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Notes from editor (not for publication):

Nice story, G. Nicely and clearly written.

I did check the report Elizabeth cited, and she didn't quite remember it correctly. It was a letter from Levenbach.
(Link added in text for website only.) You'll see how I fixed it to nudge the actual source into the piece.

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

Brattleboro's FY27 budget plan? Keep it sustainable.

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First draft aims to keep property tax increase to 4.4%

####END SUBHED####

TEXT BODY:

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Public discussion about the fiscal year 2027 budget has
started with the intention, Town Manager John Potter says, not to
increase property taxes more than about 4.4%.

"It keeps the town working for its residents but in a
balanced way," said Potter at the Nov. 4 Selectboard meeting,

9 noting “deeper dives” are coming up for each department as
10 personnel meet with the board in the coming weeks.

11 Overall, the proposed budget would need a \$861,000
12 increase in property taxes to be in balance.

13 “We’re trying to be totally transparent about what we’re
14 doing and what the need is what we’re able to afford,” he said
15 after Chair Elizabeth McLoughlin said, “so you’re letting us see
16 the sausage being made,” referring to the budget process and
17 presentation.

18 A second public budget listening session is set for
19 Wednesday, Nov. 12, at 6:15 p.m. in Brooks Memorial Library.

20 **‘Stability, predictability, and** 21 **sustainability’ are key**

22 Potter characterized the proposed budget plan as:

- 23 • Maintaining core municipal services that residents rely
24 on,
- 25 • Holding any property tax increase to about 4.4% while
26 absorbing significant health care cost growth,
- 27 • Prioritizing solid waste disposal, public safety,
28 infrastructure, parks, and fiscal stability,
- 29 • Continuing disciplined debt management and building
30 of reserves,
- 31 • Funding essential capital needs and deferring selected
32 transportation projects pending further discussion.

33 “The FY27 budget proposal represents continued
34 commitment to Brattleboro’s long-term financial principles:
35 stability, predictability, and sustainability,” Potter wrote in the
36 budget memo. “It protects essential services, funds critical
37 infrastructure, upholds the town’s fiscal position, and manages
38 increasing costs while adjusting to a changing community
39 environment.”

What's out, what's in

The proposed budget — like the current budget — does not include an assistant town manager, IT coordinator, data analyst, or a finance director, which Potter called “pretty significant positions.”

“We’re finding other ways to manage those needs,” he said.

The budget does include money for a fourth platoon in the fire department, more hours to cover some finance department needs, added help for park maintenance, 1,100 extra on-call library hours, and funding for enough public works staff to take on compost collection if need be.

For the first time in the town’s budgeting history, every staff benefits have been distributed by department rather than in a central line item so that the public can see each.

The proposal includes a 2% cost of living increase for town staff members, a new health-care provider and adjustments to employees’ health-care costs, a reduction in human services funding, and an increase in capital investment of 30% over this year’s budget.

The latter, Potter said, is still “underfunded,” and he intends to discuss with the board the potential for a supplemental request to potentially present to voters.

The proposed five-year capital investment plan shows several years of increase and then a decrease for equipment replacement and projects.

Revenues in the proposal include adjusted fees to “reflect the actual cost of service delivery” in solid waste and planning, notably.

Also, a 3% increase in EMS reimbursement over the FY25 actual reimbursement is expected in FY27.

The proposed budget includes a \$861,000 increase in property tax, a 4.4% increase from the current year.

Initial reactions by board

members

Board members noted various aspects of the first draft in which they said they would be interested to hear more: notably, human services, the capital fund, not having a finance director, and expanding the fire department.

“I always find it peculiar that during budget discussions it always seems to ignite ‘cut’ conversations and it never seems to include ‘growth’ conversations,” said Board Member Peter Case, acknowledging, however, that last year the board had to go back to the drawing board after voters rejected a budget with an 8.9% increase to the previous year.

Case said he’s also “often baffled” around first-responder overtime and that he will advocate for the human services to go to 1%.

“No matter how you slice it, it’s a burden to the taxpayer,” he said.

Case said he “always finds it funny” that “we’re always talking about where to cut” but that the area of the budget to fund human services seems “bulletproof.”

McLoughlin cited a letter to the editor earlier this year [[“Human service spending by the numbers,”](#) March 11] from F. David Levenbach, the chair of the Representative Town Meeting Finance Committee.

In that letter, Levenbach said that he and another committee member analyzed the human resources spending of Brattleboro and 13 other Vermont towns: five nearby towns and eight comparably sized municipalities elsewhere in the state.

Levenbach reported that of those towns, Brattleboro spent the most money on human services, both in bottom-line terms and on a per-capita basis.

“One might conclude from these data the Brattleboro residents have more need for social services or, and this might lead to a different conclusion, that people in Brattleboro can ill-

107 afford the current allocation of their town budget to support
108 social service organizations,” he wrote. “Citizens of Brattleboro
109 will differ on the right figure for human services spending, and
110 that is rightly so because people have different values and
111 perspectives.”

112 McLoughlin said that discussion had centered around the
113 need to “bring back a level of respect — for the townspeople
114 [and] for the taxpayer — and that the nonprofits have to be really
115 mindful of what they’re asking and who they’re asking it from.”

116 She said that “there are a lot of people in this town who
117 really need to keep the tax rate down, and we on the Selectboard
118 have great respect for that.”

119 The chair said she continued to note the process will
120 continue and every aspect will be reviewed and discussed.

121 “Everyone wants what they want, and it’s a very difficult
122 thing not to give people what they want,” McLoughlin added.

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