

MINUTES
BUDGET LISTENING SESSION
Thursday, January 19, 2023

A Budget Listening Session was held on Thursday, January 19, 2023, at 10:00 a.m. at the Bel Air Armory Gymnasium.

IN ATTENDANCE:

Kevin Bianca, Town Commissioner
Mary Chance, Town Commissioner
Paula Etting, Town Commissioner
Trish Heidenreich, Director of Economic Development
Eddie Hopkins, Town Administrator
Donna Kahoe, Town Commissioner
Stephen Kline, Director of Public Works
Michael Krantz, Director of HR & Administration/Town Clerk
Lisa Moody, Director of Finance
Charles Moore, Chief of Police
Kevin Small, Director of Planning
Jane Sudbrink, Recording Secretary

ABSENT:

Erin Hughes, Town Commissioner

I. CALL TO ORDER

Mr. Hopkins called the meeting to order at 10:08 am. He outlined that this meeting was a listening session only; no town business would be discussed. He said that he wanted to enable effective communication between employees, department heads, and town commissioners. This spring will be his first time crafting a budget as the new town administrator and he wanted to know about what the employees need and their thoughts. Mr. Hopkins said he could not make any promises or commitments, but minutes would be taken so that there would be a record. He asked for brevity in the presentations. He said that because more than three commissioners were present, the meeting was technically open to the public.

II. APPROVAL OF AGENDA

III. EMPLOYEE BUDGET LISTENING SESSION

A. Current/Active Town of Bel Air Employees Invited to Attend

1. Listen to Employee Comments and/or Suggestions

Mr. Charles Dawson, deputy director, spoke first. He asked that the repair, maintenance, and possible replacement of the equipment shed building be considered in the upcoming budget. He asked for fencing near the police department for the parking of public works vehicles. Mr. Dawson requested that the equipment vehicle replacement schedule be maintained because the department gets good resale value for its vehicles. Mr. Dawson said that he understands that street maintenance may get cut from the budget, but if possible he would like to have it stay in the budget. Mr. Dawson addressed his concerns regarding staffing at public works. He detailed that the department has lost a part-time

administrative person and now the staff member who addresses environmental issues is leaving for a higher paid position with the county. He stressed the need for an inspector. The department has over 250 facilities to inspect each year and reports must be filed with the EPA. Mr. Dawson said he did not ask for the inspector this year, but next year he will put in for that position. He added that since 2007, the public work's budget has increased only 7 percent versus 10 percent for the police department. He felt that the public work's budget should be comparable.

Jeffrey Unkart, public works employee, stated that the public works department is severely understaffed, particularly in being able to maintain the new police department. The staff is now required to do more HVAC work, carpentry, and cleaning. Other facilities, like Rockfield Manor, continue to have issues and require more custodial work than in the past. The parking garage has been subject to vandalism, and the staff is required to work there more often. He respectfully asked for more help, even a part-time position.

Joe Ritzmann, facilities manager, mentioned the aging infrastructure of several town buildings, as well as the wear and tear and abuse that some of the facilities receive. He noted the need for continuous improvements on these buildings. Mr. Ritzmann had concerns with life safety. He strongly urged the commissioners and Mr. Hopkins to consider adding AEDs in all town facilities. Mr. Hopkins said that he has spoken with Mr. Kline about these issues.

Buddy Haight, public works employee, addressed the issue of staffing needs. In particular, he would like to have an inspector hired now, not next year. He cited that the over 250 facilities in town must be inspected every three years, meaning that every year about 80 facilities must be inspected. If the town does not keep up with the inspections, it will be fined. Right now, only Mr. Haight is managing the inspections and numerous permit requests. He would appreciate even a part-time inspector, three days a week. Mr. Dawson added that places like the armory and Rockfield Manor are much busier now that the town has taken over them, which also confirms the need for at least a part-time facilities position.

2. Identify Fiscal Year 2024 (FY24) Budget Concerns

Mr. Hopkins asked Ms. Moody to explain to the group how money is designated in the town budget. Ms. Moody discussed the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds and how they are distributed and spent in the town's budget. She said that \$3.8 million of the ARPA funds have been directed to the construction of the town's administration building. The ARPA money cannot be used for reoccurring operating expenses like salaries and maintenance. Ms. Moody said that the largest source of revenue for the town is real estate taxes. Ms. Moody said that the assessment office reassesses properties every three years, and this is now occurring. She is hopeful that the impact of these assessments will be higher and, consequently, be beneficial to the budget. The town can control its tax rate, and recently raised taxes in FY22 by 4 cents, 3 cents to debt service, 1 cent for reoccurring operating expenses. Ms. Moody said the town has not kept up with expenses through tax increases. The town does receive a portion of revenue from the state via income taxes, but that is the most volatile income stream and difficult to predict. The town is now getting highway user revenues from the state, which had not always been the case since 2008. However, these monies can only be used for highway expenses. Monies not used are moved to reserve accounts. She said that there is over \$1 million in reserve, and it can only be used in the event of a catastrophe. Ms. Moody said there are other accounts in reserve where money is used to fund capital projects and pay for leave payouts. Ms. Moody said there is also grant money available but that it is capital in nature and also cannot be used for operations, salaries, and benefits. She said that

the last five to six years have been difficult to put the budget together and it is frustrating to make cuts of five hundred to three-quarter of a million dollars out of the budget each year.

3. Answer Employee Questions

Mr. Dawson asked about hiring in relation to ARPA funds. He pointed out that one-time capital projects like the new police department ultimately put long-term strain on the public works department to maintain these new projects. Ms. Moody also discussed unfunded mandates from the state that contribute to the budget strain. Ms. Moody stressed that the town does not have the ability to create new revenue sources that are significant, like a local sales tax, which is not permissible in Maryland. Bel Air also does not have many places to annex like Aberdeen and Havre de Grace. The redevelopment of buildings and property in town are not always endorsed by the public.

Mr. Unkart discussed the added maintenance that will come with construction of Hickory Flats and the mall property. Mr. Ritzmann noted for the group the loss of old growth trees in town and the need to replace them.

Kevin Kadolph, police officer, asked whether the town could raise taxes again despite citizen complaints. Mr. Hopkins said that the town has shown that it has been fiscally responsible for many years, but that in retrospect, it might have been better to increase the tax rate incrementally to prevent some of the budget difficulties that have recently occurred. Another tax increase may be very unpopular right now. Mr. Hopkins said that the public relations specialist he hopes to hire will be tasked to create a message campaign that will humanize and highlight what the town and its employees do. This messaging may make a tax increase more palatable. Mr. Hopkins noted for Officer Kadolph that the position is not a new one, rather he is looking to fill Patty Parker's vacancy. In answer to Mr. Dawson's question about using alternate funds or grants to hire another employee, Mr. Hopkins said that grants often require a match and have an expiration, which is not effective for hiring purposes.

Ms. Heidenreich spoke about the interconnectedness between the budget and the real estate of the town. She said that her main goal is to make the real estate look good and to make people want to live here, thereby increasing revenue. The most important thing in economic development is safety, i.e., the police department. Thus, she is continually looking for grants and ways to keep the real estate benchmark at its place or higher. She noted that the hanging baskets in town are part of a bigger picture—they make the town look beautiful so people will want to live here and shop here, and this creates a continuity of funding.

Chief Moore also noted that grant money is not always the answer. He stressed that law enforcement has seen considerable upheaval in recent years. The Bel Air police department has managed to stay ahead of these difficulties, but that it has resulted in unfunded mandates for the department, like acquiring advanced technology. The department now has \$30,000 in extra costs.

Ms. Moody reminded the attendees that everyone is on the same playing field. Mr. Hopkins noted that the purpose of the meeting was to hear everyone's concerns and identify priorities so that he can build the budget based on their input. He said that he has an open-door policy and welcomes input from employees via electronically or in person.

Mr. Ritzmann said that the position for inspector has been in the budget continually since 1989. Mr. Brian Mullaney, public works employee, added further that public works' positions have been open for

three years but they have not been filled because of low salary. He was also concerned about the hazardous condition of the equipment shed building.

Roy King, public works employee, said that everyone is fighting for the same needs. At his summer produce stand, he only hears compliments about the public works department from the public.

IV. MISCELLANEOUS

V. COMMISSIONERS' COMMENTS

Mr. Bianca thanked everyone at the public works department and reiterated that he only gets positive feedback about the department. He would like their paychecks and benefits to reflect this. Ms. Etting said that along with the police, the public works employees are the face of the town. She noted that employees are the first budgetary priority. She said that a lot of property in town is county-owned, and, therefore, not taxable. She hoped that the new county administration will reconsider the use of some of this property.

VI. ADJOURNMENT

Mr. Hopkins said to come by his office if anyone had more questions or concerns. Chief Moore recognized the excellent relationship between the police and public works departments. The meeting adjourned at 11:26 am.

APPROVED: February 6, 2023

Signature on file _____
Kevin M. Bianca, Chair
Board of Town Commissioners

Signature on file _____
Michael L. Krantz, Town Clerk