

UNITY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Feb 1, 2021 *DRAFT* Minutes

Unity Community Center*

* usually meets at the Unity Town Office but are meeting at the Community Center for better social distancing.

Note: Decisions and commitments made in bold italic.

Present: Tony A. (chair), Ellen B., Tara B., Matt C., Jean B., Najean S., Kari Hulva

Unexcused:

Excused:

Guests: Blaine Parsons (Fire Chief), Penny Sampson (Selectboard Chair), Dan McCromack (Selectman), Larry King, Grant Queener, Donovan Queener, Tyler Curtis, Racheal Weaver, Mike Halloran, Colby Fowler, Charlie Schaefer, Peggy Turner, Denise Whitney, Mike Berry.

ITEM 1: PROPOSAL TO RECOMMEND TIF FUNDS TO PURCHASE FIRE TRUCKS

Blaine Parsons explained that the current fire truck (tanker/pump) from 2011 was donated to the department. It has required repairs on the tank 5 or 6 times, the most recent repair cost 5000\$ (and over 75,000 over ten years). Current heavy rescue truck was purchased in 2017 for 25K(used). It has suffered mechanical issues as well and was only obtained as a temporary fix. \$9,500 in TIF were used to purchase the heavy rescue truck on top of the 10K annual fire truck fund. Both trucks could be sold for ~ 10K each.

The price of a new truck is 450 - 550K for a tanker/pumper combination.

The fire department has found a used truck for \$250,000 that would combine and replace two trucks in one: The current tanker/pump truck and the heavy rescue truck.

[2018 chassis with 2020 body and a 1500gpm pump from Brindlee Mountain with a 1 year bumper to bumper warranty.] The fire department is asking to use TIF funds towards this purchase.

Tony - the EDC will speak to this/ discuss, ask questions, then the audience will have an opportunity to ask questions.

Matt C. asks about how much of TIF funding has been allocated (appropriated?) for municipal buildings. Penny S. says this is 250K.

Tara B. says: according to town minutes from Jun 16th (2020?) - the town does not have enough money for a 250,000\$ truck. In August 2020 - quotes from these minutes from selectmen have suggested that they are not inclined to use the funds for this purpose.

Penny S. responds that they (selectboard) were not anticipating public safety being an issue at that time, but it has become an issue and the town cannot afford to continue repairing the trucks. As for financing: State Revenue sharing is now on par, though the county budget has gone down. We do not know about the school budget until June 2021, but the budget is looking up- Town loan payments are <\$400,000 against loans. Next year, one large loan (Town Office Building Loan) will be paid off, maybe 2, which will save money needing to be raised in taxes. Unity no longer has to take out a tax anticipation note (saving 10K a year). There is actually a surplus, and payments can be made without having to borrow.

If 82K were applied from TIF funds towards a combined truck, there would be a \$168K balance, payable over a 10 yr loan term (at 25K per year). There is currently \$90K in the "new truck fund." The fire dept and town could use the "new truck fund" to pay off the 25K loan payment for 4 years. So, while a loan to cover the remaining cost of the truck will cost in interest, it wouldn't substantially raise taxes and there would be a reliable fire truck.

Tara B. asks What number of accidents were missed b/c the jaws of life truck (heavy rescue) was out for repair?

Blaine replies it was (~30+). At least 2x they had to call jaws of life from mutual aid and/or transport equipment in personal vehicles.

Tara B. asks if we can bill insurance companies for the calls the fire dept responds to.

Blaine P. answers that there are a lot of steps to meet to be able to bill insurances. The first is to build up a capital reserve fund and to investigate legal matters.

Penny S. adds that it is written in the ordinance (Ordinance to set up a capital fire fund?) that the town must vote via town meeting (maybe this requires an additional special meeting).

Tara B. asks if we will have a town meeting to vote on such an ordinance? Penny S. yes, this year, but it will probably not happen until April.

Blaine P. says that a capital reserve would be useful for other costs, like fixing the roof, so they don't have to come out of the annual fire budget.

Matt C. refers to the TIF budget: There seem to be 130K for funds allocated to municipal/ public safety. We've used ~ 10k so far. 40K would be left if the 82K fire truck proposal goes through, for the remaining 4 yrs of the TIF district (TIF district ends in 2025).

JeanB asks about the process for making this request. The answer is that the EDC hears the proposal and makes a recommendation. Selectmen then review and make their recommendation, and then the proposal is voted on at a special town meeting. (Recommendations can be positive or negative).

Kari Hulva voiced concern about our own formula for deciding how much money from TIF funds to use for projects. (The TIF district encompasses 30% of the Town, and we've used that formula to designate fund sharing- so TIF Funds could go towards 30% of a fire truck).

The New Firetruck fund is funded by TIF, and the loan would be paid off through TIF, which would put us up to paying $\frac{2}{3}$ of the truck via TIF.

Larry K. reminds us also of the ladder truck that has been out of use for 2 years. A new fire truck is mechanical equipment and it will need repairs - so either through the Fire truck budget or town budget we need to set aside funds for these repairs. The firehouse loan is still being paid off as well. It would cost us less in the long run to maintain the trucks we do purchase. We should be looking to cut taxes, pay down debt, and only then to purchase equipment. This is not the time to take on more debt.

Blaine P. responds that the ladder truck we do have doesn't have a lot of mileage, but does have a lot of operating hours and is 40 years old. 300,000 operating hours on the engine or so means end of life, and if the ladder fails, people may be injured or worse.

Currently, there are two "good" pumper trucks and a "not so good" tanker. The ladder truck and the rescue truck are inoperable currently. Eventually insurance rates (for property owners) will go up if the fire dept cannot respond adequately to calls due to non-working equipment

Dan M. says that normally he would not opt to buy new equipment, but the tanker we have now hasn't been able to respond to fires (can't keep water in the tank) and it is a public safety issue. The Fire dept needs the right equipment to keep us safe. After 4 years (TIF would support loan payoff), we can use vehicle excise taxes to help pay off this kind of debt.

Blaine says that they are submitting a FEMA grant due Friday and we would hear in Sept/Aug if it was granted. This grant would give them access to monies in 2022. 45,000K would be due in the 2022 Town budget.

Tara B. adds a clarification - with a loan repayment at 20K/ yr at ~ 4% interest (and we should be able to get lower), TIF funds could give us 4 years of loan payments.

Matt C. asks who do we have for mutual aid? Blaine says Troy, Thorndike, Freedom, Albion, Burnham. It typically takes 15 - 20 minutes until they arrive; Unity can respond to fires in 10 min. or less. Recent fires have depended heavily on mutual aid.

Matt C. asks would the result have been different if we did not need to depend on mutual aid? - Blaine- Fire Dept is also short staffed.

Penny says we also supply mutual aid to other towns.

Matt C asks if a regional fire dept. would be an improvement.

Blaine says the budget for a regions department would actually be higher than for the total of individual departments.

Najeen S says that with all that's been allocated this year, are we able to cover this request?

Tony A. says yes, there should be enough. We would be left with almost 70K in the TIF account

this year, even after appropriating 82K towards a fire truck. Jean B. says, there is 272K in the TIF account currently. 158K of that is unappropriated/ unallocated.

Dan M. says that replacing the truck is the better way to go due to a record of current trucks not being able to respond, not being reliable.

Najean S. asks about the truck that is being proposed for purchase- is it the right one? Blaine - the cheapest for the year and make. The used trucks are older trucks with replaced body/tanks. A totally new truck would be double the cost. This one is The current truck is an '86 so it isn't worth it to replace the body and tank.

Penny S. asks if the sale of the old tanker and heavy rescue could go towards this purchase? Blaine P. responds yes. Putting more "stuff" on one truck takes less manpower to get more equipment on scene.

Mike B. recalls a recent selectmen's meeting or town meeting where they agreed on a price on a truck (~ 80K). He asks what has changed that we now are looking to spend 250K. Blaine P. says that amount of money would have purchased a used truck from the 1990's. This truck is much newer. Mike - but this takes away any buffer that the town might have. Why are we changing our mind?

Penny S. says that we can change our minds if a better plan comes along. The department has spent a lot of time on coming up with the best option. She doesn't want to spend 80K now only to have to spend another 80K a few years down the road.

Mike B. says that we don't know what the future brings. Indirectly he feels that this plan will end up raising taxes because we won't have a budget buffer and something else will come up.

Dan M. says that we do have a plan to build up a buffer.

Penny S. adds that the budget (and our taxes) is far more affected by the school budget than loans, and costs are going down on the things that we can control.

Matt C. moves to recommend to the Selectboard to allocate 82,170\$ toward a pumper/tanker/heavy truck, under the condition that TIF regulations say that it is legal to do so and it meets the 1/3 guidelines. Najean S. seconds the motion.

EDC votes: 0 in favor, 6 against, 1 abstention. The motion does not carry.

Penny S. says that she will contact MMA to verify the legality of the proposal before the selectboard considers it.

ITEM 2: Library Proposal

Jean B. presented an informal summary of a proposal she hopes to bring before the EDC. Everything she speaks about can be viewed at Unitypubliclibrary.org

This proposal will be to offer a public/private partnership where private owners offer the bottom floor of a central building on School street for use as a town library (in perpetuity if they wish). The library would be a non-profit organization and that entity will have use of the first floor for as long as they want. A legal document will give the non-profit first rights to buy the building and for use of the building for as long as they want.

The building is relatively new; on a reinforced slab.(This will support the weight of books). It has modern conveniences like air conditioning. It has several rooms for different sections and two entrance/exits, ADA ramp, and parking lot.

The ultimate goal is to put a full service Maine library there, though it will take some time to get there. To do so, there is a list of steps and requirements that must be met. However, the status of Maine library comes with benefits (interlibrary loans, gigabyte internet connection, etc.). One of the requirements for Maine Library status is that the library must have paid librarians, though they do not need to be full time.

The proposal will request 50K of TIF funds for startup costs. The funds, if granted, will go towards software, computers for public use, bar codes and scanners, and stipends for part time librarians, shelving, including fixed and mobile shelving, tables, desks, chairs, signs, phone service, periodical and database subscriptions (particularly for business users), and a video conferencing hub set up.

Why? We need a public library and we don't have one. Jean argues that we haven't ever had one, because even though the college allowed us to use their library, the hours were not convenient, it has been closed for a year, and there wasn't much ability to organize programming.

A town library is a critical amenity. A public library is eligible for TIF funds (as per KVCOG expert Jeff). His research on our omnibus (sections 9 and 10) suggest this is a TIF eligible project, especially since they want to offer business databases, periodicals, and services.

The project has interest and support, but a TIF supported start up grant will need to go to a town meeting for a vote. The project is already being financially supported by two Air BnB suites on the second floor of the building, which are projected to cover all the building costs. Jean hands out a projected budget (which is more than the request for TF funds).

Tara B. says that the EDC grant application form states that the economic impact must be measured. How will the impact of a library be measured? Jean B. describes how it could benefit small businesses, entrepreneurs, job seekers, and provide resources. She doesn't know yet what new businesses it may bring in. It may not be measurable now.

Tara B. says she has read that eventually a library may become the town's responsibility to pay for. What are the estimated expenses? Jean doesn't have that right now. They will apply for grants, but grants don't usually cover operating expenses. Jean says they will request \$ from surrounding towns to go toward the salaries for librarians and operating costs.

Tara says that the proposal has good ideas but doesn't have the numbers for operating costs and economic impacts that she needs to see.

Jean B. says that they don't want to have the town support a building. They want a registered Maine Library that operates with support from the town. Financial support requests to the town would be annual and voted on by town meeting.

Do we have any ideas about how much use it would get? Jean B. says that their public library consultant has shared a comparison of libraries serving similar populations in Maine. She hasn't had time to review it, but it should have that kind of information and it will be shared.

Ellen B. asks about the non profit organization - what size are they aiming for? JeanB. says it is a 501C which allows them to accept donations. The board will not include Jean B, nor will it include the paid librarian(s). They hope to invite people who understand literacy and books. The board will be 5 -15 members (they have 7 interested now) with a non-paid director (a director may need to be paid in the future).

Jean B. says she is satisfied that the amount being requested from TIF is eligible. She would like this to be brought before a special town meeting for a vote (with prior public hearings).

Penny S. reminds us that there needs to be 60 days notice for a referendum so this may not be able to make it to the town meeting.

Charlie S. says he applauds the effort. Other than the college library, there hasn't been one here for years and this one will be accessible. He would like to see numbers (costs, users, economic impact). When people move to towns, they look for schools, stores, restaurants, libraries. This is a service that attracts people here who will then contribute to the tax base. Will they (the library non-profit) be buying books? Will they be getting any of the collections from the college back? When will 501C approval come through?

Jean B. says yes, they will buy books and periodicals, and accept donations of the same. A requirement for the registered library status is a plan for building a collection. Books are good, but the digital resources that we can access through the State are also beneficial. She does not know if the college will agree to return some collections, but we should keep asking. The 501C3 approval will hopefully come back in a couple of months.

Penny S. asks if they are separating utilities from the Air BnB. from the library? Penny also reminds us that we have invested 250K into the Community Center through UBR. It used to run lots of programs, activities, and volunteers. In her mind, the programs went away because the volunteer base has been depleted. Not much has happened with it now for some time. Why run programming out of a library when UBR is here? Will a library go the same way as UBR in 5 years? Will we invest lots of \$ that will not be sustainable with volunteer efforts?

Jean B. replies that the utilities will be partially paid from the library. She thinks that many of the activities will return to UBR after the pandemic. The library has its own specific focus and mission that is separate from UBR.

Kari Hulva says a library is one of the only enduring institutions in small towns. This is a good deal. The building is free. How many thousands of visitors that might stop at other stores because they're coming in from the surrounding area to go to the library?

Penny and Tony say that libraries are closing in other small towns. Jean says this is why the library should remain a separate entity independent from the town (with support from the town). Towns' may not give support every year.

Matt C. thinks we should be supporting projects that turn a profit. He's not supportive of this initiative due partly to the timing. And he agrees with Penny that we already have a building that we could focus on to run events and community things.

Tara B. says that she doesn't view this as economic development.

Jean says she will bring the proposal back to the EDC in the next meeting with more economic numbers. She will send the documents she has to the EDC via email.

There are two ways to get this to a town vote. One way is through the EDC and selectboard. A second way is to collect the right number of signatures (a certain percentage of voters) on a petition to hold a special meeting and vote. Jean B. says she would rather go through an EDC pathway.

ITEM 3: New Ideas

Ellen - EDC "buys" things from businesses (muffins, or pizzas, or coffee mugs, etc.), that the business could then offer to customers as a "Buy something, get something: free incentive to bring customers in.

Kari - as during the depression, money is tight. We come up with "local currencies,," distribute "Unity Bucks," that could be accepted by local businesses and later cashed back into the Town. Maybe distribute it to food insecure people through the food pantry- to be spent at farmer's markets and farm stands. Right now, we (the food pantry) buy food from large companies far away to support food insecurity. This kind of project could be doubly beneficial - money that goes for food security stays local. Would be a good grant project.

Tony A. mentions the horse ring in town. We've spent some funds there on parking. An additional power pole there could run a stage for concerts, etc. (And a bathroom/ porta potty).

S.says we should consider Fairfield and how they used their TIF. They used TIF for a facade improvement. A business can get a matched grant for improvements to building facades.

Adjourn: 7:30

