

**Kingston, New Hampshire
Board of Selectmen
Budget Committee
Special Meeting of November 15, 2023
FINAL MINUTES**

This joint meeting, to hear information from the Wage Matrix study committee on their progress, was called to order at 6:30 PM by the Select Board Chairman.

PRESENT for the SELECT BOARD: Chair Chris Bashaw; Glenn Coppelman, Laurie Szwed, Ellie Alessio, Select Board Members

ABSENT: Vice Chair Chuck Hart

PRESENT for the BUDGET COMMITTEE: Chair Trisha Tidd; Vice Chair Rick Russman; Stacy Dion, Secretary; Claudine Dias, Annemarie Roth, John Pramberg, Gary Finerty and Kim Donahue, Members

ABSENT: Nick Hilfer

Chair Bashaw said that the Wage Matrix study group was formed by the Select Board, the catalyst being the Budget Committee's concern that the Pay for Performance method of employee raises is too subjective. He said that the Wage Matrix group was charged with collecting information on where current Town salaries are in relation to comparable towns. He said they had contacted municipalities, the New Hampshire Municipal Association (NHMA), and the state, and looked at their websites and databases; he said that it was not easy to collect reliable and up to date information. He had brought a "professional comprehensive payroll matrix salary study" done for Rockingham County as an example. He said this report cost the County \$200,000 and resulted in double digit pay increases for multiple years, attempting to get employees up to the goal, which was 50%.

Stacy Dion presented the findings of the study group, which she said consisted of two Select Board members, two members of the budget committee, department heads, the Finance Director and volunteers from the public. She said some departments are complete, but others still need work due to the difficulty of getting data particular to what the job is. As an example, she said that "Administrative Assistant" doesn't mean it's an equivalent position within the town or among other towns, and one of the big things is to be sure you have equivalent positions to know it's the right salary. In addition, she said that many support staff do more than one job.

The committee is working on developing a pay structure by breaking down job categories by department, and then within each category, identifying 6 different grades that begin with entry level and go up to Town Manager or Administrator. She said these grades are still being worked out. Within each grade there are 7 steps. Ms. Dion said that cost of living increases will be applied to the matrix if approved, so the salaries will keep up.

Ms. Dion said that the state and NHMA consider Kingston to be in the Haverhill, Newburyport and Amesbury, Massachusetts labor market, so along with towns chosen

based on proximity and comparable size, Merrimac, Massachusetts was included in the 21 towns selected.

Ms. Dion said that analysis performed showed the Police Department in the 50th percentile of pay range, the Fire Department in the 15th percentile, Department of Public Works (DPW) in the 95th percentile, and Town Hall employees to be determined. She said they did the analysis by getting ranges of pay for all the positions, and the lows and highs for each town. She said the easiest example is patrolman; they got the low and high rate from 30 different towns and took the median of each position, then compared Kingston's salary to the median.

The Wage Committee's recommendations for moving forward are to implement a pay matrix for the Police Department, because they are already where they need to be. They recommend a 2-year plan to increase the Fire Department salaries; she estimated that it will cost about \$47,000 to get them where they should be. The Committee will continue analysis of the Town Hall positions.

Ms. Dion said she has been working with the DPW Director, that she let him know his department is in a high percentile for pay, and that the study group is looking at the job descriptions and positions to be sure they are getting alignment.

Selectwoman Alessio said that the situations in the Police Department and Fire Department were very clear, and that the Police Department is competitively salaried and comparable to surrounding communities, so that a 7-step matrix can be implemented that moves them forward with parameters such as training. For the Fire Department, about \$47,000 is needed to bring them up to the pay of surrounding communities; this is recommended to be a 2-year process. As for DPW, Selectwoman Alessio said its salaries came in very high and the committee did not feel comfortable making any recommendation. She said the Town Hall staff is definitely more complex and the study group ran out of time. She said looking at different town halls, there are multiple clerks with multiple duties for each and some workers with three different supervisors. She said this needs more work, and the DPW is a discussion for this group (Budget and Select Board).

PUBLIC COMMENT

Ellen Faulconer said that for the Fire Department a 2-year plan is the recommendation, and asked if the plan was to put what is needed for year one in the proposed operating budget for this year and the other half next year. Selectwoman Alessio confirmed that the recommendation is for \$24,000 in year one and \$24,000 in year two. Ms. Faulconer said that maybe the town doesn't care that it will take two years for the Fire Department to come up to average, but this would also run the risk that the voters would turn it down in year two. She said they may be willing to support doing it all now.

Chairman Bashaw said that decisions don't have to be made right now and that they wanted to present the information to both boards, allow time to digest it and decide if and how to pursue it. He said it could be that the wage matrix would be on the Town warrant. Selectwoman Alessio said that the Town is not required to put the matrix in a warrant article, though if it represents a large amount of money, the Board may want to. She said her concern about putting year 2 in a warrant article is that if the voters say no, it may preclude the ability to put it back in the following year. Chairman Bashaw said

that there will be further research, and that the Finance Director has examples from each of the departments. He said that some positions are much higher than others so it's not as if the whole department will get a big raise, but rather underpaid positions will be brought to where they should be.

Committee Member John Pramberg said that even if legally you wouldn't be precluded if the voters voted down the second year on a warrant article, you are putting elected people in the awkward position of coming back a year later to fund something the voters have said no to. Mr. Pramberg then said that he would like to see the backup information that went into the study; he said he has a lot of questions that don't have to be discussed this evening. Chairman Bashaw said that they have full supporting data for each department.

Chairman Bashaw said that the decision was made to hold this meeting earlier than planned because budget season is in full swing, and they wanted to give the boards the opportunity to suggest other data that could be helpful and to have some flexibility on timing. He added that the labor market has changed, and municipal jobs are not as coveted as they once were, and it's not as easy to hire and keep personnel. He cited inflation and the changing labor pool.

Ellen Faulconer said one reason she came to this meeting was to find out how it will go forward; she said that even if it's not a contract, it is obligating future funds and that does have to go before the voters. Chairman Bashaw said that if they are implementing a pay matrix that guarantees step raises he thinks it has to be voted on. There was a brief discussion on this, including the possibility that a future board could choose not to continue with it, so to ensure that it has teeth, it would need to be voted on so that it becomes policy.

Ms. Faulconer commented that maybe the goal should be better than the 50th percentile; Chairman Bashaw agreed but said this is a starting point.

Fire Chief Graham Pellerin said that he had participated in the wage committee and wanted to make everyone aware that he had included Manchester and Portsmouth as comparison areas for his department, because while they have different populations than Kingston, he is losing employees to them. He also shared as an example a problem that he said affects his department more than most; he said that right now he has a full-time member on duty along with a per diem member, and the Police department has two members on, likely not lieutenants trained in instantaneous decisions on life safety. He said that means that right now if they have to respond to a head-on collision on Rte 125, his full-time member will be in the hot seat to make the decision to call for a Med Flight; he said his point is that he is not only comparing firefighters to other firefighters, but also his firefighters to officers in other departments.

Kim Donahue said that she would like to understand more because this discussion has not given her enough detail to have an honest opinion on it. Selectwoman Alessio said that she agrees there is a lot to digest and the reason they had to let go of the Town Hall was in order to complete the three departments as much as possible. She said that the next steps will be for both Boards to preview the information. She said that Ms. Mahoney will email the documents out and anyone with a request for more data or clarification can respond directly to her.

Slides from the Fire Department study were shown on the screen so that everyone could see the data they will be looking at. There was a discussion of pay grades and the steps

within them, and how an employee would progress. It was noted that raises are not guaranteed but based upon meeting satisfactory requirements for the job. Parameters set such as training are expected to minimize the subjective component of granting raises. There was a lengthy discussion of the data and how it was utilized.

Chairwoman Tidd said that she appreciated all the work that went into the study and said that it helps a lot to have actual reasons for why things need to go up or down in the budget.

Discussion continued on longevity vs. performance. Chairman Bashaw acknowledged that time in the job has value but there is also a cap on each job.

DPW Director Phil Coombs came forward to put context on the fact that the DPW is in the 95th percentile. He said that last summer they had advertised for over 4 months to fill two positions at \$22.50 per hour and got three applicants, none of which were qualified. He said that they had to bring that hourly amount up, and then that made it necessary to update the salaries of existing employees, noting that you can't tell someone who has been in the job a lot longer that he will be making only \$2 more per hour than the employee who was just hired and doesn't know where Main St. is. In addition, he said that all of the drivers in his department have at least two decades of commercial driving experience, and right now you can go and make \$25 working for Amazon with no commercial driving license, and they do not do the random drug tests that municipal employees are subject to. He said he wanted to provide this context because when someone is driving a massive wing plow truck down the road you want to know they can stop when necessary and not hit anyone. He also said his employees bring a lot of additional skills to the table such as hazmat and welding and fabricating experience, and they were able to tap into these skills to do projects that provided additional savings to the Town.

It was agreed that there will be another meeting to review the matrix once the members have had the chance to review it on their own.

Meeting Adjourned at 8:13 PM

Respectfully submitted:

Susan H. Ayer, Administrative Assistant to the Select Board