

Approved



SELECT BOARD WORK SESSION

**Minutes of Thursday, January 24, 2024
6:00 PM**

Board Members participating were Select Board Chair Marshall Hook, Vice-Chair and Clerk Rafael McDonald and Select Board Member Boyd Jackson, Lynne Bermudez and Cameron Brown. Of the Select Board's staff Town Administrator Kevin Harutunian, and Executive Assistant Samantha Morin were present. Planning Board Chair Martha Morrison, Zoning Chair Robert Moriarty, Treasurer Collector Morgan Dwinell, Building Inspector Ray Chesley, Fire Chief Jen Collins-Brown, Health Agent Gerry McDonald, and Water Superintendent Greg Krom were present.

CALL TO ORDER

Vice Chair and Clerk McDonald called the meeting to order at 6:00 PM.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Vice Chair and Clerk McDonald 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?" There was no response.

"The Select Board meetings can be viewed by going into the Cable Videos icon on the homepage of the Town's website."

FY2025 BUDGET

TA Harutunian provided an overview of where the Select Board is in the process and introduced the department heads that would speak on their budget for tonight's meeting.

The Assessor's budget received an adjustment of salaries and has an additional \$700 ask for an increase of dues and travel expenses.

There is a request for a one-time spend of \$5,000 to transition from a local server to the cloud. There is also an ask of a one-time spend of \$2,000 for an upgraded camera for both the Assessors and Inspectional services. There was discussion about whether these one-time requests would be better placed bundled as a warrant article as this is not an annual operational expense.

Inspectional Services has three asks, the first being \$8112 for a local part time inspector. The Town needs to get caught up and complete annual inspections required by the state building code. This also allows coverage if the Inspector goes on vacation or retires. The second is a request for \$1,000 for an upgrade to the permitting system to add the Treasurer Collector as a user. This will ensure permits are not being issued to individuals in arrears on their taxes, but it was clarified this would only apply to permits for cosmetic upgrades to their homes. It is common practice in most communities. The final request is \$1,000 to purchase code books. Typically, books are updated every few years and the Town Inspector is anticipating new codes to be released this upcoming fiscal year. There is an online version available, but having a physical book in Town Hall is a requirement. Historically, this cost has been built into the budget and then will be removed the next year.

Member Bermudez recused herself from the discussion by Planning and Zoning as she is the Administrative Assistant for both Boards. Planning Board Chair Martha Morrison and Zoning Board of Appeals Chair Bob Moriarty explained the Planning and Zoning support position was allowed 10 hours a week last year but has been averaging 13 hours a week for the past 14 months. The current ask is for 15 hours per week for FY2025. Chair Morrison provided history on the position stating that both Boards had 19 hours a week administrative support since 2006. The money was originally in the Planning budget but in 2008 the Town Administrator (TA) asked Chair Morrison if the money could be moved into the TA budget and the position expanded to 40 hours/week to cover additional responsibilities such as purchasing. The position was given the title Community Development and Purchasing Director. The Planning Board agreed as long as nothing happened to their existing 19 hours/week support. Two years ago the money for the Planning and Zoning administrative support was removed from the budget. Last year 10 hours a week was restored but it was not sufficient. The Chairs are requesting 15 hours a week. Planning is anticipating a large amount of work for mandated modifications to the town's flood plain and stormwater bylaws. There was discussion on whether 15 hours a week would be enough or if the Planning and Zoning Boards should go to the Finance Committee with an ask of 19 hours. Member Bermudez rejoined the meeting once the Planning and Zoning discussion concluded.

Board of Health Director Gerry McDonald was hired at the rate of the prior Health Agent. TA Harutunian explained there is an ask for a wage increase to

keep Mr. McDonald in the 65% percentile of the pay range. Mr. McDonald then explained there are annual contractual and educational increases that are reflected in the budget. Professional services were decreased due to additional staff being provided through the Tri-Town services grant. Various line items, such as dead animals and sharps disposal, were realigned to reflect actual expenditures in prior years.

Chief Jen Collins-Brown increased vehicle maintenance as the trucks are getting older and cost more to repair. Some repairs are too large for the Town mechanic and must be outsourced. There is also an increase in the line item for ambulance billing services since the billing company receives payment as a percentage of revenues and revenues are expected to increase. There is an increase of training due to new mandates from the Department of Public Health. The holiday pay placeholder was adjusted as the Town and Union came to an agreement.

TA Harutunian provided an overview of next steps in the budget process. There was discussion and agreement by the board that contractual increases for existing software should be included in the base budget. Funds for recreation software is labeled as discretionary as it the software is new.

The \$15,000 recreation beautification is for the downtown planters, hanging baskets and watering as fundraising efforts by volunteers is not sustainable.

Water Superintendent Krom provided an overview of his budget. There are contractual increases of wages and overtime and there was an increase in the minimum wage for seasonal laborers. Overtime is also needed for weekend testing, emergency repairs and hydrant flushing. The Select Board would like more information regarding wages and salary in a future work session.

Police Special Details is used when the water department needs to complete road work and the line item has been increased by \$2000 due to historic spending. There was discussion around the average spending of years past. There was question whether the historic spending justifies this large of an increase. The police detail and street paving lines are not reflective of actual costs as they are being absorbed into the systems emergency maintenance line. This line encompasses police special details, street paving and other expenses. These items end up in the emergency line item when the budget is met so the actual spend is not appropriately reflected in the water enterprise budget.

The unanticipated emergency maintenance is for catastrophic events so the water department can get started on repairs and services until a Town Meeting can approve the costs. The line has been utilized in the recent years. No

expenses come from the line item until the budget is depleted. Emergencies are not budgeted for in the general operating fund. If the money is not spent from this line, it remains into retained earnings.

Rate increases to pay for the water tank were debated. Rather than having the rates increase dramatically from one year to the next, there is a proposed gradual build up over 5 years. The two models generate the same revenue, the only difference is the timeframe over which the rate increases occur.

TA Harutunian explained that the water tank project will initially utilize a short-term \$80,000 BAN to initially go out to bid and begin the project. After a year the town will take out a longer-term bond. This \$80,000 authorization of debt was approved at the 2023 Annual Town Meeting.

The Board would like Superintendent Krom to come to a future meeting with an adjusted budget more reflective of actual past spending, and explain further how that new budget would affect the water rate of Topsfield residents. A note on what is an increase due to contractual costs or realignment of funds would be helpful in the next work session around the water budget.

WARRANT ARTICLES

The Select Board will discuss the first draft of the warrant articles at the work session scheduled this evening.

ADJOURNMENT

At 9:09 PM, Member Brown made a motion to adjourn. Vice Chair and Clerk McDonald seconded the motion by a roll call vote as follows:

Chair Hook	Yes
Vice Chair and Clerk McDonald	Yes
Select Board Member Brown	Yes
Select Board Member Bermudez	Yes
Select Board Member Jackson	Yes

Respectfully submitted,

Samantha Morin, Executive Assistant & Recording Secretary

DOCUMENTS

1. Agenda
2. FY2025 Omnibus Budget-Dept Level 1
3. Schedule of Departments
4. Rate Comparison FY25 Tank Ramp

Select Board Work Session Minutes 1/24/2024

5. Rate Comparison FT25 Full Ramos
6. FY25 Water Enterprise Budget
7. Select Board Budget Process
8. Engine 2 Replacement