

Town of Oak Bluffs Finance and Advisory Committee
Meeting Minutes
Thursday, July 21, 2022, 5:00pm
OB Town Hall Meeting Room/Zoom Conference

Present: Chair – Sherry Countryman, Vice Chair – Richard Weiss, Maura McGroarty, Mimi Davisson, Sean DeBettencourt

Absent: Reuben Fitzgerald, Dion Alley, Mike Taus

Others: Gail Barmakian, Jason Balboni, Patricia Washington (joined late)

Recorder: Juliet Mulinare

5:00 pm Ms. Countryman called the Oak Bluffs Finance and Advisory Committee meeting to order.

Approval of Minutes

The Committee reviewed the minutes from the July 7, 2022 meeting.

Mr. Weiss moved the minutes be approved, seconded by Mr. DeBettencourt.

No further discussion, roll call vote taken:

Weiss – Aye, McGroarty – Aye, Davisson – Aye, DeBettencourt – Aye, Countryman – Aye.
Motion passes unanimously (**5 – Aye, 0 - Nay**).

Wastewater Commission Fee Discussion/CWMP – With Commissioner Barmakian

Ms. Countryman opened the discussion by informing the Committee that the rates for being a user of the Town’s sewer system have not changed since the system’s inception. Ms. Countryman invited Wastewater Commissioner (and Selectboard Member) Gail Barmakian to attend the FinCom meeting and provide further clarification to the Committee. Ms. Barmakian explained that the Wastewater Department operates as an Enterprise Fund, meaning the Department’s operating budget is funded with the various fees that are collected, not by the Town’s General Fund (GF). Ms. Barmakian stated that the goal was to not use tax dollars to fund sewer operations with the exception that capital projects can still be funded through appropriations from the GF. The Department is not meant to profit; however, it is allowed to collect fees that exceed the operating budget to be saved as a “slush fund” for unforeseen expenses. Although the user rates have not increased, there are other fees administered that have been increased including meter reading fees, abatement fees and BOD fees, which apply to restaurants that have a higher impact to the system than residential units. Ms. Barmakian explained that in order to raise the user rates, the Town would have to identify the reason and show what the additional funds would support. The Committee discussed the history of the system. It was hooked up in 2003 with a 20 year plan. The system was originally designed for approximately 800 users but large users such as the Hospital, Community Services, the High School, and the YMCA have brought the system to capacity. The Town was required to build the system with room to grow, but was also limited to a certain size because of the cost.

The Committee then discussed the Tabernacle’s request to be added to the system, which has been denied due to capacity issues. Sewering is a complicated endeavor because in order to be added to the system, the potential maximum daily allotment must be considered year-round, even if that potential is only met a few times per year. Additionally, once the hook up is made, it cannot be undone. Ms. Barmakian explained that the amount of flow the Tabernacle would require is around 10,000 gallons per day to accommodate for events like Illumination Night; 10k gallons would be the equivalent of approximately 10 houses that could come off septic. She continued that, if the Tabernacle were located in the watershed, there might be some justification for adding them to the system, but that’s not the case.

The Committee moved on to a discussion of the CWMP (Comprehensive Wastewater Management Plan). Ms. Barmakian stated that, overall, \$75 million is needed to upgrade the existing system. Due to the expense, the upgrades will be a phased operation. The Town has already appropriated \$26 million; this money will be used to improve the technology and efficiency of the system for the existing users (Phase 1). Ms. Barmakian explained that they are rushing a bit to get started on Phase 1 due to eligibility for State and Federal grants to offset the cost. They are currently working through the permitting process and expect to start construction for Phase 1 in the fall of 2023. Ms. Barmakian stated that the DEP is coming down with very strict regulations for houses located in the watershed and will be requiring advanced septic systems to be installed unless the Town can produce a plan to address the issue another way; that is what the CWMP will do. Ms. Barmakian said she is hopeful that something can be designed that allows the existing infrastructure to remain and be improved. She explained that because there are only 800 users, the capital improvement costs (\$75 million) cannot be supported by the users alone and it will require the town to contribute tax dollars to the project. Betterment fees will offset the costs but those paying betterment fees will also have to contribute through taxes. The Committee discussed the high costs of updating septic systems and the Town's efforts to secure funding through grants and other subsidies. Ms. Barmakian said she is always looking for opportunities that make it as equitable as possible for the tax payers.

Ms. Countryman asked how the FinCom could assist with the process. Ms. Barmakian said that on-going support for the improvements is needed and perhaps the FinCom could assist with community outreach and education to prepare for future funding requests. The Committee thanked Ms. Barmakian for her time and insight.

Embarkation Fee Sub-Committee Update

Ms. Countryman told the Committee that she had spoken with Senator Cyr's legislative assistant and he is very enthusiastic about an effort to increase the embarkation fee. He agrees that the fact that the fee has not been increased for 18 years is too long, however, he said a consensus among the port towns is needed to push this forward. Ms. Countryman said that, with the rest of the FinCom's approval, she would like to meet with Tisbury FinCom Chair Nancy Gilfoxy to see where they stand on the issue.

Mr. Balboni asked what the reason would be to raise the fee. The Committee discussed how the additional funds could be used to support island-wide infrastructure and benefit shared services. Ms. McGroarty commented that it's not just the fee that should be updated, but the associated legislation should be also. The Committee agreed that the Town should have more control over when the fees are increased and how the money can be used. Ms. Countryman stated that she did not want to get caught up in discussions about a specific amount to increase the fees, she would rather get people on board with the idea before getting too granular. She stated that Cyr's assistant is looking into how the original legislation came about. Mr. Balboni stated that he was comfortable with Ms. Countryman speaking to Ms. Gilfoxy on a conceptual level. Mr. Weiss responded that the FinCom's goal is to gather information and then bring it to the Selectboard for a more detailed discussion.

Streetscape Discussion

Ms. Countryman said she had received some questions about the Streetscape project but that no one was present to follow up on them. Ms. Davisson asked what the questions were. Ms. Countryman said people wanted to know where the project budget stands and how much additional funding is needed. Mr. Balboni said to put any questions about the project in writing and submit to Town Administrator Potter. Mr. Balboni stated that he has received a lot more compliments than complaints.

Other Committee Updates

None.

Ms. Patricia Washington, prospective Committee member, joined the meeting.

Interview for Vacant FinCom Seat – Ms. Patricia Washington

Ms. Washington introduced herself to the Committee; she has been a full-time resident for the past five years and a homeowner for nine. She moved from Boston and has been looking for an opportunity to get involved with town government. She has extensive experience serving on boards that manage large budgets and has been reviewing FinCom minutes to better understand the issues at hand. She worked for BCBS for 40 years as a corporate information security officer.

Ms. Countryman emphasized the importance of showing up for meetings and being familiar with the information in order to be an effective member of the Committee. She also said she wants the FinCom members to be invested and have ideas about how to make improvements.

Mr. Weiss made a motion to recommend to the Town Moderator that Ms. Washington be the Moderator’s appointee to the Finance Advisory Committee. The motion was seconded by Mr. DeBettencourt, no further discussion, roll call vote taken:

Weiss – Aye, McGroarty – Aye, Davisson – Aye, DeBettencourt – Aye, Countryman – Aye.
Motion passes unanimously (**5 – Aye, 0 - Nay**).

Member Comments

Ms. Davisson requested that the list of questions she presented to the school officials be followed up on; she will do this and report back to the Committee.

The Committee discussed the level of detail needed in the minutes. There was some debate about whether “he said/she said” minutes are necessary. It was decided that the detailed minutes have been helpful for the newer members.

Ms. McGroarty stated that it was helpful when Ms. Potter (as Town Accountant) attended FinCom meetings.

Ms. Davisson asked about the Open Meeting Law complaint. Ms. Countryman stated that she had submitted her response and there is a 90 day window for Ms. Potter to pursue the complaint.

Public Comments

None.

Adjournment

At 6:41pm a motion to adjourn was made by Mr. DeBettencourt and seconded by Mr. Weiss. No further discussion, approved unanimously (**5 – Aye**).

Meeting Documents on File

None.

Respectfully Submitted
Juliet Mulinare, Recorder

Minutes Approved: 9/1/2022