



Programs & Services Committee Budget Report

City of Newton In City Council

Wednesday, April 20, 2022

Present: Councilors Krintzman (Chair), Albright, Ryan, Humphrey, Greenberg, Noel, Baker, and Wright

Also Present: Councilor Kalis

City Staff: Carol Moore, City Clerk/Clerk of the council; Jill Mercurio, Library Director; Marc Welch, Deputy Commissioner of Parks, recreation and culture and Superintendent of Urban Forestry; Michelle Buglio, Assistant Library Director; Carol Stapleton, Rec Program Manager; Jonathan Yeo, Chief Operations Officer; Lisa Dady, Historic Newton Director; Sheila Butts, Permit Specialist; Perry Rosenfield, Senior Financial Analyst; Seth Bai, Veterans Services Officer; Nicole Banks, Commissioner of Parks, Recreation and Culture; Josh Handverger, Senior Financial Analyst; Greg Mellett, Assistant Director of Parks, Recreation and Culture; Nathan Giacalone, Committee Clerk

DEPARTMENT BUDGET & CIP DISCUSSIONS:

City Clerk

Veterans

Museum

Library

Parks, Recreation and Culture

Referred to Finance and Appropriate Committees

#213-22

Submittal of the FY23 to FY27 Capital Improvement Plan

HER HONOR THE MAYOR submitting the Fiscal Years 2023 to 2027 Capital Improvement Plan pursuant to section 5-3 of the Newton City Charter.

Referred to Finance and Appropriate Committees

#213-22(2)

Submittal of the FY23 Municipal/School Operating Budget

HER HONOR THE MAYOR submitting in accordance with Section 5-1 of the City of Newton Charter the FY23 Municipal/School Operating Budget, passage of which shall be concurrent with the FY23-FY27 Capital Improvement Program (#213-22).

EFFECTIVE DATE OF SUBMISSION 04/19/22; LAST DATE TO PASS THE BUDGET 06/03/22

Referred to Finance and Appropriate Committees

#213-22(3)

Submittal of the FY23 – FY27 Supplemental Capital Improvement Plan

HER HONOR THE MAYOR submitting the FY23 – FY27 Supplemental Capital Improvement Plan.

City Clerk

Note: Carol Moore, City Clerk/Clerk of the Council, presented the proposed budget for the City Clerk's Office. The goals for FY23 are to complete projects put on hold during the pandemic and due to staff shortages. There is a 3.8% increase from the previous budget largely due to salary increases and supply costs.

Clerk Moore summarized the budget highlights, such as there being no inauguration nor end of term event this year. The single biggest expense is advertisements due to the COVID informational language required. Clerk Moore noted that she has been working with the Law Department to shorten the statements while still complying with requirements. Other staff focuses she described were archives management and a new census coordinator who will be working on a project to get census materials into other languages. Additionally, Clerk Moore discussed the new position which will be created in the department, akin to a deputy director in other departments. This new staff member will help oversee projects on both the City Clerk and City Council sides of the office and assist with community outreach and the newsletter.

Addressing elections, Clerk Moore stated that there will be state elections this year and that they will have a similar cost to the 2021 local elections. Additionally, the state will be printing the ballots. The biggest elections project is not shown on the budget and is the purchase of the new voting machines to be ready for use by 2024. The new docket tracking system is also approaching completion and Clerk's Office staff will be trained in its use. The Clerk's Office website will also be redesigned, including improved designs for election results. Working with the archivist, Clerk Moore stated that they are determining how to best digitally store materials in order to free up more physical space.

Q&A

Comment: Records are a source of value for institutional knowledge and the Clerk's Office should work to restore the accessibility of some materials which used to be stored physically in the office.

A: Clerk Moore answered that she would take these points into account when meeting with the archivist. She also stated that she is hoping to find a source of funds for the online code software in this year's budget. The fee is minimal and depends on how many ordinances are created. The fee does not appear until a year after implementation.

Q: What is the last open position in the department?

A: Clerk Moore responded that the deputy City Clerk, Election Coordinator, and License & Permit Coordinator (also called Business Records Clerk). All of these positions have been posted.

Q: The new deputy position is listed on the Clerk side of the office; will they assist with the Council side?

A: Clerk Moore answered that they would. This position will focus more on the Clerk side, but they will be prepared to assist on the Council side.

Q: Could historical docket materials be added to the docket tracking system?

A: Clerk Moore felt this was a great idea and would work on it.

Q: Are the births listed at Newton-Wellesley Hospital just those of people who live in Newton?

A: Clerk Moore explained that this is for all births at the hospital and it does not matter if the individual lives in Newton.

Q: Does the City generate any revenue from birth registration?

A: Clerk Moore answered that it does not.

Councilors thanked Clerk Moore for her work and stated that they were pleased to see efforts underway to make the office more accessible to the public.

The Committee took a straw vote to accept the City Clerk proposed budget of \$2,217,073, along with the Supplemental CIP and the CIP, which passed unanimously.

Veterans

Note: Seth Bai, Veterans Services Officer presented the proposed budget for the Veterans' Services Department. He explained that this department faces specific challenges as most of its clients are senior citizen veterans living on fixed incomes. Mr. Bai noted that he has collaborated with the Mayor, the American Legion, and the Elks to help get these seniors out of their homes and to get meals as well. The key changes in the budget, a 0.21% increase from the previous year, reflect upkeep and inflation-related cost increases to patriotic themed events. Additionally, there has been an uptick of female veterans coming to department. The operating highlights also distinguish between the federal and state benefits veterans receive. Mr. Bai closed his presentation by stating that he was organizing another call to service night.

Q&A

Q: Can you describe active appeals in more detail?

A: Mr. Bai explained this with the example of a veteran being diagnosed with prostate cancer. In cases like this, the Veterans Administration (VA) may determine a certain amount for medical aid benefits. If the condition of the disease changes, then this amount would need to be changed and the appeal would hope to increase the benefit.

Q: Where are the younger Newton veterans leaving the military being supported by this department?

A: Mr. Bai answered that two former students who graduated four years ago have been honorably discharged and have approached the department. They are represented in the presentation as they have an ongoing appeal with the VA for service-related disabilities.

Q: Are there ways to attract younger veterans to the department?

A: Mr. Bai answered that he would collaborate with other departments on this.

Q: What is the presence in the high schools to inform students of the military?

A: Mr. Bai answered that there is a regional recruitment hub in Waltham and that recruiters collaborate with guidance counselors. The students they first approach are those who are not planning on attending college.

Q: What expenditure is the memorial in Oak Hill Park?

A: Mr. Bai explained that this expense comes out of flags and bunting. He stated that he cannot guarantee that it will be installed by Memorial Day but hopes that it will be by Flag Day.

Q: Have the groups returned to meeting in full?

A: Mr. Bai responded that attendance has not returned to pre-COVID levels yet as given the demographic, most are seniors who do not come out as much. Additionally, they largely communicate with snail mail and phone calls.

Q: Will there be a Memorial Day parade this year?

A: Mr. Bai confirmed there would.

Q: What is your office doing to attract a more diverse group of veterans, such as those of different races and sexual orientations?

A: Mr. Bai answered that he regularly communicates with Post 440 for outreach to new veterans and noted that he does not yet have much experience specifically on those factors mentioned. He noted that a complication for outreach is that it is up to veterans to choose whether they will identify as such or not.

The Committee took a straw vote to accept the Veterans' Services Department proposed budget of \$214,100, along with the Supplemental CIP and the CIP, which passed unanimously.

Museum

Note: Lisa Dady, Director of Historic Newton presented the proposed budget for the Museum/Historic Newton. First addressing the multiple names for the department, she said that part of the reason stems from a rebranding about 15 years ago. She felt that this has been a positive change as many museums in the area have done so to sound more contemporary than "historical society." While the pandemic is still a concern for the department, Director Dady stated that the museum has almost returned to a full schedule and in 2021, attendance rose to almost 12,000 people which also includes HayFest. Additionally, Director Dady stated that many have liked the availability offered by virtual events. Historic Newton has also organized field trips for the schools or sending its educators over. Other events organized by Historic Newton include lectures on topics like the Boston accent. Director Dady noted that Historic Newton held off on other events like Lake Talk as they believe that it should be conducted in-person.

Director Dady also explained how Historic Newton has reframed its mission statement to emphasize its mission of connecting the community with its history to enrich future generations. Director Dady then discussed the three main outcomes for the department. The first is to continue its focus on Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) with a concentration on slavery/anti-slavery and filling in the gaps in this story. This will also include work on the early history of the indigenous peoples of Newton. The second outcome is accessibility, shown through the Museum Without Walls. Director Dady explained that the goal is to meet people where they are and continue to offer more virtual programming and outdoor signage as well. The third outcome is the focus as stewards of the Jackson Homestead in addition to the burial grounds master plan. She stated that in the next few years there will need to be a major rehab on the Jackson Homestead basement to make the space useable. Some of these exhibits need to be updated as well. The CPC will be approached for assistance on the funding. Lastly, Director Dady discussed the outcome of collections management which focuses on the physical materials themselves. This includes pest management strategies to protect the materials and utilizing resources like Digital Commonwealth to digitize more of them. There is also a possible documentary film to explore the history of education reform.

Q&A

Q: How can we remove the chain link fences on the burial grounds?

A: Director Dady answered that at Winchester Street, they are looking for a more attractive fence to use. The fence on West Parish is historic but easy to leave open. A fence is required at East Parish due to the agreement with the City. The improved fence would likely be the black chain-link fence used elsewhere in Newton.

Q: How does Historic Newton address the City's ethnic history?

A: Director Dady answered that this is something Historic Newton works on regularly. It uses a grant from Mass Humanities for support and has revamped its immigration school program. There are also walking tours and social media to promote this material as well.

Q: If the museum is currently open four days a week, when does it return to the full schedule?

A: Director Dady answered that four days is the full schedule.

Q: Are there any plans to replace the tree in front of Jackson Homestead?

A: Director Dady responded that it will be replaced and invitations will be sent out soon for the replanting ceremony on Arbor Day. The new tree will be an American Elm which has historic value as planting elm trees was popular during the 19th century and was an activity of the homestead's namesake. She also added that they are getting quotes about fixing the stone wall damaged when the prior tree fell over.

The Committee took a straw vote to accept the Museum/Historic Newton proposed budget of \$315,134, along with the Supplemental CIP and the CIP, which passed unanimously.

Library

Note: Library Director Jill Mercurio presented the proposed budget for the Library. She was joined by Assistant Library Director Michelle Buglio and members of the Board of Library Trustees. Director Mercurio stated that this was a year for rebuilding after COVID, as well as re-educating the public on the services the library provides. The monthly e-newsletter is a tool for this goal and it reaches about 40,000 people and after it goes out, there is a measurable increase in the usage of library resources. Door counts are rising as patrons return to the Library; March visits were up 75% from last year and the Newton Free Library remains among the busiest in the system. Both the usage and collections of digital resources and the Library of Things also continue to expand. Library programming has interacted with over 30,000 residents and the language learning programs have also been a success. Director Mercurio added that a new website will launch in the fall and that the solar canopy parking lot project has also been a success. She also noted that the children's room project is ongoing using ARPA funds. The fiscal budget increase allows the Library to maintain its accreditation with the Mass Board of Library Commissioners and most of the budget goes towards fulfilling contract obligations. Director Mercurio clarified that the Library is not creating any new positions this year, but rather reorganizing its existing ones. New community outreach plans continue to be developed as well as plans to meet the objectives of the strategic plan.

Q&A

Q: Some library departments are down, and others are up, is this because of the Library's reorganization?

A: Director Mercurio answered that while it looks like the staff count has changed, no staff has been lost aside from some retirements. The current vacancies are intentional for reorganization and efforts are underway to fill these positions.

Q: What pressure areas is the Library having issues keeping up with?

A: Director Mercurio answered that it is keeping up with technology and ebook services.

Q: Is there a wait-list for ebooks?

A: Director Mercurio confirmed that there is but added that the Library offers other services like Hoopla which do not have a waiting list.

Q: What is the status of the tween room?

A: Director Mercurio stated that it is positive as the tweens were some of the first patrons to return for in-person programming at the Library.

Q: Why did full-time salaries increase while the number of employees declined?

A: Director Mercurio answered that there have been 81 employees since last year, the chart just needed to be corrected. She added that this was also to meet obligations and that the Library needs more time to fill its staff vacancies.

Q: What happens to the extra money in the budget?

A: Director Mercurio answered that it returns to the City.

Q: What is the current year wage RE?

A: Director Mercurio replied that this is money set aside for signing bonuses and union contracts. The RE stands for retroactive.

The Committee took a straw vote to accept the Library's proposed budget of \$6,148,958, along with the Supplemental CIP and the CIP, which passed unanimously.

Parks, Recreation and Culture

Note: Nicole Banks, Commissioner of Parks, Recreation and Culture presented the proposed budget for the Parks, Recreation and Culture Department (PRC). She was joined by Deputy Commissioner/Urban Tree Warden Marc Welch and members of the Parks and Recreation Commission. She began by thanking PRC staff for all its work over the previous year, mentioning that the maintenance and beautification teams were key for preparing for the Boston Marathon and that the forestry crews continue to receive much gratitude from the community. Commissioner Banks also described how the department has been working to streamline the special event permit process and to implement the five-year fields improvement plan. Additionally, the City will also be marshalling millions of dollars in CPA funds to improve facilities such as the fields, the Gath Pool, Levingston Cove, and Crystal Lake. Other funding sources will be used to make other improvements to village centers. To assist with the long list of projects, PRC has hired a new landscape architect. Commissioner Banks then highlighted increases to the fields maintenance and cultural development budgets to improve the long-term quality of the fields and to hold more special events. The department is also hiring a part-time park ranger to assist with compliance with City regulations and permitting on the fields.

Q&A

Q: What happened with the outdoor swimming funding?

A: Commissioner Banks answered that this is a \$50,000 increase for aquatic seasonal wages. Staffing costs are borne some by revolving funds along with pool pass revenue to pay for the services which staff provide. This supplemental budget will help keep the fees, already lower than surrounding communities, low.

Q: What is the increase for special needs/cultural use?

A: Commissioner Banks answered that the \$8,000 increase for special needs has been added for the assistant director. There is a split share where Athletes Unlimited funds part of the position and this increase fulfills the City's responsibility. The funding for Cultural Affairs will primarily go to special events. Some events have fees, but many are free for the public to attend.

Q: Why has beautification funding decreased?

A: Commissioner Banks answered that this is to increase overtime funding but also because two positions are being moved into the Department of Public Works (DPW) so the increase will show up in that budget. Mr. Yeo added that some trash and recycling collection is also being consolidated.

Q: How many trees will PRC be planting?

A: Mr. Welch answered that between 800 and 850 would be planted.

Q: Is there a plan for how fields will receive turf or other improvements?

A: Commissioner Banks answered that last year, approximately \$300,000 was put towards this specific area of use and that the department will also start allocating the fees. This will allow PRC to invest more resources into the fields and the current fiscal year is the first in which the department is seeing this money.

Q: What funding is going to enhance the farmers' market and does it accommodate SNAP?

A: Commissioner Banks stated that these improvements will include increased vendor spaces, space for music, artists, and more, adding that other event funding could also be used. She confirmed that the farmers' market does accept SNAP.

Q: Why are administration costs rising if there is one less employee?

A: Commissioner Banks answered that this is due to two staff members moving to DPW, but that PRC is also working to bring back the program manager position. Restoring this position will allow the programming to return to full capacity.

Q: What is the status of consulting with the sports groups on turf management?

A: Commissioner Banks answered that PRC works and partners with these groups and that they also support turf management on some fields. Through license agreements they can also bring in contractors. This arrangement is how many fields have been maintained over the years.

Q: What is the budget for field maintenance as Newton's population continues to grow, putting increased demand on the fields?

A: Commissioner Banks answered that the increase this year is about \$50,000 in this specific area. There was also a specific investment in FY22, and the department is working to implement a new fee schedule to help with this. The youth sport fees over the first year have brought in about \$80,000-90,000. The plan discussed with the sports groups and administration has been to incrementally increase the fees over the next three years.

Q: The field maintenance is still underfunding the fields, is there a plan to raise this?

A: Commissioner Banks answered that Derek Manion's upcoming report will provide more detail on this. Close to \$6,000, not all fields need the same standard.

Q: Is there a plan to rehab the smaller fields like Hamilton and Nahanton?

A: Mr. Welch answered that both of these fields are well-irrigated and do not require major restorative work at this time. Commissioner Banks added that about 15 fields will need significant funding. A preliminary list of these fields can be forwarded to the Council.

Q: What happens with the permit fees?

A: Commissioner Banks answered that they go into a revolving fund for the athletic fields and is used for maintenance, improvements, and other related expenses.

Q: How are the organized athletic leagues reacting to the fees?

A: Commissioner Banks answered that they have been responding fairly well and that the plan is to implement this increase over multiple years. This gives the groups time to adjust to the new fees.

Q: There is little to no oversight with the new field lights. In addition to concerns over them, if Congress changes Daylight Savings will they still be necessary? This money could be better spent elsewhere.

A: Mr. Yeo emphasized that it is unknown how the House will vote on this bill and that the Council, among other bodies can act as oversight. Residents continue to be informed about this project. Commissioner Banks added that PRC has presented on these lights and also emphasized the need for them to accommodate school programming. So far over 500 hours have been booked with the lights.

Q: The park ranger position has been discussed for many years. Why is this the year it is being implemented?

A: Commissioner Banks answered that discussions over this role have been ongoing and many factors have gone into this decision as most stakeholder groups support using a portion of the fees for this position. This position will help resolve any field conflicts and can verify permit status as well. The sport groups also feel that off-leash dogs have been an issue so the ranger would be able to assist with this enforcement as well. Mr. Yeo added that there has been a buy-in from these groups. Councilors also added that they hoped the schedule would be irregular like that of the landscaper inspector.

Q: Is the mission of the park ranger too much for a part-time job at this point?

A: Commissioner Banks emphasized that this is a pilot program and will not be surprised if it expands to full time.

Q: Does the special needs funding include money to make playgrounds ADA compliant?

A: Commissioner Banks answered that there is a separate line item for this in public grounds maintenance. The maintenance scheduler may have more information as well.

Q: Are we going to meet our lifeguard needs?

A: Commissioner Banks answered that it would be another summer of younger and newer staff but that the department would be able to meet this goal.

Q: Are there plans to better address trash and other concerns at the Waban Hill Reservoir?

A: Commissioner Banks answered that having the volunteer assist was helpful as the site is difficult to manage and it will need to be reviewed periodically. Either a volunteer or another staff member would likely be needed.

Q: Why has the budget for playground equipment decreased?

A: Commissioner Banks answered that in the previous fiscal year, funds were added after a COVID pause. Now the funding is returning to regular pre-COVID levels. Other projects will be funded through non-budget sources such as ARPA.

Councilors were pleased to see the progress being made on field maintenance.

Q: Can you provide more detail on the revolving funds for PRC?

A: Commissioner Banks responded that PRC has the most revolving funds out of the City departments. She has discussed what the fields maintenance fund will allow and described how programs are designed to cover their own costs, such as the camps. Commissioner Banks emphasized that she is excited to learn more about the revolving funds as they support programming flexibility to meet community needs. For one example, revolving funds will be used to pay the off-leash specialist and supplement the park ranger.

The Committee took a straw vote to accept the PRC proposed budget of \$7,626,195, along with the Supplemental CIP and the CIP, which passed unanimously.

The meeting adjourned at 9:32pm

Respectfully submitted,

Josh Krintzman, Chair