



City of Somerville, Massachusetts

City Council Finance Committee

Meeting Minutes

Tuesday, April 11, 2023

6:00 PM

This meeting was held via GoToWebinar and was called to order by Chair Wilson at 6:00 p.m. and adjourned at 6:49 p.m. on a Roll Call Vote: 4 in favor (Councilors Clingan, Kelly, Scott, Wilson), 0 opposed, 1 absent (Councilor Pineda Neufeld).

Others present:

Michael Potere - Assistant Clerk of Committees; Christopher Ward – Deputy Chief, Somerville Police; Stephen Haynes - Director of Finance, Water and Sewer; Demetrios Vidalis - Director of Water and Sewer; Hannah Carrillo - Legislative Liaison.

Roll Call

Present: Chairperson Jake Wilson, Vice Chair Jefferson Thomas (J.T.) Scott, Charlotte Kelly and Jesse Clingan
Absent: Judy Pineda Neufeld

1. Committee Minutes (ID # [23-0447](#)) Approval of the Minutes of the Finance Committee Meeting of March 21, 2023.

RESULT: ACCEPTED
AYE: Chairperson Wilson, Vice Chair Scott, City Councilor At Large Kelly and Ward Four City Councilor Clingan
ABSENT: Ward Seven City Councilor Pineda Neufeld

2. Committee Minutes (ID # [23-0519](#)) Approval of the Minutes of the Finance Committee Meeting of March 29, 2023.

RESULT: ACCEPTED
AYE: Chairperson Wilson, Vice Chair Scott, City Councilor At Large Kelly and Ward Four City Councilor Clingan
ABSENT: Ward Seven City Councilor Pineda Neufeld

Appropriations

3. Mayor's Request (ID # [23-0298](#)) Requesting approval to appropriate \$54,445 from the Street Tree Stabilization Fund for the 2023 Ash Tree Treatment Program.

Chair Wilson stated that a memorandum for this item was produced, and summarized it by explaining that around 1,000 public ash trees need protection treatment, and this funding is for that biannual treatment.

Councilor Scott noted for the record that the funding for this treatment

would normally come from the DPW Care of Trees Line and the Highway Department, but that the budget for the Trees Line has been funded at \$0 for both Fiscal Year 2022 and 2023.

RESULT: **RECOMMENDED TO BE APPROVED**

AYE: Chairperson Wilson, Vice Chair Scott, City Councilor At Large Kelly and Ward Four City Councilor Clingan

ABSENT: Ward Seven City Councilor Pineda Neufeld

4. Mayor's Request
(ID # [23-0369](#))

Requesting the appropriation of \$600,000 from the Water and Sewer Department Retained Earnings account to the Water and Sewer Department Capital Outlay account for anticipated contractual obligations.

Councilor Kelly asked about the specific contractual obligations this funding would address because there were no contracts or receipts attached to the corresponding memorandum. Director Haynes responded that the contracts can be provided as requested, and that this funding is to cover work that will be completed moving forward.

Councilor Kelly asked what specific projects this funding would cover, and Director Haynes indicated that, among others, this will cover the Spring Hill project, as well as work that was done in December and work that will be completed in the future on an as-needed basis at schools and other similar public spaces. Director Vidalis added that these contracts mostly cover emergency contract work that will be completed in the future for various urgent water and sewer repairs, including leaks, breaks, and nonfunctioning valves. Councilor Kelly asked if there were any details on what emergency work was done under these contracts, and Director Vidalis replied that these contracts are primarily intended to cover unplanned emergency work in the future, that this is not for planned capital improvements, and that details for the work that has been completed to date can be provided on request. Councilor Kelly concluded by stating for the record that it would be helpful for residents to know how such a large amount of money is being spent.

Chair Wilson added that he recently met with a contractor, who issued a warning about the state of the water valves in the city and that a significant amount of work needs to be done. Chair Wilson then asked if this funding would be used to address that issue, and Director Vidalis replied that the work performed throughout the course of these contracts has uncovered and repaired, and that generally the department attempts to balance preventative maintenance work with vital, urgent repairs. Director Vidalis continued that to the extent these problem valves need to be replaced quickly, this funding would address those repairs. Chair Wilson expressed agreement, and summarized the issues facing the Water and Sewer Department as two primary issues: an aging infrastructure system coupled with the department being understaffed, which is why these contracts to outsource the work are necessary in the first place.

Councilor Scott asked about the time period this funding would cover, and Director Haynes replied that it would cover April 2023 through July 1, 2023, and that the funding would cover the cost of third-party labor as well as the parts and materials necessary to make the repairs. Councilor Scott commented for the record that the total budget for these repairs would be \$1.6 million if done by city employees, and that the staff shortage in the Water and Sewer Department is costing taxpayers a 50% markup because the amount requested here increases that amount to \$2.4 million for the year.

Councilor Scott asked how many Special Heavy Motor Equipment Operator (SHMEO) positions are filled right now, and Director Vidalis indicated that zero were filled. Councilor Scott replied that there are 11 such positions in the budget, but only 8 posted on the website as open, and Director Vidalis responded that the 8 currently posted are for the Monday-Friday openings, which the Department is prioritizing before attempting to fill the other vacancies, which represent the Tuesday-Saturday shifts. Director Scott asked how long these positions have been vacant, and Director Vidalis replied that they have been vacant since before he started in August of 2022. Councilor Scott commented for the record that it is outrageous that these positions have been open for so long due to the large increase in costs to taxpayers associated with hiring third-party contractors to complete the work. Director Vidalis clarified that this is impacting the ratepayers, not the taxpayers directly, to which Councilor Scott further clarified that the money comes from the Enterprise Funds. Director Vidalis added that there are also 7 SHMEO positions for Sewer, and only two are currently filled, and that requests have been made to the Personnel Department to engage in contract negotiations to fill those.

Councilor Clingan asked if the difficulty in hiring for these positions is related to the certifications required for qualified applicants, and Director Vidalis responded that he was aware of that issue, and that to address it the department will propose maintaining the Water Operator certification requirement but reclassify the SHMEO roles to just laborers that will not require a license from the Massachusetts Department of Transportation. Director Vidalis added that successful candidates will still be required to obtain the Drinking Water Operator's Certification, but that they have a year to do so and the city covers the cost of that training. Councilor Clingan stated that these will be welcome changes, particularly if they allow the city to complete more of this work using its own employees, as opposed to outside contractors.

RESULT: **RECOMMENDED TO BE APPROVED**

AYE: Chairperson Wilson, Vice Chair Scott, City Councilor At Large Kelly and Ward Four City Councilor Clingan

ABSENT: Ward Seven City Councilor Pineda Neufeld

- 5. Mayor's Request (ID # [23-0487](#)) Requesting the appropriation of \$50,000 from the Immigrant Legal Services Stabilization Fund for legal services for immigrants and asylum seekers seeking permanent residency.

Councilor Kelly asked for clarification regarding the sentence in the corresponding memorandum that states, “Nevertheless, the \$50,000 was never appropriated from the ILSSF to be used for the provision of legal services.” Councilor Kelly asked if that meant that the money was allocated but then did not go where it needed to go. Chair Wilson added that a supplemental appropriation approved on November 22, 2022 for the Immigrant Legal Services Stabilization Fund.

Councilor Kelly replied that this request is an appropriation as well, and expressed concern that the sentence in the memorandum for this item means that money was never actually used and was never accounted for. Councilor Kelly added that this money is crucial for highly vulnerable people and these funds are often needed quickly, particularly if someone is facing deportation, and that it would be best to avoid a cyclical dynamic where the Council approves funds that then fall through the cracks. Legislative Liaison Carrillo replied that the issue would be investigated and clarified by the memorandum’s author.

RESULT: **RECOMMENDED TO BE APPROVED**

AYE: Chairperson Wilson, Vice Chair Scott, City Councilor At Large Kelly and Ward Four City Councilor Clingan

ABSENT: Ward Seven City Councilor Pineda Neufeld

Grant Acceptances

- 6. Mayor's Request (ID # [23-0190](#)) Requesting approval to accept and expend a \$79,500 grant with no new match required, from the MA Executive Office of Public Safety to the Police Department for staffing costs.

Councilor Kelly asked why the grant application listed staffing levels at the Police Department at 94, when the number discussed last year was 88. Deputy Chief Ward responded that the Department is budgeted for 88 officers by the City Council but is authorized to have 94 by the Mayor, and that any reduction from that 94 number would need to come from the Mayor’s Office. Councilor Scott clarified that Mayor would need to issue a reorganization order to reduce the number from 94 officers, and Deputy Chief Ward responded in the affirmation. Councilor Scott asked for input from the Mayor’s Office, and Legislative Liaison Carrillo responded that the administration is conducting a staffing study that is still ongoing, and therefore no decisions have been made regarding staffing levels for the Police Department. Councilor Scott asked if the Mayor declined to take action to reduce the staffing level to 88 from 94, and Legislative Liaison Carrillo responded that the administration is not declining to take action, but rather is engaged in a study to determine appropriate staffing levels, and that the study has not yet been completed. Legislative Liaison Carrillo added

that staffing levels have not gone past the 88 positions budgeted.

Councilor Scott asked why it appears that these additional positions keep appearing in grant applications despite the City Council repeatedly trying to remove them. Chair Wilson responded that there may be a strategic advantage to leaving the number at 94 in grant applications to secure the funding desired.

Legislative Liaison Carrillo added that, despite the wording in the grant, there are currently six budgeted vacancies in the Department’s staffing, which were budgeted but not funded by the City Council, reflecting the difference between the 88 and 94 figures. Deputy Chief Ward added that as of this meeting, there are also seven openings in the Department that, if filled, would bring the Police Department headcount to 88.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE APPROVED

AYE: Chairperson Wilson, Vice Chair Scott, City Councilor At Large Kelly and Ward Four City Councilor Clingan

ABSENT: Ward Seven City Councilor Pineda Neufeld

7. Mayor's Request (ID # [23-0377](#))

Requesting approval to accept and expend a \$28,000 grant with no new match required, from MassDEP to the Office of Sustainability and Environment for the Recycle Dividend Program.

Councilor Kelly asked what the actual use of this funding would be, and Legislative Liaison Carrillo responded that the author of the document could reach out to the Councilor and responded.

Councilor Kelly expressed frustration that memoranda such as this are circulated for discussion at Committee Meetings but the individuals who would be able to answer them are not available to do so. Chair Wilson responded that there is a balance to having staff members come to Committee Meetings for straightforward items, but that there may be a way to fine tune getting questions to the authors earlier.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE APPROVED

AYE: Chairperson Wilson, Vice Chair Scott, City Councilor At Large Kelly and Ward Four City Councilor Clingan

ABSENT: Ward Seven City Councilor Pineda Neufeld

Rescissions

8. Mayor's Request (ID # [23-0450](#))

Requesting the rescission of \$435,000 from the Medical Marijuana Stabilization Fund appropriation of \$591,442 approved on February 24, 2022.

Chair Wilson stated this is a procedural item to return funds to the Medical Marijuana Stabilization Fund that were originally allocated for the outdoor standalone public restrooms.

RESULT: **RECOMMENDED TO BE APPROVED**
AYE: Chairperson Wilson, Vice Chair Scott, City Councilor At Large Kelly and Ward Four City Councilor Clingan
ABSENT: Ward Seven City Councilor Pineda Neufeld

Orders

9. Order (ID # [23-0137](#))
By Councilor Clingan, Councilor Wilson, Councilor Kelly and Councilor Burnley Jr.
That the Director of Communications provide this Council with an accounting of how the cable franchise fees have been expended over the past five years.

Councilor Clingan expressed satisfaction regarding the contents of the memorandum provided in response to this request.

RESULT: **RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED**

Referenced Documents:

- Finance - 2023-04-11 Recycle Dividend Program Grant memo (with 23-0377)
- Finance - 2023-04-11 MEMO - 2023 Ash Tree Treatment Program Street Tree Stabilization Funds with 23-0289)
- Finance - 2023-04-11 MEMO - Appropriation 50K for IMLSS 4.7.23 (with 23-0487)
- Finance - 2023-04-11 WS Council Appropriation_202304 (with 23-0369)