

## **West Newbury Capital Improvements Committee Meeting Minutes**

**Meeting date & place: 7:30 PM, November 10, 2022, 1<sup>st</sup> Floor Hearing Room 1910 Building**

**Members Present:** Rick Parker, Polly McDowell, Elisa Grammer, Walter Burmeister, and Chair Judy Mizner. Department of Public Works (DPW) Director Wayne Amaral, and Town Manager Angus Jennings were also present.

### **Call to order**

7:30 PM

### **Approval of Minutes From 3/24/2022**

*By a unanimous vote the Committee approved the minutes of March 24, 2022.*

### **Committee Organization**

*By unanimous vote the Committee elected Judy Mizner as Chair, Polly McDowell as Vice Chair, and Elisa Grammer as Clerk.*

### **Update re: Page School Feasibility Working Group**

Mr. Jennings briefed the Committee about an upcoming feasibility study (funded at \$85K at the last Spring Town Meeting) intended to provide a top to bottom review of needed future investments in the Page School. He noted that a study followed by major upgrades occurred in 2009—but it was known at the time that additional major work remained to be done. He stressed that the scope of work needs to be well-planned. The study will involve a broad team of various types of engineers and others. The goal is to have the study completed next year. Whatever the outcome, it will take some years to address the Page School issue.

A scoping working group (which has benefitted from the expertise of former Pentucket facilities director Greg Hadden and the Town's new Project Manager Christine Wallace, P.E.) has one more meeting and will make recommendations about the scope of work and provided that to the Select Board in the beginning of December so that the Request for Qualifications can be ready at the beginning of the year. Mr. Parker and Ms. Grammer, who are members of the working group, said that a tour of the school showed very serious and expensive issues with perpetually failing hallway flooring, fire code and ADA violations, non-working windows, water infiltration from the sides and ground floors of the building. Addressing some pressing problems may, depending on cost and square feet involved, trigger larger and even more expensive code compliance requirements. Additionally, high costs to deal with the building's problems—ranging from consumption of 30K gallons of oil/year to demands on personnel to deal with continual new issues—raise serious questions whether and when it makes sense to seek alternatives to the Page School building.

### **Presentation of updated working draft Capital Improvements Program**

Mr. Jennings described the updated capital plan spreadsheet he provided the Committee a few days before. He noted that ultimately the Select Board, which controls the Town Meeting warrant, will decide what capital items are included in a given year. Also, in a separate document, he provided a matrix that begins to integrate future Stabilization Fund investments vs drawdowns, which requires more work.

Ms. Grammer noted that the Committee had intended that the capital improvements plan could be used to educate voters at Town Meeting about choices whether to commit funds to one project or another and asked whether the spreadsheet would be made available publicly. Mr. Jennings said that the

spreadsheets could be made available twice a year: once in late fall and once in the spring before Annual Town Meeting. It was noted that the last version of the capital improvement plan spreadsheet had been posted on the Committee website in the fall of 2020 and in March 2022, a placeholder saying that the spreadsheet would be posted soon had replaced the 2020 version.

Mr. Jennings said that the Committee could review the capital improvements plan just provided, make comments, and at its next meeting in December approve a version to be posted. Mr. Parker observed that certain items, such as the Pipestave water tank, have in fact had funds appropriated, and this should be clear so that those looking at the plan understand this. Mr. Amaral said that it is important to keep track of what has been spent to effect capital improvements both to maintain the list of items needing future replacement or investment and to make sure townspeople are aware of investments that have been made. *It was generally agreed that the plan should be posted and should be clarified in this respect, and that an introduction should be crafted to explain the process and provide caveats/disclaimers.*

Ms. Grammer wondered about the degree of confidence in the assessment that the various Town-owned septic systems would last until at least 2030. Mr. Amaral said that all of them are inspected annually and are in good shape.

Mr. Burmeister noted that projected capital improvements ebb and increase unevenly in future years, inquiring whether limits in project management capabilities affect this. Mr. Amaral said that many capital costs involve replacement of equipment, which often can be pushed out into future years and then sometimes pile up when replacements must be made.

#### **Discussion of capital finance spreadsheet, and method of projecting/forecasting future**

Regarding the separate spreadsheet analyzing future capital outflows and inflows into the Stabilization Fund, Mr. Jennings noted that it is important to recognize that resources beyond the Stabilization Fund (such as Free Cash, borrowing, Community Preservation Fund monies, grants, etc) may be used to pay for capital investments. Mr. Jennings said that overall, the Town is in very good financial shape with no debt after FY2023 (except for the Water Enterprise) and a AAA bond rating. Covering future Water Department capital costs, however, poses some significant issues since the customer base of water users is significantly smaller than the number of taxpayers and it is unclear how water customers alone can support the capital improvements that need to be made for the water system. He added that the Water Enterprise hopes to use a state program in which the state makes borrowed funds available at a 2% rate.

Ms. Grammer said that she had been reviewing the draft [Massachusetts Climate Change Assessment](#) and found it concerning in terms of its findings about lack of preparedness for adverse impacts on municipal finances. Key threats identified include a loss of municipal revenues as climate change harms properties in the property tax base while at the same time, demands on and expectations for municipal funding of climate change resiliency and remediation increase. She said that while she understands that local solutions make sense, it is disappointing that state agencies like the Massachusetts Division of Local Services are not setting forth best practices guidelines to help localities prepare to manage these issues.

## **Schedule for upcoming Capital Improvement Committee meeting(s)**

Next meeting December 8, 2022

### **Other business**

Middle St Bridge In response to Ms. McDowell's inquiry about the status of the Middle Street Bridge, which became unsafe and is impassible, Mr. Jennings said that realistically, the cost is too big for West Newbury and Newburyport (which has other priorities) to pay for. The Town's agreement with Newburyport for replacement has lapsed and the Massworks grant (which had been extended with much work) will expire at the end of June 2023. Extensive time and effort have been put into the permit process, and two permits remain to be received. The plan is to have this as a shovel-ready project that will attract infrastructure funding. The Committee discussed the Town's loss of many roads in and out of Town and the need to maintain the routes that are left.

Annual Report Ms. Grammer noted that the Committee's Annual Report will be due at the beginning of the year and suggested that it be addressed at the next Committee meeting.

### **Adjournment**

The meeting adjourned at 8:57 PM

### **Meeting Documents**

Capital improvements spreadsheets

Excerpt from draft MA Climate Change Report

Respectfully submitted

Elisa Grammer