



City of Somerville, Massachusetts

City Council Finance Committee

Meeting Minutes

Monday, June 17, 2024

6:00 PM

The meeting took place virtually via Zoom and was called to order at 6:00 PM by Chair Wilson and adjourned at 9:40 PM on a roll call vote of 4 in favor (Councilors Clingan, Burnley, Scott and Wilson), none against and 1 absent (Councilor Ewen-Campen).

Others present:

David Goodridge – Director - IT, David Slonina - Deputy Director – IT, Rich Raiche – Director of Infrastructure and Asset Management, Melissa Woods – Director of Capital Projects, Brian Postlewaite – Director of Engineering, Demetrios Vidalis - Director of Water and Sewer, Julie Spurr-Knight – Director of Finance and Administration – DPW, Matthew Bennett – Superintendent of Buildings, Ben Waldrip – Superintendent of Grounds, Jill Lathan – Commissioner of Public Works, Eric Weisman – Director of Operations – DPW, Jeffrey Barbieri – Superintendent of Lights and Lines/Electrical, Erica Satin-Hernandez – ARPA Director, Peter Forcellese – Legislative Clerk.

The meeting was recessed at 7:48 PM and reconvened at 7:58 PM.

Roll Call

Present:	City Councilor At Large Jake Wilson, Ward Two City Councilor Jefferson Thomas (J.T.) Scott, City Councilor At Large Willie Burnley Jr. and Ward Four City Councilor Jesse Clingan
Absent:	Ben Ewen-Campen

1. Review of the FY 2025 Budget

- **Information Technology**

Director David Goodridge and Deputy Director David Slonina presented the department budget and told the committee that Personal Services has increased 8.4% and Ordinary Maintenance has gone up 12.6%. Councilor Scott commented on the amount budgeted for network security and the Director explained that additional email security has been implemented and procedures and checkpoints are in place which will also help with security. The plan is to make sure that everything is tight with the network before any security software purchases are made.

- **Infrastructure and Asset Management**

Director of Infrastructure and Asset Management Rich Raiche told the committee that Ordinary Maintenance expenses for Engineering and Capital Projects is combined in the IAM budget. Each of those divisions has its

own budget for contracts, however. In the FY25 budget, an additional construction liaison position is proposed due to the department's expanding portfolio. Director Raiche noted that there was a slight increase in the Professional Development line increased and that everything else is level funded. Councilor Burnley asked about out of state travel and the Director explained that it was budgeted for in-state conferences, but most of the desired conferences are out of state, so that increased the travel line. Councilor Burnley requested that the actual amount spent in FY24 for out of state travel be provided and the Director said that \$2,800 has been spent to date and there are 2 more conferences net week, which will bring that line to \$4,600 by the end of FY24. The FY25 budget line request is \$10,000. Councilor Burnley inquired about how the construction liaison position works to engage with public and Director Raiche explained that there are a number of projects in design and planning that require a great deal of public outreach since they have big impacts on neighborhoods, and the liaison coordinates community meetings with the project managers. Often times, there's a lot of confusion about projects because not enough engagement was done before the design stage. The liaison position handles more of the ground game and tries to understand the concerns of residents. Councilor Burnley asked about the line for employee training courses, saying that only \$1,500 out of the budgeted \$9,000 was spent and the Director said that this is mostly self driven by employees who identify what training would be helpful to them and that managers also steer staff to specific training courses.

Councilor Scott noted the impressive increase in projects over the past few years and asked what the cumulative amount is of projects being presently overseen and Director Raiche said that the data crunching isn't done yet, but he hopes to have a number by the fall. Councilor Scott commented that, given the volume of work and the incredible work of the department, he would like to bring the work in-house. He asked if the bonding/investment for Poplar Street project are in place and the Director said that it is and that spending is ramping up to about \$2 million per month by the end of FY24 and that all unforeseen circumstances have been take care of by the contingency funds.

- **Capital Projects**

Director of Capital Projects Melissa Woods presented the division's budget and said that it's been a busy year because of the issues with the Winter Hill and Edgerly Schools and that some of the department's goals have shifted in order to meet the needs of the city. Chair Wilson inquired about the capital outlay for engineering services and Director Woods explained that the available budget does not include recent requisitions. She also said that some project funding was shifted to available ARPA money. Councilor Clingan asked about the Argenziano School concept design and the Director explained that the city is working to retro-commission schools, i.e., to

examine them to determine if repairs or replacement work is needed. Councilor Clingan asked about the Skilton Avenue building and Director Raiche said that the building is being taken with the intent to demolish it and add it to Leathers Park as open space. Chair Wilson thanked Director Woods as she prepares to leave for a new position

- **Engineering**

Director of Engineering Brian Postlewaite reviewed the department's work during FY24 and presented the FY25 budget. He said that the department is nearly fully staffed and that the Morrison Avenue and the Mystic outfall projects are in the design stage. He noted that 60% of staff time is funded by the Water and Sewer Enterprise Funds.

- **Water**

This was discussed with the Sewer Department

Director of Water and Sewer Demetrios Vidalis said the department has made an effort to stay level funded on Ordinary Maintenance, but he noted increases in the enterprise funds. He told the committee that the city's fees for MWRA water has increased and that sewer costs have decreased. He also noted that there is an increase in debt services.

Chair Wilson spoke about the vacant HMEO positions that show a July 1 starting date and asked what the earliest date for filling those positions would be, with the thought of reducing the salary line. Councilor Scott pointed out that the only way that the City Council may influence the Water/Sewer budget is by approving or denying rate increases. Director Vidalis said that the department is actively recruiting and receiving resumes as it seeks to fill the positions. Chair Wilson commented that Cambridge budgets \$67,000 for an HMEO which is higher than what Somerville is offering. Councilor Clingan asked if some qualifications for the SHMEO positions are stumbling blocks to filling the positions and the Director said that the candidates who applied were missing CDL's or other credentials. Councilor Clingan suggested that maybe a review of the qualifications for the position is in order to ensure that all of Somerville's requirements are actually needed. Director Vidalis noted that any change to the requirements would have to be negotiated. Chair Wilson asked what the impact to rate payers would be if the department cut some lines that it knows won't be filled and Director Vidalis said that he will look at the information and provide a response at tomorrow's Finance Committee meeting.

- **Sewer**

This was discussed with the Water Department

- **DPW Administration**

Commissioner Lathan gave an overview of the department and said that the goal is to be ready, resilient and proficient by investing in staff. The DPW will be taking over recreation facilities to align maintenance and preventive maintenance. Energy audits will begin in July to control future energy cost increases.

Director of Finance and Administration Julie Spurr-Knight presented the Administration budget of \$1.9 million, which is an increase of 7.4% over FY24. Councilor Scott noted that \$15,000 was transferred in for training, yet the budget line for FY25 was level funded and the Director said the \$15,000 was for CDL training. Councilor Scott asked where in the budget is the investment in training that Commissioner Lathan spoke about and Director Spurr-Knight replied that what is presented in the budget is adequate to get training done and said that CDL training can be offered again in the fall. She also noted that there is some on the job training that takes place. Councilor Clingan asked why the Facilities Coordinator position was not a union position and Commissioner Lathan replied that it's a critical position that's aligned with the management staff. Councilor Clingan commented that he sees a trend that if a position is not a manual labor position, then it's not going to be a union position.

- **Buildings**

Discussed with Custodians

Superintendent of Buildings for Custodians Matthew Bennett explained the duties of the custodial team and presented the division's budget and said that a Building Assessment Manager and a Preventive Maintenance Manager were hired to proactively perform maintenance. Director Weisman noted that there are 5 vacancies in the Building Division and 2 in Custodians. Councilor Scott asked about tasking Building Department employees to paint rather than contracting the work out and Director Weisman replied that the department tries to do as much as possible in-house, but some larger jobs might get contracted out. Staff has been working nights and weekends to do as much as possible. Councilor Scott requested a list of where walls were painted during FY24 and asked if there is a budgetary priority or capacity limitation for painting. Commissioner Lathan will provide a painting list to Councilor Scott.

Councilor Burnley asked about after hours work and noted that the FY25 OT budget is same as the previous year and Director Bennett replied that the OT budget was used appropriately to get the work done. Councilor Clingan asked about cleaning public restrooms and when the Portland Loos would be installed and Commissioner Lathan explained that the DPW will be responsible for maintaining them and that there have been some problems getting them. Councilor Clingan noted that the extermination budget has increased and Director Bennett explained that was due to the

implementation of smart boxes throughout the city. Chair Wilson spoke about snow/ice removal and asked if the budget is sufficient to keep the stairs on Central Hill clear and Director Weisman noted that the stairs are beyond the 1-year curing period, so yes, the budget is sufficient.

- **Grounds**

Superintendent of Grounds Ben Waldrip presented the division's budget and informed the committee that it now encompasses the field maintenance and the tree crew. He spoke about investing in staff certification training and said that individual maintenance plans are being worked on for each park and that with continued training, fields will be able to be maintained by in-house staff. Chair Wilson asked about a vacant position and Superintendent Weisman said that the candidate didn't accept the position so it has to be reposted and July 1 start date is appropriate. Chair Wilson asked about the grooming of synthetic fields and Superintendent Waldrip said that there has been no outsourcing for that work and that he hopes to have the department fully staffed by next spring. Councilor Scott asked if the care of Lincoln Park is being brought in-house and Superintendent Waldrip said that the work is under contract.

Councilor Scott asked about the 5 vacant positions and was informed that 1 has been filled with a start date of August. Councilor Clingan asked if recreation space maintenance includes the community path and the Superintendent said that it does and that staff is on path daily and being as responsive as possible to calls that come in. Chair Wilson asked if the level funded budget for holiday lighting was enough and he was assured that it was. Councilor Scott noted that the water fountain at Lincoln Park is still not working, however, Superintendent Waldrip explained that it is working but there is a drainage issue.

- **Fields Maintenance**

Discussed with Grounds

- **School Custodians**

Discussed with Buildings

- **Solid Waste**

Director Weisman said that the budget for solid waste is \$9.2 million, up 4% due to contractual increases. Chair Wilson asked if the flat rate contract for hauling could be revisited if there is a dramatic drop in the tonnage being removed and Director Weisman replied that he wasn't sure, adding that although tonnage may go down, the number of households is increasing so

the vendor might have a counter proposal. Chair Wilson commented about residential totes and asked if the city has looked into any other materials that don't get eaten by rats. Director Weisman said that they looked at a higher density plastic but the barrels weren't assembled. He noted that a Sanitation and Hazardous Materials Manager has been hired and would be the person to consult about this. Councilor Scott asked if the recycling contract vendor is paying living wages and Director Weisman said it was built into the 3 year contract which will be expiring this July and that it resulted in higher costs to the city.

- **Lights and Lines/Electrical**

Discussed with Highway, Fleet Management and Snow Removal Superintendent of Lights and Lines Jeffrey Barbieri noted that the retirement of a tenured individual accounts for the reduction in personnel costs.

- **Highway**

Superintendent Barbieri reported that the pretreating of city streets was a success and that the brining system saved 72 tons of salt from being used and that the department is looking to add organics into the brine to use even less salt. The department will be taking on the removal of outside household debris and will be making repairs on the bike lanes. Additionally, the department is looking to add more solar lighting to city. The Superintendent noted that there are currently 10 vacancies in the department.

- **Fleet Management**

Superintendent Barbieri reported that 15 vehicles were acquired along with a tire mounting machine. The department will be purchasing a wheel balancer in FY25 and an alignment machine in FY26. Councilor Burnley spoke about speed limiters and asked when all vehicles would be equipped with them and Director Weisman said he would obtain the information and get back to him, adding that installations would have to meet any relevant collective bargaining requirements. Chair Wilson noted that the Professional and Technical Services line was underspent in FY23 and FY24 and asked the Superintendent if he was confident that FY25 budget line would be spent? Director Spurr-Knight said that the year to date spending for that line was in excess of \$20,000. She said that vehicles will be getting GPS devices (along with a service contract) that will provide data on engine functions, gas mileage, etc., to better manage assets. Seventy one units will be installed and will be expensed to this line. Councilor Scott inquired about the vacant Fleet Manager position and Director Weisman said that it became vacant in April and that the department is in round 2 of interviews and hopes to make an offer next week.

- **Snow Removal**

Chair Wilson commented that the lower budget for snow removal is the result of utilizing the brining system. Director Weisman noted that there were 13 winter weather events, 11 of which had accumulating snow. One event had over 4” of snow and the city declared 2 snow emergencies. Brining pretreatment was used in 8 of those events. Councilor Scott commented that the snow budget has increased every year and the expenditures for FY24 were over budget with just 3 storms. Director Weisman explained that contractors have to be brought in based on weather forecasts, not on what falls. Prices have increased for staff, equipment, contractors, and supplies. He believes that the budget tracks pretty well.

2. Officer's
Communication
(ID # [24-0913](#))

Director of Water and Sewer conveying the FY 2025 Water & Sewer Rate proposal.

Director of Water and Sewer Demetrios Vidalis addressed questions asked at last week’s City Council meeting. He explained that the proposed rates have an average increase of less than 6% and would provide \$1.6 million in revenue for water and \$1.4 million in revenue for sewer. That will fund the city’s MWRA assessments and the city’s infrastructure plan. Rate tier changes are being considered for implementation in January 2025. Director Vidalis told the committee that the city paid \$3.4 million for contract work in FY24. The department has a plan to explain rate increases in a letter to be sent with the first round of bills and is also working to get a communication out about affordability and resources.

Chair Wilson referenced a slide comparing Somerville’s rates with those in Malden and Medford. He stated that according to an MWRA chart, Somerville paid the 2nd highest rate out of the 55 communities in the MWRA district. The Director said that users are paying the retail rate, i.e., what the city is charging people. Chair Wilson said that he has a fundamental disagreement about how the city pays for the infrastructure improvements that are needed.

Councilor Scott asked about invoices for contracted work and Director Vidalis will submit the response in the next day or 2. He said that Water has 2 contracts totaling slightly over \$2 million and Sewer has 2 contracts totaling \$1.3 million, bringing the total for all 4 contracts in FY24 to \$3.4 million. Three contracts have expired and will be going out to bid, followed by 1 more next month.

The city has 15,400 rate payers and Councilor Scott noted that 924 of them saw significant increases this year. Director Vidalis explained that the department is proactively trying to adjust those bills that are brought to its

attention. Councilor Scott said that 170 bills have been adjusted so far and the Director said that they are working from bills with the greatest increase to smallest, starting with anyone who saw an increase of \$2000 or more. Below that amount, it's up to the rate payer to request an adjustment.

Councilor Clingan asked about increases over the past 5 years and the Director said that the average monthly increase was \$29. Councilor Clingan pointed out that the increase is over 30% for that period. He said that when inflation is factored in, along with prop 2.5 over rides, the lack of faith in this department and its inability to hire people, he can't support asking the public for another increase, adding that it would be felt by renters and affect affordability and displacement. Director Vidalis said that the city is looking at recruiting and expects that negotiations will improve hiring and that once the department is staffed up, reliance on contractors will lessen. Director Vidalis reported that the total spent was \$4 million and if the department were fully staffed, with overtime pay and supplemental contracting included, the total spent would still have been \$4 million. Chair Wilson stated that he can't support this rate increase and Councilor Scott noted that similar conversations have been had every year since 2019, adding that he will not support the rate increases. Director Vidalis pointed out that 85% of the department's expenses are a fixed amount and that the Enterprise Funds are designed to be self sustaining. Chair Wilson said rate payers aren't the only source of the revenue needed to fix things and he asked the Administration to consider spending any ARPA funds, not locked in or returned to the city, on the Poplar Street Pumping Station project to help rate payers. ARPA Director Erica Satin-Hernandez said that she understands the request and said all funds have been accounted for.

This will be TABLED kept in committee for discharge tomorrow for consideration before the Committee of the Whole.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE