

ANNUAL WESTFORD TOWN MEETING & PUBLIC HEARING
March 2, 2020

The Westford Annual Town Meeting was held at the Westford Elementary School on Monday, March 2, 2020. Approximately 53 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.

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

Paul Birnholz spoke to cash basis versus modified accrual accounting methods. A few years ago, the Town switched from modified accrual to cash basis. When he asked the Selectboard at a previous Town Meeting if the Town would switch back to modified accrual, he was told that the Town had no plans at that time to switch back. Paul feels that modified accrual is a more meaningful accounting method and asked when the Town will switch back to modified accrual. Greg Barrows, Treasurer, agreed that modified accrual is the better of the two accounting methods but will need to consult with the Selectboard with regard to making a change.

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, 2020, with postmarks being acceptable?

Andre Roy made a motion to accept Article 2, seconded by George Lamphere.

There was no discussion.

Article 2 was unanimously voted in the affirmative as written.

Article 3 Shall the Town continue to exempt barns, silos, sugarhouses and bunkers used for silage storage??

David Gauthier made a motion to accept Article 3, seconded by Paul Birnholz.

Martha Heath feels the article language is vague and made a motion to amend the article to read "Shall the Town continue to exempt from taxation barns, silos, sugarhouses and bunkers used for silage storage." Vicky Ross seconded.

There was no discussion on the amendment. Moderator Chase read the article as amended and asked for a vote. The amendment passed by a unanimous voice vote. Moderator Chase asked if there was any discussion on the article as amended.

Mark Drapa wanted to know why this question is being brought up again and what percentage of the Grand List does this represent. Greg Barrows, Treasurer, advised that the buildings currently exempted total \$461,000 of assessed value on the Grand List. This represents approximately an \$8,000 cost to taxpayers. For taxpayers who have property valued at \$200,000, the annual cost of the exemption is \$5.71. For taxpayers who have property valued at \$400,000, the annual cost of the exemption is \$11.42.

Bob Bancroft asked how the Town determines if a property owner qualifies for the exemption and how it is documented. Selectboard Board member Allison Hope read the

statute that defines a farmer (32 V.S.A §3752(7)) and what the requirements for being eligible for being exempt. Nanette advised that the Listers are responsible for determining if a property owner meets the eligibility requirements but was unsure how often the Listers go through this process. Lister Trish Indoe advised that there are five property owners in town that currently meet the requirements and that the Listers periodically verify that the owners still qualify.

There was no more discussion on the amended article.

Article 3 was unanimously voted in the affirmative as amended.

Article 4 Discussion of other nonbinding business.

Mark Drapa and Eric Ford provided an update on the committees of which they serve on that were created as a result of the VCRD Forums. Both committees have short term and long term priorities they are working on. Mark serves on the Communication Committee which is looking into ways to improve cell and broadband coverage availability, especially around the common, creating a local business directory and how to foster small business growth to name a few. Eric serves on the Events and Marketing Committee which is looking at ways to promote events, developing an events website with calendar and hosting events such as the May Day Festival that is taking place in a few months.

Paul Birnholz asked why there is not an article authorizing the Selectboard to borrow and spend money beyond the budget. He for one does not want to repeat what happened a couple of years ago when the Highway Dept. ended up with a deficit. Allison Hope advised that a budget is a budget and that the Selectboard and town departments do their best to juggle expenses. She feels the Town is in a good place adding that sometimes unanticipated items come up, such as flooding events, that cannot be planned for.

Bree Drapa asked that voters write Leanne Saddlemire in for Library Trustee on the ballot. The position currently does not have a candidate and Leanne is interested in serving.

Eileen Chase asked about the Community Wastewater System. She's concerned about where the money for the system will be coming from. Allison Hope advised that the Planning Commission and Melissa Manka, Planning Coordinator, are looking at the logistics of a system and funding. If the Town pursues a system, it will need to go to the voters for approval.

Dave Gauthier spoke with regards to the Town purchasing the Spiller lot several years ago and then selling it. Why is the town looking at purchasing the Pigeon property now? Allison Hope stated that a prior Selectboard approved the purchase of the Spiller lot thinking it would be useful for when the Town Office was outgrown. She feels that the store being constructed on the Spiller lot is a good use for that property. The Planning Commission is looking at the Pigeon property to be developed for a multi-use project to include a new town office building, commercial space and residential space. She feels it is worth exploring adding that it would require voter approval to happen.

Ira Allen provided a brief history of the purchase of the Spiller lot. He noted that it was the only lot at the time with a legally recognized septic system. The thought was that maybe someday the town office would move to that lot and the current town office building would become commercial space. This made sense at the time and it was not a decision that was made in a vacuum. The Westford Historical Society purchased the property after receiving a

commitment from the Selectboard that they would put it before the voters. Since then, suitable soils for a community system have been found on the Jackson Farm which negated the advantage of the septic system on the Spiller lot. With the Town no longer needing the Spiller lot for septic, the lot was sold.

Seth Jensen felt at the time that selling the Spiller lot was a mistake. However, he now feels the town made a good decision.

Town Meeting adjourned at 7:53 p.m.

PUBLIC HEARING

The Public Hearing for Australian ballot articles was called to order at 7:53 p.m.

Article 5 Shall the voters of the Town of Westford accept the Selectboard's budget of \$2,021,365 to defray the expenses for the ensuing year?

Selectboard Chair, Allison Hope, provided a brief review of FY'20. The Road Crew is at full capacity with the hiring of Torrey Webster. The Road Crew completed road projects on Rubaud Road and Rogers Road. The Spiller lot was conveyed after a lengthy process, the Westford Town Lands Management Plan for the town forest and town land surrounding the school was approved after a lot of work done by the committee, and there were community forums held to discuss Westford's future.

The total proposed budget is \$2,021,365. After factoring in anticipated revenue and using \$50,000 from the General Fund, the amount to be raised by taxes is \$1,737,765. Based on the amount to be raised by taxes and the estimated Grand List, the tax rate will increase by approximately 2.071% or \$29.40 for property valued at \$200,000 or \$158.80 for property valued at \$400,000.

The highway budget is decreasing by approximately 3%. Salaries and benefits are increasing by approximately 21% due to adding a fourth member to the Road Crew. The Board feels it is important to hire and train a fourth fulltime person because the workload is a lot for three employees. Also, a fourth person would ease the burden of the workload if another employee is out sick or on vacation. Roadside mowing is increasing by approximately 82% to allow for mowing to be done two times per year. The additional mowing will help with controlling wild parsnip and maintaining site distance at intersections.

The FY'20 highway budget includes funds to apply toward the highway deficit. Allison explained that no funds are being budgeted in FY'21. This is because the highway department ended FY'19 with approximately \$120,000 unspent funds. This amount, along with the funds in the FY'20 budget and some funds from the General Fund will eliminate the highway deficit ahead of schedule. Revenue for the highway department is decreasing by approximately 34%.

The administrative budget is increasing by approximately 4%. Major increases include funds for the Admin. and Fire Dept. Capital Budget Reserves, hiring or contracting a person to write grants, hiring a person to take the DRB minutes, allotting funds to resolve drainage issues at the library and increasing the budget amount for trash and recycling collection services. The contract for trash and recycling services expires at the end of June 2020. The Selectboard will be going out to bid in a couple of months. One item the Selectboard

will explore is the possibility of contracting with the same hauler as Fairfax to obtain a better price. The Selectboard included funds for a grant writer as recommended by the Planning Commission. The Board felt that the Town has missed out on grant funding opportunities due to volunteers not having enough time and/or skill set to research and apply for grants. Future funding for this position will depend on how successful it is. The Development Review Board requested funds for a minute taker to relieve Melissa from this responsibility so she can do other tasks assigned to her. Admin revenue is expected to increase by approximately 3%.

Peggy Bouffard asked the Selectboard if composting materials will be part of the new contract with the hauler who will collect trash and recycling. Allison advised that the Selectboard has not discussed what will be put in the bid document. She added that the Town will post information as it becomes available on the Front Porch Forum and in the Town Newsletter.

There was no further discussion on the proposed budget.

Ira Allen made a motion to adjourn. Seconded by George Lamphere.

The public hearing adjourned at 8:18 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Edward Chase
Moderator

Allison Hope, Chair
Select Board

Nanette Rogers
Town Clerk

Results of Australian Ballot Articles Voted on March 3, 2020

Article 5 Approved the Selectboard's budget of \$2,021,365 for FY'21.

Total ballots cast: 699
541 Yes
114 No
44 Blanks

Article 6 To elect all officers required by law.

Town Moderator - one year – Edward Chase
Selectboard - three years – Allison Hope
Library Trustee - five years – Leanne Saddlemire (write in)