






Special Budget Committee Meeting

Quick recap

This meeting was a Budget Committee session to gather public feedback on concerns regarding the town's recently passed budget and potential alternatives. The discussion centered around staffing levels in the town office, with petitioners expressing concerns about workload distribution, transparency in the budget process, and the creation of a new town administrator position. Key points included debates over whether to maintain, increase, or decrease the proposed staffing levels, with options ranging from keeping the current structure to adding a fourth position at 32 hours per week. The meeting also addressed communication gaps in the budget development process and the need for better transparency in future budget planning. Participants discussed the potential benefits of a town administrator role, including grant writing opportunities and handling FEMA-related work, while others expressed concerns about costs and the impact on tax bills. The session highlighted ongoing tensions between maintaining necessary services and managing budget constraints while emphasizing the importance of improving communication processes for future budget cycles.

Next steps

Collaboration

- Budget Committee: Meet next week to review feedback from this meeting and develop one or more alternate budget options to present to the Select Board by May 5th. 
- Budget Committee: Present alternate budget(s) to the Select Board at the May 5th meeting, including specific differences from the current budget and rationale for changes. 
- Select Board: Review the alternate budget(s) from the Budget Committee and finalize a single alternate budget number and structure to propose for Article 2 at the May 9th special meeting. 
- Budget Committee/Select Board: Communicate the proposed alternate budget and its details to the public via Front Porch Forum and other channels before the May 9th meeting. 
- Residents: Email the Budget Committee with additional input or thoughts on the budget before the next meeting. 

- Key stakeholders (including department heads, Select Board, and Budget Committee): Plan and participate in a "lessons learned" meeting after the budget process concludes to review and improve the budget development and communication process for future years. 📅
- Budget Committee/Select Board: Consider options for finding \$40,000 in potential savings or reallocations within the budget to fund additional staff hours, as discussed during the meeting. 📅
- Budget Committee/Select Board: Ensure the final alternate budget proposal clearly specifies intended use of funds, particularly regarding staffing, to provide transparency to voters at the May 9th meeting. 📅
- Select Board: Provide clarity to voters at the May 9th meeting regarding how the approved budget number will be allocated, especially regarding staffing decisions. 📅
- Budget Committee/Select Board: Review and potentially update the process for involving town office staff and department heads in future budget planning to improve communication and transparency. 📅

Summary

Budget Alternatives Planning Meeting

Mark Harris, currently serving as the budget committee chair, led a meeting to gather input for an alternate budget in response to a potential rescinding of the March 3rd budget at a special meeting on May 9th. The goal is to present an alternate budget at the May 5th Select Board meeting if Article 1, which involves the potential rescinding of the March 3rd budget, passes. The meeting followed an agenda that included understanding petitioners' concerns, discussing budget options, and managing time effectively to gather as many points of view as possible. Mark acknowledged the emotionally charged nature of the topic and emphasized the importance of staying open-minded and considering new information that could lead to a better or best budget.

Town Services and Budget Concerns

This topic focused on discussing concerns about town services and budget decisions. Mark emphasized the importance of the process over the specific decisions made, encouraging participants to listen and learn from each other's perspectives. Shelly shared her concerns about the workload and impact on office staff, particularly following Sarah's departure. Richard

raised issues about the degradation of town meeting quality and the need for Australian ballot voting on important decisions. The group discussed concerns about town office workload, staff involvement, transparency, and the creation of new positions, with Mark noting that the number of positions under discussion had evolved from three to potentially four.

Town Budget Representation Concerns

This topic focused on concerns about town budget representation and voting processes. Bill Preis raised questions about the fairness of representing the entire town's population with only 100 people at a meeting, given that there are 1,592 registered voters and 589 voted. Becca clarified the procedural situation, explaining that a petition to rescind the previously approved budget had gathered over 5% of registered voter signatures, triggering a special town meeting to discuss whether to rescind the budget. Dexter expressed specific concerns about the town budget, including its significant increase over recent years, redundancy in staff, and neglect of capital improvement needs for town hall and other facilities.

Town Budget and Staffing Concerns

This topic focused on discussing concerns about the town budget and staffing changes. Key issues included a lack of clear understanding of current town office staffing needs, potential knowledge gaps in staff requirements for the next budget, and concerns about transparency regarding changes to positions like the assistant town clerk. There was specific discussion about a potential conflict of interest involving Zara Vincent, who had mentioned interest in the town administrator position but did not recuse herself from influencing its creation. The group also discussed challenges with communicating information to residents, noting that important decisions weren't clearly outlined in the town report.

Town Administrative Position Clarification

This topic focused on clarifying misconceptions about the town administrator position and budget process. Mark explained that the assistant town clerk position was created to take over the Select Board Assistant role previously handled by Sarah, not to eliminate administrative time. The discussion highlighted the need for better communication during the budget process, with Cindy Griffiths and Susan Clark proposing a "lessons learned" meeting to review what could be done differently. The conversation ended with plans to review the current budget, which showed a \$2.262 million approved budget with an 11.6% increase, before adding Special Articles.

Town Office Budget Review

This topic focused on reviewing budget changes for the town office, with participants presenting current and proposed staffing hours. The current budget allocates 72 hours per week across three positions (clerk, treasurer, and asst clrk/treas combo), while the new budget proposes 112 hours total including a new Town Administrator position at 40 hours per week. The budget increase of approximately 11.6% was attributed to staffing changes, healthcare costs, public works needs, and legal fees related to wetlands compliance. Mark explained that the Town Administrator role was based on research of 18 similar towns with populations between 1,500-2,000, using median salary figures rather than averages to set appropriate compensation.

Town Budget and Staffing Revisions

This topic focused on discussing concerns about the town's budget and staffing structure. Bill Preis and Steve explained their initial concerns about reducing staff hours, particularly for the assistant clerk position, and how this led to a petition being filed. The discussion evolved to propose a revised structure with a town administrator at 32 hours, a treasurer at 32 hours, an assistant clerk at 32 hours, and the town clerk position reduced to 16 hours, which would result in an approximately \$50,000 increase to the budget. The group acknowledged that while the Select Board has the authority to make these changes without voting on the full budget, they would need to follow the intent of the original voter-approved budget.

Fourth Town Office Position Discussion

This topic focused on discussing the potential addition of a fourth position in the town office, specifically a town administrator role. Bill Preis and Stacey Skadberg highlighted the benefits of having someone dedicated to pursuing grants and managing programs like CHIP, which could provide significant funding opportunities for the town's infrastructure needs. Matt expressed initial concerns about the budget impact but acknowledged the potential benefits if supported by key stakeholders. The discussion also touched on the challenges of finding a town administrator, with 11 towns currently seeking candidates, and the potential tax implications of the proposed budget changes.

Town Administrative Positions and Budget

This topic focused on discussing options for town administrative positions and budget allocations. Sean expressed preference for Option C, which involves increasing existing staff hours rather than adding a fourth position, while Mark presented cost analysis showing a \$40,000 budget increase with an estimated 6.7 cents tax bill increase. The group debated the merits of different staffing options, with concerns raised about overloading current staff if a town administrator position is eliminated, and discussion of efficiency gains from clearly defined roles & responsibilities. The conversation ended with a proposal for Option C/D, which would add 24 hours to the assistant clerk position while maintaining a town administrator role, representing a compromise between current staffing and future administrative needs.

Town Administrator Position Discussion

This topic focused on budget discussions and staffing needs, particularly regarding a proposed town administrator position. Mark emphasized the need for a single point of accountability to avoid risks faced during recent floods, while Elias highlighted that the current select board chair is volunteering significant hours to fill gaps in town staff. The group discussed budget process improvements, with participants noting confusion around the distinction between town administrator and office staff roles, and acknowledging that the Budget Committee lacked control over assistant clerk hours. The conversation ended with a discussion about whether to revisit previously voted budget items, with Brenda clarifying that democratic process allows for amendments through petition when transparency issues exist.

Town Budget and Administrator Discussion

The Budget Committee meeting focused on discussing budget concerns and the potential need for a town administrator position. Cheryl detailed significant operational challenges in the town office, including outdated policies, backlogged records, and unprocessed grants, arguing that a town administrator could help address these issues while supporting the select board. The committee discussed the process for the upcoming May 9th town meeting, where voters will decide whether to rescind the previously approved \$2.262 million budget and potentially adopt a new budget amount. The Budget Committee will present multiple options to the select board on May 5th, with the select board ultimately responsible for determining how any additional funds would be allocated.