

# **Warren Board of Selectmen**

## **Minutes of March 17, 2022, Meeting**

### **4 p.m., Selectmen's Meeting Room and by Zoom**

**Selectmen in Attendance:** David Dufresne, Derick Veliz, Richard Eichacker (all in person)

**Others in attendance:** James Ferrara, Beverly Soltys, Madeline Witaszek, Kerry Schmidt (all in person)

D. Dufresne opened meeting at 4:03 p.m. (indicating the meeting was being held earlier than usual because of St. Patrick's Day) with the Pledge of Allegiance.

Selectmen discussed placing a portion of the ARPA allocation into the Operating Budgets account to fund the creation of a Master Plan for the redevelopment of the Wright's Mill Complex, which has been closed for about 20 years. Redevelopment of the complex could bring well-paying jobs to the town, and the developers are committed to hiring town residents.

The Economic Development Administration (EDA), a federal agency, offers grant funding for such projects, but requires it to be submitted by March 31 to get it 80% funded. To do this we need to commit 20% of the cost. The highest estimated cost that she had seen was \$350K, so the Select Board will commit \$70K to make sure it isn't underfunded. The Master Plan, which will detail all the infrastructure needs for the redevelopment project, will then be sent to the EDA to request funding assistance for those improvements. EDA funding could be used toward water treatment plant improvements, as well as repairs and upgrades to roads and bridges in the area. At a recent meeting Highway Surveyor Jeremy Olson discussed a bridge repair in the area that could cost as much as \$1 million, so any funding support along those lines is welcome and needed.

J. Ferrara indicated that this is a housekeeping request by the EDA to move the grant application forward by the deadline of March 31.

M. Witaszek questioned whether there was a statute to allow that kind of transfer – federal funds can be spent down but not transferred, at least not without some action at Town Meeting. She suggested they simply reserve the funds in the account for that purpose.

Selectmen decided that a vote to earmark those funds should satisfy the EDA's budgetary housekeeping request.

**Motion to Reserve Approve, Committed and Unencumbered \$70,000 of ARPA funds for allocation for the Master Plan for the Redevelopment of the Mill:** R. Eichacker

2<sup>nd</sup>: Derick Veliz

**Vote:** 3-0 in favor

The EDA would also like to see a letter showing a public/private partnership agreement indicating the town will support the infrastructure improvements required for the redevelopment project. Dextrust, the parcel developer, is seeking such support from the town, and town counsel has drafted a "Letter of Cooperation" indicating that the town will back such improvements. J. Ferrara indicated that the letter simply codifies the early stages of the relationship between the town and Dextrust.

D. Veliz stated that in his experience a lot of good can come out of a Master Plan, and J. Ferrara indicated that the plan will not just address the redevelopment of the complex, but also the spinoff effect for the downtown areas. D. Dufresne said that residents directly benefit from infrastructure improvements, too, as they use the roads, bridges, and water systems. Without funding help from the EDA, the full costs of all the improvements would be borne by taxpayers and the water system users.

**Motion to accept and sign the Letter of Cooperation with Dextrust in support of the Warren Mill Project:** R. Eichacker

2<sup>nd</sup>: D. Veliz

**Vote:** 3-0 in favor

Until Warren receives a new Community Development Block Grant, there are no funds to pay Chris Dunphy and the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission for the many hours they've spent on Warren. However, there is a Miscellaneous Income Fund that comes with a CDBG that can be used for that purpose. Motion and vote on the matter will be revisited later in the meeting to confirm accurate wording.

The firm that audits the town's accounts was previously Giusti and Hingston, but Mr. Hingston has retired, so James Giusti, CPA, PC will need to be officially named auditor with a signed contract. D. Dufresne asked M. Witaszek to glance over the contract and ensure that it's a standard document. M. Witaszek confirmed.

Revisit motions relating to CDBG and CMRPC.

**Motion to approve the new FY 2021 Warren CDBG agreement:** R. Eichacker

2<sup>nd</sup>: D. Veliz

**Vote:** 3-0 in favor

**Motion to approve \$1000 amendment for CMRPC technical assistance using Miscellaneous CDBG Funds:** R. Eichacker

2<sup>nd</sup>: D. Veliz

**Vote:** 3-0 in favor

**Motion to approve amended MVP contract to include the Hazard Mitigation Plan Update:** R. Eichacker

2<sup>nd</sup>: D. Veliz

**Vote:** 3-0 in favor

**Motion to approve CMRPC's agreement for the development of the Open Space and Recreation Plan:** R. Eichacker

2<sup>nd</sup>: D. Veliz

**Vote:** 3-0 in favor

**Motion to approve Derick Veliz as Planning Board chair to request use of Warren's Local Planning Assistance hours for Chris Dunphy to assist the town with One Stop and EDA grants:** R. Eichacker

2<sup>nd</sup>: D. Dufresne

**Vote:** 2-0 in favor; D. Veliz abstain

Revisit appointment of James Giusti Town Auditor.

**Motion to accept James J. Giusti as Town Auditor and allow D. Dufresne to sign contract:** R. Eichacker

2<sup>nd</sup>: D. Veliz

**Vote:** 3-0 in favor

Discussion on allowing James Ferrara to sign payroll warrant on behalf of the Selectboard.

**Motion to give Town Administrator James Ferrara the right to sign payroll on behalf of the Board of Selectmen:** R. Eichacker

2<sup>nd</sup>: D. Veliz

**Vote:** 3-0 in favor



## New Business

Today the selectmen met with the board of CMRPC to get a vote of support for the Mill Redevelopment Master Plan Project. There are approximately 20 people on the board and the vote was unanimously in favor to support the project.

There is a request from the West Warren District request to use ARPA funds for a pH Control System, and the documentation seems to be in order. The ARPA Spreadsheet will have to be revised to make sure the \$70K earmark for the EDA funds is there as well as the \$32K for the pH Control System, though the job may have to go out to bid and the amount is uncertain. There have been questions as to why the ARPA money is being used for a private enterprise water district; were the district to pay for the project itself, rates would have to be raised on users, all of whom are town residents and many of whom are on limited incomes. Also, town and school buildings use the water and sewer systems, and so would be among those users who would otherwise bear any rate increase.

The board still hasn't gotten the documentation from the Sewer Commission about the Grid Screw they had requested from ARPA funds, and it has to be in by the end of the month. They are apparently waiting for information on the custom piece from Tighe & Bond. Unfortunately, with no documentation and the deadline approaching, the Grid Screw may have to be dropped from the list in favor of the Master Plan funding. There is far more potential financial benefit for the town as a result of putting aside \$70K of that money for the EDA agreement than if \$125K were used for the Grid Screw.

The board had asked the water departments for small ticket item needs, for instance, Warren Water District requested some valves at about \$1000 each, to use up any small balance remaining ARPA funds.

J. Ferrara said that Fire Chief Lavoie indicated that the cost of the new communications system is going to come in higher than the \$200K allocated, but he doesn't have concrete numbers yet. D. Dufresne again expressed concern that they are running out of time to get those numbers in.

The town has already allocated \$780K of the ARPA funds; more may be coming, but there is no guarantee.

\$35K in abatement funds is available as a result of the settlement of the state's lawsuit against the pharmaceutical companies. It can be used for reinforcement of services aimed at prevention, harm reduction, treatment and recovery from opiate addiction. J. Ferrara will do a little more research and talk to chiefs Millett and Lavoie about the funds.

In his first week here, J. Ferrara has met with people in many of the town departments (Parks and Recreation, Planning Board, Police, Fire, Board of Health), but has yet to touch base with others. He has worked on the Mill Development Project, and, along with the Superintendent of Schools, has also looked at an opportunity to continue with the Green Communities Grants. The superintendent intends to apply for more funds through the program to continue some energy-saving initiatives, including lighting, at the high school.

Mr. Ferrara is also working on formalizing office hours to include Fridays, and he would like the building to be open on Friday mornings to be available to residents. He's had a great first week and has enjoyed working with everyone, and he appreciates the opportunity. R. Eichacker suggested the Town Administrator's Report become a regular meeting agenda item.

As to the status of the EDA, Carrie (CMRPC) was looking for a letter of support for the EDA, as well as access to the town's grant portal, which, with the board's permission, he'll provide. We should be on target for the March 31 deadline.

## Comments and Concerns

B. Soltys inquired about the Zoom meeting with Mr. Holtz of the state's Historical Commission. Mr. Holtz was concerned about bricks falling from the façade and suggested that a more in-depth inspection by masons to see if more stabilization work was needed. In April, there will be a tour of the building with the commission.

D. Dufresne said the commission was encouraged with the idea of the sale of the old Town Hall to a private entity for development. Voters will have to approve the idea at the Annual Town Meeting

J. Ferrara toured the building with Chief Millett and could see significant issues resulting from long neglect. It's clear that the building is important to town residents, and so it's best to find a developer and a use for the building. B. Soltys pointed out that the building hasn't fallen down yet. D. Dufresne agreed, but the facade bricks are anchored to the building, and if the anchors are secured in crumbling mortar they won't hold and the bricks will fall, so it is a hazardous situation.

M. Witaszek clarified that the building on Main Street is the building that's the Town Hall. The Town Offices are in the Shepard Municipal Building, not the Town Hall.

The board recognizes that the Town Hall is well-loved by residents, and the selectmen are not against the building, but delivering the bad news and dealing with the reality of it. Some people would rather not spend town money on the restoration and would rather see it torn down; others would like to restore it for the town at any cost. The state Historical Commission believes that it would be more reasonable for a private entity to take over the project – there are Historic Tax Credits available for such projects, and private entities don't have to deal with prevailing wage laws, so they can do it more cost-effectively. The building can be preserved, but the town doesn't have to pay. If the town were to repair and bring the building up to code, costs could be anywhere from \$8-20 million – taxes would undoubtedly have to be raised to cover the costs.

If residents turn down the idea at the Annual Meeting, we'll have to come up with some other solution.

B. Soltys asked if there will be only one article to allow the selectmen to go through the RFP process or would there be a separate article for the town to fix the building. Selectmen confirmed that it would be just the question about the possibility of transferring the building. R. Eichacker suggested a time limit on progress be written into the RFP.

The next meeting of the Board of Selectmen, which will be a busy one, will be at 6 p.m. March 24 in the Selectmen's Meeting Room.

**Motion to adjourn:** R. Eichacker

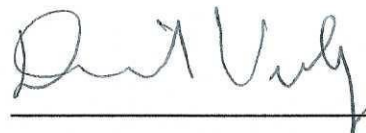
**2<sup>nd</sup>:** D. Veliz

**Vote:** 3-0 in favor

Meeting adjourned at 5:45 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Kerry Schmidt

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Derick Veliz", written over a horizontal line.

Derick Veliz, Clerk