

Minutes of Joint Meeting of Brandon Selectboard and Budget Advisory Committee

16 December 2024, Brandon Town Hall

Attendance
Selectboard
Remarks
Police
Department
Budget and
Staffing

Selectboard present: Doug Bailey, Heather Nelson, Tim Guiles, Ralph Ethier.
Budget committee present: Karen Rhodes, Barry Varian, Tricia Welch, Jan Coolidge, Gabe McGuigan.
Public present: Ken Manning, Vicki Disorda, Ray Marcoux, Steven Jupiter, Chris Conlin, Jamie Quenneville, Shay Phillip, Skye Phillip, Michael Brown, Gerrod Lowell, Brianna Stevens-Clark, Carly Stevens, Len Schmidt, Tom Kilpeck.
By Zoom: Kelly Coolidge.

Selectboard Chair Doug Bailey called the meeting to order at 7:00PM.

On motion of Heather Nelson and second by Brian Coolidge, the amended agenda was adopted by the selectboard 5-0.

Doug Bailey and Heather Nelson offered remarks related to the goals of the community and assuming best intentions of all participants, and encouraging respectful discourse. It was noted that the process began in September and we have been moving toward a consensus as best we can and at least should be able to consider that the community has had an opportunity to be heard and a fair process.

Seth Hopkins introduced a line-by-line budget with a 0.90% increase in spending requiring a 0.98% increase in the amount to be raised by taxes. This budget, printed on white paper, was the traditional NEMRC format and detailed line-by-line spending in 23 pages; in this proposal, the police department was increased in FY26 to a baseline of \$892,000, or 4.15% above their FY25 budget. After this introduction were provided a one-sheet two-page roll-up by department totals only representing a cut of \$100,000 to the police department baseline printed on green paper; a similar roll-up on pink paper representing a further \$58,000 increase to the police department; and a similar roll-up on orange paper representing a further \$45,000 increase to the police department.

Jan Coolidge and Tricia Welch inquired about a capital plan, and Seth Hopkins and Heather Nelson spoke about the department heads' standing lists of equipment to be replaced as well as the Town's practice of incurring new payments generally when an existing payment drops off (when existing debt is retired). An inquiry about the wastewater collection system was deemed the subject of a wastewater commissioners' meeting rather than the selectboard's general fund budget proposal.

Doug Bailey gave estimated dollar impacts of the four spending proposals on the table tonight, based on the FY25 tax rate and an average Brandon assessment of \$186,000. These ranged from a cut of \$61 per year (green budget) to an increase of \$45 per year (pink budget). The meeting was advised that none of these proposals would achieve 24-hour on-duty coverage in the police department; that is estimated to require \$1.2M, and the top proposal under consideration was \$950,000. On a question from Tricia Welch, Seth Hopkins explained how the dollar figures for the two increases were derived.

Barry Varian offered thoughts about coverage expectations and police value; potential duty schedule on-call hours were offered for consideration of the meeting. Heather Nelson stated she was ready to compromise to come to something that gains support at this meeting and from the voters while getting closer to the coverage that is ideal, but not all in one year. Tim Guiles stated that we tried to provide 24-hour coverage without either enough funds or enough employees, and that 24-hour on-duty is not his goal for the community. Gabe McGuigan observed that costs are naturally going up over time and these proposals are half-measures to arrive at a figure where the chief has some latitude. The differential from the previous year to now is important to not allowing the gap in real costs to increase. Heather Nelson agreed the cost of inflation ought to be built in to prevent erosion of service. Doug Bailey said the overall rubric is enabling the police chief to be responsive to what is going on in the community by providing the tools needed to do the job.

8PM Tom Kilpeck said that decreasing what we have now is not in the best interest of the town, taxpayers, end users of the services being provided. An increase of 2% - 3% a year consistently will keep moving forward regardless of swings in inflation. The community is benefitting from having recruited and trained a good group of police officers, with whom he works regularly as fire chief. Mike Brown spoke to the need for overtime, often in dangerous conditions, happening more than may be known; the town needs to get with the times; figures under discussion are tying the chief up and he needs more resources to provide the coverage the community needs. Every night is different. Vicki Disorda observed that police presence needed at Park Village, particularly with more housing planned there.

Heather Nelson moved proposal of the orange budget including \$937K for police; Ralph Ethier seconded. Brian Coolidge supported chief plus four officers as adequate and sustainable (green budget). He shared that the State education property tax is forecast to increase 5.9% this year; as a member of the selectboard feels responsible for keeping taxes affordable and offering a budget that can pass on the first vote. Heather Nelson was uncomfortable with any decrease but understands limitations of what a town of this size can afford. Orange is a compromise to set us up for moving toward fuller policing in a responsible and measured way. Barry Varian doesn't want the selectboard or budget workshop to get in the weeds of scheduling, but should we should at least strive to maintain existing staffing. Tricia Welch said a backlash would come from losing an officer and cutting funding. Brian Coolidge and Heather Nelson discussed town management and selectboard efforts at managing the FY25 police budget, and strategies for handling overtime and staffing in the department. Heather Nelson said this is the least reduction we can have (one officer leaving of his own choice and the position not being replaced) in a budget we can pass. Karen Rhodes observed that difference in real tax impact between the \$950K (pink) budget and the \$937K (orange) budget is insignificant to a taxpayer (\$7); go for the fullest funding option on the table. Gabe McGuigan said whole community needs and deserves to weigh in. Green would have to pass; white will pass; it's the duty of elected representatives to maximize services that can succeed in the voting process; orange is preparing for the change in the dollar over time; the board should advocate for at least orange if not pink. Heather Nelson offered that she favored orange over pink in the interest of compromise (by not advocating for the highest option on the table). Doug Bailey spoke directly to budget advisory committee, appreciated their participation through a lengthy process and hoped for their support. Motion to adopt the budget version including \$937,000 for the police department and requiring total spending of \$3,403,965, with \$527,320 of non-tax revenue and requiring \$2,876,645 to be raised by taxes carried 3-2 (Bailey, Nelson, Ethier in favor; Coolidge, Guiles opposed). The increase in spending proposed is 2.25% over FY25 and the increase in the amount to be raised by taxes is 2.58% over FY25.

8:30 Appropriations: A \$50,000 request for capital funding was introduced. Heather Nelson moved the article; Ralph Ethier seconded. This is in place of a paving appropriation, so the \$85,000 article from FY25 drops off the FY26 tax bill. This could help to even out / stabilize the Town's finances for capital needs. If this were to pass, the net would be about 1.5% increase on the amount to be raised by taxes (add 2.5% to budget, subtract 1% on article [subsequent actual calculation yielded 1.3%]). Tim Guiles talked about the range of resources available to the Town and the level of reserves that was most appropriate. Brian Coolidge said he is not a fan of the appropriation concept. Karen Rhodes said putting money aside is a good idea; the public would be happy if the funds were spent on things they find necessary. Tricia Welch confirmed that appropriations can only be spent on purpose stated in question. Jan Coolidge questioned reliance on funding on paving from 1% fund; Seth Hopkins confirmed \$100,000 for FY26 for paving had been reported to the selectboard at last week's meeting. Gabe McGuigan said if this were [the economic climate of] 2008, we'd be having a different conversation. It is prudent now to ask for funds from the voters. Heather Nelson expressed that the article choice is smart and would be helpful but it would not mean a crisis if the voters did not support it ("plan ahead more or plan ahead enough"). Barry Varian felt this was a good way to explore this, low risk. Ralph Ethier endorsed the way the article was worded this year. The motion carried 4-1 (Coolidge no)

Doug Bailey thanked budget advisory committee and Steven Jupiter for covering.

Tricia Welch thanked the board for a collaborative process this year.

On motion of Brian Coolidge seconded by Ralph Ethier and voted unanimously, the board adjourned at 8:47PM.

Respectfully submitted,



Seth M Hopkins, town manager

Next Meeting Doug Bailey advised that he would like the selectboard to meet with the budget committee again in January to discuss how to inform the voters about the process and the product of this year's budget workshop series.