

# Alternate Budget Meeting

## Quick recap

The Middlesex Budget Committee held a meeting on April 29th to discuss alternative budget options and review the current fiscal year 2026 budget. The committee examined historical staffing levels, comparing their current 3,844 hours for town office staff against similar towns, and discussed the proposed addition of a town administrator position at 40 hours weekly. Key topics included the role of a road commissioner, with suggestions to reduce compensation from \$60 to \$40 per hour or eliminate the position entirely, and concerns about maintaining institutional knowledge while transitioning responsibilities. The committee also addressed a backlog of 53 items in the clerk's office, determining that many were minor corrections rather than significant backlogs, and discussed the need for proper job descriptions for town positions. While some committee members expressed concerns about the process and timing of budget decisions, particularly given the approaching May 9th deadline, they generally supported the current budget amount of \$2.262 million and agreed that the current process was improved from previous years.

## Next steps

### Collaboration

- Budget Committee: Present the currently approved budget amount to the Select Board, along with a short list of specific line items or areas where savings or increases could be considered if the Select Board wishes to make changes. 🗒️
- Budget Committee: Discuss with the Select Board the possibility of adding 8 hours to the town office staff (for a total of 16 hours for the assistant), and suggest the Select Board consult with office staff on how best to allocate those hours. 🗒️
- Budget Committee: Encourage the Select Board to continue the current 32/32/32 staffing model in the town office until the new town clerk is fully trained and up to speed, to ensure continuity and knowledge transfer. 🗒️
- Budget Committee: At the next Select Board meeting (May 5th), discuss the need for and possible approaches to developing job descriptions for town office staff, particularly for the town administrator role. 🗒️

- Budget Committee: Conduct a "lessons learned" review after the budget process is complete (targeted for summer), to identify process improvements for future budget cycles. 📅
- Budget Committee: Encourage the Select Board to utilize VLCT (Vermont League of Cities and Towns) and other available resources more fully for training and support, especially for new clerks and staff. 📅
- Select Board: Consider whether to add additional budget for a minute taker and/or to allow the current FEMA coordinator to finish outstanding FEMA-related work for the current flood events, and manage this within the proposed budget or request additional funds at the May 5th meeting. 📅
- Select Board: If the vote to rescind the current budget passes, be prepared to discuss and propose specific budget amendments from the floor at the subsequent meeting, using the options and information prepared by the Budget Committee. 📅
- Budget Committee: Prepare and provide to the Select Board a list of potential budget line items that could be adjusted up or down (such as legal fees, road commissioner, office hours) as options if budget changes are desired by the town or Select Board. 📅
- Budget Committee: Consider inviting or involving department staff (e.g., road crew, office staff) more directly in future budget discussions to ensure their input on needs and actuals is included in the process. 📅

## Summary

### Budget Committee Alternative Options Discussion

The Budget Committee met to discuss alternative budget options following a special budget meeting held on April 23rd. Elias noted that while there is interest in reducing costs and adjusting staffing allocations, predicting budget impacts remains challenging due to variables like hiring timelines and workload fluctuations. Dorinda highlighted the significant impact of recent events, such as major floods and changes in staff roles, on current workload comparisons. The committee discussed the need to better understand budget line items and involve relevant department staff in decision-making processes, particularly for roles like the road commissioner.

### Budget Data Analysis Improvements

This topic focused on budget discussions and the need for better data analysis. Sam emphasized the importance of reviewing actual spending numbers rather than relying solely on budget estimates, noting that current budget figures are guesses that need to be verified against real data. Matt presented comparative data showing Middlesex's spending aligns with similar towns, particularly in areas like road commissioner and town office salaries. The group agreed on two key action items: implementing more frequent actuals reporting throughout the year (rather than just during budget process), and conducting a lessons learned review in the summer to improve future budget processes. The conversation ended with questions about the availability of FY26 actuals and when they would typically be released.

## **Budget and Administrative Positions Discussion**

This topic focused on budget discussions and town administrative positions. Dorinda explained that the current audit process involves two separate audits - one of regular books and one of FEMA-related funds, which explains why the budget line item is double what it was previously. Due to ongoing audit completion and concerns about spending and FEMA reimbursements not being properly reflected in reports, Dexter Lefavour recommended voting yes on Article 1 and no on Article 2, suggesting the town needs more time to make an informed budget decision by May 9. The discussion also covered the petition regarding town administrative positions, with participants expressing concerns about preserving institutional knowledge while managing costs, though original motivations for the petition varied among participants.

## **Town Office Staffing Review**

This topic focused on reviewing historical staffing levels in the town office. Dorinda provided details on how positions evolved over time, clarifying that no roles have been full-time, including the bookkeeper position currently held by Cheryl. The group analyzed staffing data from similar-sized towns, finding that Middlesex's current staffing levels of 3,844 hours are comparable to others in the cohort, with the addition of a town administrator bringing the total to 5,888 hours for the next fiscal year. Matt presented data from VLCT showing that Middlesex's office staffing hours are within the top range compared to similar towns, with a median of 3,200 hours in 2024 and 4,600 hours in 2025.

## **Town Staffing Levels Discussion**

The group discussed town staffing levels and compared them to other municipalities. They reviewed current salary figures for town office staff, which total \$103,548 before benefits. The

discussion touched on the separation of treasurer and bookkeeper roles, with Cheryl currently serving in both capacities. There was uncertainty about whether certain positions were necessary, particularly regarding the assistant clerk role with 8 hours, and questions about how much authority the Budget Committee has in determining staffing levels compared to the Select Board.

## **Town Clerk Position Authority Discussion**

The discussion focused on the structure and authority of town clerk and select board assistant positions, including their hours and compensation. Dorinda explained that while the Select Board has budget authority, they cannot change the hours of an elected clerk position once established, as this would require a vote of the people. The conversation also touched on the challenges of removing elected officials, with Dorinda and Elias sharing examples from other Vermont towns where problematic clerks could not be easily removed from office. The discussion concluded with an agreement to look into the specific legal restrictions regarding clerk hours and compensation.

## **Budget and Position Hours Discussion**

The group discussed shifting hours in the budget, particularly regarding a 16-hour work arrangement, though concerns were raised about potential restrictions due to state regulations. There was discussion about the relative value of maintaining the assistant position's institutional knowledge, with some questioning whether the current 10-month tenure resulted in how much institutional knowledge. The discussion also addressed the town clerk's training progress, noting that while Brenda had been training Brigid on basic tasks, she had not yet completed critical responsibilities like recordings, and the group highlighted available VLCT training resources as one alternative to internal training.

## **Town Clerk Support Systems Review**

This topic focused on discussing support systems for town clerks and addressing a backlog of issues. Dorinda highlighted the availability of training and user groups through the Vermont Clerk and Treasurers Association, while Matt noted that turnover in clerk positions is not uncommon. Dorinda presented an analysis of a 53-item backlog list, explaining that 7 items had been completed, 4 were in progress, and many issues were either not actionable or related to minor corrections in existing recorded documents. Dorinda emphasized that while some

discrepancies exist in recorded data, they are not immediate concerns and can be addressed as needed through established processes in the clerk's handbook.

## **Town Staffing and Backlog Solutions**

This topic focused on addressing issues with the town's current staffing and backlog problems in the town office. Mark suggested that some tasks currently handled by the clerk and treasurer, such as job descriptions and onboarding, should be transferred to a town administrator position to reduce workload. The group discussed the importance of establishing clear job descriptions and procedures, with Mark proposing that the select board could either hire a temporary person to clear the backlog or have current staff handle it with proper guidance. The conversation ended with a recommendation to maintain the current staffing model of having three full-time positions until the town clerk is fully trained, despite being slightly over budget for FY 2026.

## **Budget and Staffing Discussion**

The select board discussed continuing to have Zara serve as both minute taker and FEMA coordinator, particularly if a new town administrator isn't in place by July 1. The group reviewed the current budget of \$2,262,000 and considered potential adjustments, including reducing the road commissioner's pay from \$60 to \$40 per hour or eliminating the position entirely, though these changes would only result in minimal budget impacts of less than 0.5%. Dorinda suggested that hiring a town administrator might address many of the current operational challenges and recommended potentially increasing the assistant clerk's hours to 16 per week.

## **FEMA Position Hours and Budget**

Sam expressed confusion about the hours required for a new position and questioned the decision to potentially reinstate FEMA responsibilities. It was clarified that the current person would only complete existing flood-related work through July 1st, with the new town administrator taking over future FEMA tasks. Sam raised concerns about potential conflicts of interest and suggested offering multiple budget options, including cheaper alternatives, to address public concerns about budget increases.

## **Budget Process and Alternatives Discussion**

The Budget Committee members discussed their confidence in the current budget process and justified its effectiveness, noting improvements made over time. They explored potential alternatives if the current budget is rejected, including options C and D which would involve 96-hour and 32-hour positions respectively, with one option being neutral in cost. The discussion highlighted concerns about legal fees and the need for a town administrator position, with one member arguing that the current legal expenses could be attributed to lacking proper administrative oversight.

## **Town Budget Discussion Meeting**

The group discussed the town budget and potential adjustments. Elias expressed a preference to present the same budget to the Select Board but suggested offering options for potential changes, including increasing office hours or adjusting specific positions. Dorinda proposed adding another 8 hours a week to the assistant clerk's position, which would increase the budget from 11.6% to 12.2%. The group debated whether to present specific changes or leave it to the Select Board to decide how to allocate additional hours within the office staff.

## **Town Health Insurance Plan Changes**

The Budget Committee discussed the town's health insurance plan changes, which moved from Blue Cross to MVP at a slightly higher premium but with reduced deductibles. They reviewed employee benefits and discussed the importance of consulting with department heads before making budget cuts, rather than relying solely on comparables from other towns. The committee expressed support for the current budget proposal and agreed to present their recommendations to the Select Board without creating an alternate budget, focusing on discussing potential areas for adjustment during the Select Board meeting.