

GRAFTON COUNTY COMMISSIONERS' MEETING

Budget Reviews

Board of Commissioners' Office

North Haverhill, NH

Thursday, March 17, 2011

PRESENT: Commissioners Michael Cryans, and Ray Burton, Executive Director Julie Clough, Financial Coordinator Susan Cunningham and Secretary Jeri Martino

EXCUSED: Commissioner Omer C. Ahern Jr.

Commissioner Cryans called the Meeting to order at 9:12 AM.

COUNTY ATTORNEY'S OFFICE – VICTIM WITNESS

Attorney Lara Saffo and Office Manager Alison Farina arrived and Atty. Saffo reviewed the Attorney's Office budget which is up 9%. This is due in part to the increase in health insurance and retirement. Health insurance in particular has increased dramatically because of a staff member choosing to pick up the insurance whereas they did not in the past.

Attorney Saffo said that she strongly encourages the Commissioners to offer a merit increase to employees.

Attorney Saffo is requesting an additional 5 hours a week be added to the Investigator position which would result in an additional \$7000. She said that each attorney would get another hour a week investigative time. She went on to stress the importance and the need for the position.

Attorney Saffo stated that the office is short staffed and she would like to see another part time person for the Victim Witness department but understands that fiscally, it would probably not be feasible so there is no request.

A review of the case load of the office was gone over.

Commissioner Cryans posed a question on behalf of Commissioner Ahern who could not attend the meeting today. He said that Commissioner Ahern had inquired as to the possibility of using the County Attorney's office first before considering any outside council and asked Atty. Saffo her feeling on this.

Attorney Saffo said that it has always been the tradition at the County not to use the Attorney's office as council and the feeling was that is it more cost efficient to go outside because of the need for a particular specialty. She said this is particularly true with employment labor law. She made the analogy that you wouldn't hire and electrician to do your plumbing and suggested this was the same thing. She said that there may be some questions they could answer but for the most part that in addition to having an extremely large caseload per attorney; it is not the preferred practice. Atty. Saffo said there are 92 cases in the month of April for which she has 5 attorneys going up against 23 attorneys. She said there is just not enough room for anything extra on the plate.

Commissioner Burton asked Atty. Saffo if she was working with the VT Law School or Franklin Pierce. She replied that the office is surviving because of interns from the VT Law School but Franklin Pierce is too far away.

Commissioner Burton asked what the office conviction rate was and Atty. Saffo said that she would have to check that but it has been her philosophy that she didn't want to feel that it was necessary to win at all costs.

Commissioner Burton asked a number of questions such as where the cases are coming from; state or federal, what about plea bargains and how about court time, unsolved cases and how many people out of state are being sought out to be brought back.

Atty. Saffo said that cases are not being pled down unless it's agreed upon with the victims or it just doesn't appear reasonable to go to trial. She said that all pleas are being recorded to show the legislators just what is happening because of lack of Court time.

Commissioner Cryans asked about long stays at the County Dept of Corrections and Atty. Saffo said that many times a defendant will waive his rights to a speedy trial and sometimes that's in order to spend time credited in pre-trial confinement as opposed to state.

Atty. Saffo discussed the realities of going out of state in order to bring back a felon which today becomes a financial consideration.

A number of issues regarding different things that the County Attorney's office was doing were discussed. Commissioner Cryans asked if the Mental Health Court was up and running and Atty. Saffo said that the coordinator has been hired and is setting up the office but there are still a few things that are pending. There was a brief discussion about Drug Court.

Commissioner Cryans asked Atty. Saffo if there was anything in the legislature that she was concerned about and she said "guns". She said that it very much concerns when you can walk into a building with a concealed weapon and there is a small group of people who feel that the government shouldn't dictate the concealment. She feels that the government should know who is authorized to carry a concealed weapon.

She said she also has a big concern over marijuana and how it severely ruins the brain of kids and by the time they get to be adults the system gets them with a severe brain trauma. Synthetics are another area of concern, particularly as they are sold over the counter in some stores.

Commissioner Cryans asked about the new legislation to allow kids to drop out of school at 16 without parental approval and Atty. Saffo said that was another bad move. Commissioner Cryans said its one thing for a parent to agree to allowing their child to drop out but another for the State to say it's okay and he did not agree with the legislation.

The GED program at the Jail was discussed and Atty. Saffo said that Supt. Libby's program shows both success and cost effectiveness.

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

Information Technology Manager Brent Ruggles reviewed his budget saying it is up \$11K with a capital expense request of almost \$40K, with the largest majority of that going for the network consolidation.

Commissioner Burton questioned why the items for Dispatch weren't going through the Dispatch capital reserve and said that anything relating to the highway safety can be requested through highway safety funds and that ITM Ruggles should look into that too.

ITM Ruggles said that the amount of PC's will increase 30% with the new Jail. He said that during that time it's going to be a lot of work for just he and his single staff member to get

everything done and that he has managed to recruit some staff from the Jail to at least help with unpacking.

Commissioner Cryans asked if there were any computers that are not being utilized and ITM Ruggles replied that there were none that were worthy, but just for spare parts.

There was a discussion about items in the current budget's \$14K equipment line, of which very little has been used. Commissioner Cryans questioned if some items that ITM Ruggles had budgeted for FY12 could be purchased now from that line and asked him to get with Director Clough to see if that's something that can be done. He said if that does happen it will reduce the amount of capital expenses for next year's budget and that would be a big help.

COMMISSIONERS – WAGE & BENEFIT ADJUSTMENTS, INTEREST ON TANS, BONDED DEBT, CONTINGENCY, UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE, OTHER, DELEGATION

Director Clough began with the Commissioners budget which is up 3.49% and included the NH allocations factored in. Operating costs have been reduced.

There was a discussion about health insurance and what had been discussed so far regarding plans. Director Clough said that she will be ready to go over numbers on Tuesday at the regular Commissioners meeting.

No money was put into wage & benefit adjustments and retiree health insurance has increased. Due to low interest rates the interest on Tans has been reduced 75% from last year's budget. Bonded debt has increased 140% and included 25% of the Nursing Home bond, the water tank and the new Jail. Contingency lines are down 42.5% although Director Clough felt it was important leave the outside council line at \$50K. Unemployment insurance is up 50% and delegation expenses have remained flat although Director Clough said that because of all the meetings last year by the Delegation they will be over budgeted in FY11.

Director Clough added a statute to the information provided to the Commissioners which stated that "*The County Commissioners shall have the authority to hire, within the limits of appropriations, legal counsel to advise them on County affairs...*", and that she wanted to stress that monies spent on legal counsel can save a lot of money down the road in expenses. She said that its clear that the County Attorney's office is maxed out time wise.

Budget presentations for next week were discussed.

The new bond bids will be opened on the 29th of March and will be in the amount of \$15.5M which is \$5M below the original estimates. Commissioner Cryans stated the importance of getting that message out to the public. Director Clough said she will put together the new tax impact to town information regarding the Jail once the new bond interest rates come in.

11:25 AM With no further business the meeting adjourned.

Raymond S. Burton, Clerk