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RECEIVED
TOWN CLERK
BELMONT, MA

DATE: December 12, 2023
TIME: 2:30 PM

Minutes of the
Town of Belmont
Select Board
Budget Public Forum
September 28, 2023
7:00pm



To view the recording of the meeting, please click [HERE](#).

Call to Order: Mr. Epstein called the meeting to order at 7:02pm.

Select Board Members	Present	School Committee Members	Present
Roy Epstein, Chair	Yes	Meghan Moriarty, Chair, School Committee	Yes
Elizabeth Dionne, Vice-Chair	Yes	Jamal Saeh, School Committee	Yes
Mark Paolillo, Member	Yes	Aaron Pickilingis, Comprehensive Capital Budget Comm.	Remote
Geoffrey Lubien, Chair, Warrant Committee	Remote	Staff Members	
Matthew Taylor, Warrant Committee	Yes	Patrice Garvin, Town Administrator	Yes
Jack Weis, Warrant Committee	Yes	Jennifer Hewitt, Assistant Town Manager/Finance Director	Yes
Roy Epstein, Ex-officio Designee, Select Board	Yes	Jill Geiser, Superintendent of Schools	Yes
Meghan Moriarty, Ex-officio, School Committee	Yes	Alicia Sullivan, Assistant Superintendent of Schools	Yes

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Introduction

Mr. Epstein apologized that the meeting was scheduled on a night when there was so much happening in Town but invited residents to send any questions to the Board and Town Administrator. He then explained the purpose of the meeting, and how it would proceed.

Public Input Session on the FY2025 Town Budget

Mr. Lubien presented on the following topics:

- Overall Town Budget - Spending & Revenue.
 - Context for the budget, including Proposition 2.5, use of non-recurring funds, the budget gap over 7 years, and funding of new buildings.
 - The split of operations between the Town and the Schools.
 - The various FY24 Expense Categories (labor compensation, benefits, utilities, trash/recycling, Out-of-District Students, Exempt Debt, Capital Investments, and Other Expenses).
 - Recurring Budgeted Revenue (tax levy, net state aid, local receipts, enterprise receipts).
- Funding Gap – How large is it, and how did we get here:
 - How the gap increased over the years, and the involvement of non-recurring funds in FY21, FY22, and FY24.
 - Override history (passed in FY15, failed in FY22).
 - What is driving the cost increases (inflation – wages, benefits, materials & energy costs, maintenance & operations of new buildings, and school enrollment and increased social emotional needs).
- Efforts to Decrease the Deficit:
 - Financial Task Force made 15 recommendations with 12 being completed.
 - Structural Change Impact Group reviewed over 400 suggestions and is preparing recommendations for the Select Board.
 - Collins Center Report recommended the hiring of a Finance Director, using a new budget process, and transitioning to an appointed Treasurer, all of which have been completed.
 - Fall 2023 Special Town Meeting will review further efficiencies.
 - Despite these efforts, an override is needed.

- **Override & Debt Exclusion History:**
 - Historical context for tax increases
 - Provided definitions for an Operating Override, and Debt Exclusion (including the history of recent debt exclusions).
 - History of Overrides including amounts and percentage of voters who voted yes.
 - Explained why the override is needed now rather than in the future, including what was lost due to budget cuts, and upcoming capital needs.
- **Timeline for FY2025 Budget Process**
 - The budget timeline/schedule
 - The preparation of a budget with an override and a budget without an override.
 - Election deadlines.

Mary Lewis pointed out that the last successful override was in 2015, not 2019 as Mr. Lubien indicated. She then spoke about the problems caused by waiting so long for another override. She asked why the Schools were shown as the major driver of expenses when there are others such as unfunded pension liabilities, and retirement concerns unconnected to the Schools. Mr. Lubien said he meant to say 2015 and explained that the point was to show what is driving costs and that the major driver is labor costs and materials & energy costs due to inflation. He also spoke about efforts to reduce the pension and retirement costs.

Alison Lenk said that the last override was focused on roads & sidewalks and asked where the proposed funds will go this year. Mr. Paolillo said most of that override was operational in nature, with some going to roads and sidewalks. She then asked what percentage of the upcoming override will go to the town and to the school and what is the historical ratio. Mr. Epstein said this is a complicated question and they would get back to her. She then asked if the eliminated positions were just left unfilled or actually eliminated. Ms. Garvin said they were eliminated, although there are some other unfilled positions. Ms. Lenk also expressed her view that a debt exclusion is not actually temporary since they last many years.

Michael Crowley said Mr. Lubien neglected to point out the lost school positions, which illustrates that all departments were impacted by the failed override. He expressed concern that deciding the level of the override in February makes it difficult to do a campaign and asked that once critical information is determined that it be shared so a campaign can begin. Finally, he pointed out that this is a critical budget year and asked all departments to consider how to better engage the public in the process to avoid misinformation. Ms. Garvin clarified that the February date shown is the last date the Select Board can vote on the override number, but they can do it earlier. Mr. Paolillo spoke about the upcoming Budget Summits and efforts to engage residents. Ms. Dionne pointed out that the delay in getting free cash certified is being diligently addressed by the current Treasurer but emphasized that the delay resulted from accounting issues that preceded her appointment to the Treasurer's office.

Amy Kirsch spoke about the importance of staffing the town and schools.

Jack Weiss suggested that the non-override budget be prepared before the override budget to help make informed decisions on how large the override should be.

Paul Griffin suggested that the operation costs of the rink, high school, and library would be similar to the buildings they are replacing if the debt exclusion is removed from the calculation and should not be part of the need for an override. There was a discussion of the operating costs of the buildings.

Meg Moriarty, speaking as resident, spoke about identifying the services the town wants before starting to think about cuts, and asked if there had been any research done about allowing funds to be designated for specific programs/services that would be voted on. There was a discussion of this suggestion and how it could be implemented.

Peg Callanan asked the total amount taxpayers have paid for debt exclusions. Mr. Lubien said he would provide this information.

Ms. Hewitt, responding to Alison Lenk's question above, said the FY24 budget was \$151,000,000 with \$53.6m for municipal expenses and \$97.4m for the schools. That is a 35.5% municipal and 64.5% schools split. There was a discussion of this information including the impact of debt service.

88 Angus Abercrombie expressed concern about the lack of long-term planning and the language around “the
89 town versus the schools”.

90 Stephanie Liu asked that numbers for debt exclusions and overrides include Prop 2 ½ and assessment
91 increases. Mr. Epstein asked that Ms. Liu send her recommendations on how to present the information to the
92 Board.

93 Ms. Dionne spoke about the long-term planning efforts and the challenges. She spoke about the lack of new
94 growth that is a result of underfunding town operations and the importance of increasing non-residential (i.e.,
95 commercial) property tax revenue. She then spoke about the personnel and committees that are working to
96 address this need.

97 Lucia Sullivan, speaking as a resident, asked for clarification of Ms. Dionne’s comment about the split between
98 property tax and other revenues, which Ms. Dionne explained.

99 Judith Feinleib asked that the bottom line of the property tax bill be considered, as there are limits to what
100 residents can afford to pay.

101 Mr. Epstein shared his thoughts regarding the possibilities of no override, an override for level funding without
102 one-time funds, and an override for critical services not currently being provided.

103 Ms. Dionne pointed out that drastic cuts would be felt on the Town side and the School side and that it will be
104 more expensive to rebuild rather than maintain services. She also spoke about the talent that Ms. Garvin has
105 attracted and the risks of losing those people. She added that they are not just asking for money - there is a
106 plan to resolve the finance issues that will be visible.

107 Mr. Paolillo explained that they are looking at delivering services that residents are asking for and expect. He
108 spoke about the challenges of providing the services as well as remembering the costs to residents. The debt
109 exclusion for the new buildings is part of the legacy for the future and asked that residents communicate what
110 they want.

111 Alison Lenk said she hears a lot of talk about wants and expectations, rather than focusing on needs and
112 referred to the Collins Center recommendation to focus on saving. She asked about the status of reviewing
113 fleet usage, PILOT payments, and identifying other savings. There was a discussion of Ms. Lenk’s comments
114 with Ms. Garvin and others providing updates on some of her questions, especially around the issue of
115 PILOTs.

116 Claus Becker reminded longtime residents that they have benefited from the underpayment of taxes over the
117 years.

118 Mary Lewis spoke about the “good to have” and the “must have” with the good to have often saving money
119 in the long run and the impacts of cutting things that appear to be good to have (such as aids, etc.).

120 Aaron Pikcilingis shared a story about a poor effort at cost savings where 3 of his daughter’s classes were
121 cancelled due to a lack of substitute teachers.

122 Britany Ray is a renter but is trying to buy a house in Belmont and the increasing property taxes are making
123 this more difficult. She then asked about the effort to attract new businesses. Ms. Dionne spoke about the
124 current restrictions on opening businesses in Belmont, and efforts to rewrite the bylaws. Mr. Epstein spoke
125 about the vibrancy of business areas in Town and the probable impact of the MBTA Communities law.

126 Stephanie Liu spoke about her view that the new school, rink, and library have a lot of “good to have” features.
127 She expressed her views on things she believes Town is wasting money on.

128 There was a discussion of how to proceed with the process, reduce the tax burden, and engaging and
129 informing residents.

130 Ron Sacca said that Winters Hardware is going out of business, and spoke about other business activities he
131 had been involved in and the challenges he faced.

132 **Discussion and possible vote to appoint Mark Paolillo as Select Board Designee to the Comprehensive**
133 **Capital Budget Committee.**

134 There was a discussion of Ms. Dionne remaining on the Community Preservation Committee.

135 *A Motion was made to appoint Mark Paolillo as Select Board Designee to the Comprehensive Capital*
136 *Budget Committee effective until April 2, 2024. The motion was seconded and passed unanimously by*
137 *3-0 vote.*

138 **Approval of Minutes**

139 September 14, 2023 – Public Forum on Rink Operations: Ms. Dionne submitted some minor corrections which
140 were distributed.

141 *A Motion was made to approve the September 14, 2023 Public Forum on Rink Operations minutes as*
142 *amended by Ms. Dionne. The motion was seconded and passed unanimously by 3-0 vote with names*
143 *abstaining.*

144 September 18, 2023 – Regular Session: Ms. Dionne submitted some minor corrections which were distributed,
145 and Mr. Epstein pointed out that Jeff Hansell's last name was misspelled.

146 *A Motion was made to approve the September 18, 2023 Regular Session minutes as amended by Ms.*
147 *Dionne and Mr. Epstein. The motion was seconded and passed unanimously by 3-0 vote.*

148 **Adjournment**

149 *A motion was made to the adjourn the meeting of the Belmont Select Board Committee, and the*
150 *motion was seconded and passed unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 8:44pm.*
151

152 Respectfully submitted by,

153 Susan Peghiny
154 Recording Secretary
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