

BROOKLINE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Human Services Subcommittee

Council on Aging FY23 Budget

Public Hearing Held via Zoom on March 7, 2022 at 5:45 pm

Attendees: Subcommittee members Susan Granoff (Chair), Ben Birnbaum, Katherine Florio, and Donelle O'Neal; COA Director Ruthann Dobek; Select Board Members Bernard Greene and John VanScoyoc; Administrative Services Director Devon Fields; COA Chair Yolanda Rodriguez; and members of the public Lesley Archabel, Carol Caro, Susan Cohen, Janet Gelbart, Neil Gordon (TMM/AC), Carol Seibert, David Trevvett, Melissa Trevvett, and Sonia Wong. Note that Subcommittee member David-Marc Goldstein was absent from the hearing because the chair of the COA is an immediate family member. Note as well that the Subcommittee chair fully participated in the hearing but disclosed that she is chair of BrooklineCAN's Livable Community Advocacy Committee, a volunteer group that advocates for Brookline's seniors, and a member of BrooklineCAN's steering committee.

Recommendation

The subcommittee members recommended favorable action on the Council on Aging budget request of \$1,010,140 by a vote of 4-0-0. They also voted (4-0-0) to recommend full support of the COA's ARPA requests for funding related to senior food insecurity, transportation, mental health social services, and technology.

FY23 Budget

The FY23 request for the Council on Aging (COA) budget is \$1,010,140 and is essentially level funded. It is 1.7% (\$17,316) less than FY22's budget primarily due to a reduction in salary expenses as a result of replacements for departing or retiring staff being hired at beginning salary steps. The FY23 Salaries category amount (\$873,281), which accounts for over 86% of the COA's FY23 budget request, is \$17,285 (1.9%) less than in the FY22 budget request, but the number of FTEs (18.01) is unchanged. Utilities are \$231 less, and the costs for other expenditure categories – Services, Supplies, Other, and Budgeted Capital – are unchanged from FY22.

	FY21 Actuals	FY22 Budget	FY23 Budget	Variance
SALARIES	\$757,074	\$890,566	\$873,281	-\$17,285
SERVICES	37,250	48,418	48,418	0
SUPPLIES	14,181	18,846	18,846	0
OTHER	642	4,250	4,250	0
UTILITIES	44,201	59,876	59,645	-231
BUDGETED CAPITAL	5,200	5,700	5,700	0
Total	\$858,548	\$1,027,656	\$1,010,140	-\$17,516

For further details on the COA FY23 budget, see the Brookline FY-2023 Financial Plan, Section 4Q, pp. 137-143, and the opengov link:

<https://stories.opengov.com/brooklinema/published/XZAIWDD3v>

Discussion

The Brookline Council on Aging is responsible for providing comprehensive services for Brookline residents age 60 and over, who currently number over 12,000 and make up more than 20% of Brookline's total population. The COA's FY23 budget request of \$1,010,140 is approximately one-quarter of 1% of the town's total budget.

The COA operates the Brookline Senior Center at 93 Winchester Street, where Brookline residents 60 and older can go for socialization, activity, meals, and services. Its core services include transportation for seniors, geriatric social work, home care, advocacy, legal assistance, employment assistance, information and referral, and volunteer opportunities. It provides extensive cultural, educational, health education, and physical activity programs and classes both on site at the Senior Center and, during the current pandemic, virtually, with a recently added hybrid option for some meetings, while helping seniors fill out applications for town programs, such as the town's property tax relief programs and its Parking Access for Resident's Caregiver (PARC) program.

Over a third of the COA's FY22 operating budget is funded by private donations and grants. In FY22, the COA's operating budget was \$1,564,999. Of this amount, \$537,343 was funded through grants and private fund raising efforts by the nonprofit Multiservice Senior Center Corporation (the COA's charitable arm). The town currently provides 65.7% of the COA's operating budget.

In order to keep its FY23 budget request level funded, the COA has made a series of ARPA funding requests totaling \$948,180 that seek four years of funding for the provision of certain essential services to Brookline seniors that address the impact of Covid on Brookline's senior population. The ARPA grants would fund programs and staff to (1) combat food insecurity, (2) provide social services relating to mental health issues and social isolation; (3) fund transportation programs that address social isolation and medical transportation needs; and (4) install technology at the Senior Center to improve its internet connection and to permit seniors to access more virtual and hybrid programs and services. The subcommittee voted to recommend that the COA's ARPA requests related to these essential functions receive ARPA funding. See the pdf "Brief Listing of the COA's ARPA Requests."

A broad range of additional topics were discussed at the public hearing. Included among these were the following:

Impact of COVID-19

Covid has deeply affected the work of the COA during the past fiscal year because Brookline's population of older adults has been severely and disproportionately impacted by Covid's detrimental effects. These impacts have included the need for older residents to stay at home extensively, increased social isolation, dealing with loss and grief, increased food insecurity, job losses, new

transportation challenges, a greater reliance on technology for staying connected with other people and a greater need for help in using and obtaining this technology. Older adults, especially those over 75, have experienced the highest levels of mortality from this pandemic. Even now, as mask mandates are being lifted, the impact of Covid is still being felt among Brookline's older residents. According to Director Dobek, there is increased depression and anxiety and greater uncertainty about how to keep themselves safe as Covid restrictions are lifted. Those older adults whose co-morbidities create a much higher risk of their experiencing bad Covid outcomes are likely to continue to need to take extra precautions and to rely on the Senior Center for extra services.

During the pandemic, the Senior Center made it a priority to work to help and support Brookline's older residents stay connected with other people and to maintain a healthy and engaged life style despite spending so much of their time housebound. They invested in cameras, laptops, and other technology and developed both virtual and prerecorded content so that seniors could connect with other adults and could participate in Senior Center programming remotely. Now, the Senior Center has been pivoting to offer hybrid programming and meetings to enable simultaneous remote and in-person participation and to make the Senior Center even more broadly accessible. The Senior Center has begun to initiate more outreach to those seniors who have developed fears related to leaving their homes, and it has begun a new program in which groups of older residents are brought together to talk about how to be more resilient.

Need for Revised Job Descriptions and Payment Structure

Director Dobek expressed serious concern that the job descriptions and payment structure for the middle management professional positions in her department have not been reviewed during the past 20 years. As a result, the salaries being offered may not have kept pace with comparable positions in other neighboring towns or even with comparable positions in other town departments. This needs to be looked at. These disparities, if any, have not as yet had a serious impact on the COA's ability to fill vacancies, but this may not be the case going forward, especially in a competitive job market.

Need for a Long-term Townwide Strategic Plan for Aging Services

Back in the 1980s, a limited needs assessment (funded by a private grant) was done prior to the construction of the Senior Center. But the town has never created a long-term strategic plan for aging services.

According to Director Dobek, undertaking such a plan has become increasingly urgent due to projected demographic trends. In the year 2030 the youngest Baby Boomers will be reaching the age of 65 and the oldest Baby Boomers will be reaching the age of 85, when the need for aging services greatly increases. Future generations are likely to continue this upward trend so it is anticipated that the town will continue to grow old for a long time coming. Consequently, Brookline needs to develop a strategic plan for providing services for this expanding demographic.

Need for Sustained Funding for Transportation

As older adults age, their transportation needs may change. Some aging adults may not be physically able to make use of public transportation to the extent that they did in the past, some may have more

medically-related trips to make, and some may be experiencing vision and other physical changes that make them reluctant to drive cars.

The Senior Center currently provides a variety of transportation services to Brookline residents age 60 and older, including free medical transportation throughout Brookline and to select medical facilities elsewhere, four discounted rides per month for Uber/Lyft vehicle use by seniors with limited incomes, and rides to the Senior Center by the Elderbus and Van.

Director Dobek pointed out that most of the funding for these transportation programs does not come from the town directly, but rather from grants or funding sources that must be applied for each year, and, consequently, there currently exists no sustained and reliable source to provide for the growing transportation needs of Brookline's senior population.

The Director brought to the subcommittee's attention the news that recently the neighboring city of Newton has made a strategic and long-term commitment to funding the transportation needs of its older residents. In June 2019, Newton began NewMo, a shared ride service for Newton residents over 60 that was the first program of its type in the state. Shared rides in vehicles holding up to six passengers could be booked Monday through Friday between 8 am to 5 pm and from 9 am to noon on Saturdays and Sunday at a charge of from 50 cents to five dollars per trip, depending on the rider's income. On November 1, 2021, the NewMo transportation program was extended to any resident age 13 and older for trips within Newton, the time of availability was extended to from 7 am to 6:30 pm weekdays, and the rate per trip was reduced to \$2. Seniors can still sign up for NewMo for Seniors to get rides to medical facilities outside of Newton.

According to figures provided by Director Dobek, the cost of NewMo for Seniors was \$477,000-\$500,000 per year. The City of Newton pledged \$275,000 for the program, and the city received a number of grants from MassDOT and other organizations. Currently, with the expanded service for all residents 13 and older, the operating costs are about \$980,000 annually or \$58.11 per vehicle service hour.

Need for Expanded Senior Center Space

Some of the public commentators strongly advocated for the creation of a satellite senior center with ample parking, either as a stand alone building or as part of a new Brookline community center. The Senior Center's current location on Winchester St. has almost no parking nearby, and what little there is available is limited to two-hour parking. This means that Brookline seniors who live in South Brookline and many who live in North Brookline who cannot walk to the Senior Center are not able to access it easily. In addition, the senior population of Brookline has increased by more than 35% since the Senior Center first opened in 2001 and is likely to continue to grow substantially during the next decades. This anticipated population growth, when combined with multiple new senior housing within blocks of the Senior Center on Winchester St, will make it difficult for the existing building to accommodate the growing demands on its use by seniors.

Recommendation

The Human Services Subcommittee by a vote of 4-0-0 recommends favorable action on the Council on

Aging budget request of \$1,010,140. They also voted (4-0-0) to recommend full support of the COA's ARPA requests for funding related to senior food insecurity, transportation, mental health social services, and technology.

Hearing Recording

https://brooklinema.zoomgov.com/rec/share/2_PBikIGruEc5PeMPFBjE-5iAGKJip0SVnIHDwu6SwhrCS2aJz1cL3jtc2OAvLWN.WnMSBcGDA_YfGGw1

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