

Fort Fairfield Special Town Council Meeting
Council Chambers
Thursday, June 24, 2021
6:00 P.M.

- I. Roll Call
Councilors – All Councilors are present
Staff – Ms. Powers, Billie Jo Sharpe, Ella Leighton, Tony Levesque, Kevin Senal, Darren Hanson, Steve Turner, Jennifer Gaenzle, Cody Fenderson, Shelby Barnes,
Citizens – 14 including Media
- II. Prayer
- III. Pledge to the Flag
- IV. Public Comment Period

Dave Dorsey - Thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak again. Before I get into the budget, I want to make sure that everybody in this room understands my philosophy as it relates to the ambulance service. I support 100% a good quality Ambulance Service. Look, I'm 80 years old, I'll need it before you guys. Based on the first budget we had, that was proposed for the 2122 year, it would cost you people or us \$332. You know, I think that's a lot. But if you take a look at caribou, they're paying 100 bucks. If you look at Presque Isle, it's 76 bucks. So, I don't know what happened was never involved. I don't know what degree the council was in this. I don't know how we got in this mess, but we got to get out of it. This Town cannot afford that. Then you got to go back to the drawing boards and get somebody that's independent that has some knowledge of that and try to rework this program. We need an ambulance service. But we're going to be fighting over this for a long time. If you don't adjust. I don't know how involved the council was in reviewing and chasing down the supporting facts that you looked at when you made your decision. In the budget, there's a couple of things that kind of bothered me and I sought the new one, I just hadn't had a chance to read it. But as it worked as it related to income from your Ambulance Service, the one we looked at a week ago, it showed income this year of \$257,000. I challenge that one to start with, because the young man is here said during his discussion in his department that he had, what 231 cases, he only picked up \$800. So I go back and I look at last year, and you're showing \$169,000 income? Why did the income keep rolling in last year, but it stopped? You got \$800 from January 1 to July 31, five months. And now tonight, I looked at your new budget, the only things changed on it is you raised the income from the ambulance service. It's now \$408,642.00? I don't know how this is coming in. I'd like for somebody to tell me.

Ms. Powers - These are things that we've already discussed at council meeting. public comment period is supposed to be for new information for Council. But I don't mind answering that question if you'd like me to answer. We were not a full-time fire Ambulance Service prior. So income that came in was rolling income that came in, we now have a billing agent who does that for us. And there is a series of processes that you have to go through, which is what we've discussed with Medicaid and Medicare, in order to be reimbursed by those entities. And we are about to get a rather large sum of money. It is in the billing process. And that is still a very conservative number on revenue. But given the amount of time that it takes for us to receive those revenues, we've kept it

at a very conservative number for next fiscal year. And so that's the change in the revenue that you see. And the reason we haven't received it is because it hasn't been sent to us. But it does not mean that it was not billed. And it does not mean that it will not come to us. I'll just give you in the month of May alone, we billed \$31,493.40 just in May alone. And we're waiting for all of that revenue to come into us. We are waiting to collect quite a bit of money. And it is coming to us. We've been told we just need to be patient. But now that we have been awarded and allowed to bill with Medicaid and Medicare, it should be a much faster process moving.

Dave Dorsey - Would you please tell me what the 169,000 was last year?

Ms. Powers - We anticipated 169,000 for the revenue. To be billed out as the new service. But it actually is going to be more than that.

Mr. Dorsey - You put this figure in based on your billings for what gets billed out when we go on a service call? When did we start the new ambulance service?

Ms. Powers - In August, we weren't allowed until August, we didn't get our license until August.

Mr. Dorsey - Did you do anything with the insurance companies in advance? So, you would be up and ready and running?

Cody Fenderson - The process for billing is the same for every ambulance company in the state of Maine, you have to apply for transporting circumcised and you apply for Medicaid and Medicare Services to be approved as a billing be approved to submit. Once you're approved by then you're automatically approved by all private insurance companies, because they were based on Medicaid Medicare rates, that \$169,000 was an estimate based off of pure estimations, because there was no income service, there was no service license, there wasn't that our actual bill is far in excess of what has been estimated. Do we have that today? No. That was because the federal government put a pause on payments, they have to release those costs. And we will be receiving those payments shortly, just because we will be continuing on into the new year does not mean any of that amount will not be collected. The reason the number has increased for this coming year is because now we have August to do to estimate what we'll be able to collect. That's why the number is significantly more than just now we actually got a fax. Last year, the budget for the ambulance service, there was a lot of best guessing going on because there wasn't a billing service and there hadn't been. We're not looking for Cadillacs, we're looking to give you the best service we can. There are bills that have already been set forth that need to be paid regardless of whether we stay here or we get closed. We're doing the best we can. We're providing the best service with the least amount of resources.

Ms. Powers - Mr. Dorsey, I would encourage you to come into the town office, to ask your questions and to meet with us. And we would be happy to answer those questions for you and I'd be happy to spend the time with you to answer those questions for you.

Dave Dorsey -I've got one other point, then. I'd like the council to look at eliminating the reserve accounts, for the most part.

Gary Sirois - First of all, I want to thank the Council for the amount of time you put in on this budget. You have great patience. I commend you. I also want to thank the town manager. She's been very good supplying me with information I've requested. And I appreciate it. Thank you. All also want to recognize Jim and Sharon Ouellette. You may not agree with their findings, and that's your prerogative. So, especially as it pertains to cost per capita on the ambulance service, that's not sustainable. We need to balance the budget. Many ideas have come forth. Many have been forwarded to the Council. And so far, we have not reached the goal of a balanced budget. The one-time revenue that's in this year's proposed budget is going to disappear. The Fed money in the increase in the state allocation is going to be reduced or disappear. So next year, you're going to have this very same problem without that income. Lastly, the EMS budget is a killer. In my mind. I know the council approved the purchase of the ambulances and setting up the department, I realized that I question how much homework was done prior to the presentation to the council. If Sharon and Jim Ouellette can find out what it costs in other communities to provide the service, how come you didn't know about that before you bought those ambulances?

Ms. Powers - they actually did because we had representatives from Caribou and Presque Isle that came and spoke.

Gary Sirois -Is there a way to contract with Presque Isle or Caribou and take a ride on their shirttails at a cost of 100 or less per capita? I implore the Town Council to direct the Town Manager to explore that option. I don't think we can afford it. And I asked you to ask our Town Manager to explore some options. You don't have to do it, but you can explore the options and see what the options are. I would strongly recommend disbanding the whole EMS department selling the ambulances and contract with Presque Isle and or Caribou or both. That's what I would recommend.

Mr. Butler – We decided to put the Citizens of Fort Fairfield first. When we had an ambulance service sitting here in this building and it took 20 minutes to get from here to the Border, or have to tone out two or three times while they finished their supper...We are looking out for the citizens of Fort Fairfield and their safety.

V. Old Business

A. Approve FY 21/22 Budget

The council is solely responsible for approving the budget. In order for the Council to be successful, I must present a budget that is well-planned, flexible, realistic, and clearly communicated. Of which my Department Heads and myself have clearly done for Council throughout this entire FY21-22 Budget process. Successful budgeting must account for essential, recurring expenses, savings, debt reduction planning, spending planning, and accounting for irregular expenses.

An effective budget provides more than a forecast or tracking of income and expenses. We budget to stay on top of the financial trends so we know when to take advantage of unexpected revenue and unexpected expenses so we can react in real time to downturns in cash flow. We keep our budget flexible to help our departments stay on track.

Our budget is a plan of expected incomes and expenditures for the upcoming fiscal year that must be projected within a twelve-month period that does not correspond to the calendar year. Our budget is an instrument that weighs policy priorities against available public resources; specifies the ways and means of providing those public services; establishes the cost of the services and the criteria by which these services are evaluated for efficiency and effectiveness. Our budget ensures that those services are evaluated at least once a month each fiscal year; redistributes income; provides our Municipal government with a spending limitation; and provides transparency by which our Municipal government may be held accountable at the end of each fiscal year with an audit. The budget is composed of our operating budget, which shows expenditures for the current period, and our capital budget, which shows the financial plans for long-term capital improvements, facilities, and equipment and estimated revenues for the upcoming fiscal year. This is the amount of total estimated revenues available for the current period and the amount of new debt to be incurred for projects in the capital budget.

There is a process that begins in November/December of the previous fiscal year by which we begin preparations for our new fiscal year budget involving the development of expenditure estimates for departments in light of available revenues; then we present those findings for approval and budget estimates are then submitted to Council for review and directives or modifications over a period of time and Public Budget Hearings. The budget is expected to be then legally approved and adopted by Council who is responsible for providing the budget that provides the services. Our budget is then implemented by the Town Manager that works with the Department Heads throughout the fiscal year. At the close of the fiscal year there is our audit, this is an evaluation of the performance of all departments and how those departments are monitored and measured throughout the fiscal year. Those indicators are evaluated at the year's end to inform and direct the budget process for the following year.

There are Maine State Statutes the Council must follow that allows their Municipal government to operate under an audited balanced-budget, meaning that we must plan on ending the fiscal year with a surplus to carry forward. This ending balance, often referred to as our surplus, becomes available revenue for the next fiscal year.

I monitor departmental performance throughout the fiscal year and use those findings to determine efficiency that then directs and informs the budget process for the following fiscal year. In taking a realistic, transparent approach to both short-term and structural progress goes a long way in implementing what has been neglected for over 20 years. I have combined best practice budgeting techniques and created a long-term outlook that over the time period of two and a half years has created a sustainable decision framework to manage through and emerged from the crisis that was created by the closing of ReEnergy, the State required total Town Reval, and the Pandemic. Budgets, by definition, are future-looking documents. More than a year in advance I have to estimate if the Federal, State and local economies will grow, how much we will bring in taxes, what taxes we will be directed to pay from the County and the School District and then determine what the cost of the services to be provided for our citizens will be.

I have done this for Council for the fiscal year 21-22 proposed budget. We are only asking for a 1.1% increase overall, 1% of that is the voted-on increase for COLA by the Council. Social Security's COLA for 2021 was 1.3% and the adjustment for 2022 could be as high as 5.3%. That is a decrease of \$24,614 less in expenditures from FY20-21 to FY21-22. If Council were to cut any further from this FY21-22 budget it will come at a cost of eliminating services. The total amount in monies that differs from last year is a minimal increase of \$156,286.00. This puts us at an asking

deficit of \$331,930.00 which is only \$65,282.00 more in total from FY20-21 to FY21-22. If we were just keeping up with a traditional 3% increase to match cost of living increases, we would be at \$206,509.00 in operating expenditures, we are asking for far less.

Recommendation: Council approves the proposed budget for the fiscal year 21-22.

Mr. Babin made a motion to approve the proposed budget for fiscal year 21/22.

Mrs. Libby seconded.

Discussion:

Mrs. Libby - I kind of just want to start by saying that emotions are high tonight. And I understand that, and I think that's across the board, it's in the departments, it's in the citizens, and I get it, and everybody cares. everybody cares that much that our emotions are that high. So, it's appreciated. And so do we, we have worked many tireless hours, the department heads have done the same. And I know the citizens have done the same. So, we all care, we're all headed in the same direction, we all want the same thing, we want the best for our community, we want the best services without having to have our taxes increase. I think, with this budget, as it sits that that can be accomplished. I think going any lower on the budget is going to affect services, I have looked over every single line of every single department and checked all of the things that are being purchased and have been purchased and are in the budget. And I don't know, if everybody has had the opportunity to do that, but I have. And in order to operate, we have to have funds to do so we cannot do what we're doing without him. And as a council, our opinion may differ from some people's opinions. It may not we may be on track with what some people's opinions are. But for me, personally, I think that we have to find some middle ground, I agree that there is things that are there are things that need to continue to be worked on. I agree, you know, having an independent consultant come in and look at our EMS new billing service, if nothing else, because it's a new department, and we're learning our fire department, and ambulance is doing a phenomenal job. And there has been a ton of work put in. And it is very, very appreciated. I know I have sat and grilled them. And I have had nothing but help and willingness to take any suggestions into consideration. But you know, I think we still need to keep working on it again, because it's a new department. But without this budget passing the way it is it will affect our services. And I think that if this budget does pass the way that is laid out at this point, we've literally gone from a deficit of what a million dollars and what did we start 1,000,054? Yes. And now we're at 331. We have come a long way. But at some point, it does start to affect the department's and I think that's where we are now.

Mr. Smith - I agree with the citizens, I think we should be having some conversations involving the Town Manager. If we had the conversations and the citizens were involved, and saw that we're doing the best that we can. It's just simple conversations. Real simple. But my concern with this budget is you're relying heavily on one time, and I'm looking at \$737,255 that's not going to be given next year most likely. And then we're going to have to come up with that. We can't do that. It's too much. You're going to have maybe another eight or \$900,000 maybe a million There's a budget issue. And that's going to hit the taxpayer. They're upset already. You're going to have to dig deeper in people's pockets. We'll make cuts, nobody wants to come. We don't want to lose our service. Can we fine tune it, I don't know? Can we have conversations, yes, we can.

Mr. Kilcollins – Last year, it was a big decision. We got to look out for the best of the interests as the majority. I want to say 75% of all the people, not 75% of the taxpayers, but 75% of the people

that came to me that had any discussion on Ambulance and EMS was for it. I can honestly say 25% was against it. After a certain amount of time and discussion, important from all sides and what we'd been educated on, we voted for the betterment of the community, which was to give them an ambulance service and EMS. I would like to have this conversation three years from now. And we'll all feel better about the numbers and figures where we stand. I know looking after the best interest for the community and t's my job to give the majority of the community what they want, under the circumstances that we could afford. Like Melissa said that if we could have a committee that we could work with the Town Manager and EMS to work the numbers to see our options. There's a lot of smart people out there. There's a lot of smart people out there, and there needs to be a lot of credit for the amount of work that they do, what is coming next year, the information that's gathered, the corrections that we can make as a community. It makes our shoulders lighter. I think we can take this and make it more. I think we can take this and make it work. I was born and raised in Fort Fairfield; we are not quitters. It's the time to tighten our belts and roll our sleeves up and we can prevail. We've come this far and I think the distance to travel from here will be the easier with the support with people that want to work with the Community, the town manager and EMS. I think we got to give it a little better chance than one year, and then hopefully, the numbers will make more sense. We can get some education between both parties and see what we can do with this.

Mr. Babin – Thank you to everybody who's been involved, and helping crunch the numbers. And, of course, all the all the work that has been done throughout the months. And we know that it's been a difficult journey. One thing I do want to share is that we can move forward from this. The EMS seems to be the main one that we're focused on. But we're moving forward, we've established the plan, and we're moving forward with it. And at the same time, it's costing us some money to do that. It's a service that we need it is not a want, we need the service. And again, looking a year, as Bob mentioned three years from now and having a conversation, we can tweak. It's like anytime we've made decisions personally, in our personal lives, sometimes we say, well, maybe I should have done things differently. Whether it's a business adventure, or even just a personal venture, but we learn we move forward. And it affects everybody, the whole community. And as Bob mentioned, I've been talking to people also, who recognize the need. And they recognize also that if we can work at cutting costs, but at the same time still providing the need, or the service that we have. And that's what I looked at today. And again, a big thank you to all who have put in a lot of time, a lot of hours in this and we appreciate the feedback, I will say thank you to Sharon, your work has not gone unnoticed. And it's given us stuff to look at for that we can tweak. And so, we've cut back a lot. And I'm sure that as we progress in the years to come, we'll continue to move forward. And that's the thing, we move forward. We don't get stuck here. I think we may be forgetting one thing is that things change. What could happen positively for the community of Fort Fairfield? We don't know that we're judging from this circumstance, or where we're at right now. Well, we've all seen things have changed overnight sometimes or in the months in the planning and whether its businesses coming in or your new endeavors, but it's positive, and we have to look at that instead of getting stuck in a negative, we look important and we look for the future to be better. I always look for the good to happen. I look for the positive. And even though this is a major decision. The cost has not fallen on one person. The burden falls on the community. And I'm a part of the community. I have been a part of this community for 30 some odd years. And I know sometimes things have not always been pretty, but we move forward. And is it the community that it once was? No. But we can change the community and it starts with the citizens working together and doing what we can to make things move forward.

Mr. Butler - I've been an emergency tech person most of my life. I see people who have driven their husband or child or somebody to the hospital because they can't wait for an ambulance service to

show up. I had my grandson... when you're three years old and have to wait 20 minutes while having a seizure because the ambulance wasn't around. I look at my past experience. I understand what the taxes, stuff like that, and I pay the taxes also. And when I see the people out there needing the service and the ambulance service pulled out of here, I think we did the community a service by adding the EMT paramedics and firefighters combined them together because we've got two services. I talked with the former Fire Chief, and he was at an accident scene and he had to tone-out because he needed assistance; four times he toned out before he even got a response. Now if he's sitting down here at the fire station by himself; at the time he was by himself, he couldn't go to a fire. I could call a fire at my house and he'd be sitting down and have to wait for somebody to come in or waiting for somebody to come from Presque Isle or Caribou. I don't live in Presque Isle or Caribou and I don't expect services from Presque Isle or Caribou. I'm all for mutual aid, I worked mutual aid when I was a police officer. I've helped many different police departments. But I think we owe citizens and visitors to the Town of Fort Fairfield some type of service where if they get in an accident, or they have a fire, the fire department is going to be there in four or five minutes. Not 10 to 15 minutes and not at their leisure. And that's where I put my feelings for; the Citizens of Fairfield. I've been a resident most of my life. Until a few years I was in the military. When I moved to Fort Fairfield. I love Fort Fairfield and I look out for the citizen for Fairfield.

Vote: Mr. Kilcollins – Aye
Mrs. Libby – Aye
Mr. Smith – No
Mr. Babin – Aye
Mr. Butler - Aye

VI. Executive Session

A. * *M.R.S.A. § 405 (6)(A) Personnel Matters*

Motion: Bob
Second: Mark
Time: 6:43pm

Motion: Mark

Second: Bob

Time: 7:07pm

VII. Adjournment

Motion: Mark
Second: Bob

Town Council adjourned at 7:23pm

Respectfully submitted,

Billie Jo Sharpe
Town Council Secretary

**Added after Agenda was posted*