

Special 2021 Budget Meeting
Of the
Putnam Town Board
November 17th, 5PM ~ Putnam Town Hall ~ ZOOM

5:00 Meeting called to order

Councilman Christopher Mallon led the Pledge of Allegiance.

Roll Call

Members present:	Supervisor	Darrell Wilson
	Councilman	Christopher Mallon
	Councilman	Larry Shiell
	Councilwoman	Carole Schneider
	Councilman	Charles Bain

Others present: John LaPointe (Budget Officer, 109 County Route 2), David Hayes (PVFD, 560 Gull Bay Road) **Present via ZOOM:** Cee McKenzie (BAR Chair, 526 Gull Bay Road), Bob Rudt (Planning Board, 526 Gull Bay Road, John Breitenbach (Town Attorney, 23 Father Jogues Place, Ticonderoga, NY 12883),

Supervisor Wilson opened the meeting stating the purpose of today’s meeting is to discuss and adopt a budget for 2021 budget for the Town of Putnam. Today’s meeting was necessary because the Fire Department line of the budget was undetermined. The Fire Department budget was presented as a proposal on the November 3, 2020 ballot for voters to approve or not approve of a 31% increase in the Fire Departments contract with the Town of Putnam. The increase was approved by voters 182 yes votes/ 167 No votes. Total registered voter participation was 73% with 354 cast votes of 487 registered voters in Putnam. The purpose of having the increase on the ballot was to understand better how the residents felt about the increase. The Fire Department line represents 15% of the Town’s overall budget. If the Board were to vote to not accept the increase, the Fire Department would get the standard increase of 2%. Standard increase of 2% would be \$124,052 or 12% of the total Town Budget. Should the Board approve the requested increase of 31% it would total \$162,600 or 15% of the total Town Budget.

Supervisor Wilson opened the floor to the Board members.

Councilman Bain opined that the voters in Putnam passed the increase by ballot and he will follow what the voters indicated on the ballot.

Councilman Mallon spoke next saying he agrees with Councilman Bain about the voters, however going forward, unless the Town has some level of oversight, he cannot be asked to approve anything they want. Without oversight he will not vote favorably again.

Councilman Shiell stated he would have liked to see a larger margin on ballot. He indicated he will move forward with the increase and vote yes.

Councilwoman Schneider stated she wants to vote yes, but she is “choking” on it. She indicated she would like to investigate alternate companies to contract the service with, perhaps Dresden. Supervisor Wilson replied that this is a contracted service, and the Town has a right to investigate contracting other Fire Companies and that it could represent a lower cost the bottom line. He indicated he has had

conversations and feels that the Dresden Fire Department could provide services for a much lower cost. Councilwoman Schneider continued; her concern is if the large increase is approved this year that next year the Fire Department will ask for yet another increase with an endless cycle of requests for exorbitant increases. She stated she feels they are not going to cooperate with the Town Board and also that the taxpayers have a right to see where their money is going as it's a large "chunk of change" they're asking for.

Supervisor Wilson stated he will vote yes for the same reasons as the other Councilpersons. A majority representation of the Town in favor of the substantial increase for the contract with the Fire Department. Supervisor Wilson cautioned his yes vote comes with great reservation and that he agrees with the other Councilpersons and their weighty reservations. Supervisor Wilson indicated further conversations will need to take place regarding oversight of the contract. Attorney Breitenbach has provided a draft contract which was provided to the Board. Supervisor Wilson indicated that when the Board comes back together in December the Board can shape the contract as an offer to the Fire Department. He stated that a little more oversight and understanding can be written into the contract that would address the concerns expressed by the Board. Supervisor Wilson continued another concern he has is the growing requirement that the Fire Department feels from their perspective is needed by the Town, but the Town is not necessarily asking for. Basic fire protection is one thing, enhanced fire protection is another. To use the justification of a fire insurance rating as a primary reason to enhance and increase the costs year over year to buy capacity and capability that is not necessarily something the Town needs. The equation is "need vs. want". He continued there is not doubt the Fire Department takes the job seriously, but we must temper that enthusiasm with fiscal reality. Supervisor Wilson continued that we don't need as many trucks, we don't need as many new trucks, but we do need certain capabilities. Councilman Mallon expressed that it "20-30% feels like an ambush". Supervisor Wilson agreed adding it feels like "extortion" for a service that we can go elsewhere with a reasonable cost-effective measure at providing basic fire and rescues services. He continued he understands the Fire Department has been a bit of the Town's identity and a focal point of the Town but that has also been eroded over time and we have to look out for the taxpayers wellbeing. Looking back the Fire Department increase history, two years ago they asked for and received a 24% increase in addition to regular increases over the past five years.

David Hayes spoke saying with the Town Clerk's help he put together a spreadsheet of the Town's financing of the Fire Department. Looking back over 20 years the Fire Departments average annual increase is 7.3%. Mr. Hayes argued that the 7.3% is essentially "playing catch-up" from the starting point. Mr. Hayes asserted that the Fire Department callouts varied from 59-69 callouts each year, including mutual aid, and first responder calls. Mr. Hayes has laid out a spread sheet of expenses of the Fire Department to the middle of November for the purpose of balancing the Fire Department budget. Supervisor Wilson stated going forward we need transparency, dialogue and an understanding of requirements. He continued no one is disputing the need, Ticonderoga EMS stated at one of our meetings how beneficial Putnam's first responders are in regards to securing a location and giving guidance to locations shaving essential minutes off response times, that's "well deserved recognition" but we need to be sure making capital investments in the right areas and not unnecessarily driving the cost of business up. Supervisor Wilson asserted there are Fire Departments that are covering the same size areas for much less money. Supervisor Wilson reiterated that he is voting yes with great apprehension because after working with the Fire Department for two years, then having an ultimatum "thrown at us" was disturbing. He continued that the Town is not going lightly down this path. Councilman Mallon asked if in the future the Board feels it is being extorted. Does the Board have to bring it to a ballot vote? Supervisor Wilson replied that a ballot vote is not required, and the Town can seek contracted services at a fair reasonable rate from whomever can provide services. Councilman Shiell commented saying he would like to see a new beginning the first of the year with the Fire Department, with everyone getting along. Councilman Shiell expressed his frustration with rumors that the Town Board is against the Fire Department, this feels like "a slap in the face, we're not against them, we're working with them" he continued, "we just can't hand the money out the way that they want, but we need to talk and get along, I want to see that in the worst way". Councilwoman Schneider commented her concern is the conversations she's had with

community members that are “really opposed to this”. She continued “I’m not against the Fire Department, I think it’s great to have them, but I don’t understand why they need so much money”. Councilwoman Schneider continued saying what appears to be a lack of transparency with their books is of great concern to her. She stated that if the Board could understand the expenses of the Fire Department a little more, they might understand where the taxpayer’s money is going and be more willing to give more financial support. Supervisor Wilson replied that the Fire Department has supplied some information to the Town, but around June communications broke down and the ultimatum was made to the Town by the Fire Department. “The dialogue broke down because the justification being used for the rate increase was not agreed upon. The thought that the Town Board doesn’t support the Fire Department is untrue, we have spent hours and hours working with them” said Supervisor Wilson. He continued expressing that the Town is asking for a contract, the Town is the customer and should not pay for more than what the Town needs. Councilman Bain added to the discussion saying the Board needs to consider how different this year is financially for State reimbursements and assistance, “we have to think about that too”.

Supervisor Wilson asked if there are any other comments before the vote.

Resolution #114

Adopt the 2021 Budget with the Fire Department line at \$162,600 and a total budget of \$1,091,504
On motion of Councilman Christopher Mallon, seconded by Councilman Larry Shiell,

Roll Call:

Councilman Christopher Mallon	YES	(with reservation)
Councilman Larry Shiell	YES	(with reservation)
Councilwoman Carole Schneider	YES	(with reservation)
Councilman Charlie Bain	YES	(with reservation)
Supervisor Darrell Wilson	YES	(with reservation)

All in favor; Resolution unanimously adopted.

Supervisor Wilson reviewed parts of the draft contract with the Board. Page one shows a multi-year contract. The advantage to having a multi-year contract was discussed very briefly. The only variable is on page two, which states the value of each year. It is currently written an installment contract, however that could be moved to one payment on March 1 after tax collections. Supervisor Wilson asked the Board to review the draft contract and get back to him with comments so that the Town Attorney can draft the changes and send them to the Fire Department’s attorney. Supervisor Wilson conveyed that if a catastrophic event like a truck failure should occur, the Town may have to re-visit helping the Fire Department outside of the contract. Councilman Mallon opined that yes the Board would look at the need but felt that the Fire Department is an independent entity and should address issues of that type in their own budget, although he did not completely disregard the possibility helping the Fire Department in the future. Councilwoman Schneider added to the discussion saying that the Town maintains a fund balance as part of the Town Budget and the Fire Department should do the same with their budget. Supervisor Wilson agreed saying the Fire Department should be trying to put a little money away each year in preparation of unexpected expenses. The discussion turned back to a multi-year contract. Attorney Breitenbach commented in the multi-year contract each succeeding year the number would be determined by a discussion by the Board and the Department. Councilman Mallon expressed he thought that the Board needs to get into a better relationship with the Department so that the needs of the Department can be discussed and planned for instead of being “ambushed” like this year. He would like to see a several year plan. Councilman Bain expressed that the Board needs to make a list of what they think the Towns “needs” are versus what the Fire Department wants or “thinks” we need.

Supervisor Wilson asked if there were anymore comments, there were none.

Resolution #115

Adjourn the Special 2021 Budget meeting

On motion of Councilwoman Carole Schneider, seconded by Councilman Christopher Mallon; all in favor.

Resolution unanimously adopted.

Special 2021 Budget meeting adjourned at 5:40 PM.

Next meeting is December 10, 2020 at 7 PM at the Putnam Town Hall and via ZOOM

Respectfully submitted,

Darlene Kerr
Putnam Town Clerk

Darrell Wilson _____ Supervisor

Christopher Mallon _____ Councilman

Larry Shiehl _____ Councilman

Carole Schneider _____ Councilwoman

Charles Bain _____ Councilman