

ANNUAL TOWN MEETING AND PUBLIC HEARING
February 29, 2016
Draft Minutes

The Annual Town Meeting was held at the Westford Elementary School on Monday, February 26, 2016. Approximately 83 registered voters present as well as the news media. Moderator Edward Chase called the meeting to order at 8:17 p.m. The Moderator read the warning.

Article 1 To act upon the reports of the Town Officers.

Jacob Cady made a motion to accept Article 1, seconded by Andre Roy.

There was no discussion.

Article 1 was voted in the affirmative as written.

Article 2 Shall the Town of Westford collect its real estate and personal property taxes in four equal installments due on August 15th, November 15th, March 15th and May 15th, commencing with the fiscal year that begins on July 1, 2016, with postmarks being acceptable?

Bob Bancroft made a motion to accept Article 2, seconded by Ira Allen.

There was no discussion.

Article 2 was voted in the affirmative as written.

Article 3 Shall the voters of the Town of Westford authorize the Selectboard to solicit bids or offers for and convey (on commercially reasonable terms as determined by the Selectboard) the Town's undivided one-half ownership interest in an approximately 20-acre parcel of land owned jointly with the Westford Town School District and located at the southwesterly corner of Old Stage Road (Town Highway #6) and the Milton-Westford Road (Town Highway #2)?

Carol Howrigan made a motion to accept Article 3, seconded by Ira Allen.

There was no discussion.

Article 3 was voted in the affirmative as written.

Article 4 Shall the voters of the Town of Westford authorize the Selectboard to fund the Contingency Fund created in 2013 with a portion of, or all surplus funds from budgets commencing with the 2014-2015 budget as deemed necessary?

Bob Bancroft made a motion to accept Article 4, seconded by Millie Therrien.

Ira Allen asked for clarification of the article. Dave Adams explained that this article would give the Selectboard authority to transfer any unspent funds (carry over) from a fiscal year into the contingency fund.

Becky Roy asked how much money is in the surplus and why is it not being used to offset taxes. Alex advised that typically there is a surplus every year therefore this is not something new. With regard to the proposed budget, the Selectboard is using approximately \$43,000 to reduce the amount to be raised by taxes and would like to transfer the remaining funds into the contingency for unexpected expenses that may arise instead of taking out a loan.

Andre Roy asked if there is a cap to how the size of funding or surplus. Alex advised there is no formal policy however it is good practice to have 5% of the operating budget set aside.

Bob Thompson commended the Selectboard for setting up the fund for future flooding events, etc.

Article 4 was voted in the affirmative as written.

Article 5 Shall the voters of the Town of Westford authorize the Town to collect fees for trash and recycling services based on a flat rate per household in lieu of the property's assessment (advisory only)?

Dave Gauthier made a motion to accept Article 5, seconded by Andre Roy.

Ira Allen asked for a definition of what a household is. Dave advised that is yet to be determined. Ira asked that the Selectboard take into consideration rental units when making the determination.

Andre Roy asked if homeowners will have the option of opting out if services are billed as a flat rate or fee. Dave advised it would not be an option. Alex added that the Town plans to keep the system that is in place and is only considering the way the fee is billed and collected.

Marilyn Thomas asked if the Town expects to see any savings if the method is changed. Alexa advised this has nothing to do with savings but simply the Selectboard following up on suggestions made by citizens.

Barb Peck is in favor of billing the service at a flat fee per household rather than based on the assessment. She feels this would be fairer than the current system.

Eric Jacobsen suggested the Town look into a tag system for bags.

Susan Lloyd expressed her desire for the Town to promote recycling.

Greg Baker would like to consider this as a proposal to reduce the tax rate to attract more people to town.

Joan Farmer feels the new method being proposed is more equitable.

Martha Heath liked the suggestion of the bag tag system.

Kim Phinney expressed concern for mechanisms to be put in place for those who cannot afford the service.

Dan Strobridge feels the system should not be changed. He is concerned with trash being discarded along the road sides when people can't afford to pay the fee.

Marge McIntosh feels this would hurt those who pay taxes based on income sensitivity. She also pointed out that people would no longer be able to deduct this part of their property tax bill on their federal income tax returns if it is separated out.

Maura O'Brien feels this proposal is too complicated and divisive therefore the Town should keep the current system.

Martha Heath agreed with Marge McIntosh that this would hurt those who pay property taxes based on income sensitivity.

Bob Bancroft wonders what would happen if someone were to pay their property taxes but not the fee. He expressed his opposition to a bag tag system given there is no good way to purchase and distribute tags due to the lack of places the tags could be purchased after office hours and on weekends.

Joshua Smith called the question. Seconded by Heather Armata. 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 5 was overwhelmingly defeated.

Article 6 Discussion of other nonbinding business.

Dan Strobridge would like the Town to have large red and blue bins for trash and recycling available for purchase.

Becky Roy asked if the Board has placed the Road Foreman on salary versus hourly. Alex advised they have not.

Nanette Rogers thanked Alex for his three years serving on the Selectboard.

Joshua Smith asked what the long term plan is for the Spiller lot. Alex advised the Selectboard needs to decide whether or not to demolish the house. Part of the reason why it has not been done as of yet is due to preserving the ability to hook the town office and library up to the septic system in the event the current system fails. Until the Town has more information on wastewater options the status of the property is in limbo.

Town Meeting adjourned at 9:16 p.m.

PUBLIC HEARING

The Public Hearing for Australian ballot articles was called to order at 9:16 p.m.

Article 7 Shall the voters of the Town of Westford accept the Selectboard's budget of \$1,849,500 to defray the expenses for the ensuing year?

Selectboard Chair, Alex Weinhagen, gave a presentation on the proposed budget. The proposed tax rate is decreasing by approximately 1.49%. The decrease is due mostly to a

decrease in the highway budget and a fund balance from FY15 being applied to reduce the amount to be raised by taxes.

The current fiscal year had two large road projects included in the budget – paving the Westford Milton Road and installation of the Seymour Road bridge. These projects are complete. The Town plans to do some road reconstruction projects in FY'17 however the cost of these projects are significantly less than the paving and bridge projects. The amounts budgeted in gravel – road resurfacing and road rebuilding – reflect the Town's plan for FY'17. The gravel used for mud season was increased and was based on actuals from the past few years. The highway budget also includes a down payment for a new truck (this expense will be offset by taking funds from the Equipment Reserve fund), the first loan payment for the loader and an additional \$7,000 to be put in the Equipment Reserve fund.

The non-highway budget is increasing by approximately 6%. The major increases are for the bookkeeper's salary (53%), trash and recycling services (5%) and a down payment for a new fire truck. The down payment will be offset by using funds from the Fire Department Capital Reserve fund.

Dick Lavallee asked why purchase of the loader was accelerated. Alex advised it was because the prior year a truck was purchased sooner than anticipated therefore the Town moved the purchase of the loader up one year. Dick Lavallee cautioned the Board to keep oversight of the Town's highway budget.

There was no more discussion.

Article 8 Shall the voters of the Town of Westford authorize the Selectboard to borrow up to \$325,000, to be offset by funds from the Fire Department Equipment Reserve, to purchase a pumper truck for the Fire Department to be amortized over a period of 10 years in accordance with 24 V.S.A. §1755?

Cheryl Lavallee pointed out that the fire truck purchase is shown in the Town budget. She asked if the voters vote no to purchase a new truck, will it still be purchased. Alex advised no.

Becky Roy questioned whether a new fire truck is needed. John Quinn advised that the Department uses all the trucks. The one being replaced is 27 years old. The Department has been putting money into maintenance and repairs however due to the age of the truck, it has become impossible to find anyone to service it. He added that Westford's trucks are also used to aid neighboring towns.

There was no more discussion.

Article 9 Shall the Town authorize the elimination of the office of Town Auditor, with future annual audits to be provided by a certified public accountant in accordance with 17 V.S.A. §2651(b)?

Becky Roy asked why the auditor positions are being elected under Article 10 if this article is being put forth. Alex explained that until the voters vote to eliminate the position, the positions need to be elected. No one has submitted a petition for any of the three vacancies. If this article fails, the Selectboard will need to solicit applicants to appoint to the positions until next March.

Mark Drapa asked how much an audit will cost. Alex advised that the cost is around \$9,000.

Article 10 To elect all officers required by law.

The candidates running for Selectboard - Greg Baker, Derrick Kendrew, Nathan Lavallee and Dave Tilton – introduced themselves and stated why they are running for the Selectboard.

There was no more discussion.

Dave Gauthier made a motion to adjourn. Seconded by Henry Tarrier.

The public hearing adjourned at 9:54 p.m.

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

Article 7 Approved the Selectboard's budget of \$1,849,500 for FY'17.

Total ballots cast: 827
657 Yes
140 No
29 Blanks
1 Defective

Article 8 Approved to borrow up to \$325,000 to purchase a pumper truck for the fire department, which shall be amortized over a period of 10 years.

Total ballots cast: 827
667 Yes
139 No
20 Blanks
1 Defective

Article 9 Approved to eliminate the office of Town Auditor, with future annual audits to be provided by a certified public accountant.

Total ballots cast: 827
686 Yes
99 No
41 Blanks
1 Defective

Article 10 To elect all officers required by law.

Town Moderator - one year – Edward Chase
Selectboard - three years – David Tilton
Town Clerk – three years – Nanette Rogers
Auditor – three years –
Auditor – two years remaining –
Auditor – one year remaining –
Library Trustee - five years – Andrea Letorney