

**Brandon Budget Workshop
December 5, 2023**

Staff present: Town Manager Seth Hopkins, Deputy Town Manager Bill Moore, Town Clerk Sue Gage, Jackie Savela

Selectboard members present: Tracy Wyman, Tim Guiles, Heather Nelson, Brian Coolidge, Cecil Reniche-Smith (by Zoom).

Budget Committee members present: Jan Coolidge, Doug Bailey, Barry Varian, Neil Silins, Peter Werner, and Tricia Welch (by Zoom).

Also present: Jim Emerson, Steven Jupiter, Ralph Ethier, Sandy Mayo.

Call to Order:

The meeting was called to order at 6:00 pm by Tracy Wyman.

Motion by Guiles / Nelson to adopt the agenda for the Budget Workshop of 12-5-23.
Motion passed.

Public Comment:

Neil Silins said the budget advisory committee meets and talks with the Selectboard about it, but that only the Selectboard members vote. The advisory committee has no more input. He said that townspeople are interested in a beneficial budget and he would like to see consideration of having the budget advisory committee members voting on the budget.

Tim Guiles said the advisory committee members were not voted in by the public. He thinks it is appropriate for them to be a part of the public process. And that the Selectboard is responsible for the budget. Silins said it would be good to have a bigger spread of representation. Barry Varian said he is in favor of the budget committee having a positive influence on the process but he does not think it is appropriate for anyone other than the Selectboard to have the final say. Silins said he thinks the hearts and minds of the Selectboard might not include what the advisory committee wants. Guiles said a small group of people could get on the advisory committee and tilt the process. Elections keep that from happening.

Sue Gage said she believes it is statutory that the Selectboard authorizes the budget that goes before the voters. She can look into that.

Silins said it is an issue for him that the advisory committee talks and talks but that the Selectboard will vote how they would have to begin with. Then the advisory committee hasn't had input except as a mild suggestion. Jan Coolidge asked the Selectboard to think about the budget committee's role.

Tracy Wyman said at the next meeting, Dec. 18, he would like to hear from one individual talking for the advisory committee on where they think the budget should be

and what they think would sell. He said that is when the Board will be doing the most adjustments.

Guiles said it is his understanding the budget committee is made up of townspeople who want to come to the meetings and pay attention. He is impressed that the budget committee will make that effort. It is more than a narrow point of view. He said that anyone can do that; anyone who wants to be involved can be. He feels that the budget committee has no more or less sway than others who come to the Board's meetings. He said he thinks it is important for each Selectboard member to weigh what they think is important. It may not reflect the budget committee.

Varian said he does not agree the budget committee should be involved in voting. Many of those on the budget advisory committee have been doing this for quite a while and have a much more detailed understanding of the budget process. He said their influence in the conversation is more than an "off the street" perspective. Heather Nelson said she has learned from those with other perspectives and with more knowledge than she has. She hopes to get input from all budget committee members. Doug Bailey said ten or eleven years ago when he was on the Selectboard, there was no budget committee. Just a group of naysayers who would come to their meetings. The Board wanted to get other people involved and to listen to others. The budget committee gets something in the town report and gives the public more background to what was looked at than just what the Selectboard members provide.

By Zoom chat, Tricia Welch said she has been surveying people on the street about police coverage and the budget. She said he has talked with about 35 people who have said they would accept an increase in the police budget to get 24 hour coverage and keep officers safe. She also said she thought the budget committee would have more input in the decision than just listening.

Seth Hopkins thanked everyone for the thoughtful process. This is the last of the three workshops to introduce new information. The next meeting, the fourth workshop, will be a more holistic analysis. He said he has heard rumors that people are saying the town budget is up 20%. He said he went to great pains at the last budget meeting in saying that the budget spreadsheet that had been presented had everyone's recommendations on it. It was an opportunity to see what everyone was asking for all on one page. It was not a proposed budget. Wyman said he had asked for it – a wish list to include what everyone wanted. Peter Werner and Bailey said there has been statewide news about town budgets increasing 20% and that is perhaps where rumors are coming from.

**Budget Review:
Revenues:**

#9 – Tax Revenue - Hopkins said the tax revenue line item is the amount to be raised by taxes, which will be determined by what comes up during the budget workshops. Penalties and interest are back after taking a break during covid.

#10 – Town Administration - Hopkins said these are miscellaneous revenues and vendor permits.

#11 – Assessor - The assessors have some revenue from the state to help prepare for re-appraisal. It is not much. Based per parcel.

#12 – Code Enforcement – Hopkins said this is zoning revenue. Zoning Administrator Jeff Biasuzzi has said there about 65 permits a year. Larry Stevens does rental code compliance. There is a \$25 annual registration for each rental unit.

#13 – Town Clerk – Gage said they receive some monies from the State. There are PILOT funds (Payment in Lieu of Taxes for properties they own) and Current Use. There is a small check annually from the Railroad. There are fees received for liquor license renewals. As for Land Records. Gage said there was a lot of recording going on during covid but that has dropped down. Property sales are robust but they have tapered off and people are not mortgage refinancing. There are fees for vault time set by statute. There are fees from Green Mountain Passports, copies, marriages licenses, and hunting and fishing licenses.

Any clerk in the state can do birth and death certificates. We do a lot of deaths because we have a funeral parlor in town. There are dog license revenues. Gage said there are revenues for Records Preservation which matches a line item on the Expenditures side. Those monies are set aside for preservation. Interest revenue is increasing. Penalty and Interest revenue is substantial and consistent.

Overall revenues are down 5% and Gage said that bulk of that is in land recordings.

#17 -- Intergovernmental and #19 Transfer In-Debt – Hopkins said there are no revenues forecasted. The Town intends to apply to the Trustees of Public Funds for mosquito abatement but it is not being projected in the budget.

Questions and Discussion on Revenues: Discussion on cannabis license fees. There has been some revenue. Discussion on which line item it was going into and if there were going to be annual fees or if the fees were just for new licenses.

Expenditures:

#9 Tax Expenditures – Hopkins said a tax sale is in the process of being accumulated so we know which properties are eligible. There are people still working on payment

plans, designed to clear what they owe in a year. That is the town's preference. The town attorney is expecting a late winter tax sale. Hopkins said there are a lot of properties on the list because there hasn't been a sale since covid.

#10 Town Administration – Hopkins reviewed some of the line items. There is a little overtime for Jackie and Elaine. Animal Control officer Tim Kingston is paid a stipend. There are other fees associated with wages. There are some dues, subscriptions and professional development.

Hopkins said the Town wants to buy access to a program called GOV PILOT. It is software that achieves some tasks that we otherwise need staff to do. Some of these costs are being apportioned to Administration. Some to Highway, etc. Hopkins said the vendor was chosen because Rutland City has had a positive experience with them.

\$500 was added for emergency management to pay for text alerts, etc. and also for the possibility of VT Emergency Management doing local preparedness training. The Town Report line was increased because we are exploring a local source for doing the layout. All prices in that field are up.

The total Administration expenses are up 2-3/4%.

Questions and Discussion: Legal services are up from \$10K to \$15K. Are we expecting something? Hopkins said there is nothing on the radar. This was increased to better reflect expenses even in a normal year. For example, there was one recent zoning enforcement issue that cost the town almost \$1000. The town hires an outside attorney, rather than someone on staff with salary and benefits.

Why are service contracts and technical support up to \$12,000 and \$15,000? Hopkins said it reflects costs. For example, the Town has Office 365 Office Suites which costs \$700-800 a month. Plus anti-malware software. Gage said a few years ago we had a data breach and she lost five years' worth of work. Now, everything is backed up to the cloud and it feels more secure. We have contracts for our professional grade equipment like copiers.

Jan Coolidge said she was of the understanding that when Hopkins became the Town Manager, that Bill Moore was to be the Deputy Town Manager temporarily until Hopkins was up to speed. Hopkins said there has been a lot of thought about the scope of the Town Manager position. It is a big job with a big salary. There was an honest desire to lessen the job and push the salary down 25%. In that way, there is a team approach between he and Moore and it is not an overwhelming job. They cover for each other. He said he was not under the impression it was temporary. Guiles said it was not the intention of the Board for it to be temporary..

#11 – Assessor – Hopkins said there is a \$0 increase. Karen Folger does clerical work and works six hours a week for the town. Lisa from NEMRC is a professional and paid more like an attorney.

#12 - Code Enforcement – Jeff Biasuzzi is the Zoning Administrator and is an appointee of the Selectboard. He works 12 hours a week -- 1-1/2 days. Hopkins said there is ongoing discussion about creating one larger job between ZA and Rental Housing. Maybe also the Assessor's clerk. Perhaps to make it one 60% job and get more coverage in the office. Jeff and Karen communicate and are in the office at the same time but it means most of the week there is no one available to assist people in this regard.

Cecil Reniche-Smith, who is also on the Planning Commission, said she gets a lot of calls about zoning enforcement and difficulties people have. The two comments she hears most are, "You need someone who can be there every day if possible." And, "You need someone there often enough and also to do enforcement, which is not necessarily happening." She would like to see the two part time positions combined to create one larger position that would allow us to have a Z.A. in the office four days a week to address some of the issues she has been hearing from developers and townspeople. Hopkins said he concurs with Reniche-Smith.

Hopkins said the town has been doing zoning, land use, and permitting on a shoestring. It can be admirable in a way to be frugal. But he has had conversations with people about difficulties and delays to redevelop and develop new properties because of this bare bones department.

Hopkins said he has been talking to people about how these positions were handled in the past. At one time there was a full time zoning and rental position, combined. There are different levels of service the town can choose to acknowledge and that the townspeople sound like they are wanting. Moore said because of the current levels, it falls to other town staff to do some zoning work. Gage said for example, her office has to do zoning's filing. Hopkins said Biasuzzi has prioritized moving along permit requests and enforcement is not necessarily happening. Some tasks will hopefully be picked up with the GOV PILOT but it won't pick up all the slack.

Guiles asked about the large increase in the LHO/ Rental Code line item. Hopkins said the rental housing program hasn't been actively managed in the last few years. More time will be needed to do retroactive catch up work. There are landlords not realizing they need to register. This needs to be rebuilt. Money is needed to make sure rental housing is safe and habitable. The town hasn't even been reminding landlords they need to register every year. There are approximately 400 rental properties in town that need to be tracked. Moore said there had been talk of the State taking over rental inspections and we were hesitant to invest in our program. But that hasn't happened. This also provides an opportunity to address short-term rentals. Hopkins said it appears there is room in the current allotment for the Rental Housing Officer to do more work. Right now, he responds to landlords and tenant complaints. He doesn't keep set hours in the office.

Hopkins said the biggest increase in this department is because two of the five of the GOV PILOT modules are being charged to this department. One is for rental housing registrations. The other is for land use permits – one of the modules.

Also in this department is Energy. Jim Emerson said the committee has gained statewide recognition from the work they have done and he will be presenting at an upcoming statewide forum on how energy committees work. He was congratulated on those successes and being recognized on a statewide level.

There was discussion about the energy request, which is not on the proposal in hand. Hopkins said the request is for \$4250 and read a list of the proposed items that make up that number. There was discussion on the energy library, which is in the Library. Emerson said part of the expenditure is to do a town wide mailing to educate people about the committee's goals and work. They would like a lending library of electric tools and to be able to support the maintenance of tools and bikes.

Reniche-Smith said there was criticism about the last town wide mailing. Emerson said there were some mistakes made that wasted about \$20 due to human errors. The success was that they reached 27 people about the mission for people to be more efficient. Brian Coolidge said he thinks a mass mailing is wasteful. He thinks it can be done with social media like Front Porch Forum and Facebook. He said the majority of people will throw it away.

There was further clarification about the total expenditures in this department. The hope is that the cost of GOV PILOT will be offset by the money it saves the town and the ability to apply for grants because we will have data. Guiles said most of the increase in Code Enforcement, which is up 21%, is due to items not related to the energy committee's request of \$4250.

#13 Town Clerk – Gage said the overall increase request is 4.42%. She reviewed line items. The Town Clerk salary is up 2% and the Assistant Town Clerk's is up 4%, to matches everyone else's. There will be more elections in 2024. We are still mailing ballots from town.

The Matching Records Preservation line item is matched from the revenue side. Even if it is not all spent now, it will get spent. Every once in a while there is a large amount and it comes from the reserve.

Brian Coolidge said he thinks it is time to stop mailing ballots townwide. Covid is over. If people want a ballot, they can call. Gage said it is a decision of the Selectboard.

Gage said it costs \$1000 for programming of the tabulator and the budget presumes no revotes. We have to print the ballots and pay for postage for absentee ballots.

Jan Coolidge said if people are capable of calling for a school ballot, they can call for a town ballot. Gage said again, that it is a Board decision.

Reniche-Smith said she would like to keep mailing ballots. She believes it increases voter participation; not everyone can get to the polls. She thinks it is good to have both – ballots by mail and in person. Brian Coolidge said people can vote early in the town office. This would be a good way to trim the budget substantially without causing a disservice. The Town doesn't need to mail a ballot for people to throw them away. Guiles said he would like this to be a Board agenda item, he agrees with Reniche-Smith. Nelson said she would tend to agree because she leans toward increasing voter turnout. But she said she also sees that it would be good to be consistent with the school board.

Gage said that for the general election, the State will be mailing a ballot. There will be more of it, not less. She reminded that this discussion is for the FY25 budget. There are a lot of upcoming elections and in some, ballots will be mailed and others, like the VT primary next summer, ballots will not be mailed. The presidential ballot next November will be mailed. Gage said mailing ballots does increase voter participation, that is a fact. Questions on whether it is worth the money?

There was a question about leases being paid off last year. Gage said it is in Highway. The \$33,000 is the remaining payment for the grader.

#17 Intergovernmental – Hopkins said these are agreements the town has made for insurance or another district we belong to. There is very little discretion.

Hopkins explained changes in the Mosquito Control line item. This is a big increase - up \$10,000 -- based on a reformulation the district did. They use many factors in determining what each town is going to pay. There are two Brandon town reps to the district and they were at the last Selectboard meeting explaining the changes. The district puts different weights into an algorithm and Brandon's went up the most of all the towns. This was a rebalancing.

#19 Debt Service – Hopkins said the Route 7 bond from 2006 will be retired in 2026. There is still the police department bond and the "catch-up" bond for Segment 6 which we will have for a long time. The Route 7 bond from 2006 will be completed in Dec. 2026 (FY27). That is \$150,000. Gage said the only amount that went to Route 7 out of the \$3.2 million bond was \$750,000. We did a lot of deferred maintenance.

Hopkins explained the bi-annual paving grant we are eligible for (and receive) which is for larger roads like Arnold District and McConnell. We always pay 20% and they pay 80%. He explained how it is reflected in the budget.

Questions and Discussion:

There was a question about the Town Hall roof. Hopkins said we have received communication in writing that none of our previous grants received and spent are in jeopardy if we do not do a historic material for the roof. We are beyond the look-back periods. However, they will not look favorably if we use anything but slate for the roof in

the future. He said this was from the Division of Historic Preservation. We would then be ineligible for further Historic Preservation funds for the building, which are consistently needed. The historic preservation grant source could potentially be up to \$100,000.

Hopkins said Reniche-Smith has identified the grant and he has made good progress moving it along. He said they may want engineered plans for the slate roof. Varian said he considers that to be good news. He would like to see an engineered design and would like to see a slate roof. He believes with engineering, there could be improvements to the building. There has been a “snow off the roof problem” since the building was built – it even shows in historic photos. This will be the only time to improve roof snow and ice problems forever. Hopkins said he plans to include this information in his next report.

Gage said the town office downstairs heat pump died this summer. Hopkins said this will be recommended to be paid for from the 1% fund.

Jan Coolidge asked about a five-year capital plan for the budget. She said she brings it up every year. She said we are finally going to do the roof. What year are we planning to do the highway? She said we only talk one year at a time and don't plan for other big tickets. Hopkins said he supports a capital plan. We need to identify assets and life spans. That is one of five components that will be addressed with the GOV PILOT software. Previous capital plans are very outdated. Hopkins said the previous Town Manager had a different approach to this but he plans to develop one.

Jan Coolidge said this is the first year without a line item of \$30,000 for a police car. She said in 2017 there was a capital plan for administration. Hopkins said the State has what they consider a capital plan, which is something the Planning Commission writes. But they have been busy with the Town Plan and they are moving on to the Land Use Ordinance. He thinks we could do a capital plan in-house but it will not be put in front of the voters. Jan Coolidge said it keeps being pushed down the road – there is only talk. Hopkins said there is now a Selectboard and management team inclined to do it. Statutorily, the capital plan is the responsibility of the Planning Commission but it has not historically been like that in Brandon.

Moore said the Planning Commission is finishing the Town Plan that should last eight years. From that document there can be actual planning. It will be a comprehensive guidebook and a capital plan can be based on that. He said Hopkins is an amazing planner. We all want to see improvements to Estabrook, the highway garage, etc. Then we look at the finances. Gage said some towns in VT have a good capital plan and a capital fund tax rate so there is always money for improvements.

Hopkins said an accidental way of Brandon doing this is the 1% fund. He gives a lot of credit to the Selectboard for using the 1% funds for Segment 6 and waiting until that was totally finished before looking at the 1% fund for anything else.

Bailey said there have been different viewpoints. We did it for police cruisers. Years ago, the Selectboard wanted cruisers but also trucks and plows, which cost much more. Interest rates were low for years so we bought cruisers and leased snowplows and bigger trucks. Last year rates went up. The 1% fund was hit really hard. A capital plan is very important and it will help in the budgeting process. Since we will be finishing up a bond in the near future, we have the 1% fund and the bond paving, it can set us up nicely for years. It takes a long term plan and a vision. Hopkins said he is serious about this and is making small steps in that direction. He said we will get it in order. And he is committed to budget footnotes.

Adjourn - Motion to adjourn by Nelson/ Coolidge at 7:43 pm Passed.

Respectfully submitted,

Janet Mondlak