

## Minutes of the Budget Hearing February 11, 2025

Members Present: Lynn Sweet, Chair; Chris Garcia, Bryant Scott

In Attendance: Brian Monahan, Joann Brown, Liz Evans, Eric Almanzan, Fire Chief Steve Johnson, Deputy Fire Chief Erik Aucella, Matt Messenger. Greg Messenger, Steve Smith, Police Chief Randy Young, Hill Library Director Larisa Molloy, Ed & Linda Pape, Charles Burnham, Phil Auger, Mike Harrington, David Ekstrom, Liza Witonis, Don Clifford, Betsy Cozine, Lindsay Aucella, Betsy Schaefer, Terri Marsh, Dan Howard, Terrence Hyland Jr.

The meeting was called to order at 6:03PM in the conference room of the Town Hall. Those in attendance were given the option of utilizing the provided copies of the draft of the proposed budget, the draft of the 2025 Warrant, and the tax impact of each article. Lynn Sweet clarified that article 1 will be voted on by ballot on election day, Tuesday, March 11, 2025. She then recited the articles on the Warrant with a comment and question time after each article. She began:

**Article 2.** To see if the Town will vote to raise and appropriate the sum of \$445,000. for Capital Improvements (Drainage work, culverts, gravel and paving) of roads within the Town boundaries at the discretion of the Road Agent, as funding permits.

Road Agent Matt Messenger expanded on the scope of which roads they hope to address in 2025. There were no comments or questions.

**Article 3.** To see if the Town will vote to raise and appropriate the sum of \$1,030,217. for the operation and maintenance of the Strafford Police Department.

Police Chief Young explained that he froze his budget for the most part. Any increases were for insurance and retirement. There is no new position being requested and that any increase in pay was to keep the officers he currently has.

**Article 4.** To see if the Town will vote to raise and appropriate the sum of \$25,000. to be placed in the Police Vehicle and Equipment Capital Reserve Fund. The Selectmen recommend this article.

Chair Sweet reminded the attendees that the Capital Reserve Funds are there for, in effect, as savings account for future expenditures and these are normal to the Town's Warrant. Police Chief Young stated the next purchase would be in 2026.

**Article 5.** To see if the Town will vote to raise and appropriate the sum of \$61,102. for the purpose of purchasing quality communications equipment and services (i.e. body cameras). (Note: The intent is to apply for a grant to reimburse 50% of the funds expended for this purchase. if a grant is awarded, general fund will be reimbursed.)

Police Chief Young addressed the article. The Police Department have already applied for the grant. If the grant is approved, the amount would be half of the \$61,102. The Town has to appropriate the full amount before the grant can be approved. Chief Young said these cameras are a must. Strafford PD is one of the last departments to have them.

David Ekstrom asked if the new cell tower will help the computer systems in cruisers.

Chief Young explained that even though the tower will help the computer systems in their cruisers, these are strictly body cameras and the tower wouldn't aid in the operation.

**Article 6.** To see if the Town will vote to raise and appropriate the sum of \$1,084,006. for the operation and maintenance of the Strafford Fire Department.

Fire Chief Steve Johnson stated his budget increased \$102,000 due to 2 full time FD employees receiving health benefits and an increase in retirement, FICA and Medicare. He also would like to give everyone in the Department a raise. The Fire Department is now able to have one person on duty at night, would like 2 at night in order for the ambulance to transport.

Don Clifford asked what percentage the Police Department was increasing their salaries. Chief Young said he didn't have the figure at that time. Mr. Clifford then asked Chief Johnson what percentage he was requesting. Chief Johnson said he didn't go by percentages and instead would be giving the Fire Department members \$2/hour more across the board.

**Article 7.** To see if the Town will vote to raise and appropriate the sum of \$154,161. for the fourth year's payment of the lease agreement for the new Fire Engine Tanker approved at the 2022 Town Meeting and to authorize the withdrawal of \$77,081. from the Fire Engine Capital Reserve Fund to be used for this purpose. The balance of \$77,080. to come from general taxation. This lease/purchase agreement contains an escape clause. The Selectmen recommend this article.

No questions were asked.

**Article 8.** To see if the Town will vote to raise and appropriate the sum of \$25,000. for the purpose of purchasing equipment and supplies for the ambulances, and to authorize the withdrawal of \$25,000. from the Rescue Vehicle and Equipment Special Revenue Fund to be used for this purpose. No funding to come from general taxation. The Selectmen recommend this article.

No questions were asked.

**Article 9.** To see if the Town will vote to raise and appropriate the sum of \$65,000. for the purpose of purchasing a new First Responder Vehicle and equipment (i.e. Lighting and Radios) for the Fire Department and to authorize the withdrawal of \$65,000. from the Rescue Vehicle and Equipment Special Revenue Fund to be used for this purpose. No funding to come from general taxation. The Selectmen recommend this article.

Chief Johnson explained that this is what they consider "car one". They'll be able to transfer the plow from the old truck to the new one. Deputy Chief Aucella stated that the current "car one" needs \$20,000 in repairs; it cost \$10,000 just to get it inspected this past year.

Eric Almanzan asked that they consider trying to use what they have for the next couple of years to get by. Chief Johnson explained that the truck is used for fires and to tow and that it needs to be replaced now.

**Article 10.** To see if the Town will vote to change the purpose of the Capital Reserve Fund known as the Dry Hydrant Fund established by Article 11 at the March 12, 2016 Town Meeting to the Dry Hydrant, Fire Gear/SCBA and equipment fund for the purposes of dry hydrant repair/replacement, purchasing turnout gear/SCBA and equipment, and to designate the Selectmen as agents to expend. The Selectmen recommend this article. (2/3 vote required)

Ms. Sweet stated that if this article fails, the Capital Reserve Fund would stay the same.

A question was asked as to how many dry hydrants the Town has and how many need repair.

Chief Johnson answered he was unsure how many the Town has now, but believes there are 3. He

thinks the one across from the school isn't usable. He plans to look at the dry hydrant situation more thoroughly in the spring. Currently the fire engines carry equipment similar to dry hydrants. Chief added that the new fire trucks have more capability of arriving with more water than previous trucks. The Department's priority is turnout and SCBA gear and feels this fund would be better used for this purpose.

David Ekstrom asked for clarification on whether any hydrants were fixed with the money the taxpayers had put in the account and who is responsible.

Eric Almanzan asked for clarification on the hydrant at the pond across from school-is it not a usable hydrant? Chairman Sweet answered that through conversations, she had learned of there being lots of sediment and the pond would have to be dredged out to make it usable. Eric asked where the next nearest location of a water source is to the school. Someone answered Huckins Road.

Chairman Sweet gave a reminder that the Town's current trucks have a much better water capacity than the previous fire tankers.

**Article 11.** To see if the Town will vote to hear the report of the New Fire Station Committee established by a vote at the 2022 Town Meeting to be comprised of the Fire Chief, one Fire Department member, one Selectman, and two Town residents. The committee to report back at the 2023 Town Meeting. Article tabled at 2023 and 2024 Town Meetings, to be heard at 2025 Town Meeting.

Steve Johnson stated that the Committee had met and have a report-will explain at the next article

**Article 12.** To see if the Town will vote to establish a capital reserve fund pursuant to RSA 35:1 to be called the Fire Station Expansion/Improvement and/or Relocation Fund to be used for the purposes of funding expansion, improvement, and/or relocation and raise and appropriate \$350,000. to be placed in this fund, and to designate the Selectmen as agents to expend. The Selectmen recommend this article.

Joann Brown stated she was not in favor of this amount of money and the \$100,000 would be more appropriate. Eric Almanzan stated we haven't heard a report yet and asked if this station would be in addition to the three the Town currently has.

The Fire Chief said the plan was to keep the Crown Point Station and combine Bow Lake and Center Station. Ideally, 3-5 acres is needed. They'd like to stay in the vicinity of where Bow Lake Station is now, since it's a more central location. Selectman Garcia has visited different stations with the other Committee members and recognized that the critical path is to find land. He also added there will be a short slide show at Town Meeting on the study that was done.

Charlie Burnham expressed that he too feels this amount is too high and suggested the fund start at \$100,000 since there is no land currently for sale.

Chief Johnson does not want this to get postponed as the estimate of cost increases 3-5% each year.

Steve Smith stated that when this Committee was established at Town Meeting in 2022, it was to establish a Committee and hear a report.

It was asked where did the funds come from to pay for the study. Chair Sweet said it came from the Fire Department's budget. Steve Smith asked were those funds already allocated in the budget?

Chair Sweet stated that the Selectmen agreed to the study and the funds could come out of the Fire Department's budget. Steve Smith stated the taxpayers didn't agree to that and added that things were done out of order as land should have been approved before a study was done and funds expended. Mr. Smith questioned once land is bought, will the study have to be done again? The Board agreed it would probably have to be redone once land is acquired.

Noting the architectural drawing on the wall, Selectman Garcia stated that for this design, the Fire Department will need 3-5 acres of land. The Board was given the report and they understand that the building will have to be addressed in order to fit the land. They expect the price of the land to be about \$500,000. An attendee asked if they, as a Board, know this. The answer was no.

Don Clifford, a member of the Fire Station Committee, feels that the architect was top notch; the architect worked with the Committee and brought back the design. Adding that the other thing to consider is that the School will be done paying for a bond within the next year or so.

Steve Smith stated that the plan wasn't the issue; it was the order it was done.

Brian Monahan stood and felt the Board made a good decision.

Eric Almanzan said there wasn't much land in Town; asked if Center Station could have a second floor.

Chair Sweet asked School Board Member Eric Almanzan how much longer the School had on the bond. Mr. Almanzan thought it was 5 years, but not to quote him on that.

Liz Evans stated that given the other expenses in Town: the aging community, the school adding another \$750K to their budget, etc, the tax rate is going to go up incredibly this year. She feels this amount should be thought about a bit more before it goes to Town Meeting.

**Article 13.** To see if the Town will vote to raise and appropriate the sum of \$66,509. For the purpose of funding a full-time Library Director position at the Hill Library and associated costs. This position is currently a part-time position.

Hill Library Director Larisa Molloy explained the increase is adding a few more hours a week and benefits. Trustee Lindsay Aucella added that this has been a long time coming to add this position. Several voiced their support for this article.

**Article 14.** To see if the Town will vote to raise and appropriate the sum of \$174,543. for the operation and maintenance of the Hill Library.

Chair Sweet explained that if article 13 passes, then the article will be amended on the floor to include the two together, decreasing the bottom line.

**Article 15.** To see if the Town will vote to change the purpose of the existing Capital Reserve Fund known as the Library Expansion and Improvement Capital Reserve Fund established by Article 12 at the March 16, 2013 Town Meeting to the Library Expansion, Improvements and/or Relocation Capital Reserve Fund for the purposes of Library Expansion, Improvements and/or Relocation, and to designate the Selectmen as agents to expend, and furthermore to raise and appropriate \$10,000. to add to the newly established fund. The Selectmen recommend this article. (2/3 vote required)

Chair Sweet stated that this is a repeat to the dry hydrant article-changing name and purpose. No questions were asked.

**Article 16.** To see if the Town will vote to raise and appropriate the sum of \$10,000. to be placed in the Library Expansion and Improvement Capital Reserve Fund, and to designate the Selectmen as agents to expend. This article will be considered null and void on the passage of Article 15. The Selectmen recommend this article.

It was explained that if Article 15 fails, then this account would stay the same and \$10,000 would still be deposited into it. No questions were asked.

**Article 17.** To see if the Town will vote to raise and appropriate the sum of \$5,000. to be placed in the Town Hall Building Maintenance, Improvements and/or Expansion Capital Reserve Fund. The Selectmen recommend this article.

No questions were asked.

**Article 18.** To see if the Town will vote to raise and appropriate the sum of \$10,000. to be placed in the Future Reval/Statistical Update Capital Reserve Fund. The Selectmen recommend this article.

The Board explained that revaluations are required by the State every 5 years.

**Article 19.** To see if the Town will vote to raise and appropriate the sum of \$5,000. to be placed in the Highway Department Vehicle and/or Equipment Capital Reserve Fund. The Selectmen recommend this article.

This account is used to maintain the current Town truck and to add more in the future.

**Article 20.** To see if the Town will vote to raise and appropriate the sum of \$5,000. to be placed in the Reflective Road Signage Capital Reserve Fund. The Selectmen recommend this article.

Matt Messenger spoke and said the State required the signs to be replaced every 4 years.

**Article 21.** To see if the Town will vote to raise and appropriate the sum of \$10,000. to be placed in the Repair/Replace Recycling Center Equipment Capital Reserve Fund. The Selectmen recommend this article.

There were no questions or comments.

**Article 22.** To see if the Town will vote to raise and appropriate the sum of \$25,000. to be placed in the Bridge Construction & Repair Non-Capital Reserve Fund. The Selectmen recommend this article.

There were no questions or comments.

**Article 23.** To see if the Town will vote to raise and appropriate the sum of \$25,000. to be used for the preparation of a Bow Lake Watershed Management Plan. The plan will include a comprehensive septic system inventory, road drainage analysis and mitigation to correct issues that are negatively impacting water quality in a defined watershed area. This appropriation is contingent on the Town successfully applying for a \$25,000. grant through the Piscataqua Regional Estuaries Program. The Planning Board recommends this article.

Phil Auger addressed this article. According to Mr. Auger, it seems that Bow Lake is in trouble. The Master Plan Committees asked that the Planning Board do something about it. DES requires a watershed management plan to be established before granting money. The Planning Board want to get started on the studies.

There was discussion on matching funds and PREPA grants. The purpose and necessity of this study were questioned as there is an Isinglass River study that is available at the Town Hall that remains to be unread by the general public.

There are other funding options available other than using taxpayer money. Logistics of the study and the benefit to the Town were questioned and the timing of the request being premature.

David Ekstrom asked who would be doing the septic system inventory.

Mr. Auger said it would be a door-to-door effort with volunteers.

Eric Almanzan asked if impact fees would be available to offset the cost. Mr. Auger explained that impact fees are not feasible.

**Article 24.** To see if the Town will vote to raise and appropriate the sum of \$1,925,112. for general Town operations.

Executive.....	\$ 100,814.
Election & Registration.....	33,750.
Financial Administration.....	111,075.
Appraisal of Property & Tax Maps.....	49,047.
Legal Expenses.....	60,000.
Employee Benefits, FICA, Medi & Unemp. Comp.....	45,918.
Planning and Zoning.....	53,150.
General Government Building.....	57,700.
Auto Permits/Town Clerk Fees.....	42,350.
Insurance.....	75,735.
Advertising and Regional Association.....	5,000.
Strafford Regional Planning Comm. Dues.....	5,682.
Contingency Fund.....	15,000.
Annual CPA Audit.....	13,000.
Emergency Management.....	5,500.
Building Inspection.....	36,621.
General Highway Expenses and Town Maintenance.....	750,790.
Street Lighting.....	5,500.
Solid Waste Disposal.....	402,247.
Animal Control.....	1,800.
Cemeteries.....	11,000.
Cornerstone VNA.....	3,991.
General Assistance and Welfare.....	10,000.
Community Action.....	2,000.
Haven Sexual Assault Support Services.....	992.
My Friend's Place.....	1,000.
The Homemakers Health Services.....	3,200.
Catamount Womenaid.....	1,000.
Ready Rides.....	1,500.
CASA.....	500.
Strafford Nutrition & Meals on Wheels.....	1,500.
Parks and Recreation.....	6,350.
Patriotic Purposes and Fireworks.....	6,900.
Conservation Commission.....	2,500.
Interest Expense & Tax Anticipation Notes.....	2,000.

TOTAL..... \$1,925,112.

(The intent of this article is to raise the sum of \$1,925,112. exclusive of all other Articles addressed.)  
No questions were asked.

**Article 25.** "Shall the Town vote to change the Veterans' Tax credit (the optional tax credit for all Veterans and Service Connected Total Disability) upon adoption by the Town pursuant to RSA 72:28 and RSA 72:35, shall be the amount of \$500.00 and \$1,000.00. The optional tax credit and service connected total disability shall replace the current credits of \$200.00 and \$700.00 in their entirety and shall not be in addition thereto." (by Petition.)

Don Clifford spoke to this petition article. He stated that it has been 22 years since we addressed this as a Town.

Article 26. To transact any other business that may legally come before this meeting.

With no further business to discuss, the meeting adjourned at 7:22PM.