

Special Town Council Meeting
April 6, 2022

The April 6, 2022 Special Town Council Meeting was called to order by Denise L. DiFranco, President, in Foster, RI at 7:00 p.m.

The following members were present:

Denise L. DiFranco, President
Heidi Rogers, Vice President
Chris Stone
David Paolino
Cheryl Hawes

Also present:

Kelli Russ, Finance Director
Julia Chretien, Solicitor

- I. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE** The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.
- II. EXECUTIVE SESSION**
6:30 p.m.
Potential Litigation:
Investigation into B&Z
official's allegations
(procedural steps)
- OPEN SESSION 7 p.m. Denise L. DiFranco announced that two votes were taken. One to hire an investigator; they will be hiring William Core to complete the investigation. Vote was 5 – 0. Ms. DiFranco also said they voted on the scope including a preliminary investigation and that vote was 5 – 0.
- III. NEW BUSINESS**
Restructuring of Emergency
Services Denise L. DiFranco thanked everyone for coming out and said that they wanted them to be part of the discussion. She explained that the meeting is a result of the public hearing last Thursday regarding the budget and there are copies of the budget available. It was brought to the Council's attention that funding is in a difficult situation. Foster does not have a lot of revenue; the revenue is the taxpayers. There are a lot of expenses. They need to look at how those expenses are spent and how they can dovetail, lessen them, and they certainly don't want to affect the safety of the town. This meeting is for emergency services, fire, and ambulance; tomorrow will be Land Trust and the Library. Ms. DiFranco called on Kelli Russ.
- Kelli Russ said that the budget is out of balance based upon everybody's needs by about \$400,000. There is a current plan to fund the Rescue Company by \$100,000 this year, and her concern is that next year that is going to cause a structural deficit. She stated that she has been saying this for a while that she did not think they could continue to offer all the services because it creates a huge issue. She said they currently do not have another revenue source that is lasting, so to use a grant or the American Recovery fund just creates a structural deficit again because the money is not there in the following

year's budget. The schools said they will go up another 4% next year, which puts it at \$400,000, so we would be \$400,000 in the hole and no practical way to fund it. She said on Thursday that there was a structural problem and unless we restructure the way that we provide services as a whole to the Town of Foster residents, we will have a problem. The services we provide are garbage removal, the library, the three fire companies, the ambulance corps, and then the Land Trust in the way we provide the funding to carry on, and we need to start absorbing some of that revenue into the town instead of giving it all to the Land Trust, but again we are at the point where you actually have to in order to provide the services we do because you don't have enough money to do it.

Denise L. DiFranco interjected that her pet peeve is the recycling. We need to recycle! It's ridiculous what we are being charged for garbage pickup because people don't recycle enough.

Kelli Russ said that this week we received notice that our cap is decreasing next year by 129 tons, so as we already exceed our cap--there's like a \$42 per ton penalty--so that's in addition to the \$5000 that we don't have in the budget this year. She did change the budget to reflect that as we're going to have increase the tipping fees by 4-5 thousand dollars.

Denise L. DiFranco said we are looking at the three fire stations and the ambulance corps, and she doesn't know how we can continue with three [stations] and the one ambulance. Do they have a suggestion?

Ron Cervasio, Old Plainfield Pike, complimented all the people on the fire companies, and Ginny Colwell, Gordy Brayton, Tom Walden. He said that Kelli is talking about a structural deficit. It did not happen in the last couple years. When you take a full time position and cut it half, and take that half of the money and apply it to the budget next year, after that, with inflation, you have created a structural deficit. So try to remember how many things that they cut to save the taxpayers money, and now we get to the point of where we are. Thirty-something years ago, he said to get rid of the elderly tax freeze, and he got laughed at. Twenty-five years ago he said to get rid of Foster Center Fire Station—that would have caused a cash flow for years. What you are doing today is to fill the hole, so the issue is revenue and revenue is not created by five guys forming an Economic Development Committee that have no idea what they are doing. You need to go downtown and get the State to help us. What the real problem is—I know some of the people in this room—that the people sitting at the table do not have the abilities to

fix the problem. So we have a circle, you back them, they can't fix it, now you are here saying there's a problem. Kelli is talking about a structural deficit. Go back to the high school; Michael Barnes knows there is a structural deficit being created at the Region. He asked for 4, he got 2, and it ended up that he's not there anymore. You can't keep voting for these people because they can't fix it. The solution is to get qualified people with degrees in something sitting at the table talking with Kelli and then going downtown with the Planning Board, with the Zoning Board and say, "We are open for business." I've been saying to Denise for years to go downtown. You guys have a problem; the libraries have a problem. Years ago he said to make one library. The Land Trust, it's unbelievable that the Land Trust has a steady cash flow instead of coming to the people in this room and asking for a bond for what they want to buy. When did you have to go to the Senator downtown to float a Charter Change? You are going to talk about it tomorrow night and then in May you think you are going to do something? You can't do it without downtown. So that's the solution. Keep doing this and you can't fix it; it's going to get worse. Denise L. DiFranco replied that the Charter Change is in November not at the Financial Town meeting in May. Mr. Cervasio asked what they are going to do? Kelli Russ noted that we don't regularly bond.

Erin Ferguson, Plainfield Pike, said she is a recent resident of town having moved from West Greenwich but is thankful to be a resident of the town. She stated that she is a full time EMT; she is not a volunteer in this town and never was but she was in the Town of West Greenwich for several years. She made a case for having an ambulance corps. Denise L. DiFranco stated that they are not looking to get rid of the ambulance.

Dave Rathbun asked what the council was proposing. Denise L. DiFranco said that they have not formalized anything. It was brought up after the budget public hearing and was not on the agenda to vote on, so we decided to have everyone come here. Ms. DiFranco said her opinion is that they need to look at downsizing the fire departments. She agrees that we need ambulances but what that looks like she does not know. Mr. Rathbun asked what kind of savings does that generate? Heidi Rogers said about \$70,000, not enough. Mr. Rathbun asked if his house insurance would go up. Cheryl Hawes said they were told no. Chris Stone said we are already at the highest rate. Ms. DiFranco said it's not going to save a lot of money and there's going to be another empty building in Foster Center. The price of fire

trucks, we can't put enough money aside. Mr. Rathbun asked how they got to this point. Heidi Rogers said they used to be all volunteer fire and rescue. Volunteers have dwindled. Now we have paid EMTs. That's part of it, there's inflation, we have a cap, the school is going up. There are only so many dollars to go around. [At the regional meeting] someone made a motion to increase the appropriation 1.5%. If it passed, the Town of Foster would have had \$59,000 for everything. Once it's voted on, we can't say we can't fund you. This year it didn't happen but we are way over the cap. Ms. Russ said we are already at the cap and we are \$400,000 short on our budget; something has to change. The ambulance corps increased their budget by \$400,000, that's just one thing; the school went up 4%, our population of Foster students went up at a rate greater than the growth of the Gloucester students which means we pay a higher percentage. The reality is that we can't fund it. A decision has to be made. You have to combine services or eliminate something.

Guenter Bay, South Killingly Road, closing Station 3 is \$70,000. Closing a fire station is not a problem; it's easily done. The problem is that it's all hanging on one fire station and explained mutual aid.

Michael Rose, South Killingly Road, said he has been a fire EMS for close to 25 years. He discussed the lack of volunteers. You have four chiefs, consolidation might be a good thing, but shifting trucks around to different ends of the town increases the response time. Heidi Rogers said not if you have one at each side. Denise L. DiFranco said she lives on Central Pike. Her side of the road is [covered by] Foster Center, across the street is [covered by] South Foster, but South Foster is closer, mileage-wise, to her. Mr. Rose said that \$400,000 for trash pickup is insane, pay for your own trash or bring it to the dump. Cheryl Hawes said we don't have a dump.

Matthew Haynes, Johnson Road, said the issue was not so much cutting money but that we need to come up with more revenue for the town. The simplest way to do that is not be raising taxes but changing what our assessments are, aligning them more to the market value. Kelli Russ explained that revaluation occurs every three years, but the levy is the important number, it can only increase by 4% per year so we would have to decrease the tax rate. It does not include motor vehicles. Ms. Russ said we are already at the cap. We increased the assessed value a year ago. We are still \$400,000 short. We cannot collect it from the taxpayer.

David Paolino asked if everyone understands that. We could raise taxes if that was allowed. That's not what we are looking to do. We are looking for suggestions on how to generate enough money back into the budget so that we are not over the cap. Everybody is asking for funds and you may not know what the others are asking for; we do. We are looking for valuable suggestions and cooperation on how to create a better situation right now.

Dan Marcinko, Snag Wood Road, asked if they are collecting for ambulance rides? Are we billing for that? Where does that go? Heidi Rogers said back to the ambulance corps. Mr. Marcinko said it seems we have three fire departments and an ambulance corps, why don't we combine them? Fire/EMS, that's what everyone does.

Ginny Colwell, Salisbury Road, she said she provided a spreadsheet of third party billing. The reality is there are not enough volunteers. If you put rescues at either end, if there aren't enough people, there are just not enough volunteers. She brought applications with her. It can't be the same faces all the time. The last three years have been a nightmare because of COVID. Active people were no longer active because of it, some have died, some have moved out. It has escalated for a need for 24-hour coverage. She was doing 68 hours a week because there was no one else stepping up and volunteering. It's a legal responsibility of the town. The balance in the bank accounts is \$9,976.00. Heidi Rogers noted that payroll expenses from July 2021 to March 2022 were \$183,855.19.

Tom Walden, Central Pike, said payroll was approximately \$264,000 for the year. Third party billing was \$160,000 for the first nine months of the year. David Paolino thanked Ginny Colwell and all the volunteers. He said this is a result of an immediate increase in the school budget, a cap on the amount of percentage increase, and the health and well-being of the volunteers. To say it is the Council's fault because we are not intelligent is foolish. We are asking for help and compromise, not turf protection.

Gordy Brayton, 5 Round Hill Road, noted that he has been the fire chief at South Foster for 37 years. He has seen a lot of volunteers come and go. He discussed mutual aid. He has heard a lot of problems but hasn't heard any good ideas. He addressed the volunteers, noting that some were totally against a fire district, they didn't even give it a chance. Let the committee do its

work. It would be wrong not to consider it. Come July, he doesn't know what they are going to do.

Erin Ferguson said she did offer a solution, eliminating \$410,000 for trash collection.

Mr. Brayton said we have three things: the council to come up with the money, form a tax district, and eliminate trash pickup. Erin Ferguson suggested the stations be responsible and own their own trucks.

Bob Moreau, Central Pike, said he thought the fire departments had formed a committee to explore a fire tax district. Mr. Brayton said they did but had not set a rate for it yet. They spoke with other towns like Exeter; their voters were happy with it. Heidi Rogers said the council voted to send it to the legislature to be voted on in November.

Lynne Rider, Burgess Road, said that tax incentives were brought up. Let's say \$1000 off their taxes, if you got 50 people in, that's 50 people off the tax roll but 50 new personnel. Mr. Brayton said they did gain people but not EMTs, they still had to hire those.

Joe Nogueira, Balcom Road, asked about buying land in town. He was told there was more land that couldn't be built on. If we held off on purchasing land, would that help? Heidi Rogers said that would be discussed tomorrow night. Kelli Russ said that is the Land Trust, we can discuss how much we are willing to fund them. That is contingent on conveyance. We have an extraordinary amount of land taxed at a lower rate or not taxed at all. Considering Providence Water Supply (they own about 2800 acres), the Land Trust, Audubon Society, and Farm, Forest property, and that is part of the problem.

Paul Cunniff, Barb's Hill Road, said he was chief of Moosup Valley. He said he was a taxpayer too. No matter what, we have to pay. He is also on the committee. If we don't do it the right way, we are still stuck. The idea of the tax district is because everyone else is doing it. He would rather not eliminate trash pick-up. He thinks that is more economical the way it is. If we went to a fire tax district, we would have our own meetings and members from each company.

Wolf Mueller, South Killingly Road, said they had talked about many towns, but one branch never discussed was the police department. Exeter does not have a police department; they have State Police coverage. Looking for

consolidation and restructuring, he thinks that should be up for discussion as well looking forward. Heidi Rogers that had been discussed before and was shot down.

Tom Walden stated that he is a member of South Foster Fire Corps, the Ambulance Corps and is the treasurer for both. He noted that of \$70-80 thousand per department approximately half of that goes to insurance which leaves very little so that is fund-raised. By not increasing, you are forcing them not only to volunteer but also to fund raise. He discussed pay restrictions.

Guenter Bay asked about the amount of the tax, building ownership, and age of volunteers.

Denise L. DiFranco said she is looking for suggestions, and that they are learning a lot. May 3rd is less than a month away. They have to adopt by April 14th and they are not any closer to where they can present it to the people. Dave Rathbun, 28 Hartford Pike, said he was in favor of a fire tax. He doesn't want to pay any more in taxes any more than anybody else does, but if he calls 911, he wants somebody to show up. If it's \$2-300 a year, that's too much? He didn't think that would break the bank. Getting rid of the trash is a good idea, but you know where it's all going to end up? Denise L. DiFranco said in the streets. Kelli Russ said DPW would be out there every day. Cheryl Hawes said we don't have a dump, and nobody will drive to Johnston. Mr. Rathbun says opening a couple businesses on Rte. 6 is not enough. There's no easy answer.

Cheryl Hawes said she has spoken to a few people, looking for solutions. She said that she is a single person and wasn't going to say what she said before as she was ridiculed for that for a few years, so she won't say that if she has to get another job to stay here, she would; because she chooses to stay here and because she has lived here her whole life. She said she wants to do what's right for the town. If they have to put an ambulance in Moosup Valley, and we would hate to disband Foster Center, but we have to do something. She appreciates everything they have been doing. When she had a problem at her house, they all showed up and she was so proud, and so happy to see them. We need to be able to see that. We have to come up with something that works. The fire tax will be on the ballot. So don't wait.

Patti Moreau, Central Pike, asked Kelli, how it all is going to help us by May 3rd? Kelli Russ said it would not. We still have the problem of being \$400,000 over budget. We

have it in fund balance. You aren't going to solve the problem in the amount of time that you have. You have a \$500,000 structural problem for next year and it has to be addressed. The auditor general will not let me advertise this budget without the use of fund balance. Ms. Russ said she thinks they should move forward with a taxing authority. It's more like \$3 per thousand.

Lisa Sambain, Salisbury Road, asked if we had three weeks? If it goes through in November, so tonight you are trying to find an answer for next week and next year? What do we do if we don't have an answer tonight? Denise L. DiFranco and Chris Stone said they don't know either. Ms. Russ said we can solve their immediate problem from now till June, but going forward that doesn't solve anything.

Gordon Brayton said we need to have a sit down business like plan. He has to take this tax district very seriously. Every volunteer and general public should too.

John McPhee, formerly of Winsor Road, said he thought the fire tax is the only solution. In the short term, he knows they can't get rid of the Foster Police Department, but is there a reason their budget is not up for debate here? Denise L. DiFranco said that their budget went down this year. Mr. McPhee said it seems like we are trying to cut from the bottom. The police have a 1.6 million dollar budget, and you're trying to cut a \$70,000 fire department. Chris Stone said we're not trying to cut anything. Cheryl Hawes said there had to be two people on at night and we were down to one person. We finally have that back up. Atty. Chretien says they have to be listed separately because they are chartered.

Denise L. DiFranco called a break, and then called the meeting back into session.

Ginny Colwell, Salisbury Road, Commander Foster Ambulance Corps, said that it was brought up that Station 3 has been excluded from the bylaws presented to the State. That is not correct. All four departments, three fire departments and the ambulance corps, are all inclusive in the fire district and the proposals. She asks that the next meeting be posted on the town site because other than that how can they reach people. Prior to that, it was left up to a chief and we're all volunteers continuing to try to solve this problem as well as running the companies. That way, you will get facts instead of hearsay and rumors. We will have a lot of informational hearings.

Gordon Rogers, Cucumber Hill Road, stated that he joined the fire department in 1980. He said he is the only one who knows both sides with the exception of his wife. For the short term that the council is in, what he sees that might help is that we have two groups. He suggests that one or two council members be part of their committee because there may be things you are not aware just as they found out things they were not aware of. They- are going to need you and you are going to need them. In the short term, he doesn't know what they are going to do. The State says 4 percent. There are only certain things that can go over 4 percent, and it's very limited and you have to have prior approval and that train left a long time ago.

Denise L. DiFranco thanked everyone for coming out.

IV. ADJOURNMENT

David Paolino moved, Heidi Rogers seconded, to adjourn. Motion passed 5 - 0.

Heidi Rogers, aye; Chris Stone, aye; David Paolino, aye; Cheryl Hawes, aye; Denise L. DiFranco, aye.

Meeting adjourned at 9:30 p.m.

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Submitted by,

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Susan M. Dillon,
Town Clerk