

Town of Copake 2022 Preliminary Budget

Executive Summary

Retrospective

The months since this Town Board took office in January 2020 have been tumultuous. The Board has been confronted with both a pandemic and a proposal to build a utility scale solar project in the Town.

In spite of that we are proud of what we have accomplished in these 21 months. We have worked collaboratively. We have built consensus. Individual board members have worked hard (Deputy Supervisor Wolf spearheaded the Town's response on the solar project and worked countless hours keeping all of us informed and represented; Stosh Gansowski has been pro-active in working with our new code enforcement officer to enforce zoning, and initiate court action where necessary, he has also worked closely with NYSEG to fix streetlights, get refunds, and ultimately to have our lights replaced with LED lights; Terry Sullivan has been active with the Summer Music Program and the Park Commission; Jeffrey Judd did our internal audit and assisted in our negotiations with the Union.) We are proud that we created an Economic Development Advisory Committee; we applied for and received a Local Champions grant and formed a Climate Task Force; we created a new Historic Preservation Committee; we are planning a new historic display for the walls of Town Hall and have already redecorated the Rheinstrom Room; we are working to redesign our Website; we became a Purple Heart Town, we switched from an old payroll system to ADP; we switched our bookkeeping to a new system; we hired a new accountant, and a new attorney; we hired a new Dog Control Officer and a new Code Enforcement Officer; we installed a light on the flagpole in front of Town Hall, and resurfaced the parking lot- and through it all we met by Zoom, by Google and finally in Town Hall.

So now we are back in "budget season" and we see this as the next step as we work to make our Town Government responsive and efficient.

When we drafted last year's budget it was a precarious time. With the pandemic raging, no one could predict what would happen financially. We were cautious to make any real changes since no one wanted to gamble on what the year would bring. The County comptroller warned us to be conservative in projecting sales tax since no one could say what would happen to the local economy. No one wanted to take any chances in such an unpredictable economy. Therefore the only significant changes we made to the 2021 budget were to raise the salary of the Town Clerk since it had not been raised in many years and to increase the budget for the Code Enforcement Office in order to hire more staff.

Now looking at the past 12 months we can see that sales tax has not decreased. Nor has mortgage tax. And when we take a hard look at the budget we see that the actual amounts received, in both mortgage tax and sales tax, are substantially higher than projected and have been for many years.

Goals for 2022

It is our intent to propose a 2022 Budget which is both transparent and realistic. First, we are using a new format suggested by our accountant Robert Patterson CPA which is both streamlined and easy to navigate. Now the expenses and revenue of every department are easy to track.

Second, we have tried to make our budget realistic. By accurately projecting revenue and appropriations we are able to address several issues **without raising taxes**.

Overview of 2022 Budget

A major goal of this 2022 budget is to make our Town Government be professional, responsive and effective. Toward that end we are both increasing the wages of Town employees and we are creating a line so that in the future we can consider hiring an administrative assistant for the Town.

Salaries

Although the hourly wages of clerks and secretaries have climbed gradually in the past decade, the 2021 rate of \$16 per hour is insufficient in view of the local economy and the local job market. The 2022 Budget as proposed will increase the hourly rate to \$17.00.

This budget would also include increases for the Town Board, Town Justices, the Assessor, the Code Enforcement Officer, the Dog Control officer, and the Custodian. Most of these individuals have not received an increase in more than a decade.

Before proposing these increases I did a survey of other Towns in the County. Our salaries in many cases were far lower.

Our goal here is two-fold. For one thing, we do not want to take advantage of people who have dedicated themselves to Copake. We want to compensate employees fairly. Second, we have a very good team. The way to keep a good team is to pay fair wages which demonstrate that we value their work. .

Incidentally, one of the places where we saved money last year was in the Code Enforcement office. We had added money to that budget last year because we anticipated the need to hire an assistant. As things turned out our new Code Enforcement Officer (CEO) has worked so efficiently that the work is being completed without the need of a second person in the office. So in spite of giving the CEO a raise, the personnel line was decreased.

Administrative Position

It is our goal to make Town Government efficient and transparent so that we are responsive to taxpayers. In furthering that goal, we have added a line for an administrative assistant.

This is an approach which some other Columbia County Towns have employed. We will have to do more research on this but are thinking that the person would handle administrative tasks

such as HR, grant administration, maintenance of the Town's email and internet, bookkeeping, NYS Retirement, and oversight of the budget. The Comprehensive Plan recommended such a position in 2011. The Plan suggested that such a person would be a professional who would serve across administrations.

In creating a line for this position the Town has not committed to the creation of such a position but is putting aside \$35,000 so that the position can be studied in the months to come.

Cyber Concerns

The Town is concerned about cyber security and will be addressing these concerns. As part of this we anticipate changing our email provider. With that in mind we have increased the line for central data contractual.

Attorney's Fees

As of 2022 we will have three attorneys working for Copake. We are represented by Ken Dow, Esq with regard to ZBA and Planning Board matters. General day to day inquiries and issues are handled by Jonathan Tingley, Esq. We are represented by Ben Wisniewski of the Zoughlin Group with regard to the pending solar proposal. It should be noted that the Town is not paying for the litigation against New York State. As for the 94-c work, some of the costs might be offset by Local Agency Account Fund, but we cannot be sure.

Highway Department

The Town will pay a 3% increase in 2022 pursuant to Union negotiations. The Town agreed to this percent in view of the projected increase in Cost of Living for 2022 (for instance, the expected increase in social security payments). In subsequent years the negotiated increase is less.

Conclusion

The Town is in very solid shape financially and our budget decisions have been fiscally prudent. Our 2020 AUD, which is posted on the Town website shows we have substantial reserves in addition to Fund Balance. In our continuing efforts to be transparent, the Town Board recently voted to post monthly Budget to Actual Reports on the website. The Reports are clear and easy to read. We understand that we are accountable to the taxpayers.

The 2022 Budget demonstrates our continued commitment a Town Government which is efficient, effective and transparent.

Jeanne E. Mettler
Supervisor

Copake New York
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