

**A JOINT MEETING OF THE
GENERAL GOVERNMENT SUBCOMMITTEE / TOWN
COUNCIL MEETING
WEDNESDAY, MARCH 24, 2021 6:00PM
REMOTE PARTICIPATION**

Pursuant to Governor Baker's March 12, 2020 Order Suspending Certain Provisions of the Open Meeting Law, G.L. c. 30A, §18, and the Governor's March 15, 2020 Order imposing strict limitations on the number of people that may gather in one place, this meeting of the General Government Subcommittee is being conducted in person as well as remote participation. No in-person attendance of members of the public will be permitted, but every effort will be made to ensure that the public can adequately access the proceedings as provided for in the Order. Despite our best efforts, we are not at this time able to provide for real-time access, and we will post a record of this meeting on the city/town's website as soon as we are able.

A ROLL CALL VOTE IS REQUIRED FOR ALL VOTES TAKEN UNDER THIS

General Government Subcommittee members present Chair Gus Steeves, Councilor Michael Marketti, Councilor Ryan, Citizen Member Denise Clemence, Citizen Member Martena Shea (5 present)
Also present: Town Manager Michael McCall, Councilor John Daniel, Councilor Joseph Cotrona, Councilor David Adams, Councilor Scott Lazo, Council Chair John Jovan, Fire Chief Paul Normandin, CDBG Coordinator Peg Dean, Director of Finance Karen Harnois, DPW Director Heather Blakeley, and Conservation Commission Member Maureen Doyle.

1. **Consider and accept General Government Subcommittee Minutes of March 3, 2021.** A motion was made by Councilor Marketti, seconded by Ms. Shea to vote on this item. Members in favor: Marketti, Shea, Steeves. Members abstained: Ryan. By 3-0-1 the motion carries.
2. **Discuss the Hyde/Dexter-Russell Charitable Foundation donation in the amount of \$1,000.00 to be used for the Southbridge Holidays Vision Program, and entertain a motion to vote to recommend that Council accept this donation.** It was indicated that they traditionally accept donations and a motion was made. A motion was made by Councilor Marketti, seconded by Ms. Shea to vote on this item. Members in favor: Marketti, Shea, Ryan, Steeves. Members abstained: Clemence. By 4-0-1 the motion carries.
3. **Discuss /review a transfer from account #001132-578100 Town Council Reserve Fund to account #01900000-521200 Heating Fuel in the amount of \$3,000.00 due to a shortage in the Heating Account because of an extra oil delivery at DPW and to cover the price increase from \$2.0675 to \$2.1547 per gallon. Entertain a motion to vote to recommend that Council approve this transfer. Vote to recommend that the Council.** DPW Director Blakeley said the account came in a little short this year for DPW Director Blakeley said the account came in a little short this year for oil, but the good news is they've locked in the price for the upcoming year. Councilor Marketti asked if this item should have gone to the DPW subcommittee, but Ms. Blakeley clarified that this account doesn't sit directly under DPW. Councilor Cotrona asked if this item should be rewritten to reflect that there was not an extra delivery, there was a price increase per what Ms. Blakeley described. Ms. Harnois said it wouldn't be necessary to do that because a few extra gallons were purchased and this just covers the amount they are over for the last delivery. A motion was made by Councilor Steeves, seconded by Councilor Ryan. Vote by roll call. Members in favor: Marketti, Shea, Ryan, Clemence, Steeves. By 5-0 the motion carries.
4. **Discuss/review a transfer from account #001132-578100 Town Council Reserve Fund in the amount of \$10,126.00 and a transfer from account #001945-565000 Bay Path Assessment in the amount of \$ 15,874.00 to account #001297-521000 Public Safety-Street Lights Electricity for a total amount of \$26,000.00 due to an increase in street light costs at approximately 17% over last year. Entertain a motion to vote to recommend that Council approve these transfers.** Ms. Blakeley provided information on the increased streetlight costs and is in the process of getting a meeting with National Grid. The supply costs are locked in, but they have no control over the distribution costs that are set by National Grid, therefore those rates fluctuate month to month and that trend has been a dramatic increase. This is not something they would have been able to predict therefore they are in need of

this transfer to cover the costs. They are hoping to get the meeting with National Grid to get more information on why those rates are escalating. Ms. Blakeley explained that the majority of the costs here are directly associated with other fees such as maintenance, rental, and distribution, not usage increases. Several members commented and suggested ways to decrease costs, but they need to meet with National Grid to talk through some of these issues. Ms. Blakeley responded to a question regarding the spacing of street lights and said there was a policy set up, however even if they redlined lights, they would still pay a rental unless they told National Grid to physically remove some. Ms. Blakeley thinks there would be a lot of pushback if they proposed removing lights. Councilor Cotrona believes there should have been more follow up on rate increases if they've been on the rise for the last few years, but Ms. Blakeley explained that there are a lot of electric bills and factors that play into actually doing an indepth evaluation of the rate increases across the board. A motion to move the question was made by Councilor Marketti, seconded by Ms. Shea to move the question. Vote by roll call. Members in favor: Marketti, Shea, Ryan, Clemence, Steeves. By 5-0 the motion carries. A motion to vote to send this up to Council was made by Councilor Marketti, seconded by Ms. Shea to move the question. Vote by roll call. Members in favor: Marketti, Shea, Ryan, Clemence, Steeves. By 5-0 the motion carries.

5. **Discuss/review a transfer from account #001123.524100 Registry of Motor Vehicles (RMV) account to account #001123.573000 Dues and Subscriptions in the amount of \$270.90 to reimburse the Town Manager for membership to the ICMA. Entertain a motion to vote to recommend that Council approve this transfer.** Ms. Clemence excused herself from the meeting at this point to attend another meeting but stated that she supported this and the following items. Town Manager McCall explained the purpose of the ICMA and noted that it is part of his contract. Councilor Steeves said they are happy to see him signed up for this. A motion to vote to send this up to Council was made by Councilor Ryan, seconded by Councilor Marketti to move the question. Vote by roll call. Members in favor: Marketti, Shea, Ryan, Steeves. By 4-0 the motion carries.

6. **Discuss/review the USDA Rural Development Program's Community Facilities Disaster Funds, NOFA 2019-19552, providing 35% of Capital purchases made prior to June 2021 to eligible communities per USDA requirements with a USDA secured amount of \$115,847.81 of grant funds for our community, and consider approving the Town apply for the grant to fund proposed Capital purchases as described in attached document. Entertain a motion to vote to recommend that Council approve our application for the grant and authorize the Town Manager to sign all paperwork related to the application.** Town Manager McCall said the USDA reached out to the Town to let them know that they qualify as a rural community and for some USDA grant programs. He explained that money is awarded on a first come first serve basis and what they stand to gain are four vehicles that would be capital purchases and that would allow for a 35% reimbursement. Ms. Dean thanked everyone involved with this process and said this is not a guarantee of the fund, but they have been given the greenlight to submit to pre-application. Councilor Marketti thinks this grant forces the Town to spend more money and since it is only covering 35% of the costs, he can't support it. Town Manager McCall noted that the items are capital expenses that have been requested that they would end up paying 100% for without this grant. Councilor Marketti believes they need to stop spending money at some point. Ms. Shea said this sounds like one of the four vehicles would essentially be free in this equation, but she agrees with Councilor Marketti that she would rather have a higher reimbursement percentage. Councilor Steeves asked if any of this funding would be able to be used for roads, but Ms. Dean said they are being encouraged to use the funding for capital costs with a higher turn around, such as the purchasing of vehicles, therefore this is the easiest, most realistic way to utilize these funds. Councilor Cotrona agrees with the previous speaker and thinks they need to say no to more spending at some point. Councilor Steeves likes the idea of saving some of this extra money, but it also means putting out \$200,000.00 for a capital budget they haven't actually looked at yet, therefore he isn't sure where he will ultimately stand on this matter when it goes up to Council. Council Chair Jovan understands it is hard to prioritize items, but they often talk about studies that have been done and sit on the shelves and there have been studies indicating that they need to regularly replace vehicles. He said they often find themselves in a bind because they don't take advantage of addressing these kinds of needs when grant funds are available, such as this instance. A motion to vote to send this up to Council for further discussion was made by Ms. Shea, seconded by Councilor Ryan to move the question. Vote by roll call. Members in favor: Shea, Steeves. Councilors Opposed: Marketti, Ryan. By 2-2 the motion fails. Council Chair Jovan reminded Councilor Steeves that this item shouldn't be stalled based on disagreement on the item itself, since the recommendation is just to send this up to Council. A motion to send this up to Council without a favorable

recommendation was made by Councilor Ryan, seconded by Ms. Shea. Members in favor: Ryan, Shea, Steeves. Members opposed: Marketti.

7. Discussion regarding Injured on Duty (IOD)

Councilor Adams has been working on this issue for a long time and he has done his research, gathered information from others, and he does not think the town can afford to accept the sub section. He spoke with many people to make sure he could make an informed decision and appreciates that Mr. Lamica brought this up, because it made him educate himself on the process. He does not support this right now, but he'd like to explore what the Town can do to support first responders without breaking the bank. Councilor Adams wanted to bring this to the subcommittee to give everyone a chance to discuss this further since Councilors now have concrete information given to them by the current Town Manager who did an exceptional job providing all facts. Councilor Adams noted that municipalities have been held 100% for medical costs in the past, despite certain language saying that "reasonable" medical expenses will be paid, but that leaves confusion as to whether the town gets to determine what is and isn't reasonable.

Councilor Marketti has spoken to many of those who are concerned with this and he agrees that it might be a little too much to pass the legislation. He noted that he doesn't believe some of these individuals are looking for full coverage, they may be looking for assistance with their prescription and copay coverage. Councilor Marketti is interested in seeing if there are options within their disability insurance that they can explore to help these individuals with the medical expenses specific to the injury.

Town Manager McCall said the current IOD insurance covers from the injury up to three potential triggering events which are: the cap out on \$100,000.00, 10 years, or if they go out on accidental disability retirement. He has been in contact with the insurance company, and there are no other options they can provide.

Council Chair Jovan appreciates the detailed work the Town Manager did to provide factual information to all parties pertaining to this.

Derek Lamica thanked Councilor Adams for the work he's been doing to look into this since 2018. He elaborated on a situation in which one of the IOD individuals retired and then received a letter from the Town that they were no longer providing coverage on his injury. He appreciated that Councilors Adams and Marketti have helped bring this item forward for discussion and noted that he believes the town can help these individuals more. Former Town Councilor and Firefighter George Chenier shared the history of IOD claims and policies from the late 60's on. The Indemnification Board came about to keep politics out of the Fire and Police service injuries because they did not trust the Town Manager at the time, therefore the Board determined if the injury was at reasonable cost and if the injured part was at no fault. Personally, he has never been denied a claim through Blue Cross Blue Shield and the only time he had an issue was when dealing with Central Mass Healthcare because they weren't timely with payments. He stated that Blue Cross Blue Shield never denied his claims that were related to his injury.

Bob Campbell agrees with the town for sticking with the 41B and the insurance covering after, however as a young person retired due to injury, it does get costly to the individual to cover copays, deductibles, and treatments. His hope is that they would explore offering some aid to those in need with costs not covered by insurance. Mr. Campbell is also worried future individuals will have to go through the same issues surrounding IOD claims.

Councilor Steeves agrees with a lot of what is being said, and worries that the town is not in a position to fund all of this. He believes they need to advocate for funding on the state and federal level and encouraged the individuals on this call to write to legislation to take the steps to make sure everyone is covered on the level they need to be covered. There was a lot of discussion from committee members and individuals personally involved with this matter. Councilor Adams wants to make sure they continue to do everything they can to explore options and make sure they find ways to support these workers the best they can. Councilor Lazo said the Council supports first responders, and doesn't think this is a question of that. This is a question of whether or not the Town can afford what's being asked. Councilor Lazo thanked George for sharing his wealth of knowledge with them tonight. He is a no vote right now until they can explore options that work, but it is not out of not supporting them. Mr. Campbell said he is not looking for full coverage, but he is looking to see if copays can be taken care of since many of those costs are a strain on top of other costs that they end up having to pay, so he wanted to clarify that they are just looking to get a little bit of assistance toward some of these costs that add up across the board. Mr. Campbell is happy he got to have these discussions with members of the Council.

Councilor Steeves said although they can't adopt that law right now, maybe they can explore putting aside some funds like they have for road work, to put toward these kinds of issues. Town Manager McCall said they would have

to be careful because they wouldn't be operating inside of any statute in doing that so they'd need to do some more research. Councilor Lazo clarified that adopting the statute and exploring ways to help with just copays are two different discussions, but he'd be willing to discuss those options at another time. George suggested having the town make a policy that assists the IOD employee file a social security disability application to help them move the process along because they are eligible despite popular belief. Councilor Marketti noted that the agenda item doesn't specify the statute, it dictates that there will be a discussion on IOD, He asked if he could make a motion to ask the Town Manager to look into exploring options to allow for assistance with copay, Council Chair Jovan advised that the Town Manager research if that would impact union and collective bargaining agreements in any way before they make that motion. Melissa Zawadzki said they currently do have a way to help subsidize out of pocket costs, and said all out of pocket costs under Blue Cross Blue Shield plan are eligible to submit those for reimbursement at this time, but noted that doesn't include MEDEX. You have to exceed the maximum out of pocket cost to be eligible for the reimbursement.

Councilor Marketti asked for a timeline on when the Town Manager could get more information to them, Town Manager McCall explained that there are several priorities on his plate right now and he would need to shuffle items around to put that one on the fast track, therefore he may need a little more time to get back to them.

8. Discussion of Town Manager's Major Initiatives, dated memo 3/11/2021. Councilor Marketti brought this up because he was concerned with the Fire Station Building ballot question discussion. Councilor Steeves said the question itself would be going straight to Council because it is debating the idea of putting it on the ballot, not a discussion on whether or not they individually support the item itself. Councilor Marketti is just confused as to why the Town Manager is suggesting putting the Fire Station on the ballot even though it is a should have, but the must haves like curbside collection and storm water are not being put on the ballot first. Town Manager McCall said the memo he put out is based on his thoughts and opinions on the priorities, but they are open to be reordered pending what the Council wants to see accomplished. His proposed plans allows them to prioritize the Fire Station over the next five fiscal years since it is something that has been on the back burner. He said if those other issues are out into play first, he doesn't know how the Fire Station would even stand a chance on the ballot, if it were to come at the end of the line people may not entertain it. All of these items are costly and they are all needs that need to be addressed in a strategic manner. Councilor Adams said they've built in different ideas and safeguards into the curbside collection planning, and he recommends they allow the Fire Station to get on the ballot first because of the timing of these issues. Councilor Daou wants to see this move forward, he believes they need to make progress on some of these big items and show taxpayers where the money is going.

9. New business.

10. Adjourn. A motion was made by Councilor Marketti, seconded by Councilor Ryan. Vote by roll call. Members in favor: Marketti, Shea, Ryan, Steeves. By 4-0 the motion carries.

The meeting adjourned at 8:30 PM.

Respectfully submitted,
Mary Darling
Recording Clerk