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**Notes from editor (not for publication):**

- I took out both sentences about impact of human services on individual tax bills. We can put one back in.
- Nothing was in the story about ICE, so I watched the meeting and popped that in.
- While I was looking for ICE, I stumbled across Starr LaTronica’s standing ovation and thought I’d pop that in.
- I pulled Mollie’s announcement out as a sidebar and cross-referenced it.



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 Brattleboro voters approve \$27 million at Town Meeting

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

2 First open Town Meeting in 66 years keeps trash removal,  
3 funds human services, and sends a message sent to lawmakers  
4 about ICE

####END SUBHED####

5 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

6 Voters on April 11 passed a \$27 million budget, agreeing  
7 to pay for trash removal and fund human services after lengthy  
8 discussion, procedural clarification, and multiple amendments.

9 For the first time since 1960, deliberations were not  
10 limited to 150 elected representatives. With all registered voters  
11 eligible to vote directly, nearly 300 — almost 4% of the town’s  
12 electorate — turned out to the meeting at Brattleboro Union High  
13 School at some point to do so.

14 Voters had agreed in March to discontinue  
15 Representational Town Meeting (RTM), which had limited  
16 participation to 150 people elected to represent the town’s 9,072  
17 registered voters.

18 The 1,457–841 vote last month in favor moving to the  
19 open Town Meeting, combined with a 1,362–945 to move to  
20 Australian ballot voting. The contradiction left the town with an  
21 open meeting as the sole option for this year.

22 In May, the Charter Revision Commission will make final  
23 updates and offer a proposal on how future balloting and  
24 meetings will be conducted. Such changes will need to be  
25 approved by the state Legislature, a multi-year process.

## 26 **FY27 budget debated**

27 Selectboard Chair Oscar Heller, a member of the RTM  
28 Finance Committee that was wiped out of existence with RTM  
29 itself, opened the budget discussion, acknowledging that while  
30 the proposed 6.3% increase to this year — before human services  
31 money was added on Town Meeting floor — was high and the  
32 budget “imperfect,” he hoped it would pass.

33 “The 10,000-foot view is that it funds the various  
34 departments and functions of the town that we all rely on,” Heller  
35 said. “We went through a long process of trying to design a  
36 budget that would be as functional for Brattleboro as possible.  
37 This is an imperfect document, this budget.”

38 Saying the town isn’t spending enough on sidewalks and  
39 roads and doesn’t pay for an assistant town manager, Heller also  
40 acknowledged that at the same time, “the number’s too high; the  
41 tax increase is too high.”

42 “What I hope that we’ve done over the past five months  
43 is create an adequate compromise,” he said. “I know that  
44 ‘adequate compromise’ is not much of a battle cry, and yet, I  
45 really I do think that in some ways, this budget is an achievement  
46 and the product of a great deal of hard work.”

47 Heller said it took months of regular work, of just  
48 understanding and designing options and making choices.”

49 “It’s also the product of a great deal of spirited, possibly  
50 even heated, Selectboard debate,” he continued. “I think every  
51 single member of the previous board was on the losing side of a  
52 vote about the budget that they really wanted to go the other way.  
53 We tried to make hard decisions.”

54 It was noted that, since 2018, the budget has increased  
55 \$10 million, yet road repairs are lagging, the replacement cost for  
56 the town pool has been pegged at about \$6.5 million, replacing  
57 the public works garage would be an additional \$15 million, and  
58 the Municipal Center and the fire station elevator also need  
59 major repairs.

60 Suggestions included finding efficiencies, such as in  
61 software decisions, and to defer non-essential vehicle buys.

62 Ultimately, voters authorized spending up to  
63 \$27,040,801 with \$20,864,686 from property taxes, but not  
64 before an amendment to reduce the budget to \$26 million was  
65 defeated.

## 66 **Trash stays at the curb**

67 The budget includes a 14-month contract with Rutland-  
68 based Casella Waste Systems for trash and recycling, costing just  
69 over \$1 million, and a new municipal compost program, costing  
70 more than \$220,000.

71 It was noted that all properties are taxed for solid waste,  
72 but only residential properties under five units — 56% — are  
73 eligible for the service.

74 Arguments against eliminating municipal collection  
75 included the high cost of private pickup — about \$50 per month  
76 — and the risk of illegal dumping.

77 A straw poll showed the majority opposed striking trash  
78 collection from the budget. The program will remain in place for  
79 the next 14 months, after which a new contract or plan will be  
80 needed.

## 81 **Funding human services draws** 82 **longest discussion**

83 The Selectboard's proposed budget allocated \$1 for  
84 human services.

85 Tom Miner, chair of the former RTM Human Services  
86 Review Committee, told the group that the panel reviewed 36  
87 applications totaling about \$525,000 and recommended  
88 allocating approximately \$482,665 to 33 organizations, based on  
89 last year's RTM directive to spend 2% of the preceding year's  
90 budget. That directive, however, is not perennially binding.

91 An alternative proposal was made to reduce the funding  
92 to a "compromise" of \$250,000 to re-examine grant criteria.

93 Gemma Seymour proposed spending \$482,665 for social  
94 services, stating that it would be a moral obligation and that this  
95 funding effectively serves to defray costs for other town  
96 departments.

97 Ken Fay also supported full funding, linking it to the town  
98 charter's safety tenet, and Spoon Agave cited a moral duty to care  
99 for those less fortunate.

100 Aaron Smith opposed mandatory tax funding, arguing it  
101 increases the cost of living and argued that the human service  
102 organizations that would receive the municipal funding should  
103 instead fundraise independently.

104 Thus ensued a series of votes to amend the budget.  
105 Seymour's amendment to fund \$482,665 was adopted by a vote

106 of 144-101. Arthur Davis then moved to amend the funding to  
107 \$250,000, which passed by a paper ballot vote of 133-125.

108 Next, Leland Wilson proposed another amendment, to  
109 increase funding from \$250,000 to \$350,000, arguing the  
110 reduction would be too severe. Supporters argued that  
111 preventative human services save money on emergency care, are  
112 essential to the town's crisis response, and provide crucial  
113 unrestricted funds that state and federal grants don't cover.

114 Opponents argued that \$250,000 was generous, that  
115 citizens could donate privately, and that the town could not  
116 afford more.

117 Voters approved the amendment to raise the funding to  
118 \$350,000 by a 145-113 paper ballot.

119 Yet another amendment by Timothy Belknap to reduce  
120 the amount to \$300,000 was defeated by a voice vote.

121 The meeting ultimately voted to approve spending  
122 \$350,000 for human services programs.

123 In response to concerns about yearly funding volatility,  
124 Moderator David Gartenstein said the Charter Revision  
125 Commission is reviewing the process.

126 For FY28, the Selectboard will set an initial line item sum  
127 for human services, which Town Meeting canV then amend,  
128 aiming to avoid future procedural conflicts.

## 129 **Tax exemptions**

130 Voters authorized raising and appropriating \$131,698.86  
131 through special assessments on property within the Mountain  
132 Home Special Benefit Assessment Tax District.

133 They also approved \$80,000 through special assessments  
134 on commercial properties within the Downtown Improvement  
135 District for the Downtown Brattleboro Alliance. That money  
136 support programs such as Gallery Walk and the downtown flower  
137 program.

138 Opponents argued against tax exemptions not required  
139 by law, noting about \$20 million in property goes untaxed,

140 shifting the burden to other taxpayers. It was confirmed that  
141 organizations can be exempt from municipal taxes and still apply  
142 for human service grants.

143 A five-year municipal tax exemption for the Brattleboro  
144 Post 5 American Legion's Little League field on South Main Street  
145 — a renewal of an exemption that's existed since the 1950s and  
146 is valued at \$1,568 in the current fiscal year — was adopted after  
147 an amendment to change the exemption to one year was  
148 defeated.

149 A five-year municipal tax exemption for the nonprofit  
150 Family Garden child care center passed. That exception is valued  
151 at \$4,147.

152 Voters also approved a five-year municipal tax  
153 exemption of \$26,315 for the New England Center for Circus Arts  
154 (NECCA). Representatives of the circus school stated the  
155 exemption would fund a 3% staff cost-of-living increase amid  
156 declining federal and state funding and said the organization  
157 bring 4,000 people to town annually.

158 Listers had previously rejected NECCA's exemption  
159 because it did not meet state standards.

160 An amendment to halve the exemption amount was  
161 defeated (84 in favor, 92 opposed) to what it had been last year.  
162 An amendment to reduce the term to one year to provide stability  
163 was also defeated.

## 164 **Appointments and resolutions**

### 165 **made**

166 In other matters:

167 • Gemma Seymour and Gary Stroud were elected to the  
168 Capital Review Board for one-year terms, although it was noted  
169 the board is inactive and its elimination has been recommended.

170 • The town also voted to establish a seven-member  
171 Advisory Budget Committee to replace the defunct RTM Finance

172 Committee. The Selectboard to appoint its initial members, with  
173 members to be elected at the ballot box in 2027.

174 • Margaret Atkinson, Jennifer Rowe, Stephanie Swindle,  
175 Felicity Ratté, and Robert Ferrante were elected or ratified as  
176 trustees for Brooks Memorial Library.

177 • Annual Town Meeting for non-ballot business will be  
178 moved to the Sunday preceding the first Tuesday in March due to  
179 logistical challenges on other days. This is subject to the Charter  
180 Commission’s final review and recommendation.

181 • Hilary Francis was appointed town clerk and Leslie  
182 Smith, town treasurer, for one-year terms.

183 • Fisher & Fisher Law Services, PC, was appointed to  
184 serve the town for the next year.

185 • Voters also passed a non-binding resolution calling for  
186 an independent consultant to analyze town ambulance transport  
187 service finances. Supporters cited a need for financial clarity,  
188 while Fire Chief Jay Symonds noted that transport revenue largely  
189 offsets costs.

190 • The town recognized several retiring employees and  
191 departing elected officials, including Parking Enforcement Officer  
192 Carol Coulombe, Fire Captain Dave Emery, Fire Alarm  
193 Superintendent Joseph Newton, Selectboard Chair Elizabeth  
194 McLoughlin, Police Chief Norma Hardy, Brooks Memorial Library  
195 Director Starr LaTronica, and state Rep. Mollie Burke [story this  
196 issue].

197 Voters interrupted Rep. Emilie Kornheiser’s accolades for  
198 LaTronica with a standing ovation for the librarian.

199 “That’s just about all I can say — ‘Wow.’” LaTronica said,  
200 taking the microphone and thanking staff, trustees, and the  
201 community for their work in building Brooks Memorial Library  
202 into “an exemplary place.”

203 “We are so lucky. There’s no better place to be a  
204 librarian,” she said.

205 Kornheiser said that a retirement party will celebrate the  
206 “sparkly, galactic electricity that is Starr.”

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# Support for dismantling ICE,

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## Defend the Guard Act

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Voters unanimously approved a non-binding resolution submitted by Rachel Distler, a member of Brattleboro Indivisible, expressing opposition to the federal Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) "in its current form," calling on federal elected officials to "create a law dismantling ICE" and institute full congressional oversight hearings into the agency's conduct, and to call on the Vermont Legislature to create laws that permit civil actions in state courts to "hold federal agents accountable for violations of legal or constitutional limits."

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A non-binding referendum calling on federal and state representatives to pursue reforms and oversight, the Vermont Defend the Guard Act (H.355), also passed unanimously.

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Robert Oeser, an Action Corps Vermont volunteer, proposed the resolution to urge the Legislature to enact the bill, which has not yet moved through the House Committee on Government Operations and Military Affairs.

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Selectboard member Isaac Evans-Frantz, who also serves as director of Action Corps, said at a Vermont State House press event last month, after confirmation that the Vermont Air National Guard took part in attacks on both Venezuela and Iran this year, "The Vermont National Guard is needed here at home to fight fires here, not be starting fires halfway around the world."

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