



City of Somerville, Massachusetts

City Council Finance Committee

Meeting Minutes

Thursday, June 15, 2023

6:30 PM

Committee of the Whole

This meeting was held in the City Council Chamber and via Zoom and was called to order by Chair Wilson at 6:30 p.m. with 9 Councilors present (Councilors McLaughlin, Davis, Scott, Clingan, Burnley, Gomez Mouakad, Kelly, Pineda Neufeld, Wilson) and 2 absent (Councilors Strezo, Ewen-Campen); and adjourned at 8:26 p.m. on a Roll Call Vote: 11 in favor (Councilors McLaughlin, Davis, Scott, Strezo, Clingan, Burnley, Gomez Mouakad, Kelly, Pineda Neufeld, Ewen-Campen, Wilson), 0 opposed, 0 absent.

Chair Wilson noted that Councilor Strezo joined the meeting at 7:03 p.m.

Chair Wilson noted that Councilor Ewen-Campen joined the meeting at 7:32 p.m.

The Council entered into recess at 6:35 p.m. and returned at 6:41 p.m.

Others present:

Michael Potere – Assistant Clerk of Committees; Charles Breen – Chief Engineer, Fire Department; Michael Mastrobuoni – Budget Director; Charles Femino – Chief of Police; James Stanford – Deputy Chief of Police; Denise Molina Capers – Director of Racial and Social Justice.

Roll Call

Present: Chairperson Jake Wilson, Vice Chair Jefferson Thomas (J.T.) Scott, Charlotte Kelly, Jesse Clingan, Ben Ewen-Campen, Willie Burnley Jr., Lance L. Davis, Beatriz Gomez Mouakad, Matthew McLaughlin, Judy Pineda Neufeld and Kristen Strezo

1. Review of the FY 2024 Budget

- Fire
- Fire Alarm
- Emergency Management
- Police
- Animal Control
- E-911

1. Fire

Chief Engineer Breen briefly presented highlights from the Fire Department's published budget proposal and stated that the department submitted answers to previously submitted written questions ahead of the meeting.

Councilor Scott asked about the department's request for \$2 million in overtime, compared it to the \$2.5 million that was requested for the previous

two years, noted that in both of those years the department came to the City Council to request an additional \$1 million to cover overtime expenses, and asked how the present \$2 million figure was established. Chief Engineer Breen replied that the figure is based on the department's analysis of the overtime spent during the first half of the fiscal year, and noted that the department has been successful in adding staff, which has caused overtime to decrease.

Councilor Scott asked if the planned Assembly Row fire station was included in the department's Fiscal Year 2024 budget, and Chief Engineer Breen responded that it was not, and that it would be included in next year's budget. Councilor Scott expressed concern that there was no requested appropriations to hire for the new positions that will be located at that station in this year's budget, noting that the hiring process can take up to a year.

Councilor Scott asked if the department's proposed Director of Finance Administration position is the one that used to be shared by the Police Department, and Chief Engineer Breen confirmed that it was. Councilor Scott asked how that position split its time, and Chief Engineer Breen stated that the person was only permitted to spend 25% of their time on the Fire Department, and that this new position would account for the difference.

Councilor Pineda Neufeld asked when the department's proposed assessment of the city's fire stations and implementation of a corresponding master plan would take place during Fiscal Year 2024, and Chief Engineer Breen replied that the assessment should be done during that timeframe.

Chair Wilson noted there were no motions or resolutions on this subject.

2. Fire Alarm

Chief Engineer Breen opened by stating that the budget is expected to increase by 10% for this year due to collective bargaining agreement obligations and overtime.

Councilor Clingan asked about candidates who were offered jobs in Fire Alarm but then did not accept them, to which the department did not have an answer, stating that it could have been for personal reasons. Councilor Clingan noted that the decreased pay scales for these open positions could end up costing the department more in overtime.

Chair Wilson noted there were no motions or resolutions on this subject.

3. Emergency Management

Director Mastrobuoni summarized the changes to the Emergency

Management budget as being reflected in the creation of two new positions, a Director of Emergency Management and a Deputy Director of Emergency Management, and noted that the former position exists but was previously funded by ARPA.

Councilor Scott commented that he will consider this proposed Deputy Director position, along with similarly proposed positions for other departments, as potential cuts to be made in the budget. Director Mastrobuoni replied by clarifying that although the position is labeled “Deputy Director,” it is less of a managerial role and more of a role focused on emergency management communications and infrastructure.

Councilor Kelly asked about overlap between this position and the Emergency Communications Public Information Officer proposed by the Communications & Community Engagement Department. Director Mastrobuoni replied that the two positions would complement each other to make sure the city has plans in advance of any emergency situations it might face in the future.

Councilor Gomez Mouakad asked about the difficulty in hiring for the existing Director position, and Director Mastrobuoni replied that the department is looking for a specific skillset and has not been able to identify a candidate who possesses it. Councilor Gomez Mouakad asked if the proposed Deputy Director role was also intended to serve as a backup role for the Director, and Director Mastrobuoni confirmed that was the intention.

Councilor Pineda Neufeld asked for clarification on what defines an “emergency” as that term applies to the department. Director Mastrobuoni stated situations like the MBTA shutdown, fires, and the COVID-19 pandemic, and added that, in addition to be responsive to emergencies, the department’s goal is to be as proactive as possible in planning and preparing for them.

Councilor Clingan asked if these positions would be present at the locations of emergencies that may arise, and Director Mastrobuoni replied that the specifics regarding that were still being developed. Councilor Clingan noted that there appears to be overlap in these positions and others being proposed, and does not clearly see the need for all of them.

Councilor Pineda Neufeld expressed support for the creation of emergency management positions, noting the turbulence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chair Wilson noted there were no motions or resolutions on this subject.

4. Police

Councilor McLaughlin recused himself from this portion of the meeting

after confirming no votes would be taken tonight.

Chief Femino outlined the Police Department's proposed personal services budget, noting that further reductions in staff would negatively impact the department's ability to respond appropriately to public safety needs, as well as lower department morale. Chief Femino added that the reductions in staffing the department has already seen has forced it to, for example, abolish the Community Policing Unit, and has turned the department into a "reactive," as opposed to "proactive" policing position. Chief Femino also explained that, while the staffing numbers have decreased, crime levels and workload have increased, in part due to the expansion of the MBTA and new commercial developments, both of which are bringing more people into the city. Chief Femino stated that the only proposed additions to the department's staff are two Jail Diversion Coordinators, which are clinician positions that will help the department identify and evaluate cases appropriate for participation in the program. Chief Femino concluded by stating that the department is also requesting a \$64,000 increase in the ordinary maintenance budget, including \$22,000 for an evidence tracking system upgrade.

Councilor Kelly asked about officer training regarding traffic education, particularly with regard to bicyclists and pedestrians. Chief Femino replied that there are officers from the traffic office who are tasked with this enforcement, and that the program is primarily educational in nature, and that very few punitive monetary fines have been issued for violations.

Councilor Kelly asked if the department's civilian positions were considered in its staffing study, and Director Molina Capers replied that they would.

Councilor Kelly asked about the data that is collected during a park "walk and talk," and Chief Femino replied that the purpose of the talks is to engage with the community, and the reason that they are quantifiable is because the officers report back to the department when they are over to indicate that they are back in service.

Councilor Kelly requested an accounting of how much the department has billed city and non-city entities for officer traffic details, and Chief Femino indicated such a report would be provided. Councilor Kelly also requested a memorandum explaining the way checks written to pay for officer traffic details are processed, and Director Mastrobuoni stated that one would be provided.

Chair Wilson commented that the department should deprioritize enforcement of red-light infractions by bicyclists who have stopped at the light in the meantime. Chair Wilson also encouraged the department to digitize the process it uses for coordinating the processing of checks and payments for officer traffic details.

Councilor Ewen-Campen expressed frustration with the department's inability to readily produce a breakdown of officer traffic details, particularly because the department has the exclusive contractual right to those details due to its collective bargaining agreement.

Councilor Scott asked about the decrease of traffic citations issued by the department, noting a decrease from 11,580 tickets in 2017 to around 5,000 from 2020 to the present. Chief Femino and Deputy Chief Stanford both expressed that part of the reason for the decrease is less staff within the department.

Councilor Scott asked about the role of the FBI Liaison. Deputy Chief Stanford explained that he has an office within the city but spends most of his time at the FBI office, and Chief Femino added that although his work is primarily with the FBI, he is available to the city if needed.

Councilor Scott asked about the department's Homeland Security Liaison, and Chief Femino stated that position was combined with a Special Operations Lieutenant position, both of which are now undertaken by one sergeant.

Councilor Gomez Mouakad expressed frustration that significantly more time is spent discussing the police budget than the education budget, and stated that continuing down that path will erode the city's education system. Councilor Gomez Mouakad concluded by urging the Council to prioritize funding education over police.

Chair Wilson noted there were no motions or resolutions on this subject.

5. Animal Control

Chief Femino stated the department is requesting a 1% budget increase for personal services based on salary increases resulting from collective bargaining, and \$6,000 for professional and technical services, which cover the costs of veterinarians used by the department.

Councilor Kelly asked why kennels was being cut from the budget book, and Chief Femino replied that the city no longer uses kennels because it has its own housing for animals.

Councilor Scott asked if the department has procured a new van, and Chief Femino indicated that it has not.

Chair Wilson noted there were no motions or resolutions on this subject.

6. E-911

Chief Femino proposed a 5% personal services budget increase of around \$65,000 to reflect cost of living adjustments.

Councilor Kelly asked about an increased budget for holiday pay, and Chief Femino responded that Fiscal Year 2024 has an additional Saturday holiday.

Chair Wilson noted there were no motions or resolutions on this subject.

Note: Written comment may also be emailed to cityclerk@somervillema.gov and will be accepted until noon on Wednesday, June 21, 2023.

Referenced Documents:

- Finance - 2023-06-15 Emergency Management
- Finance - 2023-06-15 Police Budget Question Responses
- Finance - 2023-06-15 SFD ORG CHART
- Finance - 2023-06-15 FY24 Budget Q's