

**SCHOOL DISTRICT ANNUAL MEETING AND PUBLIC HEARING
FEBRUARY 29, 2016**

The Annual Town Meeting was held at the Westford Elementary School on Monday, February 29, 2016. Approximately 95 registered voters were present as well as the news media. Moderator Edward Chase called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m. He reviewed Roberts Rules of Order procedures, made several announcements and recognized nonresidents. The Town Clerk led the Pledge of Allegiance. The Moderator then read the warning.

PUBLIC HEARING

The Public Hearing for Australian ballot articles was called to order at 7:13 p.m. School Board chair, Mark Drapa, gave a presentation on the proposed budget.

Article IV: Shall the voters of the Town of Westford School District approve the school board to expend \$5,052,810, which is the amount determined to be necessary for the 2016-2017 school year? It is estimated that this proposed budget, if approved, will result in education spending of \$15,054.81 per equalized pupil. This projected spending per equalized pupil is 1.62% higher than spending for the current year.

Mark Drapa gave a presentation of the proposed budget. He noted this is the last operating budget that will be voted on for the Westford School District due to the merger of the Essex, Essex Town and Westford Districts, which goes into effect July 1, 2017.

The School Board made every attempt to adhere to the allowable growth mandates under Act 46 from its passage in 2015. This was prior to the mandates being removed by the Legislature in January 2016. After the Legislature removed the mandates, the School Board decided to not adjust the budget and keep the one they had prepared.

Mark noted that the most significant budget issues were the need to increase private preschool slots, an increase in health insurance premiums, and a large fund balance (\$87,900) from FY'15.

The proposed budget reflects a decrease of 0.76% from the current budget. Salaries are decreasing by 1.3% due to new hire savings, a shift to shared IT services and staffing adjustments. Even though health insurance premiums are increasing, the budget reflects a 0.5% decrease due to changes in coverage. High school tuition is decreasing by 3.6% due to fewer students. Increases in the budget include direct instruction mainly due to the shift of IT services and addition preschool slots (175.3%) and Special Education due student needs (105.1%).

The replacement of the Common Area roof in FY'16 cost less than anticipated. The Board plans to use the remaining funds plus an additional \$8,000 from FY'17 to replace 8 windows; 12 of the 20 windows have already been replaced. In order to meet the allowable growth mandate, resurfacing the driveway is being deferred unless other funding sources become available.

Mark advised that Westford is benefitting from a hold harmless exemption that was granted because of the merger study. The tax rate information he provided was based on information obtained prior to removal of the mandates of Act 46. If Westford did not have this exemption,

the Homestead tax rate would have increased 3.2 cents with an impact of \$31.71 per \$100,000 in property value. However, due to the exemption, the Homestead tax rate is anticipated to be \$1.498 which decreases the impact by \$28.55 per \$100,000 in property value. For residents who pay taxes based on their income, taxes will decrease by \$60.25 per \$50,000 of their income.

There were no questions or comments.

The public hearing ended at 7:41 p.m.

Moderator Chase announced the Annual Town Meeting articles will be discussed and voted on.

Article I: Shall the Town of Westford School District authorize the school directors to borrow money by issuance of bonds or notes not in excess of anticipated revenues for the next fiscal year?

Frank Howrigan made a motion to accept Article I. Seconded by Becky Roy.

There was no discussion. The Moderator called for the vote.

Article I was voted in the affirmative as written.

Article II: Shall the voters of the Westford Town School District authorize the School Board to solicit bids or offers for and convey (on commercially reasonable terms as determined by the School Board) the School District's undivided one-half ownership interest in an approximately 20-acre parcel of land owned jointly with the Town of Westford and located at the southwesterly corner of Old Stage Road (Town Highway #6) and the Milton-Westford Road (Town Highway #2)?

Ira Allen made a motion to accept Article II. Seconded by Millie Therrien.

Dave Tilton wanted to know what the sale of the land will result in. He noted that if the lot were sold and developed with a single family dwelling, the Town would see some benefit in the receipt of taxes however he feels eventually the development would increase property taxes due to the demand on services.

Mark advised this lot was created when Green Mountain Meadows when the King's Hill subdivision was done. The lot was set aside for an additional school. King's Hill Homeowner's Association has right of first refusal. Any property owned by the Westford School District July 1, 2017 will then become the property of the Union School District approved in November 2015, which will complicate the ownership of the property. The Town currently has the property assessed at \$114,000.

Cheryl Lavallee asked what happens to school property if the school is closed. Mark advised the Union School District can sell it to the Town of \$1.00 however any debt incurred would need to be paid. As for this lot, it is jointly owned by the Town and School. The proceeds will go toward something instead of raising taxes.

Ira is in favor of the lot being sold or at the very least the school's interest being deeded to the Town. The worst option would be to leave it as is and have the Union School District own the property.

Mark advised that he and Dave Adams (on behalf of the Selectboard) have discussed options with an attorney and the recommendation is to sell it.

Jake Cady if this article is voted down will there be another opportunity for the article to come before the voters again. Mark advised that this article has to be voted on from the floor. A special meeting could be held however special meetings tend to have low voter turnout. If the article is not passed tonight, the time spent before it being voted on again would take time away from trying to sell it.

Alex Weinhagen feels this is a no brainer. The lot does not serve the community in any substantial way and the proceeds of a sale will help with revenues for the town and school. He's in favor of selling the lot.

Linda Johnson asked where the proceeds would go. Mark advised that 50% of the proceeds would go to the school and 50% to the town. The school's goal is to utilize those funds to better the school, such as taking care of capital projects, prior to the effective date of the merger.

Dave Tilton disagrees with Alex Weinhagen. He feel the town should cash out on the property as opposed to using it for recreational purposes.

Bob Bancroft pointed out that the Town has a 32 acre parcel just down the road that has restrictions on it to be used for recreational purposes only.

Marilyn Thomas called the question. Seconded by Gordon Gebauer. Moderator Chase explained that a 2/3 vote is required to cease debate. The Moderator ruled that the 2/3 requirement was met and called for a vote.

Article II was voted in the affirmative as written.

Article III: Discussion of other nonbinding business.

John Doane asked what the Annual Meeting procedure will be with the merger. Martha advised the date of the annual meeting needs to be determined by the Union School District Board. Each town will vote at their respective voting places by Australian ballot. The ballots will then be comingled and counted. There won't be a way to know how Westford voters voted in comparison to Essex voters.

Gaylan Herr would like a component of future Town Meetings to include discussion of the Union School District. Martha advised that it will depend on when the Annual Meeting is held for the new District. She added that the school directors from Westford could provide information however it would be informal.

Dick Lavalley asked about the generator purchased by the Town that is located at the school. Mark Drapa advised that the generator will still belong to the Town and the specifics will need to be sorted out during the transition of the school district.

Nate Lavallee asked about the cost of elections if they are not held on Town Meeting Day. Mark advised costs would be included and paid for from the Union School District budget.

Art Menut asked why voters are electing school directors this year. Mark explained that the Westford School District has one more year of operations and need a school board to manage the last year.

Henry Tarrier made a motion to adjourn the meeting, seconded by Carol Winfield. Motion passed unanimously.

The School District Meeting adjourned at 8:16 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Edward Chase
Moderator

Mark Drapa, Chair
School Board

Nanette Rogers
Town Clerk

**Results of Australian Ballot Articles
Voted on March 1, 2016**

Article IV: Approved the Westford School District budget of \$5,052,810 for the 2016-2017 school year.

Total ballots cast: 826
501 Yes
268 No
56 Blanks
1 Over vote

Article V: Elected a school moderator and two school directors.

School Moderator 1 year term – Ed Chase

School Directors 3 year term – Martha Heath
2 year term – Christian Frenette