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Notes from editor (not for publication):



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

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1 Brattleboro vote to abolish RTM causes new wrinkles

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2 Town Manager affirms ‘deliberate policy choices made
3 through a public process’ as new board meets to warn a first
4 open Town meeting April 11

####END SUBHED####

5 TEXT BODY:

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6 While the town’s Representative Town Meeting Finance
7 Committee issued a “short preview” of its independent budget
8 report and it was not exactly on board with the about \$27 million
9 budget the Selectboard voted to recommend in January, things
10 may have changed.

11 For sure what has changed post-annual election is that
12 the vote kicked in a few new wrinkles that are set to be addressed
13 at the Tuesday, March 10 Selectboard meeting after press time.

14 Now that voters have eliminated Representative Town
15 Meeting, the newly constituted board must warn an open Annual
16 Town Meeting for Saturday, April 11.

17 The meeting warning must be approved between prior to
18 Friday, March 13 for the Annual Town Meeting to legally proceed.

19 Most articles mirror the prior Representative Town
20 Meeting warning, but several changes are now required.

21 The Human Services Committee, previously created by
22 Representative Town Meeting, no longer exists. Town staff
23 members recommend appointing its current members as a
24 temporary, Selectboard-appointed ad hoc committee so they can
25 finish this year's work.

26 Because the former Finance Committee was also created
27 by Representative Town Meeting, two articles propose
28 establishing a new advisory budget committee under state law,
29 and determining whether it will be Selectboard-appointed.

30 The recent charter change petition votes about moving to
31 Australian ballot and open Town Meeting were inconclusive —
32 voters chose both. To comply with state law while the Legislature
33 considers the proposed changes to the town charter, two articles
34 ask voters whether future budget articles and public questions
35 should be decided by Australian ballot.

36 State law requires Annual Town Meeting on the first
37 Tuesday in March, but the open meeting portion may occur up to
38 three days earlier, if voters approve. Another article asks whether,
39 starting in 2027, the open meeting should take place on the
40 preceding Saturday.

41 A separate memo recommends formally creating a
42 Human Services Committee and appointing seven members for
43 five months so they can complete the current budget cycle.

Former Finance Committee's

stance

Millicent Cooley, who chaired the former RTM Finance Committee, said all six members agreed to share publicly the committee's initial summation.

The Finance Committee memo notes the Selectboard-recommended budget is "without any funding for human services" and goes on to say "this is after a 10.8% increase in FY26 (\$1,918K), and a total 17.9% increase in two years."

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

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

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

The memo emphasizes several times that the Selectboard's recommended budget would increase the town part of property taxes by 6.3% "without any consideration for human services" and that it would increase the town portion of those taxes by 7.6%, if human services in the amount of \$250,000 were added during Town Meeting.

The members of the former committee continue, saying that the Selectboard's budget would result in the overall town property tax increase around 7.5% when combined with the state education tax, and may be as high as 9 or 10%, depending on the state education tax assessment — and that town tax increase, they say, "could be as much as 3-4 times the rate of expected inflation."

77 The memo also points out that Town Manager John Potter
78 has published a five-year general fund projection, “which is a
79 great start.”

80 It also says “there is no 25-year capital investment plan
81 showing future investments for things like the pool (\$6.5M) and
82 DPW building (\$15M).”

83 If those projects were financed together in a bond, say
84 Finance Committee members, “it would likely result in additional
85 yearly payments of over \$1 million over 30 years.”

86 The committee also says “there is no reporting of the
87 current unassigned fund balance — also called rainy day or
88 contingency fund — that is used to deal with unanticipated
89 emergencies.”

90 **The Town Manager responds**

91 Prior to the March 3 election, *The Commons* asked each
92 Selectboard member who voted on the budget — which was not
93 unanimously recommended — and Potter for their responses to
94 the Finance Committee’s memo.

95 Only Potter responded.

96 “The Finance Committee plays an important role in
97 reviewing the town’s budget and helping inform Representative
98 Town Meeting, and I appreciate all the time and effort that goes
99 into that work,” he said. “At the same time, it is important that the
100 discussion reflects the full context of the budget and the decisions
101 that have been made.”

102 Potter continued to say the FY27 budget “reflects a
103 continuation of trends that communities across Vermont and the
104 country are experiencing — rising costs for wages, health
105 insurance, liability coverage, and infrastructure, along with
106 increasing demand for services.”

107 “In Brattleboro, these pressures are compounded by our
108 role as a regional hub, serving a broader population than our
109 resident base alone, as well as increased service demands
110 associated with statewide programs such as the motel voucher

111 program,” said Potter, adding that “some of the information being
112 presented reflects only part of the picture and additional context
113 is important to fully understand the impact on taxpayers.”

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

117 “Brattleboro continues to deliver a full range of services
118 at a relatively low cost per resident, but relies heavily on property
119 taxes, which makes any increase more noticeable,” Potter said.

120 “The budget ultimately reflects a set of tradeoffs about services,
121 infrastructure, and long-term sustainability.”

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

- 124 • FY23 to FY24: 2.2% overall (4.5% municipal)
- 125 • FY24 to FY25: 7.8% overall (4.4% municipal)
- 126 • FY25 to FY26: 2.7% overall (8.9% municipal)

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

131 In summation, Potter said “the FY27 budget reflects a
132 series of deliberate policy choices made through a public
133 process.”

134 “These choices balance maintaining essential services,
135 addressing rising costs, investing in infrastructure, and
136 recognizing the financial impact on taxpayers,” the Town
137 Manager noted. “Any reduction in the proposed increase would
138 require corresponding reductions in services, staffing, or capital
139 investment, and those tradeoffs are appropriately part of the
140 public discussion.

141 “The Finance Committee may come to different
142 conclusions about these policy choices, and their report may be
143 an important part of the community’s consideration of the
144 budget,” Potter said, noting that ultimately, voters at Town

145 Meeting “will have the opportunity to weigh these perspectives
146 and determine the path forward.”

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