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**Notes from editor (not for publication):**

Nice job.



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

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1 RTM Finance Committee champions human services

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####BEGIN SUBHED####

2 Town manager affirms 'deliberate policy choices made  
3 through a public process'; proposed budget eliminates all  
4 humanitarian and nonprofit aid

####END SUBHED####

5 TEXT BODY:

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6 The town's Representative Town Meeting Finance  
7 Committee has issued a "short preview" of its annual,  
8 independent budget report and it appears that board is not  
9 exactly simpatico with the about \$27 million budget the  
10 Selectboard voted to recommend in January.

11 Finance Committee Chair Millicent Cooley says all six  
12 members agreed to share publicly the committee's initial  
13 summation. The Finance Committee memo notes the  
14 Selectboard-recommended budget is "without any funding for  
15 human services" and goes on to say "this is after a 10.8%  
16 increase in FY26 [\$1.92 million], and a total 17.9% increase in  
17 two years."

18 "The overall budget went up 17.2% [\$3.98 million]  
19 during the last two years," writes Cooley. "This trend is troubling,  
20 as the town now has a \$27 million FY27 budget and did not  
21 achieve the goal of a low, single-digit increase."

22 The Finance Committee says the FY26 increase in overall  
23 property taxes "went up less than expected because the state  
24 supplemented some of the education costs, and relying on that is  
25 bad economic business."

26 The committee also says "both FY26 and FY27 budgets  
27 were approved without the consideration of a long-term plan to  
28 show the consequences of those budgets."

29 The memo emphasizes several times that the  
30 Selectboard's recommended budget would increase the town  
31 portion of property taxes by 6.3% "without any consideration for  
32 human services." The town portion of those taxes would rise by  
33 7.6% "if human services in the amount of \$250,000 were added  
34 during Town Meeting," the Finance Committee says.

35 They continue to say the Selectboard's budget would  
36 result in an overall town property tax increase around 7.5% when  
37 combined with the state education tax, and may be as high as 9  
38 or 10%, depending on the state education tax assessment — and  
39 that town tax increase, they say, "could be as much as 3-4 times  
40 the rate of expected inflation."

41 The memo also points out that Town Manager John Potter  
42 has published a five-year general fund projection, "which is a  
43 great start."

44 It also says "there is no 25-year capital investment plan  
45 showing future investments for things like the Living Memorial

46 Park pool (\$6.5M) and the Public Works Department building  
47 (\$15M).”

48 If these anticipated expenses were financed together in a  
49 bond, say Finance Committee members, “it would likely result in  
50 additional yearly payments of over \$1 million over 30 years.”

51 The committee also says “there is no reporting of the  
52 current unassigned fund balance — also called rainy day or  
53 contingency fund — that is used to deal with unanticipated  
54 emergencies.”

## 55 **The Town Manager responds**

56 *The Commons* asked each Selectboard member and  
57 Potter for their responses to the Finance Committee’s memo.

58 Only Potter responded.

59 “The Finance Committee plays an important role in  
60 reviewing the town’s budget and helping inform Representative  
61 Town Meeting, and I appreciate all the time and effort that goes  
62 into that work,” he said.

63 “At the same time, it is important that the discussion  
64 reflects the full context of the budget and the decisions that have  
65 been made,” Potter added.

66 He continued to say the FY27 budget “reflects a  
67 continuation of trends that communities across Vermont and the  
68 country are experiencing — rising costs for wages, health  
69 insurance, liability coverage, and infrastructure, along with  
70 increasing demand for services.”

71 “In Brattleboro, these pressures are compounded by our  
72 role as a regional hub, serving a broader population than our  
73 resident base alone, as well as increased service demands  
74 associated with statewide programs such as the motel voucher  
75 program,” said Potter, adding that “some of the information being  
76 presented reflects only part of the picture and additional context  
77 is important to fully understand the impact on taxpayers.”

78 Budget increases, he said, “don’t translate directly into  
79 tax increases, and the actual impact on taxpayers is influenced by  
80 factors such as Grand List growth and state education funding.”

81 “Brattleboro continues to deliver a full range of services  
82 at a relatively low cost per resident, but relies heavily on property  
83 taxes, which makes any increase more noticeable,” Potter said.  
84 “The budget ultimately reflects a set of tradeoffs about services,  
85 infrastructure, and long-term sustainability.”

86 Potter noted that in recent years, the actual property tax  
87 increases experienced by taxpayers have been:

- 88 • FY23 to FY24: 2.2% overall (4.5% municipal)
- 89 • FY24 to FY25: 7.8% overall (4.4% municipal)
- 90 • FY25 to FY26: 2.7% overall (8.9% municipal)

91 These figures, he said, “illustrate that the relationship  
92 between budget growth and tax impacts is not one-to-one, and  
93 that overall property tax changes are influenced by multiple  
94 factors beyond the municipal budget alone.”

95 In summation, Potter said “the FY27 budget reflects a  
96 series of deliberate policy choices made through a public  
97 process.”

98 “These choices balance maintaining essential services,  
99 addressing rising costs, investing in infrastructure, and  
100 recognizing the financial impact on taxpayers,” the town  
101 manager noted.

102 “Any reduction in the proposed increase would require  
103 corresponding reductions in services, staffing, or capital  
104 investment, and those tradeoffs are appropriately part of the  
105 public discussion,” Potter said.

106 “The Finance Committee may come to different  
107 conclusions about these policy choices, and their report may be  
108 an important part of the community’s consideration of the  
109 budget,” he added.

110 Ultimately, the Town Meeting body — whether it  
111 continues in its current form or defaults to a form where all  
112 registered voters are eligible to participate, pending three

113 questions on the Australian ballot on March 3 *[story, page A1]* —  
114 “will have the opportunity to weigh these perspectives and  
115 determine the path forward,” Potter said.

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