

And that's important.

Any discussion?

Robin?

RW: We can start out, Paul, with telling you that I have 27 years as an assessor and I do everything in Windsor.

I have been denied when I have asked to fill that third position, get that straight to begin with.

I am questioning why when we are paying, and this question goes to the select board, we are paying \$25,000 a year to Patriot and almost \$19,000 for what is now assessor number one, Why does the signing board member need to be here on Monday nights?

And I'm going to tell you, part of what Patriot and what the lead member does is set the tax rate.

Shanna is needed for a signature only, and I can about guarantee that's all she's ever done is sign her name.

If she was here, we could certainly ask her questions to find out just how much she knows about setting the tax rate.

She is in here to sign her name.

She does not need to be here every Monday night when we are paying what, \$25,000 and \$19,000, \$44,000 for the assessor's office to get a job done.

I'd like to know how many building permits there are.

I'd like to know number one, how many parcels, how many residential parcels are being inspected.

We have way too much money going toward that.

It was even discussed last week or mentioned that Shanna would be here to file.

Well, as far as I'm concerned, the lead member, because Patriot is supposed to be doing everything, the lead member has in 12 hours plenty of time to file.

I don't think that Shanna is required to be here every Monday night, and I can tell you the boards that I work with definitely, and they're different.

Savoy, the board members get no money, maybe \$3,000 a year, and they do all their permits, all their sales inspection.

In Windsor, my board signs.

They get \$1,200 a year.

We have board meetings when we have to discuss something and they sign all documents as needed.

In Cheshire, the board that I work for, they do sales inspections, interior inspections.

Two of them get \$2,600 a year.

One gets 30, whatever, \$3,500, and they work every Tuesday night.

PH: Okay, and Robin, I'm not to cut you off, but I also know Jesse had a question.

So let's jump over to Jesse, and we could always have additional contributions.

JP: This was, to my recollection, this was heavily discussed prior to going to annual town meeting last year.

We discussed on reducing that salary because Sue, Sue that was coming in was going to be doing all the work.

And we discussed reducing it, we discussed leaving it, you know, and the ultimate thing was in order to get Sue in, the select board, I think it was, recommended that we drop that salary because we were given Sue more money.

This, I'm sure other people can say that, I know Ed wasn't on the board at that time, but it was discussed.

And they did agree to drop that pay because they wanted to get Sue in because she had the more experience and more knowledge.

And what's going to stop us from doing this in the future?

This is a precedent that we need to set because, you know, I mean, we set that rate for last year.

It was heavily discussed between the finance and the select board in the meetings.

You know, and we all agreed to that.

I feel at this time that we should be sticking to that until next year.

PH: Thank you, Jesse.

Any other comments?

RW: I agree with Jesse in that...

PH: *Just a second, Robin, any other comments outside of the two that have gone so far?*

EM: I can't comment. Verne can't comment on it, there's only two selectmen here.

I wasn't in the finance meetings and the select board meetings when you set this rate.

PH: Okay.

EM: But I can see something on the outside that I am in now that we don't want to lose the second assessor.

And I'm not going to get into debating with Robin.

I know she knows what she's talking about, but at the same time, I think we need two assessors.

And Sue wants to bring Shanna along more.

Get more involved.

Sue said that when she was an assessor before, she had a clerk that did her filings.

And she doesn't, so she's doing all the work now.

So, these are the things that I'm seeing once again for coming on the board in July, or actually at the end of June

DH: Well, I'll speak on both sides for a minute, if I can.

When we were at the finance committee meeting, and the board of selectmen, when I was on the board of selectmen at that day.

It was lengthy discussion on lowering it to \$2,500 a year because of the hours were going to be caught.

From four days a month to two days a month.

Now, you know, like Robin said, I don't know how we can justify just changing it without having more input from the assessors to begin with.

You...does Sue actually need her four and four nights a month?

That's the thing.

I'm done.

PH: Sam?

SH: Yeah.

I agree with Jesse and Doug.

It was pretty much the context of the discussion.

It seems like it's basically came down to not really requiring more hours, except that she refused to work for the \$2,500.

And the feeling is that you need her so desperately that we had the select board...

EM: Am I only selectman here to answer any of these?

SH: Well, but you're on the select board now.

EM: Okay.

Well, yes, we need her.

We didn't want to lose her because of the experience.

And what are we talking for the difference in money?

PH: It's 971.

DH: But to me, it's not the money.

It's what was voted on at the annual town meeting.

That means you're changing what the people on the floor voted for that day.

PH: Robin?

RW: With the understanding that there was going to be somebody in here.

I cannot get past paying a firm \$25,000 to do a job that you're now paying \$18,000, \$19,000 for the same work.

And now you've got somebody who is being expected to be here every Monday night.

Yeah, I don't blame her for wanting more money, but that's not the way, you know, just because somebody wants more money.

You don't go to special town meeting.

This decision was made and Sue Koziera should not be, she should not be needing anybody to do anything when Patriot is getting \$25,000 a year.

I am not going to let it go.

When you get rid of Patriot, when this town is not paying forty some odd thousand dollars to get this little tiny town done, then I would feel differently.

And you don't need just one assessor, so taking that money from one position, you think this town is a one or three or five member, all towns, boards.

You don't get to just because we, all we need is two signatures.

That is not the requirement, two signatures.

So, bottom line is, you raised her to 35, you better raise that third person, the second board member that gets nothing to the same thing.

PH: I think what's being discussed is raising it to 3,471.

RW: Okay, well.

PH: to be specific.

RW: You know, my God, you know, let's split hairs here.

It's \$3,500.

PH: Just being specific.

RW: For somebody that does not need to be here every Monday night.

PH: *I've given some consideration to having Sue be here tonight, but I figured that the discussion would be pretty spirited.*

So I thought that would put her in an awkward situation.

One of the reasons for this meeting is so that we can have a discussion of the situation and try and at least try to align some of our thoughts so that if we, you know, in terms of a special town meeting.

That we can sound like that we've kind of discussed things and have recommendations as a group.

I don't think it's our job to get up in front of a special town meeting and to do Mortal Kombat. I don't think that's helpful.

I don't think that's why people, you know, that's not what they want from their small town government.

RW: Okay, Paul, why do you think it's Mortal Kombat when a taxpayer and a finance committee member who works for the taxpayers, I am in this position for the taxpayers, has a problem with paying a firm and somebody else to do the same job and then expect somebody to come in for very little money every Monday night of the year.

If that's Mortal Kombat, there's a problem here.

PH: I think it's the ability to be able to have a rational conversation about the situation.

It was my first annual town meeting and things were pretty spirited. It didn't need to be that way.



There could have been an exchange of ideas without things getting out of hand.

I think in this situation for us to be able to come together and have a rational conversation about it, we may not all be in agreement,

but I think that we should have a plan going into that meeting if we need to discuss this particular issue at that special town meeting.

Now, one of the things that I discussed is that we do have a way to avoid that.

And that is one option.

So tonight we're giving our opinions about those different options.

It's not silly to mention the options. It's just about looking at the pros and cons of each.

Jesse?

JP: It's always been our, last I knew, our outlook on position, not person.

And tonight it's turning into person and not position because we're saying 10 year person, we don't want to lose this person.

It's always been the position that we were looking at for the salary, not based on the person for that position.

And that's the way we've always gone with the salary, pay raises and everything.

It's not who's in that position, it's that position.

And all of a sudden tonight it's turning into that person.

And I don't feel that's appropriate at this point.

It should be looked at as a position.

And that position, no matter who was in it, was voted on for that salary.

And that, if that person can't accept that salary, I'm sorry.

But that's what, it wasn't based on a person. It wasn't based on experience. It wasn't based on anything.

PH: I appreciate that contribution, Jesse. And that's an example of just exchanging views and perspectives. I appreciate that.

Doug, were you finished with everything that you wanted to sell?

DH: Yeah, unless I think of something else, not at the moment.

UNKNOWN (possibly Vern Leach): That'll be after the meeting.

PH: Sam, anything else that you can think of from the Finance Committee?

SH: No but if the intent is to actually put this on the annual town meeting warrant, the Finance Committee can certainly provide a recommendation, yay or nay, to provide to the community.

PH: Terry, as the town administrator, do you have anything that you wanted to contribute?

TW: The only thing I'd like to say is everyone got a 3% raise.

And I feel that, Shanna the person who's been here for a while, Her salary was the only one that was cut, and if it was level funded I would feel better

But to cut somebody's salary, I just, I feel that that was wrong to do.

I'm not a selectman, Finance Committee member, but I feel that she's willing to stay on, that she should have continued getting the salary she'd been getting, you know, a level funded salary.

PH: Okay.

RW: Can I make a comment?

PH: Yeah, Robin.

As Jesse stated, this cut was discussed in that there was also going to be a cut in hours.

I think that is the main issue here, is that the hours were supposed to be cut.

Now all of a sudden, they're not, and why weren't we told that at the annual town meeting?

That Oh, by the way...I mean, you were putting the money forward for Sue Koziara specifically.

Why wasn't it changed then? Why weren't people told then that Sue Koziara expects this person to be, I don't care who it is, expects this person to be there every Monday night?

Because I most assuredly would have asked the same questions then.

We're paying two, a firm and a person to do the work of one person, which is incredible all by itself.

DH: I think at the annual town meeting it was brought up, and I think Bruce mentioned it, and I mentioned it also that that second assessor was, her hours were going to be two hours a night, two Monday nights, which changed that.

That's why it got lowered to 2,500.

JP: So it was voted on at... oh, sorry...

PH: Go ahead.

JP: Sorry. It was voted on, if it was discussed and it was voted on at the annual town meeting with every other week, two hours, that's what the taxpayers knew at that time.

So that, in my eyes, that's where it should stay for at least a year.

PH: Okay.

Yeah.

EM: The information at the annual town meeting, we didn't have all the information.

Of course, you know, I'm starting out again here, so.

And we're not, we're also, we wanted to eliminate the third assessor.

So, we're going to offset that by keeping the two assessors and the difference in the money is not going to, it's going to be less money coming out of that account than more money.

And once again, a lot of information wasn't on hand at the annual town meeting.

EM: Now, the other point I have to make is the selectman agreed to get her to stay that we would attempt to get this put on to the annual,

a special town meeting.

And Doug, you agreed with me at the time.

DH: Right, but she was also told that there's no guarantee.

EM: But we did agree that we were going to put this on a special town meeting.

So it's, the selectman and Verne can't talk.

So it's just, right now it's just Doug and I, I'm asking him as a selectman not as a finance committee.

So we can, like you said, when you started the meeting, we can go through two things, which I think is kind of ridiculous, but we can either come to an agreement tonight, the selectman already came to an agreement, or we can put it on the annual town meeting, or the special, I'm sorry, the special town meeting.

DH: Well, it would have to go on a special town meeting to begin with because their salaries already been fixed at a certain pay rate, so you can't just increase it without going to a certain rate.

EM: Weren't we told that the selectman can do that, to change something like that?

DH: I don't think so.

RW: If you were, I wouldn't trust who told you.

DH: I don't think... that was fixed, you don't give somebody a pay increase through... just because I don't think we can.

PH: So one of the things that we could do at this point is that we can, I could make a motion, you know, and it speaks to what Sam was discussing, that we make a recommendation.

If we're going to go take this to the special town meeting that we make a recommendation, we could do it separately as the finance committee and then select board could do a vote separately about recommending that this be level funded from fiscal year 23 to 24.

And we could just do the vote now as the finance committee and then we could do the vote.

If that seems appropriate for the select board. If the select board feels like that's appropriate for them to weigh in on tonight in terms of recommendation.

EM: Well, we've already agreed that we're going to put it on the special town meeting warrant.

PH: Okay.

EM: I mean, that's something Doug just got finished saying. He says we have to do that.

So we've agreed that we're going to put it on that warrant.

So as far as, we're at a handicap here, we have two, we're deadlocked. If Doug votes against and I vote for it, we're deadlocked.

PH: So that's a good point.

EM: Null and void.

JP: But it should be written down there anyway.

PH: So why don't we at least look at the finance committee moving forward through a vote, it'll carry a recommendation about level funding the position to the special town meeting.

And that will at least give the town what we are suggesting as a committee by virtue of our vote.

It doesn't mean that people won't have different perspectives on it, but that's part of how we function as a group.

So I make a motion that we vote to level fund the assessor position at the special town meeting.

Do I hear a second?

*For the finance committee.*

SH: Second.

All those in favor?

PH, SH, DH: Aye.

All those opposed?

RW, JP: Nay.

PH: Recommendation carries. Okay.

RW: Can I question that Doug is on the select board and the finance committee?

And should he be recusing himself from this issue on the finance committee?

PH: I think that that same topic came up actually correct me if I'm wrong, but when Bruce served in different capacities.

I think we discussed because it's a small town and we carry different responsibilities that sometimes there is a crisscross.

But I think that that people who, you know, I would have to say that just from working with Doug and I'm just going to say this as the relative new person.

That he's been pretty objective about that trying to separate his different roles.

When he does want to speak in both capacities, he'll identify that.

So he's pretty clear about where he's coming from.

But I certainly recognize your your feedback on that Robin and.

You know

RW: thank you.

## 6. Discuss Assessor Pay:

Selectman Leach recused himself. Fin Comm Chairman Hickling stated: "The first discussion was going to be reinstatement of assessor salary from fiscal year to look at level funding it from fiscal year 23 to 24"... "So, the salary is currently at 2500 and we are looking at reinstating the 3,471." Hickling continued to make statements regarding discussion had at prior Fin Comm meeting, specific to a member of the Board of Assessor and her desire to get paid what she made when she worked for the Board last, due to the alleged requirement that she work every Monday night with the new head assessor. Hickling stated that this reinstatement could be accomplished either by Special Town Meeting or by using the funds of the third board member, since that position is vacant. Fin Comm member Robin Wadsworth stated: "I don't agree with that". Fin Comm Chairman Hickling stated his opinion on why this salary had to be increased: "And I think that in looking at the options, we had discussed having a joint finance select board meeting because there was some information that was not known." Hickling went on to open the issue for "rational discussion". Fin Comm member Robin Wadsworth began by stating that she, with 27 years of experience in Assessing, has been denied a position on the Board of Assessors and went on to question "why does the signing board member need to be here on Monday nights?", "when we are paying \$25,000 a year to Patriot and almost \$19,000 for what is now assessor number one and "I don't think that Shanna is required to be here every Monday night." Fin Comm member Jesse Pelkey stated that the issue of reducing the salary of two of the board members was "heavily discussed prior to going to annual town meeting last year", because the (Assessor) "Sue that was coming in was going to be doing all the work." Pelkey also stated that he believed the select board "recommended that we drop that salary because we were giving Sue more money." Pelkey was also concerned about setting a precedent of changing salaries that were discussed, agreed upon and then voted at the annual town meeting. Select Board member Ed Munch inserted that "we need two assessors". Doug Haskins stated: "Well, I'll speak on both sides for a minute, if I can. When we were at the finance committee meeting, and the board of selectmen, when I was on the board of selectmen at that day, it was lengthy discussion on lowering it to \$2,500 a year because of the hours were going to be cut, from four days a month to two days a month. Now, you know, like Robin said, I don't know how we can justify just changing it without having more input from the assessors to begin with." Fin Com member Sam Haupt agreed with Pelkey and Haskins regarding the "context of the discussion" of the prior year's meeting. Haupt also stated "It seems like it's basically come down to not really requiring more hours, except that she refused to work for the \$2,500"...Ed Munch interrupted, insisting that we need her and questioned: "what are we talking about for the difference in money?" (amount of \$971 supplied by Hickling). Haskins then stated: "But to me, it's not the money. It's what was voted on at the annual phone meeting. That means you're changing what the people on the floor voted for that day." Further discussion caused Hickling to state: "I've given some consideration to having Sue be here tonight, but I figured that the discussion would be pretty

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