

Lunenburg Finance Committee
Meeting Minutes
Thursday, November 4, 2021

Location: In-person at Lunenburg Town Hall and broadcast on Zoom

Present: Chairperson Peter Beardmore, Chris Menard, Dave Passios, Evan Watters, Thomas Balish, Thomas Gray

Absent: Jay Simeone

Guests: Town Manager Heather Lemieux, T.C. Passios Building Design Committee Chairman Greg Roy, Select Board Member Michael Ray Jeffreys, Town Accountant Karen Brochu, Lunenburg Resident Rhonda Lissio, Lunenburg Resident Dave Rodgers via Zoom

1. Call to Order

Mr. Beardmore called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m. and read a statement concerning the Open Meeting Law, and how all public meetings are legally being held remotely.

This meeting was recorded and is viewable on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/kUqJBVgp2mk>

2. Pledge of Allegiance

3. Announcements: none

4. Public Comment:

5. Town Manager/Finance Director Reports: none

6. Public Hearing on Special town Meeting Warrant Articles 3, 7, and 8: Mr. Beardmore opened the public hearing. Mr. Beardmore explained that the committee resolved to avail themselves to public hearing after the Warrant was printed if more information was made available.

- a. **Article 3:** Though Ms. Lemieux anticipated the collective bargaining agreement with the Lunenburg Professional Fire Fighters to be ready for discussion, another piece, not having to do with finances, still needs to be addressed. Mr. Passios suggested that anything could change until an agreement between the two parties is signed.
- b. **Articles 7 and 8:** As a member of the T.C. Passios Building Design Committee, Mr. Jeffreys gave a presentation on Article 7 which pertains to renovation the T.C. Passios building. Mr. Jeffreys explained that when the committee was tasked with its charge in 2019 the cost of renovation would be \$22,592,000, and as it's two years later, the cost has increased to \$28,967,640, citing cost increases across the board from inflation, to materials and labor, as well as the job market. Mr. Jeffreys also proposed a conceptual design for a completely new building for \$39,637,229, which would house many uses

including: most town offices, the ACE Program, Lion's Club Food Pantry, the Extended Day Program, storage for schools and the town, as well as conference/meeting space.

As a Select Board member, Mr. Jeffreys then gave a presentation on Article 8, which requests \$350,000 to advance the design of the proposed new building, if the town would decide to choose that option. Mr. Jeffreys pointed out that as the building stands, the current tenants who pay rent on the building are what keeps the building in operation, and the town does not currently appropriate any funds for the T.C. Passios building. Mr. Jeffreys pointed out that a study was done on all town facilities in 2016, which revealed the town would soon need a new building to house town offices as Town Hall and the Ritter buildings have been rendered inadequate. Mr. Jeffreys shared pictures of current storage conditions, and informed those in attendance that the town has lost records due to mold from leaking roofs. Mr. Jeffreys drew attention to the inadequate accessibility of the Ritter building, as well as an inadequate supply of electricity. He also pointed out that by relocating town offices, a preservation of Town Hall and the Ritter could be attempted. Mr. Jeffreys also suggested in his presentation that not investing in a new building will cost the town millions of dollars a year to address the problems it currently faces with the existing conditions. Mr. Jeffreys explained that the late information of the increase in costs has caused the Select Board to recommend to pass over both Articles 7 and 8 at Special Town Meeting on Nov. 16, 2021.

Mr. Beardmore thanked Mr. Jeffrey for the presentations, and asked Ms. Lemieux what she knew about the new numbers. She consulted the town's financial advisor, who was not available to give an answer.

Mr. Beardmore said he encouraged the Select Board to pass over the articles. Mr. Beardmore also said he analyzed the new numbers and compared them to the average value of homes in Lunenburg and realized that funding either project, without taking into consideration funds to be expended to address Turkey Hill Elementary School, would put the town in violation of its own financial policies for five years. Mr. Beardmore calculated that the average property owner could expect to pay \$341 more per year at the \$28.9 million price tag, and \$467 more per year with the \$39.6 million price tag.

Mr. Menard approached the situation as a need vs. want scenario, and questioned whether busing students from the Primary School to the T.C. Passios for two hours out of the day was beneficial. Mr. Jeffreys said that the Extended Day Program is definitely a need, and that Superintendent Dr. Kate Burnham had several reasons why it's important for students to separate learning in the classroom from after school activity. Mr. Menard agreed that Extended Day is needed, but asked whether it needs to take place at the T.C. Passios and suggested the town library as an alternate location citing the library's newest master plan featuring the library as a community space. Mr. Watters asked whether the projects have taken into account the possible increase to the Extended Day Program.

Mr. Gray inquired if there were other locations for some uses, could the size of the building be decreased in order to lower the cost. Mr. Jeffrey responded that it's not a proportionate relationship.

Mr. Beardmore concluded that there is a strong possibility that the articles will be passed over, and asked where the town should go from there. Mr. Jeffreys reiterated that the problems the town faces will not go away, and the T.C. Passios Building Design Committee has done the best they can do. Mr. Jeffreys pointed out that the Town Manager plans to separate town facilities from the Department of Public Works, which will give the town the opportunity to properly address problems with town buildings.

Mr. Watters motioned to close the public hearing. Mr. Passios seconded. On vote, motion carried unanimously.

Public Hearing Public Comment:

Ms. Lissio commented that she disagrees with the tasks the T.C. Passios Building Design Committee were charged with, which was to house the current groups using the T.C. Passios building along with municipal offices. Ms. Lissio stated that she disagrees with passing the costs of housing the existing programs onto the tax payer. Ms. Lissio also claimed that in her research she found only one community that funds an Extended Day Program, and that is Lexington.

Mr. Rodgers called into the meeting and recognized that the town faces a complex situation with prices being a moving target, and that any project will cost more money than anticipated.

- 7. Discussion and Votes on recommendations for Special Town Meeting Articles:** The committee agreed to meet at 6:00 p.m. on November 16, 2021, an hour before Special Town Meeting is scheduled to start to address any new information regarding Article 3.
- On Articles 7 and 8 Mr. Beardmore informed the committee their choices are to recommend approval, recommend disapproval, defer, or claim no financial impact, and that the committee would be setting a precedent to recommend to vote to pass over the articles.
- Mr. Passios opined he would only vote on passing over if the motion was on the floor at Town Meeting. Mr. Passios expressed that passing over would not give voters a clear picture of what committee members are thinking, and that without debating the articles on the floor, and giving the public a chance to respond, there's no way to tell how the rest of the town thinks on the articles. Mr. Passios also expressed his concern over the current working conditions of the town's employees and the possibility of a push back, and asked if not now, when. Mr. Passios wants to hear the voice of the townspeople. Mr. Beardmore opined that if committee members had more time to consider the numbers they might be able to form an opinion to express, and also pointed out that with commodities pricing, along with inflation, and other issues being impacted by the pandemic also holds weight in deciding. Mr. Menard agreed with Mr. Beardmore and said the committee should have been able to start the discussion six weeks ago, and if they did, committee members might have an answer. Mr. Menard agreed to take a stand and recommend passing over the articles, and recognized that passing over is unprecedented, and pointed out that these are unprecedented times. Mr. Menard also said he would disapprove both articles, citing that Article 8 is still incomplete, and the price is too high. Mr. Passios pointed out that a yes vote to renovate the T.C. Passios would result in a special election to fill

the sudden vacant seat on the Select Board. Mr. Watters pondered whether recommending to pass over the articles would only lead to another Town Meeting where the committee would again seek to pass over the articles. Mr. Watters also said he would vote to disapprove both articles because putting all the proposed uses together does not make sense. At the same time, Mr. Watters expressed his concern over kicking the can down the road, and pointed out that it's been almost a decade, and the town is still having the same discussion. Mr. Gray said it's the committee's job to make a recommendation, and currently he couldn't approve of the article, so he would vote to disapprove. Mr. Gray also pointed out that if the prices keep rising, and they go up to \$50 million, there won't be much building of anything anywhere. Mr. Gray also drew attention to the programs the town currently provides at the T.C. Passios, and pondered what kind of town Lunenburg would be if they did not provide those programs. Mr. Beardmore claimed he's been against the articles since they've began, and that comparing the options of renovation and building new was the right thing to do. Mr. Beardmore prefers to look at alternative options for the ACE Program, Extended Day, PACC, and food bank locations within the next six months. Mr. Beardmore said he's not sold on municipal offices and all the other programs needing to exist under one roof. Mr. Beardmore said he'd initially vote for disapproval, but would entertain a motion to pass over the articles. Mr. Balish claimed he'd be against both articles and would prefer to look at what the town can actually afford, and make a decision based on that.

Mr. Menard moved to recommend disapproval of Article 7, Mr. Gray seconded. Motion passes, 3-2. Mr. Menard –yea, Mr. Balish –yea, Mr. Beardmore –yea, Mr. Passios –no, Mr. Watters –no.

Mr. Menard moved to recommend disapproval of Article 8, Mr. Balish seconded. On vote, motion carried unanimously.

Mr. Menard moved to recommend the Finance Committee, as a whole, pass over Articles 7 and 8, Mr. Beardmore seconded. Motion failed. 4 no, 2 aye.

Balish –no, Gray –no, Passios –no, Watters –no, Menard –aye, Beardmore-aye

Mr. Passios explained that a vote of the Finance Committee, as a whole, would not impact the way he votes on other committees.

Mr. Menard reiterated that the committee has just been presented with new data, which hasn't had the opportunity to be discussed enough publicly, and that is his reasoning behind the recommendation to pass over.

Ms. Lemieux clarified for the committee that moving to pass over the articles on the Town Meeting Floor is a debatable motion, which can be discussed on the floor.

8. **Special Town Meeting Consent Calendar:** Ms. Lemieux informed the committee that the Select Board voted Articles 5, 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13 as “noncontroversial,” and agreed to vote those articles first at Special Town Meeting as a block.

Mr. Menard moved to recommend agreement with the Select Board on the consent calendar, Mr. Balish seconded. On vote, motion carried unanimously.

9. **Minutes:** No minutes to review.

10. Committee Reports: Committee members updated each other on their respective liaison assignments.

11. Public Comment

Mr. Passios informed those in attendance that the T.C. Passios Building Design Committee would host a public forum on the latest information regarding Articles 7 and 8 on November 10, 2021.

Mr. Beardmore reminded those in attendance that the work of town committees and boards is that of volunteers, and that there aren't many, if any hidden agendas, and everyone is trying their best to do what's right for the town. Mr. Beardmore harkened back to when the town was facing a very contentious time. During that time, it was Lunenburg resident Mr. Rodgers who said that the voters at Town Meeting will ultimately make the right decision for Lunenburg.

Mr. Menard requested of Mr. Jeffreys copies of the presentations he gave at the Finance Committee meeting to hold onto for reference, and reminded those in attendance that the presentations are now public documents.

12. Items for Future Meetings

13. Next Meetings November 16, 2021 at 6 p.m. at Lunenburg Middle High School, and Special Town Meeting at 7 p.m. on November 16, 2021. December 9, 2021 (Follow up on Chp 70, Green Communities Committee, ARPA funds)

14. Adjourn At 9:54 p.m. Mr. Watters motioned to adjourn, Mr. Passios seconded. On vote, motion carried unanimously....*[This happened really fast, and when I looked back at YouTube, the camera was on the Town Manager, so I'm really not sure who moved and/or seconded to adjourn]*