



## **SELECT BOARD WORK SESSION**

**Minutes of Wednesday, March 27, 2024  
6:30 PM**

Board Members participating were Select Board Chair Marshall Hook, Vice-Chair and Clerk Rafael McDonald (arrived 6:34PM) and Select Board Members Lynne Bermudez and Boyd Jackson. Select Board Member Cameron Brown was absent. Of the Select Board's staff Town Administrator Kevin Harutunian, and Executive Assistant Samantha Morin were present. From Town Hall, Treasurer Collector Morgan Dwinell and Town Accountant Amanda Auriemma were present. The Select Board was also joined by the Finance Committee, Chair Che Elwell and Members Michael Hartmann, David Larson, Catherin Hodges, Heidi Fox and Matuely Lugo-Gomez. Masconomet School Committee Members Zillie Bhujju, Melissa Ogden and William Hodges were present along with Topsfield Elementary School Member Candice Snyder. Topsfield residents Doug Link, Michelle Link and Dick Gandt were present.

### **CALL TO ORDER**

Chair Hook called the meeting to order at 6:31 PM.

### **ANNOUNCEMENTS**

Chair Hook made the following announcements:

"The meeting is being recorded by the Recording Clerk via ZOOM in the event that the connection is lost at any time during the meeting a device is being used by the recording clerk for the purpose of taking minutes; is there anyone else present who wishes to record the meeting?" The Finance Committee is recording the meeting.

### **FY2025 Warrant Articles**

TA Harutunian provided an update on where the current status of the budget and warrant articles. A few articles still require a vote from the Select Board, and the fire engine article needs to be voted again as the funding sources have changed.

The Select Board and Finance Committee discussed grammatical edits and language clarifications; all agreed with the changes. KP Law offered language clarification changes to the opioid article that are reflected in the new version.

Member Bermudez motioned to approve article fourth (Water Department Operating Budget) of the 2024 Annual Town Warrant. Member Jackson seconded the motion and it carried 4-0.

There were changes in the funding source of article nineteenth (Fire Engine) since the last work session when the Select Board approved it. Member Bermudez motioned to approve article nineteenth. Chair Hook seconded and the motion carried 4-0.

Member Bermudez motioned to remove article twentieth (Fire Department Storage) from the 2024 Warrant. Member Jackson seconded and the motion carried 4-0.

There were conversations with the Essex Regional Retirement System to gain a cost estimate of the impact of Article thirty-second (Public Employee Retirement Buy-Back Option), but it was stated that there is no ability to assess that impact until an employee retires. After more discussion, the Select Board agreed that the cost would likely be nominal. Member Bermudez motioned to approve article thirty-second. Vice Chair and Clerk McDonald seconded and the motion carried 4-0.

TA Harutunian provided a cost estimate for article thirty-third's active military duty compensation. Estimated costs spanned potential deployment of one weekend a month to a full year. There may be the potential for a transfer of funds depending on the pay of the employee and length of deployment, but shorter active-duty deployments could be absorbed within the operating budget. Member Bermudez motioned to approve article thirty-third. Vice Chair and Clerk McDonald seconded and the motion carried 4-0.

Member Bermudez stated her recommendation that Article thirty-ninth (Removal of Sale of Vehicles as an allowed use in the Business Highway Table of Uses) be withdrawn from the warrant. She provided her reasons and also cited the fact the Finance Committee's preliminary vote was to not recommend action. After discussion by the board, Member Bermudez motioned to remove article thirty-ninth. Vice Chair and Clerk McDonald seconded and the motion ultimately carried 2-2 with Member Bermudez and Vice Chair and Clerk McDonald voting in favor and Chair Hook and Member Jackson voting in opposition, but Chair Hook subsequently agreeing to remove the article.

Vice Chair & Clerk McDonald motioned to approve articles thirty-fourth through thirty-eighth and article fortieth. Member Jackson seconded the motion and it carried 4-0.

The Select Board brought up article forty-third (creation of a special education stabilization fund). The funding of the stabilization fund is intended to come from tailings in one year that would be certified as free cash and then deposited into the stabilization fund the next year. Vice Chair & Clerk McDonald motioned to approve article forty-third. Member Brown seconded the motion and it carried by a 4-0 vote.

Finance Committee Member Hartman next provided a review of the finance model under different Masconomet scenarios; the total override ask and an override ask of just on the enrollment change. Topsfield's share of the budget increased as Topsfield's enrollment increased marginally, but enrollment from both Boxford and Middleton decreased. Bill Hodges (via Zoom) addressed the enrollment shifts. It is anticipated that Boxford and Middleton will approve their proposed Masconomet allotments. The Finance Committee was open to favorable action and discussed ways to decrease the size of the override ask. Additionally, the Boards discussed how available funds should be shared between helping reduce the Masconomet override and help funding the elementary schools. It was decided to provide \$50,000 to each.

Topsfield's portion of the Essex North Shore Agricultural and Technical School District budget (article Sixth) numbers decreased compared to last year due to a shift in enrollment. Vice Chair & Clerk McDonald motioned to approve article sixth, as amended. Member Bermudez seconded the motion and it carried 4-0

Article forty-first is for Masconomet Regional School Miscellaneous Capital Improvements. Language changes were discussed to show how this is anticipated to be a recurring capital item with a breakdown of what the capital entails. There was discussion on adding language to show that this could be a multi-year request depending on assessed needs. Member Bermudez motioned to approve article forty-first, as amended. Chair Hook seconded the motion and it carried 4-0.

Article forty-second (Masconomet Regional School Capital Debt Authorization) still needs confirmation on numbers from Masconomet. This authorizes the school committee to take out debt, but as there is no term or assessment of principal available, interest and expenses cannot be ascertained. Voting on Article forty-second went forward with the knowledge that the two Boards would have to revote the article on Monday if the final numbers were any different than those currently presented. Member Bermudez motioned to approve article forty-second as written. Member Jackson seconded the motion and it carried 4-0.

The amount to transfer and appropriate from Free Cash (Article forty-eighth) was changed to match the Finance Committee's model of \$305,000. Vice-Chair & Clerk McDonald motioned to approve article forty-eighth, as amended, for the 2024 Annual Town Warrant. Member Bermudez seconded the motion and it carried 4-0.

Article forty-sixth (Capital Stabilization Fund) was discussed. The Finance Committee recommended to fund the account in the amount of \$100,000. Vice-Chair & Clerk McDonald motioned to approve article forty-sixth, for the 2024 Annual Town Warrant. Member Jackson seconded the motion and it carried 4-0.

In regards to article forty-seventh (the General Stabilization Fund), the Finance Committee agreed there is no immediate plan to pull from the fund so there was a question as to whether Topsfield should continue making deposits. Continuing deposits may be beneficial in the event that Topsfield needs to take out debt in the coming years. Member Bermudez motioned to approve article forty-seventh for the 2024 Annual Town Warrant. Vice-Chair & Clerk McDonald seconded the motion and it carried 4-0.

Vice-Chair & Clerk McDonald motioned to approve articles first through third, for the 2024 Special Town Warrant. Member Jackson seconded the motion and it carried 4-0.

The Finance Committee voted their recommendations for the warrant articles discussed and voted on tonight by the Select Board.

The Select Board and Finance Committee discussion returned to article fifth and ways to reduce the override ask from the residents. The Finance Committee agreed to take money from the tax levy buffer in the amount of \$100,000. TA Harutunian and Treasurer Dwinell looked into whether they felt comfortable including a higher number for interest income in the budget. They did not. The Select Board debated how the money should be divided amongst the Masconomet override and Elementary School operating budget. The Select Board agreed to split the \$100,000 equally between the two.

Discussion of article third commenced with agreement amongst the Board members that last year's Elementary School Budget conversations started much earlier in the overall Town Budget process and occurred more frequently. Members agreed that this year's override request was coming extremely late in the process, without any significant and formal ability to ask questions about the overall budget, despite several attempts by the Select Board to gain such understanding from the Elementary School Committee. The Finance Committee

expressed similar frustration. The Finance Committee provided the historical definition of Extraordinary Special Education, which was supposed to represent fluctuating and unanticipated extraordinary expenses which could go up or down in any year, and thus not put into the operating budget (such as salaried positions). Salaries in this year's proposed budget increased by 9.9%—and have now been introduced as Extraordinary Special Education - in contrast to the previously described and adhered to definition. The Select Board voiced their appreciation and respect for the Elementary School Committee's dedication to the schools and the children of Topsfield but also recognized that the broader finances of the Town and its taxpayers have to be considered as well, especially given the large override approved for the elementary schools last year. There remains consensus that broader town considerations such as affordability are absolutely part of the Selectboard's remit.

Member Bermudez motioned to approve article third, with the dollar amount amended by \$50,000 based on the discussion immediately prior. Member Jackson seconded the motion and it carried 3-1 with Vice Chair & Clerk McDonald voting no, stating he would have preferred that the override be included on the warrant for a vote by residents as was done last year.

Discussion again returned to article fifth. The Select Board and Finance Committee agreed to fund an addition \$50,000 from the Town budget to reduce the override ask of the Town residents. Member Bermudez motioned to approve article fifth, with the dollar amount amended. Chair Hook seconded the motion and it carried 4-0.

The lack of override associated with Article third necessitated a renumbering of the questions to be placed on the Ballot, as well as an adjustment in the amount of money being requested for the Masconomet override. Member Bermudez motioned to eliminate question one. Member Jackson second the motion and it carried 3-1 with Vice-Chair & Clerk McDonald voting in opposition. Member Bermudez motioned to renumber question 2 as question 1 and modify the amount to \$336,556. Vice-Chair & Clerk McDonald seconded the motion and it carried 4-0.

The Finance Committee voted their recommendations for articles third and fifth.

The Select Board voiced support with the Finance Committee with respect to funding a special education stabilization account funded with Elementary School tailings.

### **ADJOURNMENT**

At 10:59 PM, Member Bermudez made a motion to adjourn. Vice-Chair & Clerk McDonald seconded the motion and it carried 4-0.

Select Board Work Session Minutes 3/27/2024

Respectfully submitted,

Samantha Morin, Executive Assistant & Recording Secretary

**DOCUMENTS**

1. Agenda
2. 2024 ATM Vote Tracker
3. 2024 ATM\_Warrant V6.01
4. 2024ATM\_Warrant V6.02
5. 2024STM\_Warrant V1.02
6. FY25 Attachment A
7. Military Pay Warrant Article Est Costs
8. Final MBTA Draft Bylaw
9. 2024ATM\_Warrant V6.03 Clean+Masco Updates