

KNOX COUNTY COMMISSION

Regular Meeting

Thursday – February 3, 2022 – 5:00 P.M.

The Joint Supplemental Budget Meeting of the Knox County Commission was held on Thursday, February 3, 2022, at 5:00 P.M., via ZOOM.

Commission members present were: Dorothy G. Meriwether, Commissioner District #1 and Sharyn L. Pohlman, Commissioner District #3.

County staff present included: County Administrator Andrew Hart, Administrative Assistant Wendy Galvin, Sheriff Tim Carroll, Finance Director Kathy Robinson, Communications Director Robert Coombs, Systems Administrator Mike Dean and EMA Director Ray Sisk.

Budget Committee members present: Chair Shawn Levasseur, Roger Peabody, Gayle Gallant, Charles Grover, Randy Stearns, Bob Duke and Nick Lapham.

Absent: Barry Norris and Richard L. Parent, Jr. Commissioner District #2, Register of Probate Elaine Hallett, Register of Deeds Madelene Cole, Jail Administrator Bob Wood, Airport Manager Jeremy Shaw, Prosecutorial Assistant/Investigator Shane Riley and District Attorney Natasha Irving.

Joint Supplemental Budget Meeting – Agenda via ZOOM

Thursday – February 3, 2022 – 5:00 P.M.

- I. 5:00 **Meeting Called To Order** (Vice Chair Roger Peabody for the Knox County Budget Committee, Commission Chair Dorothy Meriwether for the Knox County Commission)
- II. 5:01 **Public Comment**
- III. 5:03 **Approve Minutes** (Chair Shawn Levasseur for the Knox County Budget Committee, Commission Chair Dorothy Meriwether for the Knox County Commission)
 1. Minutes of the 2022 Budget Public Hearing/Final Vote of December 16, 2021.
- IV. 5:05 **Supplemental/Amended Budget Review**
 1. ARPA Projects – Knox County Departmental List
- V. **Adjourn**

I. Meeting Called to Order

The February 3, 2022 Joint Supplemental Budget Meeting was called to Order by Budget Committee Vice Chair Roger Peabody and Commission Chair Dorothy Meriwether at 5:02 P.M.

II. Public Comment:

Vice Chair Peabody asked if there was any Public comment.
None.

III. Approve Minutes (Vice Chair Roger Peabody for the Knox County Budget Committee, Commission Chair Dorothy Meriwether for the Knox County Commission)

1. Minutes of the 2022 Budget Public Hearing /Final Vote of December 16, 2021.

- *Charles Grover made a motion to approve the Minutes of the Joint Commission and Budget Committee 2022 Budget Public Hearing/Final Vote Meeting of December 16 2020. Randy Stearns seconded the motion. A vote was taken with all in favor.*
- *Commissioner Pohlman made a motion to approve the Minutes of the Joint Commission and Budget Committee 2022 Budget Public Hearing/Final Vote Meeting of December 16, 2020. Commissioner Meriwether seconded the motion. A vote was taken with all in favor.*

VI. Supplemental/Amended Budget Review: Knox County Departmental List:

- Administrator Hart stated that stipends were approved thru December 31st for Dispatch, Patrol and Corrections, a few employees in EMA and IT. We are in limbo so it would be good to take action on that item.
- Administrator Hart reminded all that we completed Phases 1-3 as that was approved in the 2021 Budget. The plan was to do Phase 4 in the 2022 Budget, and we ended up stripping that out because we had to fund the Inmate Medical Contract, as this was an excessive increase that we did not anticipate. We agreed to do a letter of intent with Siemens for Phase 4 so we are pretty much obligated to fund Phase 4. The request is to fund it through the ARPA funds. The dishwasher at the Jail currently does not heat to the temperature that DOC requires. The dishwasher is thirty (30) years old and it is \$11,000 for a new one that has to meet certain specifications but had to remove that. Those are the high priority items right now. The stipends subtotal is \$1,006,000.00, the HVAC is \$196,400.00 and the dishwasher is \$11,270.00. The Sheriff and Administrator Hart are requesting the Inmate Medical be removed as this will be budgeted in each new Budget going forward. If this is approved through the Budget we would not need to go through ARPA. That amount to be removed would be \$858,654.00.
- A Budget Committee member asked how much we have, and how much have we approved if any.
- Administrator Hart stated we have received \$3.85 million and we will get the rest in May of 2022. We did not make any approvals last week; we just moved items forward on the list. The items that moved forward totaled \$6,070,000 and again those were not all approved they were just agreed up to move them forward for consideration.
- A Commissioner wanted to talk about the distinction made in the Final Rule between Premium Pay, Retention and Recruitment. Her interpretation of Premium Pay is to compensate Essential Workers on the front line subjected to greater risk from Covid-19. But we face a more critical concern of retention and recruitment in two (2) departments, Corrections and Dispatch.
- Budget Committee member would like to hear from the Sheriff or Administrator Hart. What are other Counties using these funds for and therefor exacerbating the competitive nature of the market place?
- Sheriff stated that yes other Counties are. We have a neighboring County offering \$15,000 hiring bonus for certified Corrections and Law Enforcement. For non-certified they are offering \$7,500 sign on bonus. Through the budget process we gave a healthy pay increase and even with that it still has kept us on the lower end compared to other close neighboring Counties. Our neighbor to the South of us is also offering a \$16,000 sign on bonus. He has publicly stated at the Maine Sheriff's Association that we are poaching each other. The \$200 per/wk. we did last year was a success in retaining what we have. With this ARPA money we are asking for this to continue to stay in touch with everyone else. For example, Somerset County is offering \$5,000, Waldo County is offering \$15,000, Lincoln County is at \$16,000 and Cumberland County is guaranteeing a \$50,000 salary a year after six (6) months of employment. We are about \$11,000 shy of that. Other agencies are losing to higher paying Counties.
- A Budget Committee member stated that Cumberland County cannot guarantee \$50,000 salary forever, because that ARPA money will not be there forever.
- A Commissioner stated that she believes the distinction being made in the American Rescue Plan does account for retention and recruitment. At this particular point we need to use ARPA funds in

order to retain and recruit Corrections Officer and Dispatchers. To address what the Sheriff is talking about is concerning about offering this money for a year then people will expect this will be ongoing. If we are not paying our employees comparable to other Counties then that needs to be addressed with Union Negotiations.

- A Budget Committee member asked do we know what the recruitment and retention stipends will be. How much are we going to dedicate?
- Administrator Hart stated that if we paid Corrections the extra \$200/per week in 2022 it would be \$494,333. This number includes vacancies we have right now. This number is a moving target. If we finish in another month this will be a different number. He agrees with the Commissioners, this is a recruitment and retention issue.
- A Budget Committee member asked, once we start paying these funds will these be fixed rates over the employees tenure?
- Administrator Hart stated no.
- A Budget Committee member asked what is the expectation. These funds will expire. Where are we in two (2) or three (3) years down the road, and how do we position ourselves for that time.
- Administrator Hart stated that one of the things we are doing is each year we are looking at wages for Law Enforcement, Dispatch and Corrections. We are looking at this County wide but really trying to focus on these three (3) departments because there is such a fluctuation in wages. Trying to bring forward an allowable amount that people can tolerate. We will look at it again in 2023 and reevaluate. If we have to come in at nine (9) or ten (10) we will do that to get it to where we have to be. It's a tough environment right now.
- A Budget Committee member asked if there are the other Counties doing this because it's less desirable to work in those Counties compared to others.
- Sheriff stated that this profession is less desirable right now compared to what it was three (3) years ago. This profession is going through a very rough time. The atmosphere that's out there, watch the news. People are killing cops left and right, and we are very fortunate in Maine. It's a tough job. It is not the respected job it used to be. It's constantly being criticized. This is not a desired profession to get into; you get into this to basically get beat up. The desire to be a Corrections Officer or a Law Enforcement Officer is down with all sixteen (16) Counties. Through State mandates we have to have some many people on the floor all the time. His staff is being burnt out with the mandates. This is why they are offering so much for a retention bonus. They are down nine (9) positions right now out of thirty (30).
- A Commissioner wanted to support what the other Commissioner had to say about addressing the problem short term and longer term. She also is supporting what the Sheriff was just talking about. How do we provide longer term so we can recruit and retain the best employees that we can.
- Chief Deputy stated that on the Patrol side, of the last five (5) applicants four (4) were certified. We had vacancies and they came to us. Law Enforcement is running out of applicants off the street, so they are asking their employees to talk to their friends/family what we can do to entice them to apply. He would hate to see us loose good Patrol Deputies due to the pay. We just lost four (4) Corrections Officers to our neighboring Counties because of something we could not offer.
- A Budget Committee member stated he agrees the labor pool has dried up with Covid being to blame. This pay that we are talking about is a necessity.
- A Commissioner stated that the final rule had a clear cut off based on 150% of average annual income of State average. You could not give premium pay without extra justification to anyone that was making more than 150% of the average State annual income, including the premium pay. Just to be clear, if you take what the person makes and add on their premium pay it cannot exceed the 150% of the annual average income. So, did these numbers take that into account? There were some negotiations, and were adjustments made for this.
- Administrator Hart said he would have to ask the Finance Director.
- Finance Director Robinson said there is a particular formula that's being used. If we have employees that fall above that, we do have to write additional justification to support it. In talking to the Consultant, she feels very strongly that we have the justification for the couple of employees that fall into that category. She did not eliminate those employees.

- A Commissioner stated the 150% of average annual income previously did not include the premium pay. That was new in the way it was figured. For example, someone making \$56,000, if you add on the premium pay that could potentially put them over \$71,000. That we did not figure last year. Did you take in consideration this year, because that was different? It did include the addition of the premium pay in figuring that.
- Finance Director Robinson said that she did not take that into consideration because the justification is the same this year as it was last year. It is the same group of people doing the same job. She stated she did not look at that because that was not how we were making our decision. We were making our decisions based on the departments and based on the employees, not based on what their salaries were.
- A Commissioner stated that when she looked at that in the final rule that it made a difference. A very large portion of the American Rescue Plan was devoted to try to assist those people who were most effected by the pandemic who were disadvantaged or extremely disadvantaged. So for a Knox County resident making \$71,000 it is hard to justify them as being in a disadvantaged class. It makes a difference in terms of this conversation.
- Finance Director Robinson said that she can go back and do a recalculation and let you know how many employees that applies to. When Commission voted the first time around there was not any employees that were excluded because they fell into that category. She did not factor this in this time in completing the calculations.
- A Commissioner is bringing this up because she wants feedback from the Budget Committee.
- A Budget Committee member had a question for the Sheriff. He asked, when you are talking about \$15,000 -\$16,000 sign on bonuses do these Counties also offer the weekly bonus of \$200 like Knox County is doing? Because you are looking at \$10,000 in increased pay, plus the \$15,000, so that is a \$25,000 pay increase. As soon as this money runs out, are we going to be losing these same employees because they are going to go and do something different? That \$25,000 is not a realistic number that you could take someone off the street and hand them and say just to get you in so we can help retention wise. It just seems astronomically high numbers to him.
- Sheriff spoke, he's not sure if anyone else is giving the \$200 per week. Others are doing a recruiting bonus of \$5,000-\$15,000 or call it a sign on bonus. Some are breaking it up into a lump sum. Everyone is doing this different.
- A Budget Committee member said that the piece he's struggling with is that we have workers in Hannaford that provide us food every day and other people working hard in the County, and they are receiving anything extra. Now we're looking at a problem that we haven't created, but the system has created, and we are looking at paying a \$25,000 a year bonus.
- Sheriff and a Commissioner stated we are not doing the \$15,000 bonus. Yes the \$200/wk. adds up to \$10,400 a year.
- A Budget Committee member stated that the conversation today has been about what our competitors to the South and to the North of us are doing, and how we stay competitive. We may not be planning on it but we have to face reality of what you (Sheriff's Dept.) are facing to try to recruit people.
- Communications Director stated that Portland RCC does recruitment for Dispatch which is not being real successful. It is a five (5) year commitment you have to give to that center in order to get the full \$15,000 recruitment money.
- A Budget Committee member said it is his understanding that none of these funds can be used for pensions? Can they be used for a back loaded contract? Where it vests if they are there for two (2) or three (3) years. We have two (2) or three (3) years to expend these funds so there a way where we can play the long game or at least a medium long game without trying to react to the immediate situation? Is that allowable with these ARPA funds or not?
- A Commissioner stated that she thinks we are back loading because these stipends are basically retention. It is back loaded because they are receiving \$200/wk. Basically this is offering \$10,000 a year extra but you don't get it right up front you get it every week. She believes that fair.
- A Budget Committee member thinks what the County is doing is the smart way to go. (Paying the extra money weekly). He does not think this is a Covid related issue he thinks this is a retention

issue. This effects all three phases of Law Enforcement including Dispatch and does not think this is a one (1) year thing. It's a question of how much money we want to throw at it to buy time to get the compensation up to get back to some normalcy with these departments. He thinks we should budget for two (2) years to continue to pay that \$200/wk. and then be prepared for us to budget that money in future budgets.

- A Commissioner said that was a good idea. We would basically remove IT and Airport Security and suggesting that we double that amount, and make it for a two (2) year period.
- A Budget Committee member stated that this is not because of the appeals that are heard because we know those three (3) departments are definitely the front lines keeping the County safe. If you look through the past requests we looked at a few weeks ago, when you think of the truest need; homeless and hungry need it but if we don't keep people safe where are we standing. That's why he feels the money should be spent on those areas not putting the money towards other departments.
- Sheriff stated that the Airport Security is sworn Law Enforcement Officers. They are paid out of a different budget that's why it is a separate line.
- A Budget Committee member talked about the IT line. He stated that IT is a security line also. Maintaining websites and all the connections they take care of and IT deserves this as much as anyone else. They protect us from being hacked into.
- IT Systems Director thanked the Budget Committee member for recognizing the important role IT plays in all of this. It is in the Jail, cruisers and the Dispatch center and is the one department that cannot isolate. IT has to maintain their physical presence. We keep computer systems running and safe.
- Administrator Hart wanted to add to that by saying when we looked at departments we included IT because we were dealing with a retention issue when IT lost one employee. (There are only two (2) employees).
- A Commissioner stated that if we don't have IT nothing else works. All departments are essential and all integrated. She can see the need for IT to receive the funding.
- A Budget Committee member asked within the guidelines we can extend this over two (2) years, and can this be extended to people over the 150% over the State regulations.
- Finance Director stated that yes we can. There is a cap per person of \$25,000. If we are looking to do it for all of this year we would only potentially be able to do it for part of 2023 because we would be hitting a cap.
- A Budget Committee member stated that if the Federal Government is saying that we can only spend \$25,000 per employee that is sending a big message to the staff that we are spending out as much as we can to help solve a problem.
- A Department Manager asked is there going to be a mechanism in place to ensure that once an employee reaches the \$25,000 that they will not go to another County with another sign on bonus.
- A Budget Committee member states that if we take the \$25,000 and when it runs out, looking to budget that amount on an annual basis.
- A Budget Committee member stated that is not what he said. He said is that it buys the County Commissioners and Budget Committee time to think of more permanent solution to this retention problem. If you negotiate with all Unions right now they'll say they want \$200 for everyone per week. This is not going away.
- Administrator Hart stated that we did have a Union that did ask this year for a percentage increase plus \$200/wk. We said no to that because we did a wage analysis and our wages fall in line for the most part. The biggest problem is that our starting wage is lower because some Counties start out a lot higher and they don't do any increases for a few years. If you look at the middle we are competitive and on the end we are actually higher than a lot of Counties. His only concern is when this \$200 goes away.
- A Commissioner agrees with Administrator Hart on this. If we have a wage problem it needs to be dealt with through the budget. She does not agree with another Budget Committee member that we should be using ARPA dollars in order to kick a can down the road. She understands the problem. She really wishes to address this through the budget process not through ARPA.

- A Budget Committee member asked: at the last negotiations it was proposed by the Union for an increase and the \$200/wk. and that was refused, correct?
- Administrator Hart stated that we didn't agree to what they totally asked for. The \$200 was already in place, they were asking to continue it the next year and they wanted a substantial percentage increase on top of that.
- A Budget Committee member stated that he thinks it's going to be the solution and it could have been solved in the past negotiations.
- A Budget Committee member asked is this \$200 on the books for 2022. Are we committed to that?
- A Budget Committee member suggested taking half and half. We could approve the requests as we just discussed for this year out of our funds. Why don't we see what we can do in the Budget process, and then make a decision at that time. Do we then need to use our second check from ARPA funds to help out or can we handle it through the budget process.
- A Commissioner suggested moving along in list so we can determine if we want to commit the bulk of the money towards the County. The total amount in three (3) years is \$7.7 million.
- Budget Committee Chair confirmed no votes at this time.
- Administrator Hart stated this for the Corrections HVAC we had money in the budget under capital, but had to remove it due to the cap. We signed a letter of intent with Siemens to complete all four (4) phases.
- A Budget Committee member asked if the intent of this money to be taking care of our issues. It just looks like we are trying to use extend our budget using these monies rather than what the money is intended for.
- Budget Committee Chair has the full set of rules in front of him.
- A Commissioner asked how does HVAC in the Courthouse and how does repointing qualify.
- Finance Director stated that in the final rule they changed how revenue loss can be calculated. Anyone receiving less than \$10 million can take the money and spend it on any level of government services within certain parameters. The final rule allowed a larger flexibility and allowed the list to become bigger for Knox County.
- A Commissioner stated that her interpretation is that you don't have to justify it the implication is that you are doing it against revenue loss, and we don't have revenue loss.
- Finance Director stated there is a high level of reporting no matter what we do with these funds. There are perimeters we need to fall into whether it be bidding or awarding. We did not suffer revenue loss, but there was some lobbying before the final rule that Counties were arguing that they have a greater need than what is proposed in the perimeter of the categories. The Consultant or Lawyer did review everything on the list. They did take off a couple things that did not fall into the government services category. Everything else can move forward.

Department Requests:

A consensus vote was taken by the Budget Committee on whether to keep or remove the Microwave for \$300,000.00 as Dispatch's request to the ARPA list.

In favor: 7 (Roger Peabody, Shawn Levasseur, Bob Duke, Gayle Gallant, Randy Stearns, Nick Lapham and Charles Grover)
Against: 0
Maybe: 0
Abstained: 0

A consensus vote was taken by the Commissioners on whether to keep or remove the Microwave for \$300,000.00 as Dispatch's request from the ARPA list.

In favor: 2 (Commissioner Meriwether and Commissioner Pohlman)
Against: 0
Maybe: 0
Abstained: 0

This item will stay on list.

Communications Director said to remove the recorder for now. He said the biggest most important thing is the microwave – **REMOVE this item.**

A consensus vote was taken by the Budget Committee on whether to keep or remove the replacement Hazmat Decontamination Tent for \$20,000.00 for EMA’s request to the ARPA list.

In favor: 7 (Roger Peabody, Shawn Levasseur, Bob Duke, Gayle Gallant, Randy Stearns, Nick Lapham and Charles Grover)
Against: 0
Maybe: 0
Abstained: 0

A consensus vote was taken by the Commissioners on whether to keep or remove the replacement Hazmat Decontamination Tent for \$20,000.00 as EMA’s request from the ARPA list.

In favor: 2 (Commissioner Meriwether and Commissioner Pohlman)
Against: 0
Abstained: 0

This item will stay on list.

A consensus vote was taken by the Commission on whether to keep or remove a match of up to \$500.00 for Essential Worker Stipend for Municipal Emergency Management Directors. Each Town can allot up to \$500.00 and Knox County will match up to \$500.00 as EMA’s request from the ARPA list.

In favor: 7 (Roger Peabody, Shawn Levasseur, Bob Duke, Gayle Gallant, Randy Stearns, Nick Lapham and Charles Grover)
Against: 0
Maybe: 0
Abstained: 0

A consensus vote was taken by the Commission on whether to keep or remove a match of up to \$500.00 for Essential Worker Stipend for Municipal Emergency Management Directors. Each Town can allot up to \$500.00 and Knox County will match up to \$500.00 as EMA’s request from the ARPA list.

In favor: 1 (Commissioner Pohlman)
Against: 0
Abstained: 1 (Commissioner Meriwether)

This item will stay on list.

A consensus vote was taken by the Budget Committee on whether to keep or remove a \$600.00/per person Essential Private Sector Workers Stipend for EMA’s request from the ARPA list.

In favor: 0
Against: 0 (Gayle Gallant, Bob Duke, Roger Peabody, Charles Grover and Shawn Levasseur)
Maybe: 0
Abstained: 1 (Nick Lapham)

A consensus vote was taken by the Commissioners on whether to keep or remove a \$600.00/per person Essential Private Sector Workers Stipend for EMA’s request from the ARPA list.

In favor: 1 (Commissioner Meriwether)
Against: 0
Abstained: 1 (Commissioner Pohlman)

This item will be removed.

- A Budget Committee member stated that this would have to be more specific on who would receive the money before she could make a vote. It seems too open ended.
- A Budget Committee member stated he felt \$1.5 million is a large chunk of money, and the employers should step up and pay their workers. He does not feel it would be an appropriate use of the money.
- A Budget Committee member spoke and agreed saying it was a great thought but we would have way too many people asking for it and how do you narrow that down? This should be put on the backburner.
- Finance Director Robinson spoke and said we do not have this type of infrastructure to handle this type of allocation of funds. We are not in the position of reviewing people's needs and being able to validate the truth to that. She would be a little bit concerned with moving forward with this.
- A Commissioner asked if we working on just the Department list next week.
- A Budget Committee member stated that at the next meeting we should wrap up County requests, and get to Municipalities the following meeting.
- Administrator Hart stated at the next ARPA Meeting we will have nonprofit groups. We will have to figure out the final meeting as we need to get notification in paper so we don't violate the Charter.

- *Roger Peabody made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Bob Duke seconded the motion. A vote was taken with all in favor.*

- *A motion was made by Commissioner Pohlman to adjourn the meeting. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Meriwether. A vote was taken with both in favor.*

The regular meeting adjourned at 7:15 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Wendy Galvin
Administrative Assistant

The Knox County Commission approved these minutes at their regular meeting held on March 3, 2022.