

Approved May 23, 2023

Select Board
Meeting Minutes
May 2, 2023 at 6:00 p.m.
Hatfield Elementary School, 33 Main Street, Hatfield, Massachusetts

Present: Select Board: Diana Szynal, Chair and Member Brian Moriarty. Edmund Jaworski is not present.

Also in attendance: Marlene Michonski, Town Administrator; Diane Brzozowski, Chair, Kim Baker, Darryl Williams, Sean Barry and John Wilkes, Jr., Finance Committee; Phil Genovese, DPW Director; Michael Dekoschak, Police Chief; Robert Flaherty, Fire Chief; Kerry Flaherty, President Fire Association; Lydia Szych, Town Clerk; Alaina Wilcox, Assistant Town Clerk; Jennifer Dawson, Assistant Assessor; Geralyn Rodgers, COA Director; Liz Kugler, Board of Health Member; Christy Boudreau, Chair, and Adam Sullivan, Member School Committee; Michael Wood, Superintendent; David Keir, Chair, Capital Improvement Planning Committee; Robert Betsold, Celebration Committee Member; Eliza Langhans, Director, Library; Shawn Robinson, Friends of Council on Aging

CALL TO ORDER Chair Szynal called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m.

PUBLIC FORUM No one

Chair Szynal thanked the members of the Finance Committee, the Treasurer, Marlene Michonski, Town Administrator and her colleagues, Brian Moriarty and Edmund Jaworski, they have all done a fantastic job. Chair Szynal gave special thanks to Ms. Michonski for all of her hard work. It's not easy, it's very time-consuming and a lot of work.

POSTED BUSINESS

TOPIC 1 Select Board and Finance Committee overview/presentation of FY24 override budget and balanced budget: Chair Szynal talked about how the budget works. It's a year round process. Starting in the fall, Department Heads are given budget worksheets. We start meeting and we go through every single line of every Department with the Department Head. We assess the revenue we get - taxes, 2 ½, local aid, levy and expenses. This year we are presenting at Town meeting a balanced budget and an override budget. Chair Szynal explained the different terminology used in budget preparations: fiscal year – the Town operates on a fiscal year which is July 1 through June 30; revenues – monies we get from local aid but taxes are the bulk of the money; proposition 2 ½ and levy limit – 2 ½ of total assessed values of property and cash value of all real estate and personal property. We can't raise taxes more than 2 ½% per year without residents' approval. The Town also gets revenue through new growth and new revenue; the stabilization fund – our savings account; bond rating is the Town's credit score; free cash is money left from prior fiscal year projects after payment of all bills; ARPA funds is money

received from the federal government; enterprise funds – are self-supporting funds for the sale to the public which are the water and sewer bills. Tonight, we need to be careful on how to word things, we can't advocate anything. We can't advocate for or against anything. We are here to be sure if residents have questions, we answer them.

Diane Brzozowski stated the front page of the handout is an overview of the differences between the different fiscal years. Mr. Barry stated we have a few things going on - choice of needs of departments for the Town, staffing and services. This is driven by various things. In years past, we had volunteers for the Fire Department who worked in Town. As Hatfield has become an older community, we no longer have volunteers who work in Town, yet demand has gone up. We are looking at record low unemployment and the cost of electricity, heating costs, fuel, maintaining all Town buildings and health insurance have increased. There were several years without an increase in health insurance but this year we have a 6% increase. With inflation at 8%, 2 ½% isn't covering these costs. The Town's general insurance went up dramatically.

We want to talk about the school and what costs have gone up. Chair Boudreau informed everyone the school has seen skyrocketing costs. To offer the same number of services we have it's a 6 ½% increase or around an additional \$467,000.00. We are losing enrollment; several school choice kids didn't return and Hatfield students who choose to go elsewhere. Ms. Boudreau explained if we get 20 students back from school choice the school would be in a better position. Mr. Barry spoke up that part of the issue is we are losing revenue in the school. In the last few years, we have brought in \$395,000.00 and Ms. Boudreau stated we spend more than that. We are obligated to educate the students we have, and we can't get enrollment numbers up. Mr. Barry stated we are \$300,000.00 short in the new fiscal year. If we continue to lose choice students, the Town will continue to have to pay more to fund the schools. Ms. Kugler asked if losing kids was from one school or both and Ms. Boudreau answered both. A resident asked when you look at the total eligible students in Hatfield, what is the number and how many of those go elsewhere in both schools? With respect to those kids coming in, what's the total number coming in? Can you talk about the trend in the last five years and what can be done to get more kids? Ms. Boudreau did not have the breakdown but did state the resident trend in 20 years is down 32%; the area average is 28%; western Massachusetts student numbers are down; the district is down 20% and students are choosing other schools. Shawn Robinson stated that he is hopeful that the school has a plan on how we are going to attract more students. Ms. Boudreau answered we started our year with plans looking at that. Marketing efforts and community growth have been going on this year. Ms. Boudreau also stated there is a plan on the website if you want more information. Lucinda Williams spoke up that some are choosing to attend private school or home schooling. We don't have a choice but to educate our students, it's federal law. Whether we pay the money for students to go to other schools or pay our schools either way we are going to be paying the money to educate our students. We don't have to fund the police or fire but by law we have to educate our students. Ms. Boudreau replied we do not spend more money to educate a student here than other communities. If you decided you want to regionalize, it's not an option. If we must charge tuition to go to school here, it's a possibility. If you look at the cost of other towns running K-6 their costs are much higher. Cindy Doty asked

when you talked about the long-term plan are you looking for what is next year going to be? Ms. Doty asked how many students are at the high school and Ms. Boudreau replied 139 children at the high school but 40 are school choice. Ms. Doty stated years ago there was a non-binding question, and the Town didn't want school choice but the School Committee went ahead and did it. Ms. Doty went on, are we reaching the tipping point? Is next year going to be doubled? People have less children and 60% of households are headed by a person over 60. Are we at the point where we can't afford it any longer? Is the increase for programs and instructors? How many students are you going to get? Ms. Boudreau answered 20 children per school. We are not creating a new classroom with only school choice; we try to have 2 classrooms per grade. Ms. Boudreau replied that the increase this year we would get back the following year. The increase we are looking for will impact FY25. Another resident asked to give specific examples of consequences if the override is not passed. Mr. Barry said the override is an all or nothing proposition. Mr. Sullivan stated if the override doesn't pass classroom size would double, we would lose teachers, JV sports would be eliminated, and the superintendent would be a part-time position. Mr. Barry stated earlier someone asked if we are at the tipping point the answer is yes, this is it. Shawn Robinson stated this is a difficult decision, everyone's costs have gone up 8% but the school's costs also went up. I would like to hear from the school about cutting JV sports, to say you will cut that, we should be cautious about that. If you want to bring students in without sports, it doesn't look good. What are the increases for next year? We need to see a plan on how we need to get to where we need to be. We need to grow. I haven't heard any plan about growth but seems you want to squeeze more money from us. Ms. Boudreau replied we are out there doing social media and other marketing efforts. We can't hire new staff until we know what the funding for FY24 is. For the cost in the following year, our contractual staff will be an increase but I don't know the amount. We are the lowest paying district, with only 2.6% to the teachers. Chair Szynal stated if you get the choice numbers, you will recoup the money? Ms. Boudreau replied we want to bring in the revenue for the growth. The goal would be to offset any increase in FY25. It's the gap year and we are looking for help.

David Keir spoke while I appreciate the school, part of the override is for police and fire. If the override doesn't pass, when you call fire and police it may not be there. If you want your roads cleared, DPW may not be there. Mr. Barry stated we made a large investment in police and fire. The investment in fire and police was made with temporary money. The override would make the services permanent. Bill Beldon spoke regarding the first page of the handout, I would like to discuss what is cut if it doesn't pass. People don't volunteer any longer for fire. What are the police and fire going to lose? Mike Dekoschak, Police Chief responded that the Act of the police reform decimated the ranks for police. We used to have part time employees, we ran academies throughout the state. We would train people and put them on part time. The reform changed that to full time only. Hatfield has three full time and four part time for now. With the override, nothing changes for the Police Department. We will do our best and we will be here when we are here. If we lose money, then hours are cut. If the override passes, there is one full time, but I need two full time. I am funded for 16 hours 5 days a week. If I hire full time 7/365 for 16 hours per day, there will still be uncovered shifts if it passes. A resident asked if a shift is not covered, does the State Police cover? Chief Dekoschak replied the State Police will cover. We

met with the Executive Office of Public Safety. They would do it for a month but no longer. The EOPS is to assist when in need, but they don't have the manpower. Chair Szynal asked the Police Chief if there is an option to have staggered hours? He replied 20 years ago yes but not today. There needs to be an Officer at the front desk and the other one to patrol. One person is from 4:00 p.m. to 12:00 p.m. which is not a good situation. We help with picking people up from the floor. We do medical type calls as well. Adam Sullivan asked about how we compare to other communities and the Chief Dekoschak replied Sunderland has 1 full time and Whately has 2 full time; if you look at the budget, we are funded around 1.8-1.9% overall budget.

Chief Flaherty responded to the Fire/Ambulance Department that if the override doesn't pass – currently we house a truck at the station around Nourse Farm and that could close. The COA van would be put outside as the fire trucks need to be inside; air filters would no longer be changed; fire prevention program would suffer; less cleaning and medical supplies; no seminars for personnel; 8 hours per day 5 days a week if override doesn't pass. Currently, we have two call staff members. Ms. Boudreau asked if the override passes, how would that affect you? Chief Flaherty responded ambulance is over \$120,000.00. If we continue this and cover all shifts it would be \$165,000.00. If override fails, revenues will be around \$50,000.00 to \$60,000.00. Ambulance is self-supporting. A resident asked do you get service from other towns? Chief Flaherty responded according to law if someone calls you have to respond. Hatfield's response time is around four minutes; if you call Northampton or South County, the response time is around 11 minutes. Selectman Moriarty stated that personnel working at the Fire Department and ambulance have dual roles they are trained as both fire safety and ambulance. Each one has dual roles.

A resident wanted to know what would happen to the Council on Aging if the override doesn't pass. Geralyn Rodgers, Director, Council on Aging said we have tried to get a nice center for the seniors. When I started the budget was around \$4,000.00. We provide services for seniors. I'm running a business. In the last 2 years, we had 11,000 visits. I may have to start charging fees if the override doesn't pass. Chair Szynal stated you didn't mention the services you provided during COVID. Ms. Rodgers replied we did outreach, we made phone calls, we got supplies to seniors and we got people scheduled for their COVID shots.

A resident asked if Community Preservation Funds can be used for some of this. The Select Board and Finance Committee answered no.

Phil Genovese presented what will happen to the DPW if the override doesn't pass. We are not asking for anything new. We are looking to have a level funded services. If it doesn't pass, the transfer station will be open only on Saturdays, there will be no seasonal help and no brush pile. Mr. Genovese said utilities have gone up 30% to 40%; the impact is significant. We will have to absorb contractual fees for union staff. Ms. Boudreau asked if there is no seasonal help, what does that mean? Mr. Genovese responded he hires three seasonal employees every spring. Without them there will be no bush trimming, no crosswalk painting, less mowing around facilities, cemeteries and the basketball court; we supply dog waste bags and pick it up. David Slysask asked what's the outlook for next year, what's the override for next year? What's the five-

year plan? Shawn Robinson stated you keep mentioning 2.½% but many people haven't gotten a raise in the last few years and they are struggling.

The Select Board made sure that all residents' questions were answered. The Select Board and Finance Committee voted on the budgets to be presented at Town meeting:

Selectman Moriarty made a motion to approve the 2 ½ override budget to be presented at Town meeting; Chair Szynal seconded; no discussion; all in favor – aye; motion approved.

Selectman Moriarty made a motion to approve the balanced budget to be presented at Town meeting; Chair Szynal seconded; no discussion; all in favor – aye; motion approved.

Darryl Williams made a motion to approve the balanced 2 ½% cut budget; Kim Baker seconded; no discussion; all in favor – aye; motion approved.

Kim Baker made a motion to approve and accept the budget for the override; Darryl Williams seconded; no discussion; all in favor – aye; motion approved.

Karen Pruett asked if a resident could change a line item in the budget at Town meeting. Ms. Szych, Town Clerk answered yes but I encourage you not to make those motions. These people have worked hard over the last 4 months and if you make a motion like that, Town meeting could run three nights.

UNANTICIPATED NEW BUSINESS

ADJOURN Chair Szynal made a motion to adjourn; Selectman Moriarty seconded; no discussion; all in favor – aye; meeting ended at 8:27 p.m.

Respectfully,
Karen Brodeur
Executive Assistant