

TOWN OF WESTFORD
ARPA COMMITTEE MEETING
November 17, 2021

Members Present: Dave Baczewski, Greg Barrows, George Lamphere, Nanette Rogers, Bill Hill, Martha Heath, Bree Drapa

Members Absent: n/a

Also Present: Callie Hamdy (Minute Clerk), Katie Buckley (VLCT),

The meeting was called to order at 7:00pm and was held in person and via Zoom.

CHANGES TO THE AGENDA

There were no changes to the agenda.

MINUTES

George Lamphere motioned to approve the Minutes of October 20, 2021, as amended. Martha Heath seconded. Motion passed 7-0.

Q&A WITH KATIE BUCKLEY, DIRECTOR OF ARPA ASSISTANCE AND COORDINATION PROGRAM

Katie Buckley, Director of the ARPA Assistance and Coordination Program at Vermont League of Cities and Towns (VLCT) was present. Katie began her presentation about ARPA Basics, with the Q&A to happen afterwards. Katie introduced herself to the board; she has worked as a town administrator and has worked with housing non-profits amongst other non-profit organizations. Katie's role at VLCT is to help aid and guide towns regarding their ARPA funds; she also works closely with regional planning commissions.

Katie explained the timeline. The first payment for local municipalities went out in August, the second would go out at the same time in the next year. All funds were to be obligated by December 31st, 2024 and expended by December 31st, 2026. Funds that are not obligated and expended would return to the treasury. Katie explained the seven categories in which towns can spend money. Whatever the town chooses to fund needs to fit into one of the categories. The money could not be used as federal match money, pension funds, financial reserves, and outstanding debt amongst others.

Dave thanked Katie for the presentation and opened the floor for questions. Bill Hill asked where Westford is in our process versus the rest of the state? Katie responded that we are in the upper tier of towns. We have formed an ARPA Committee and begun work which is more than a lot of municipalities. Katie notes that VLCT's advice to towns is to take our time. Producing a list of priorities, even if they are not ARPA eligible is a valuable exercise for towns. Bill followed up and asked if there are any communities that are leaders to look to? Katie thought that Jericho was doing a great job with their community engagement.

Martha had the results from the Community Survey. Several people wanted money spent on roads; it was Martha's understanding that we could not do so. Is that true? Katie confirmed that unless we could prove loss of revenue than we were not eligible to do so. Greg had run the

calculation for loss of revenue, and we did not have a loss of revenue. Katie explained there was some pushback on the formula so there may be an update on this in the future.

Several folks wanted a reduction in taxes and to Martha that does not seem like a legitimate use. Katie confirmed that it cannot be done directly unless it is done through loss revenue. Bill explained that if there was any infrastructure that influenced the grand list this could offset taxes. Katie explained we could also set up a fund for those who could not pay property taxes due to hardship, but there is a state program coming up the pipeline to help with that. This is a good example of looking into non-ARPA funds for some of the items desired. Greg asked if she thought there was any possibility of us not being able to spend all the money. It was certainly possible, especially with a shortage of contractors.

Bree mentioned that via the survey results broadband and cell coverage were big priorities. We do not have universal coverage in Westford. We are not going to be out laying infrastructure ourselves. If this is something the community wants, can Katie help us contact broadband folks? Martha explained that Comcast had come into town but had left many pockets unconnected. Westford is not part of a Communications Union District (CUD). Katie thought staying connected with CCRPC it is certainly something we could spend our ARPA monies on. Dave felt like Westford is sitting in Chittenden County but missing out at a lot of opportunity state wide. Dave and Bree mentioned concerns that we do not have the staff to possibly do a lot of these items. Bill referenced the upcoming infrastructure bill. Why spend our ARPA monies there if we could get it with the infrastructure bill?

Dave wondered how we might make the biggest impact, especially in a small town, but at the same time understanding we cannot afford to take on administrative costs or lawyer fees to a great extent. We are in this limbo where we want to make the biggest impact for our town and do not want to waste money on things that could be done on a federal or state level, but ARPA funding is on a timeline. Katie asked if we have a water sewer project we need to do? We do, it only needs approval by the voters and is close to shovel ready. Katie explained this is the easiest use of ARPA funds. The more that a community divides out its administrative burdens. A couple of large projects to keep administrative burden low.

Dave asked if we were to support a private non-profit what does that look like? A grant? A loan? A gift? Katie asked if they would be providing services on behalf of the town or are they just a local organization that administers separately from the town? If they are not doing business on our behalf, they are a beneficiary. Martha asked if the money were gifted, the individual or organization that received it would report back to the committee? That was correct. We would have to report on the expense but not to the level of following uniform guidance, contracting, etc. Bree asked if they still need to spend it on ARPA appropriate expenditures? That was correct. We would need to be clear on the reasons the money is for use.

Bree asked about open meeting law. Katie responded that as much as we can meet open meeting law standards the more built-in transparency we will have. Anything we can make available to our residents so they can understand our process and understand the enormity of the work will make us more transparent. Bree asked about emails best practices. The committee has seven people and there is a lot of editing. Katie suggested some could break into smaller groups to work on things and bring them back to the committee. Use reply all very judiciously and discuss admin tasks in email but nothing more. It is challenging, but it is like how any other

board and commission works. Martha asked if somebody is working on documents that are going to be use, for example the application, can one send that person a suggestion? That was fine if the reply all is not used.

George asked what happens if we obligate funds to a project and the organization or group that is executing the project fails to be able to spend the money. If the schedule allows re-obligation is that allowed? Is that allowable after the first deadline? Katie did not have a clear answer, but she thought this was a very likely scenario. Not every project will happen easily. She envisions towns working right up until the deadline then de-obligating and re-obligating wherever they can and that should be approached on a case-by-case basis. Timelines must be considerate of extensions.

Bill asked if Katie has any projects that have been proposed or are underway to run through our rubric process to see if it works? Katie does not have any practice projects as most towns are not at that point yet. Katie asked if we could share our rubric. Bill was happy to do so and explained the rubric to her which features a section to see if the project fits the ARPA guidelines and another section that sees how a project fits the desired projects in town/town plan etc. A third section would be a recommendation. That is how it is intended to work but as it is a draft, we do not know that yet. Martha suggested that we could make up some examples to put through, asking our Regional Planning Commission would also be helpful.

PHASE 1-2 SUBMISSION PROCESS AND RUBRIC DEVELOPMENT

Bill Hill and George Lamphere had started to pull together an outline of the whole process, which they shared with the group. George thinks the content of the Phase 1 form is shaping up but would like to reformat it to a form that can be filled out manually or electronically. George asked if we wanted to have applicants ask if they want a grant or a loan in the Phase 1 questionnaire. Greg explains if we give out a grant, we will give out sub-recipient responsibilities to them, so he would prefer not to do that. George explains it is a little tricky, especially when looking at funding stacks, because this money cannot be matched for a federal grant. Bree feels this would be too complex for Phase 1 and could confused some applicants that are not familiar with the grant process. The line was changed to “do you have other available funding sources?”

Bree did not think we needed a phone and mobile phone box; a simple contact phone number line would be appropriate. Bill asked when we talk about a contact person, his experience is that there is a big difference between a contact person and a sponsor who is accountable for the project getting done. That can be a huge variable on the success of many projects. Do we need to differentiate between those two things? Martha feels that if we still have that question after the first submission, we can ask and clarify that. George suggested that would be a good item for the Phase II form. Bree thought the term sponsor would be confusing. ‘Project Lead’ would be a better option. George’s biggest question was if somebody comes out of Phase I with a positive yes, they almost need a mentor from either somebody on the committee or town, to say “we believe in your idea but here’s the data that needs to be gathered” or else we may get poor answers to our rubric. Martha feels this will depend on the sophistication of the group that is applying, which will vary.

Bree feels like once we get through this initial push, we will not have much work except to deal with requests so it would be easier for members to take on the responsibility of being a liaison on a project. Martha did not think we should assume it will move to Phase II and believes we

should amend language to say, “possible move to Phase II.” We also should not assume the Selectboard is going to approve; it should say “Selectboard approval and action.” Bree wonders if we should limit the descriptions to a certain number of characters to avoid a cut and paste situation. The committee agreed. Wording like “concise summary of project” or setting a character limit and notifying of such would be sufficient. Martha suggested adding language explaining this is a preliminary application. Greg suggested a cover page with instructions and the actual form afterwards. Dave believes the important thing is we are going to be working with these entities; we simply need enough information to help facilitate the process. Bill thought that if we are going to commit to a liaison to projects that should be mentioned in the Phase II form. Bree sees the Phase I form to weed out projects that do not fit the categories.

Bill explained how he envisioned the process. Section 1 is confirmation that everything is eligible. Section 2 is the subjective work of the traits that matter in what scores high and low, and Section 3 would be a recommendation. Dave liked the way the rubric flowed. Bill suggested we hold discussion on Section 3 until we get Sections 1 and 2 ironed out. Bill and the group discussed general language changes they wanted in the rubric for clarity. The group discussed and agreed that ongoing cost was an important part of a project score. Martha would rather not assign a non-specific category like low, high, or medium. She feels it could be confusing and asking ‘cost’ would be more effective. Dave agreed that project cost would be important, especially when asking for Selectboard approval. A true understanding of the cost would be best. The board added “human resources” to the “ongoing costs” category.

As we get through Section 1 it should make one of the sixty-six categories, the four town categories, upfront costs and schedule are known, and it meets overall guidelines. We can then invest in Section 2. Section 2 becomes the Committee’s rubric, which has three major categories: how does it influence pandemic resilience, which can be a broad category, how does the project bring strategic value to the town and, is it ready or is it just an idea? As we go through the pandemic resilience: how does it influence our health baseline, how does it influence our pandemic resilience (how does it prevent future pandemic), does this help us sustain ourselves through future pandemics. Bill explained the scoring system within these categories. George thought better wording on ‘prevention’ would be better; Bill suggested ‘mitigation’ could be a good alternative. Martha offered ‘improving resilience.’ Bill will input information gathered from the survey and this meeting into his next draft.

For strategic value what Bill thought that Town Plan alignment, ARPA survey input, community voice, and overall population benefit would be good. We can propose a high score if in community benefits it is a large portion in the population or if it serves an underserved population in town. These were just examples. If items align highly with the town plan they should score highly, especially if it aligns with high priority items. Maturity of the project would score it high in the executability category. Martha thought putting practice examples through the rubric would be the best option before further changes. Dave and Martha also explained they felt that projects where this ARPA funding would be their only funding option could be given special priority. Transformative projects that need this money and fit the rubric would be an easy yes.

Dave explained that each committee member will bring their own biases to their scores and that is okay if they are disciplined within the group one way or another. There will be subjectivity to some of these scores and that’s okay because members will have equal weight. Martha

suggested that we could score, explain why we scored a certain way and be allowed to change our scores after hearing reasoning from other committee members. Dave explained that items like town plan alignment would be more factual, but that community voice etc. would have more subjectivity. Where two different people determine a baseline would be different, but that is okay. It cannot be so pure we do not get to an approved rubric. Having seven equal strength votes and discussion time will balance it out and take some pressure off the rubric to define the baseline.

COMMUNICATIONS AND OUTREACH

Bree Drapa went over the results of the Community Survey. We have 138 online survey results so far and approximately 12 paper responses. That is an approximate sample of 150. Based on preliminary results the biggest priority is broadband and then wastewater, third is to address the negative impact on the town from Covid in low-income individuals and families, the fourth is to support health expenditures related to the Covid 19 pandemic. The point of the survey was to help us priority and engage. There is a lot of talk about wastewater and development so we are getting into people's emotional responses to those projects, but once a rubric is set up with can differentiate ourselves from that.

Many ideas proposed from the survey are not necessarily eligible or would pass Phase I. The other thing that Bree wanted to talk about was Community Outreach and Community Engagement. She feels we need a Community Engagement Activity especially when our Phase I form launches. A public meeting and town groups we are hoping to reach should be invited and we need to talk in simple terms for uses and non uses. The slide deck shared by Katie would be useful, just so we can let people know that there are things that do not fit the allowable ARPA uses and not to take it personally. Letting people feel heard will be important. There is a lot of change going on in town and if we can ease people into the idea of ARPA and funding the better received we will be. People had an emotional response to some of projects proposed in other community engagements and we must ease that to get people thinking logically.

The broadband issue, if at some point, we would want to have Mark Drapa come in and talk to us about broadband he could expand on that. There are many ways to expand broadband. Just because we cannot physically lay lines, there are projects that could support digital infrastructure in town. Martha asked how much we are responsible about moving a broadband idea forward or are we simply a receptacle for people's ideas?

Martha thanked Bree; she had spent time thinking about when we can get back to the community to explain why we cannot do certain items. Do we need a communication right now? Do we do a graphic result of the survey? Or do we wait until a public meeting. Bree thinks putting something on the website and a graphic would be a good idea. We would not be able to have a public meeting until January. People really want to know the results of the surveys they take. We could put it out in a Newsletter, even just the visual. Bree and Martha will work on a communication to the community regarding the results and a potential community meeting.

Bill's concern is that he feels a lot of people that have projects already in the pipeline are responding to the survey, are we getting the voice of the people we need to here? Bree suggested targeting groups that help those in need such as our Mutual Aid Fund and Food Shelf.

PUBLIC COMMENT

There was no public comment.

The meeting adjourned at 9:28 p.m.