

(The following is not a verbatim transcript of comments or discussion that occurred during the meeting, but rather a summarization intended for general informational purposes. All motions and votes are the official records).

SPECIAL FINANCE COMMITTEE – APRIL 4, 2023
(BUDGET HEARINGS)

A special meeting of the Finance Committee was held on Tuesday, April 4, 2023 in the Council Chambers, City Hall, 869 Park Ave., Cranston, Rhode Island.

CALL MEETING TO ORDER:

The meeting was called to order at 6:20 P.M. by the Chair.

Present Councilman Robert J. Ferri
 Councilwoman Aniece Germain
 Councilman Richard D. Campopiano
 Councilman Christopher G. Paplauskas
 Council Vice-President Lammis J. Vargas, Vice-Chair
 Councilman John P. Donegan, Chair
 Council President Jessica M. Marino

Also Present: Councilwoman Nicole Renzulli
 Anthony Moretti, Chief of Staff
 Tom Zidelis, Finance Director
 Christopher Orton, Assistant City Solicitor
 David DiMaio, City Council Budget Analyst
 Tracy Nelson, City Clerk
 Rosalba Zanni, Assistant City Clerk/Clerk of Committees

Chair indicated that the Budget Schedule is available online on the City’s website.

Director Zidelis asked that he be allowed to discuss his approach to the budgeting. The Mayor’s FY2024 Budget presentation, which is before the Committee, is what he has internally named an austerity Budget. The reason he referenced this document as an austerity Budget is from the inception, the Mayor and the Administration asked him to take an approach where we developed a Budget that first minimized any tax impact to the residents of Cranston. The second component was recognizing the known State Aid reductions between FY2023 and FY2024. Last year, we had known of the step down on the distress community. This year, it went down to -0-. During the formulation of the Budget, approximately two weeks ago, we had learned of the effects of the changes that were being made to the Pilot Program, which was another reduction of \$974,000 that we were made aware of approximately two weeks ago. Besides the known \$1.3 million in distressed communities, with this Budget document, we have absorbed another reduction of \$974,000 in State Aid in the form of Pilot Program. He was also directed by the Administration to start, what he referred to, weaning off ARPA funds as a source of Revenue supporting municipal services so this Budget, as that is before the

Committee this evening, also incorporates a reduction in the use of ARPA funds. Of the things that they did was they employed a dual system in Finance on two different methodologies of projecting the Revenues, predominantly the larger categories. What they did, in addition to suggestions of Revenue changes, Finance looked at it independently two different ways and before the Committee is a collective process with three people projecting Revenues. On the expense side, the function is to provide the baseline services that we are observing currently in FY2023. For exiting funded positions, that are filled in FY2023, those have generally been carried over at their current position in the 2024 Budget. The current Budget, as far as he knows, adheres to all the collective bargaining agreements. The current Budget funds it at their required contribution pensions in the OPEB and in Debt Service.

BOARDS & COMMISSIONS

Director Zidelis stated that the Boards and Commissions are pretty much level funded. There is a slight adjustment in the Arts Commission, which was a reduction of \$13. In the FY2024 Budget, as submitted by the Mayor, recommends appropriation for Boards and Commissions the amount of \$39,659.

Councilman Donegan indicated to the Pawtuxet River Authority expenditure side and stated that they are currently budgeted at \$5,000 and they have spent \$7,000. He questioned this. Director Zidelis stated that he does not know why, but he will check into it and report back.

No one from the public appeared to speak.

CITY COUNCIL

Director Zidelis stated that the Mayor's proposal is a reduction from FY2023 in the amount of \$353,397 to the FY2024 appropriation level of \$329,687. The reductions recommended are on line items #52213 Stenographer, #52214 Orders of the Council.

Council Vice-President Vargas asked for reason for the reduction. Director Zidelis stated that the actual expenditures, services were incumbent for the entire year for the full amount. Actual expenditures were only \$7,800 through February so that trend is an observation that we were saying is going to continue. Relative to the Orders of the Council, through February, they are seeing actual expenditure for a line item of \$17,000, expenditures of \$1,216 through February, which was the rationale behind reducing that line item.

Council President Marino questioned decrease in Video Streaming expenditures. Director Zidelis stated that looking at expenses paid to date, it was approximately \$2,775 through February, which was what precipitated us to look at that line item and reduce it down to \$7,000 from the budgetary line item of \$10,000 from the FY2023. Council President Marino stated that her assumption was that previously, in 2022, 2021 and even 2020, was significantly higher, but some of those prior costs and those prior Budgets, the cost incurred, she is assuming, was because of the initial setup that we had to enlist in. Former Council President Paplauskas can confirm this. Councilman Paplauskas stated that the big number there is a year that he believes we had to do the cameras in the Chambers, but some of the other years, we do see some higher costs and it is not due to our video streamer. It is because we had to purchase laptop and some equipment that had broken, such as power supply and some other things. So, it is nice to have a little bit of a cushion in the Video Streaming Budget in case something does break.

Mr. Dimaio asked if the Inventory Tax is included in the Clerk's Office Revenue because there is a 1% Inventory Tax that is passed on to the State of Rhode Island up to \$1,500. He asked if this is recorded in the Probate Court fees. Director Zidelis stated that the tax he is aware of is in the Instrument of Recording and the Real Estate, so on the Revenue side, it is #52124 and #52145. The specific one, he is not able to answer that right now, but will report back, but he believes it is #42124, but he is not sure.

CITY CLERK

Councilwoman Renzulli indicated to the Overtime line item and stated that now that we have a City Clerk, she asked if this should be reduced. Director Zidelis stated that he will make an assumption that it is for coverage of multiple meetings. In terms of the appropriation side of it, we recognize that there will be a redeployment, but we wanted to ensure that there was ample appropriation to both recognize and trend and potentially continue providing an appropriation where we could have access to Overtime. Director Moretti stated that they are running approximately \$15,000 now and the Budget may have been below or some changes took place, so annualizing that gets you probably the \$20,000 number.

City Clerk stated that, as everyone knows, she just joined the City in March and was not given the opportunity to submit Budget requests nor was she involved in preparation of the Budget. She did have a brief meeting with Director Zidelis back on March 7th, where she addressed the questions and some concerns she had and they reviewed them, but she does not see those reflected here in this Budget, so she wonders if she could address those again for the record for Council's consideration. Chair stated, absolutely.

City Clerk addressed the following items of concerns and questions:

- Expenditures – she had the same question regarding #51101 for Overtime. It is her understanding that this line item is to pay the Assistant City Clerk for Overtime for attendance at meetings, which she understands it is probably overbudget at this time from previous years, but she thinks there is a potential for some reduction and since her being onboard, once we get everything flowing, those meetings will be split between the Assistant City Clerk and herself. She does not know what the appropriate amount is, but she does not know that it needs to be doubled from previous years, so that is something that we can certainly look at.
- Line item #51104 Differentia – this line item seems to have been zeroed out. She is not quite sure the reason for that. It is her understanding that this line item is in the event that she needed to have an extended absence, which she does not intend to do, but if something were to happen, this would be a differential pay for the Assistant City Clerk to fill in her position. She is just wondering why that has been removed in its entirety. Director Moretti stated that across the board, we do not build in those contingencies if a Department Head has to go out on long-term.
- Line item #52004 Departmental Expenses – in the Budget detail it states that this line item is \$5,000 is level funded, but the previous year it was \$6,000 and it is being cut to \$5,000. If it is going to be level funded, it should be level funded at the \$6,000. Director Moretti stated that across the board, you are going to find various reductions in some of the smaller accounts and we are asking people to tighten their belts.

As Director Zidelis mentioned, the Mayor submitted a very austere Budget and we have to look at ways of doing things differently even in the small ways. City Clerk stated that the only reason she questioned it is because the Expenditure listing does specifically say level funded. She did not know if it was a typo or if the level funded statement is a typographical error. Director Moretti stated that we will change it to reflect a decrease. City Clerk reiterated her concern that with decreasing that line item by approximately \$1,000 when the cost of supplies and things like that are out of our control and they continue to rise.

- Line item #52251 Doge Licenses – last year this was budgeted for \$600. The dog tags have been ordered and invoice is in and we did go overbudget at \$735. She thinks a minor adjustment should be made to approximately \$800 in case there is a minimal increase this year.
- Line items #52252, #52254 and #52259 – these are all Expenditures for Advertising, which also have Revenue Accounts and question she had for Director Zidelis at the time she met with him was it is her understanding that these advertising fees are paid by the applicants, whether it be Probate, a business license or for a Zone Change, so she does not understand why there is such a discrepancy between the Expense and the Revenue. Director Zidelis stated that he is going to have to make an assumption that these accounts, unlike the other known fees, are linked in our work papers, so he is going to make an assumption if it is one to one, it is an error on their part and so a change on one automatically makes a change on another line item a/k/a the Revenue follows the Expense so he can check on that.
- City Clerk stated that when she met with Director Zidelis she asked for some minor additions to the Budget: approximately \$300 for use of professional associations. She stated that the City Clerk and Assistant City Clerk are members of the Rhode Island Clerks Association and she is a member of the Rhode Island, New England and International Municipal Clerks Associations. That is her professional development and she needs to maintain her status in those to maintain her CMC and work towards her MMCIP and that is what the approximate \$300 is for. There is no line item for this and she had asked for it to be added. She had also asked for additional line item for approximately \$2,000 for continuing her Certified Municipal Clerk and to work towards her Master Municipal Clerk.
- City Clerk stated that the Clerk's Office is severely behind in technology and she understands that finances are tight, but there is something to be said for investing in technology to assist staff and maybe reduce costs on other ends, so she had asked for \$15,000 for a business licensing software program and that is a quote she received from one company so she would expect that it to be no more than \$15,000. This would allow us to have a program to input, track, run reports for all the licenses issued by the City. She thinks this would be a great first step in heading towards the right direction to get some automation in the Office. It would particularly helpful for the public, Safety Services Commission and the Council when licenses were to come up for renewal and they wanted history. Right now, that is all done manually and it is very labor intensive and it does, at times, result in human error. She hopes this is considered.

- On the Revenue side, line item #42138 Tobacco Licenses – we are budgeting \$11,000 of Revenue, however, those licenses are being phased out so that should be -0-.
- Instrument Recording – we should be taking in \$3 per document for the State Historical Trust and \$1 to the City for Historical Records Trust and she just wants to be sure that there are somewhere a reflection of that in the Budget that we pay that out to the State and the \$3 is paid to the State and the other \$1 is retained in a Reserved Account that is specifically reserved for certain purposes such as preservation of historic documents. Director Zidelis stated that he is not aware that it is Reserved and that is something we can work on how we report them. When Revenues come in they do just hit a Revenue account. We can set it up so they do hit a Reserve account so that would be an accounting change. City Clerk stated that the same thing happens with the Probate filing fees, \$3 per instrument goes to the State and \$1 is to the City for Historic Preservation. Also, according to RIGL 34-13-7, 10% of recording fees provided for in this Section shall be utilized by each City or Town for the purpose of document preservation and technological upgrades so she just wants to be sure that 10% of those fees are being set aside for those purposes.

Council President Marino thanked Ms. Nelson for speaking up on the issues in her department that are important. She would like to see \$15,000 implemented if somehow we can do that with the technology so we can start to get to a place where we need to be and that also would free up time for the Clerks with that type of system and it would free up space.

Director Zidelis stated that there are two parts to that. Yes, he is one that embraces technology. The one issue is this is one that we would logically run through our IT Department as they deal with the vast majority of our software applications. Also, we will have to work with the Clerk’s Office to get a scope of services or determine that this one is going to be a sole source and there is no other. He knows the Clerk stated that she had a preferred company and there is a software package and she had an estimate, we would have to run it through IT and Purchasing and BOCAP. Ms. Nelson stated that that price was a quote given to her by one particular company who offered a free demo. She realizes and is happy to do a whole RFP, RFQ, whatever is necessary to do that. That was only to indicate that she knows she can get it for \$15,000 or less so if we went out for RFP, that is the maximum amount she would expect to spend.

Councilwoman Renzulli asked Ms. Nelson if we use Clerkbases. Ms. Nelson stated, no.

No one appeared to speak from the public.

PROBATE

Director Zidelis stated that for FY2023 budget amount was \$19,339 and for FY2024, the Mayor is recommending an appropriation of \$18,839, a reduction of \$500, which predominantly is coming out of the line item for Departmental Expenses.

No one appeared to speak from the public.

FIRE DEPARTMENT

Director Zidelis stated that the Mayor's FY2024 Budget is in the amount of \$37,216,710, which is a reduction from the FY2023 level of \$397,821. Although the amount is reduced, the compliment is increased and it is due to the fact that the current class is being paid for with the new and improved Safer Grant, whereby the federal government paid for 75% of the employee and their fringes. Current Safer Grant picks up 100% of salaries and fringes of those eligible new recruits that are going to be firefighters for the City of Cranston.

Chief James Warren appeared to speak.

Chair indicated to Overtime and stated that it is level funded for next year. The average over the past five most recent years is just shy of \$6 million and he believes it is running at approximately annualized at about \$6.1 million, so is the level funding realistic at \$5.5 million? Director Zidelis stated that the Chair is correct that the Overtime Budget is trending down \$6.1 compared to actual previous year \$6.4 so the reliance on Overtime is going down. That coupled with the addition of the new recruits led us to level funded with the assumption that trend going down will continue. What we have seen in prior years is as the Overtime is decreasing, we are still picking up because we budget 100% in the salaries. In terms of the logic behind the level funding of Overtime, we anticipate that the work the Chief has done in managing man hours will continue into FY2024.

Chief Warren stated that we were hoping to get sooner verdict on the Safer Grant. We were hoping to have the new Firefighters start last September. They did not get started until March 13th of this year. That was our big problem with waiting and waiting for FEMA to give us the Grant so that was a big hit to us. We thought we would have a lower Overtime cost to share.

Chair asked if the Firefighters that are funded through the Safer Grant will be up and running for the entirety next year. Chief Warren stated, yes, and that is 13 Firefighters.

No one appeared to speak from the public.

FIRE ALARM

Director Zidelis stated that the Mayor's FY2024 Budget is in the amount of \$303,000, slight reduction from the FY2023 Budget of \$305,000, so you will see most of the slight modifications in a couple of areas. The biggest reduction is in the area of Electrical Equipment Repair, which we recommend a reduction of \$3,000 between the two Fiscal Years.

No one appeared to speak from the public.

POLICE DEPARTMENT

Director Zidelis stated that the Mayor's proposed Budget for FY2024 is in the amount of \$29,040,463, an increase over the FY2023 Budget appropriation of \$28,405,686. He noted an increase in Overtime, which Administration is recommending an increase of \$300,000 based on trends that we are seeing over the \$1.2 million appropriation for FY2023.

Colonel Michael Winqvist appeared to speak.

Chair indicated that if anyone that is listening this evening or in the future, the Police Department puts out an annual report that is available online that really gives a lot of information about the Department, the state of what is going on in the City and he would really encourage anyone interested to go to the Cranston Police website and check that out. It is a tremendous resource.

Councilman Paplauskas asked why the Crossing Guards is in this Budget and not in the School Department Budget. Colonel Winqvist stated that he is not sure because they do not have any direct oversight with the contract negotiations. They do provide input on some of the posts, but it is mostly the School Department that should be more involved in it and because they know where the bus stops are and so forth, but that has been an increasing cost over the years for the vendor that they have been using. Councilman Paplauskas asked if the hiring goes through the Police Department or if it goes through the School Department also. Colonel Winqvist stated that is a sub-contractor, so that sub-contractor does all the hiring. Councilman Paplauskas asked who negotiates it. Colonel Winqvist stated that he believes the City negotiates it and School Department has some say on increasing some of the posts, decreasing the post, where the post should be, so they have a big involvement and they have discussed whether it belongs with the School Department for that reason and under their Budget.

Council President Marino asked Colonel Winqvist if he feels that the budgeted amount for line item #532110 Replacement Vehicles is an adequate amount. Colonel Winqvist stated, yes. Every year they try to replace eight of the front-line cruisers based on mileage and wear and tear and they have been doing that every year since he has been Chief and he really appreciates that and that has allowed the fleet to remain one of the best fleets, he believes, in the State. The cost has gone up slightly, but they do try to get the very best price by tapping into the group pricing through MA and RI so they have done pretty well with that. They also have their own installer of the lights that does it inhouse, so they have saved some money having access to that resource at the Police Department.

Councilman Paplauskas asked if Fleet Maintenance services their vehicles. Colonel Winqvist stated, yes, depending on what it is. If it is something that is under warranty, it usually goes to Tasca, but the general maintenance, such as oil changes and tire rotations, they go to the City Fleet Maintenance Department.

Chair indicated to line item #51102 Expenditure side, Special Duty, and stated that FY2023 Budget is \$176,000 and the proposed Budget is \$191,000. Mr. Dimaio stated that he did the math and it is currently running the actuals for this Budget actually are annualized to \$367,000. He questioned reason for that. Director Zidelis stated that one of the issues that they are having is how Grants or specialty details are captured and accounted for. What they are doing in this Budget, the Revenue now is going to be properly allocated, so what you should see going forward, both in 2024 and forward, is the accounting of those expenses not appearing here following where the Revenue is.

Councilman Paplauskas asked Colonel Winqvist if the Care Program is still in effect and if there are Details out there every day to track traffic enforcement and keeping our Municipal Court busy. Colonel Winqvist stated that since COVID, the number of tickets that have been written have declined significantly and that is not just in Cranston, that is in every Police Department in the State.

They are running the Care Program and they make it very convenient for the Officers to go out and all those areas that come in through Constituent Affairs are put on a list and there is four to five Care Officers that work these Details, whether it be overnight parking, speed enforcement, DUI enforcement, but the numbers are coming up. They stop almost 20,000 cars a month, which is a lot of cars. They are trying to send a message the best they can to get more tickets written.

Council Vice-President Vargas asked where the Flock System is listed in the Police Budget. Colone Winqvist stated that they use forfeiture money for that. Council Vice-President Vargas asked what the cost for that is. Colonel Winqvist stated, \$80,000 in total. Council Vice-President Vargas stated that she supports the system. She supported it when it came for the Pilot and she will continue to support that.

Councilwoman Renzulli asked for explanation of what School Safety Initiative is. Colone Winqvist stated that when Mayor Fung was in Office, he added that program and essentially, every single day of the School year, they have two Officers on Detail on both the Eastern side of the City and the Western side of the City. Those Officers randomly check all schools within a jurisdiction, not only for safety reasons, but also interact with the kids. It is a very effective program and they get a lot of positive comments back.

No one appeared to speak from the public.

ANIMAL CONTROL

Director Zidelis stated that the FY2024 Budget recommendation from the Mayor is \$358,881. That is up from the FY2023 Budget in the amount of \$334,100. They are in the areas of Salary Schedule and the line items have pension contributions and line item of Care of Animals.

No one appeared to speak from the public.

HARBOR MASTER

Director Zidelis stated that Mayor's FY2024 Budget is recommendation is for \$4,770, that is a reduction from the FY2023 level of \$5,770, predominantly in the area of departmental expenses.

Chair indicated to the Revenue side and asked if those licenses collected are by the Harbor Master themselves. Colonel Winqvist stated, yes. That is mooring fees and fines that he writes and collects and submits to the City.

Councilman Paplauskas asked if the City still has Police Explorer Program and how that is going and if there are enough funds for it. Colonel Winqvist stated that they have over twenty Explorers from Cranston High School East and it is a very diverse group of kids from 14-18 or 19 years of age. It is a lot of work and the program is very successful. They have expanded the number of Explorer Advisors so it is a more diverse group so that they have a female Explorer Advisor as well. Expense primarily is insurance which goes through Boy Scouts of America and uniforms.

No one appeared to speak from the public.

MUNICIPAL COURT

Director Zidelis stated that the Budget submitted by the Mayor is for \$360,300,634, a reduction from the FY2023 Budget in the amount of \$444,049. There is a reallocation on the Salary side where an appropriation has been moved down to part-time help for a certain position. Reductions also flow through the fringe benefits including Hospitalization and Departmental Expenses in the amount of \$45,000 down from \$50,000. Similar to the Clerk's Office, a reduction in the amount of payments to the State for tickets being issued.

Council Vice-President Vargas asked for reason for moving the Salary allocation to part-time help. **Director Zidelis** stated that this was a transitional. The position in question was not a full-time scheduled position, at least the way they looked at it when they did the extract for payroll. They have the funding in the Budget, but it has been reallocated down to a part-time position because it was not a filled position. **Council Vice-President Vargas** asked **Director Moretti** reason why. Was it because they could not find help and what is the strategy behind that? **Director Moretti** stated that from a discussion held yesterday, a full-time position was never filled and we are making do with a part-time position. **Council Vice-President Vargas** questioned if it's correct that that position was going to be an Interpreter. **Director Moretti** stated that there is one person right now as an Interpreter Clerk and that person, should they leave, will be replaced with the equivalent of a part-time Interpreter Clerk. Just like every department, there is demands and every department there is requests for more people and more help, but it is working right now in this department and we are able to make it work.

Elisabeth Bettis, Municipal Court Clerk and Judge Matthew Smith, Associate Municipal Court Judge, appeared to speak.

Ms. Bettis stated that they are all wearing a lot of hats because the Court runs on one full-time and one part-time employee and then herself.

Council Vice-President Vargas asked **Ms. Bettis** if she thinks the Court is operating as smooth as it could. **Ms. Bettis** stated that we are the second biggest Municipal Court in the State with the lowest staff, by four. We rely right now on the part-timer as well as several Interns that go in through the Universities as well as the High School right now. That is pretty much how they are staying afloat through those enrichment programs where the students go in to learn the job and the inner workings of the Court. Without those students, they would have to shut the Municipal Court down. She indicated that she spoke to **Director Moretti** a few days ago and they are working on a secondary bi-lingual part-timer. They share them with the Police Department.

Judge Smith appeared to speak and stated that they will exceed their Budget. Looking at the projections for next year, they do not believe that is a realistic number for the amount of Revenue that they are going to generate. As it is right now, they may have to eliminate the night sessions, which are quite popular. They do not have any more money in the Budget to pay for Detail.

Ms. Bettis stated that she does not have a Budget for Overtime nor does she have the staff to facilitate Night Court right now. Not to say, that it won't happen, but the Clerk and she, as of right now, take Comp. time because they know that it is not in the Budget for Overtime. Going forward, that is not an option that she wants to utilize anymore, so her only choice, because she legally can't run the Court

with one person, is to eliminate Night Court sessions. As an example, parking tickets right now, she is at about one week behind. There are several hundred that need to be entered. They get approximately 300 come Monday from the ticket Details and that is not just parking, that is also Animal Control violations, any Municipal Ordinance, so it is an array of tickets that they are backlogged in because they have to be entered manually.

Judge Smith stated that he does not think the proposed Budget on the Revenue side is realistic. Director Zidelis stated that this Revenue estimate was predicated and is aggressive in relative terms. In terms of the balancing act between a warning and a ticket is a judgement call and one of the conversations that we are having was on the number of tickets being issued.

Mr. Dimaio stated that payroll taxes not inclusive of the part-time position, which is approximately \$2,500 in expenses that was omitted. He questioned this. Director Zidelis stated that he will check into this.

Council President Marino acknowledged and welcomed Chief Judge Raymond Coia in the audience. She thanked Ms. Bettis for all her hard work.

Chair asked if the Court partners with the Community Development Department as to the Housing issue to help connect residents with some of the housing rehab programs that are available. Ms. Bettis stated that that is one of the hats that the Clerks in the Court wear. She personally has made it a mission to give people the resources that they might not be cognizant that they have available to them.

Councilwoman Renzulli asked if the Interpreters are being paid as Interpreters or as part-time Clerks or part-time Clerks with a stipend to interpret. Ms. Bettis stated that they are paid at a higher rate than most of the part-time Clerks because their first and primary function is as a translator. Councilwoman Renzulli asked, between the day and the nighttime Court, is there more of a need for translation in one or the other. Ms. Bettis stated that it is primarily in the morning because a lot of those people do not know that they have the option of a nighttime session.

No one appeared to speak from the public.

The meeting adjourned at 8:30 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Rosalba Zanni
Assistant City Clerk/Clerk of Committees