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—Contributor.....Virginia Ray
—Contributor email.....ginnypray@gmail.com
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HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

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1 Brattleboro board sets potential 6.2% tax increase

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2 In a 3-2 vote, the Selectboard recommends \$27 million

3 FY27 budget to go to voters at Town Meeting in March

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4 TEXT BODY:

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5 Voters will decide in March whether to approve a
6 proposed \$27,018,335 fiscal year 2027 town budget after
7 Selectboard members voted 3-2 to approve the plan.
8 Board members Isaac Evans-Frantz and Amanda Ellis-
9 Thurber voted against it, while Vice Chair Oscar Heller, Chair
10 Elizabeth McLoughlin, and member Peter Case voted in favor.

11 The meeting date will depend on what format voters
12 choose in an upcoming vote: retaining Representative Town
13 Meeting or moving to a “regular” annual meeting format.

14 The board started the discussion Jan. 22 by looking at a
15 plan that would be a 4.7% (\$923,000) increase in the property
16 tax, but ended voting to recommend one that would raise taxes
17 by 6.2% over this year.

18 “I realized the other day that we’ve been talking about
19 this for about a thousand hours,” said Heller at the top of the
20 meeting. “If we retread the same ground over and over again for
21 another six hours and another six hours, we may not be making
22 forward progress.”

23 “I think context is important, and I want to get back to
24 the beginning of this Selectboard year,” said McLoughlin, noting
25 a “rapid review” last spring after RTM voted the budget down.

26 Calling that “not the normal order,” McLoughlin went on
27 to say the board recognized the need to talk about the budget
28 “early and often,” and started to do so in September. That was
29 followed by hearing from department heads who didn’t receive
30 “a lot of feedback.”

31 “I would just hope that we could get back to a place
32 where we could discuss the budget without a lot of brinkmanship
33 and really discuss it in a reasonable way,” she said, noting the
34 week prior the budget went from a 4.4% increase on Jan. 20, and
35 to an 8% increase on Thursday, and then the suggestion for
36 “across-the-board cuts.”

37 “That was really dramatic,” she said.

38 Key budget adjustments in the initial scenario had
39 included reducing EMS reimbursement revenue, adding money
40 for capital projects and a finance director, and accounting for a
41 significant and unexpected 46% (\$178,000) increase in workers'
42 compensation and liability insurance.

43 Proposed cuts included eliminating a full-time Parks and
44 Recreation Department position, reducing library hours, cutting
45 the Fire Department’s overtime budget, leaving a police captain

46 position unfunded, and eliminating curbside compost and
47 recycling.

48 Since Capt. Adam Petlock will be appointed assistant
49 police chief when Assistant Chief Jeremy Evans becomes chief
50 following Chief Norma Hardy's retirement [*story, A1*], a captain
51 position will be left open in the police department budget.

52 Overtime in the fire department was reduced by \$45,000
53 to \$280,000. After discussion, a motion to add a part-time
54 finance clerk position back into the budget failed in a 2–3 vote.

55 A motion to add a 20-hour per week part-time Parks and
56 Recreation position failed by the same margin. Part-time hours for
57 a library position also were eliminated.

58 The approved budget includes reinstatement of recycling
59 and compost, removal of the part-time finance clerk position, and
60 removal of the human service budget allocation.

61 Concern was raised about the absence of an article for
62 the annual audit. Town Manager John Potter explained the
63 numbers may be unaudited in the initial report due to difficulties
64 finding an auditing firm.

65 Those in attendance raised lots of questions about the
66 budget process, discrepancies in financial figures, the cost of staff
67 positions, and the impacts of cutting the expenses.

68 **Trash talk**

69 A major proposed change had been to eliminate
70 compost and curbside recycling collection programs to save
71 \$577,682.

72 In that scenario, the town would subsidize half the cost
73 (\$30) of the annual sticker for residents to use at the Windham
74 Solid Waste Management District (WSWMD) facility on Old Ferry
75 Road.

76 Public feedback was strongly against eliminating
77 curbside services, with many citing the negative impact on
78 residents who don't drive, the elderly, and lower-income
79 individuals.

80 "I think solid waste has to come back in," said Heller.

81 Case noted numerous public messages he'd received
82 "face to face and over the phone" that advocated for municipal
83 services, notably waste removal, over funding the human services
84 budget.

85 "Absolutely none of it was in support of getting rid of
86 curbside and trash pickup," Case said.

87 Board members expressed conflicting views: Some
88 prioritized affordability and finding cuts to avoid a high tax
89 increase (proposed at 7.7% at one point), while others
90 emphasized the importance of maintaining services like the pay-
91 as-you-throw solid waste program.

92 Data provided for Brattleboro's waste streams showed a
93 monthly average of 59 tons for trash (35.3%), 60 tons for
94 recycling (36%), and 46 tons for compost (28.7%).

95 Ultimately, the board voted 4-1 to add the two streams of
96 solid waste (recycling and compost) back into the budget.

97 After much discussion, board members agreed to
98 continue discussion about changes to the solid waste program
99 and to form a committee to study it and report back to the board
100 with recommendations for FY28. The committee will have six
101 months to analyze the impact of moving to a trash-only curbside
102 service.

103 And WSWMD has agreed to discuss extending its hours
104 to accommodate Brattleboro residents, if the proposed changes
105 are approved.

106 **Human services**

107 During discussion of cutting the human services budget
108 — which had been previously reduced from \$500,000 to
109 \$250,000 — public comment highlighted the small savings for
110 taxpayers versus the large impact on community services.

111 Data was shared showing that from FY17 to FY26, town
112 budget expenditures increased by 59.1% while human service
113 expenditures increased by 227.7%.

114 "We want to help, but we want to help within our
115 means," said Ellis-Thurber, adding that perhaps the half-million-
116 dollar request could be less.

117 Noting the Finance Committee's "extensive analysis" of
118 Brattleboro being "far and away the most generous of
119 communities with regard to human service funding," McLoughlin
120 noted "what's been happening in Brattleboro in recent years" and
121 the state's allocation to the motel program.

122 "We are strapped because of that," said McLoughlin,
123 who noted that "a tremendous amount of our budget is already
124 expended to proving support to people in need."

125 Evans-Frantz noted the board's responsibility "to come
126 up with a budget that's affordable," notably in view of the town
127 meeting direction to fund the human services request.

128 "What I would ask is that we do so in a responsible way,"
129 he said, saying he'd like to know the impact of cuts to the human
130 services fund.

131 "These are the things we're juggling, and there's no
132 movement left," McLoughlin said, noting trash service versus
133 human services, and keeping the budget increase about 6%.

134 "I just think we should be — let's say it one more time —
135 charity beginning at home," she said, noting her advocacy for the
136 trash service and that one person told her, "it's tearing our town
137 apart."

138 A motion to reduce the human services allocation from
139 \$250,000 to \$0 for the FY27 budget was made and passed 3-2.

140 The board approved the final amended FY27 budget,
141 with some members voting to conclude the process with the
142 expectation that human services funding could be debated again
143 at Town Meeting.

144 A lengthy debate occurred about including human
145 services funding as a separate article on the Town Meeting
146 warning. Proponents argued it would allow for direct democratic
147 participation, while opponents felt the Selectboard should retain
148 control over the final budget number.

149 The broader issue of reforming the Human Services
150 Committee process is to be addressed by the Charter Review
151 Committee.

152 The board decided to add a new article (Article 7) to the
153 warning for voters to decide on the amount of money to raise for
154 human services, with the proposed amount in the article being
155 \$0.

156 **A final answer**

157 After a nearly five-hour meeting on Jan. 22 and abundant
158 discussion, the new projected budget increase was about 6.2%.

159 "This is a year where we're really struggling to make
160 these things connect up ... at some point there have to be things
161 we have to say no to," said Heller, adding he also feels "terrible"
162 about those things not being funded.

163 He added that while the process and outcome were not
164 perfect, the budget includes a lot of good decisions and took a lot
165 of work.

166 Concern was raised about the absence of an article for
167 the annual audit and Potter explained the numbers may be
168 unaudited in the initial report due to difficulties finding an
169 auditing firm.

170 When asked after the meeting, McLoughlin said the
171 budgeting process and outcome this year included "several very
172 long meetings together with wild swings in the budget."

173 "I had planned for in-depth budget discussions to take
174 place in November and December in a thoughtful and deliberate
175 manner, but my colleagues chose the last possible moment for
176 their budget ideas," she said of numerous 11th-hour amendments
177 proposed in the past week alone.

178 "Throughout this process I have been focused on the
179 appropriate provision of town services. We now have a very bare-
180 bones municipal budget — so bare-bones, in fact, that my
181 colleagues would not fund a needed part-time finance clerk for

182 \$29,000 a year to help with internal controls and the human
183 service grants were completely halted."

184 McLoughlin said she's "pleased that all the public safety
185 work our town does in collaboration with nonprofit services was
186 maintained" and "that a majority of my colleagues chose to join
187 me" in restoring all three streams of the pay-as-you-throw
188 program.

189 "Trash, recycling, and compost are back in the budget,
190 saving our town's decade-long sustainability project, a needed
191 service and a public good," she said.

192 Summing up, McLoughlin said that "my colleagues
193 challenged us to a cap of 6% rate of increase on the municipal
194 tax rate."

195 Thanking Potter and his staff, "we came as close as
196 possible," she said.

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