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Town of Ayer

RATE REVIEW COMMITTEE

Meeting Minutes from September 29, 2020

TOWN OF AYER
TOWN CLERK

3:30pm
Dana Copeland

Attendance: Jannice Livingston (Chair); Mark Smith (Fin Com Rep); Pam Martin (DPW Business Manager); Rick Skoczylas; Mark Wetzel (DPW Superintendent); Lisa Gabree (Finance Manager); Robert Pontbriand (Town Manager)

Call to Order: The meeting was called to order in the First Floor Meeting Room of the Ayer Town Hall at 4:00pm by J. Livingston.

R. Pontbriand read the following into the record: *Due to the ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic, Governor Baker issued an Emergency Order Temporarily Suspending Certain Provisions of the Open Meeting Law. Public bodies otherwise governed by the OML are temporarily relieved from the requirement that meetings be held in public places, open and physically accessible to the public, so long as measures are taken to ensure public access to the bodies' deliberations "through adequate, alternative means." This meeting will be broadcast live on Channel 8, and on Zoom. The public may participate remotely by following the call-in information on the bottom of the live broadcast screen.) For the Zoom meeting information relating to remote participation, please contact Cindy Knox, IT Director at cknox@ayer.ma.us or 978-772-8252 prior to the meeting.*

Approval of the February 18, 2020 Meeting Minutes:

The Committee reviewed the DRAFT meeting minutes from the February 18, 2020 Meeting. There was one edit from P. Martin to include that P. Martin was present at the February 18, 2020 meeting.

Motion: A motion was made by J. Livingston and seconded by R. Skoczylas to approve the February 18, 2020 Meeting Minutes as amended. Roll Call Vote: J. Livingston, Y; M. Smith, Y; P. Martin, Y; R. Skoczylas, Y; M. Wetzel, Y; L. Gabree Y; R. Pontbriand, Y. **Motion Passed 7-0.**

J. Livingston announced that M. Spinner has resigned from the Committee. She thanked her for all she has done and for her service on the Committee. She was an excellent note taker and kept everyone on track. The Committee and the Town thanks her for her service.

Discussion/Review of the Transfer Station (Solid Waste) Rates for Calendar Year 2021:

M. Wetzel provided an overview of the model/process used in developing the rate model for the Transfer Station rates. He noted that L. Gabree still needs to review the financials. He advised that changing the Senior age rate had a favorable impact on revenue and sales. He further advised that the various trash hauling and recycling contracts for the Transfer Station expire in June of 2021. He assumed a five percent contract increase.

J. Livingston stated that if the current rates were maintained we would have a shortfall of approximately \$1,000. We made significant changes and increases last year, and it would be ideal to not do so this year especially given the current circumstances with the pandemic.

L. Gabree advised that she is confident that expenses will still go up and that increasing the permit fees from \$95 to \$100 (a \$5 increase) would be advisable as we are so close to the margin.

J. Livingston stated that she is concerned with systemic increases. Are we pricing ourselves out of the market? Additionally, there has been a reduction in some services due to COVID-19 such as the swap shed being closed.

M. Wetzel stated that one option at this time would be to leave the permit price the same and reevaluate where we are in May/June of 2021.

M. Smith asked how do we compare (and compete) with other communities?

M. Wetzel stated that communities with curbside, the costs are between \$500 to \$550 a year. We do have a lot of value to offer.

M. Smith stated that he would be in favor of waiting until the Spring to consider any rate increases. The Town should also market the services and benefits of the Transfer Station out to the public.

J. Livingston stated that in 2014 we did get all the information out there. It is a cultural thing. If you live closer to the Transfer Station you tend to use it and use it more.

L. Gabree state that she is not opposed to delaying any increases until we have more financial history in the Spring of 2021.

M. Wetzel stated that if we delay to the Spring of 2021 than the increase would most likely need to be on the bags as most of the permits will have been already sold.

P. Martin advised that changing the bag prices is not as seamless as permit changes.

R. Skoczylas stated that it is only fair to bet more data and to wait until the Spring of 2021 before considering any increases.

Lauri Sabol (resident) stated that an increase in the bag prices is a disincentive to throw out and recycle more. Additionally, increasing feed discourages the use of the transfer station. People on Face Book are constantly complaining about the schedule and costs of the transfer station. The Town should publicize the value, services, and benefits of using the transfer station more.

J. Livingston stated that the Town should advertise and promote the transfer station and its services more.

Motion: A motion was made by J. Livingston and seconded by R. Skoczylas to delay any increases in rates and fees for the Transfer Station until the Spring of 2021. Roll Call Vote: J. Livingston, Y; M. Smith, Y; P. Martin, Y; R. Skoczylas, Y; M. Wetzel, Y; L. Gabree Y; R. Pontbriand, Y. **Motion Passed 7-0.**

Water and Sewer Revenue Update During COVID-19:

M. Wetzel provided the Committee with an update on the status of water and sewer revenues during COVID-19. He advised that things are close to target. There has been less water revenues by

about \$40,000 but sewer revenues are up. Rates were raised last year and there was less water use this year.

L. Gabree concurred that we are running on target for this year at this time.

M. Wetzel advised that the Grove Pond Water Treatment Plant will be back online soon with the completion of the PFAS treatment plant there.

Initial Discussion on Proposed FY 2022 Water and Sewer Rates:

M. Wetzel discussed a proposed Water and Sewer Superintendent position for FY 2022. The position would only be responsible for the Water and Sewer Departments and would report to the DPW Superintendent. The position would be mostly funded from the Water and Sewer Enterprise Funds.

M. Wetzel further stated that he is planning to retire in July 2021. He continues to struggle to find qualified personnel for the water and sewer departments. This is a common trend across the industry. He is concerned about upcoming staff transitions. The position of Water and Sewer Superintendent is needed and would have minimal impact on the general fund budget.

J. Livingston stated that the proposal does have merit.

R. Pontbriand advised that the next steps would be the development of a job description and the classification of the compensation and salary range. The position would have to be approved by the Select Board and the funding approved by Town Meeting. He recommended that the Committee make a formal recommendation on the proposal soon.

L. Gabree stated that she is concerned that there is no trained back-up for the water and sewer billing. P. Martin does all of it but there is no back up. She would recommend the Committee consider recommending a parti-time water/sewer billing position for FY 2022.

J. Livingston stated that this proposal also has merit and that we should move forward with the planning and discussion of both proposals.

Initial Discussion on Proposed FY 2022 Water and Sewer Rates:

M. Wetzel stated that he is working on getting better numbers. Two key factors on the rates will be the Spectacle Pond PFAS Plant on the water rates and the next phase of Wastewater Treatment Plant Upgrades which is approximately \$3.8 million.

L. Gabree also stated that between FY 2022 and FY 2025 there is another \$10 million in Wastewater Treatment Plant Upgrades. This cannot be funded without rate increases but it is premature on the specifics.

New Business:

M. Wetzel advised that he received a request from Nasoya to increase their water and sewer capacity. He is looking at the development of future capacity charge.

R. Skoczylas asked with new potential tie-ins, are our pipes and plants adequate to support the tie-ins?

M. Wetzel advised that he recently gave an update on capacity issues to the Select Board. We do have some capacity. The Town will also be renegotiating the Devens Wastewater Agreement at the end of 2021.

Scheduling of Next Meeting(s):

J. Livingston advised that the Committee should be meeting monthly as opposed to every other month, given all the matters before the Committee.

The Committee agreed to meet monthly on the fourth Tuesday of every month at 4pm. That would make the next meeting on November 10 at 4pm.

Motion: A motion was made by R. Skoczylas and seconded by J. Livingston to adjourn the meeting. Roll Call Vote: J. Livingston, Y; M. Smith, Y; P. Martin, Y; R. Skoczylas, Y; M. Wetzel, Y; L. Gabree Y; R. Pontbriand, Y. **Motion Passed 7-0.**

The meeting adjourned at 5:03pm.

Minutes recorded and submitted by Robert A. Pontbriand, Town Manager.

Minutes reviewed and approved by the Rate Review Committee on January 26, 2021.

Signed:  1/26/2021
Robert A. Pontbriand, Town Manager