

Budget Committee Meeting Minutes
Tuesday, November 7, 2024, 6:30 pm
Belmont Mill
Tioga Meeting Room

Present were Chairman Ron Mitchell, Vice Chair Tracey LeClair, Selectmen's Representative Ruth Mooney, Members Albert Akerstrom, Mark Roberts, Marsha Campbell, Jessi Fleck, Don House, Don Hurd, Fred Wells and Marc Zimmerman; TA Alicia Jipson, Executive Assistant Colleen Akerman, Finance Director Steve Forster, DPW Director Craig Clairmont, Assistant DPW Director Brian Jackes and Parks & Rec Director Danielle St. Onge. Also present were Selectmen Sharon Ciampi and Travis O'Hara and Police Captain Steve Akerstrom.

Via Zoom was Eileen Gilbert.

Chairman Ron Mitchell welcomed everyone for the 2025 season and warned everyone that with the default budget there will be more pressure this year.

Officer Nominations & Elections:

Ruth Mooney moved to nominate Tracey Leclair as Chairman and Ron Mitchell as Vice Chair; seconded by Mark Roberts and the motion passed unanimously. (11-0).

R. Mitchell passed his gavel on to T. LeClair and mentioned the gavel was given to him many years ago by Diane Marden, who was the Committee's secretary at that time. He remembered many of our residents who have volunteered their time over the years to the Committee. All of these volunteers do their work for the betterment of the Town and we have to run the Town on the money that we appropriate. Last year was a default budget and things didn't get done and departments struggled. Townspeople are used to having a certain level of service. We need to be sure the Town runs efficiently but we still need to move forward. If we cut a lot there is a lot to make up.

Resignations:

Two members submitted their resignations this year: Bob Chapman and Kevin Sturgeon.

New Member Interviews & Appointments:

The Board received three letters of interest in advance of the meeting. Three candidates introduced themselves: Rachel French, Paul Maggioli and Kevin Leandro. Rachel French is a long-time resident who likes to budget at home and thinks it would be good to learn what the Town is doing. She is retired and has the time to volunteer. Paul Maggioli moved to Belmont in 2018 and has a financial background and experience managing a large budget for a

tech company. He is also retired and the weekly meetings aren't a problem. Kevin Leandro's background is heavy trucks and he owns some real estate. He moved to Belmont 3 years ago and served on the Gilford Budget Committee for 6 years. He manages his own schedule and Tuesday evening meetings are okay.

R. Mooney moved to enter non-public session at 6:38 pm; seconded by Don House. Motion passed unopposed (11-0).

The candidates and the public left the meeting room and the LiveStream and Zoom recordings were paused.

Some Committee members spoke on behalf of the candidates they are familiar with. Votes were tallied by TA Alicia Jipson.

R. Mooney moved to exit non-public session at 6:42 pm; seconded by Al Akerstrom. Motion passed unopposed (11-0).

The candidates and the public returned to the meeting room and the LiveStream and Zoom recordings were restarted.

D. House moved to appoint Rachel French and Paul Maggioli as members of the Budget Committee with terms to expire in March 2025; seconded by M. Roberts. Motion passed unopposed (11-0).

Approval of Minutes 01/09/2024:

R. Mooney moved to approve the minutes of the Budget Committee meeting held on January 9, 2024 as written; seconded by Al Akerstrom. Motion passed unopposed (11-0).

Overview 2025 Budget:

TA Jipson presented a PowerPoint with the 2025 budget overview. The budget books were printed a few weeks ago so members could start reviewing, so the Actual column is only a snapshot from the time the sheets were printed. She has the "live" spreadsheets to review and update throughout the meetings. November and December are when a lot of departments do the bulk of their spending because many contracts are due. This is everyone's first time with a default budget so the information sheets are slightly different and there is more information and comparisons. Each department gave more detailed descriptions for each individual budget line item. Members were also provided with agendas for meetings and public hearings and other important dates as well as the budget law and retirement rates. Members may write on any of the papers but the tabs and binders are reused each year to save on costs. We have 4 sitting members who are up for reelection in 2025: T. LeClair, R. Mitchell, A. Akerstrom and F. Wells. Our new appointees R. French and P. Maggioli will also need to run on the ballot if they wish to continue serving after this budget season.

The tax rate was set last week at \$15.74. It is down \$1.73; a 9.9% decrease. The pie graph shows the breakdown of the portions at 30% for the Town, 58% for the School, and 6% each for the County and State Education rates. Commercial values are down and residential values are up. In 2024, our proposed budget failed by 77 votes. There were also some warrant articles that were not approved. We are keeping a close eye on spending to stay within the default budget. The Tax Collector's office has collected 98% of the first issue tax bill for 2024, so people are paying their tax bills. The Town has locked in oil, propane and electric rates and has been seeking grants. We have filled vacant positions but we could see an increase in retirements. Health insurance increased 15.9%, dental insurance increased 5% and our property/liability/workmen's comp increased 10%. The NH Retirement rate will go down slightly mid-year 2025.

There have been 18 staff changes this year, which generates a lot of extra work for Finance/Human Resources. We received over \$350,000 in grants in 2024 including police and fire department personnel, opioid settlement, voting machines, hazard mitigation, library and the diesel grant for DPW. All of these grants reduce the tax impact. Revenues are based on an ongoing estimate. This year \$5,121,784 was taken off the tax rate calculation due to revenues and grants that were received in, as well as revenue we conservatively estimated before the end of 2024. The 2025 requested budget is only \$60,000 more than the 2024 requested budget, but we lost about \$2 million dollars between the operating budget and unfunded warrant articles.

Each department will present their budget and discuss it with department heads. The Committee may move to recognize audience members if they have questions.

Highway (1):

DPW Director Craig Clairmont and Assistant DPW Director Brian Jackes presented the Highway Administration and Streets budgets.

Director Clairmont read from a prepared statement. Department heads have been tasked by the Board of Selectmen (BOS) to develop a fiscally responsible budget. Many of the department heads are lifelong Belmont residents and taxpayers. DPW is only asking for funding to provide the services our residents expect. Their goal is to do the best job possible with the amount of funding that is provided. The workload has increased but the department is still operating with the same number of full-time employees as it has had for many years. The funding for the road repair warrant article failed for the first time in 17 years, by 13 votes. There was no major road work completed this year. They completed some smaller projects this year and will need to cut services if funding falls through again.

They have received a "Diesel" grant to turn an old 2006 truck in for a brand-new truck. There has been progress on the new well using ARPA funds. This will replace the original 1939 well #1. There is not much to cut in the budget, but services will need to be trimmed if the budget is cut. People are accustomed to the way things are done and it is hard to go

backwards. The \$750,000 warrant article for road repairs was not passed and if that happens again we will continue to go backwards.

TA Jipson explained the different budget columns and what they represent. The narrative section includes additional details. Director Clairmont commented this has been the most challenging budget ever. They are dealing with increased costs with a minimized budget. Parts are very expensive and they are doing the best they can. Their goal was to put together a budget that will pass.

R. Mooney moved lines 01-4311-101 through 01-4311-505; seconded by R. Mitchell. Director Clairmont said they have no control over most of these items. Drug testing is required. Prices are increasing. R. Mooney commented there are only a few places where a big impact can be made because we still need to run the Town and pay salaries and maintain vehicles. DPW Director Clairmont stated it will cost more money down the road. He invited everyone out to see the garage and see if they are efficient. They have been fully staffed for 1 and ½ years. *Motion passed unopposed (13-0).*

R. Mooney moved lines 01-4312-102 through 01-4312-505 ; seconded by M. Roberts. R. Mitchell asked if they are still using outside help. Director Clairmont said they met with someone from the jail a few weeks ago and they are going to start getting some help again. In the past, residents of the Belknap County Jail picked up trash on the roadside, painted plows and completed yardwork. Covid put a damper on that. They worked hard and collected over 550 bags of trash one year.

Everyone in the department is cross-trained and they use pagers for on-call service. They have one full-time sewer employee and the Director and Assistant Director are partially paid from the Highway, Water and Sewer. Regular inspections of the stations provide better protection of infrastructure for the Town. R. Mooney asked if that helps with overtime costs and they confirmed that it does. Fred Wells asked about the big increases from 2023 to 2025. TA Jipson noted the wages are reflective of the 4% increase that should have been included in 2024, as well as standard steps and 4% for 2025. Director Clairmont stated these are reflective of the union contract. The Director and Assistant Director are paid 87% from Highway and the remainder from Water and Sewer, which means those wages are paid by rate payers not tax dollars. They are two people running three departments: Highway, Water and Sewer. There is no support staff in the office. R. Mitchell observed that it is hard to get a handle on wages with the private sector changes and it is hard to keep people. We still need to compete with the State and other municipalities in the area to be competitive. R. Mooney reported there will be new union negotiations starting in 2025. TA Jipson added that the BOS addressed wage disparities with a wage study with comparisons to bring everyone up to a competitive standard. The Fire and DPW contracts passed but non-union and police wages look more inflated. The State is offering \$5,000 retention bonuses. The State Police are down over 100 positions. *Motion passed unopposed (13-0).*

R. Mooney moved lines 01-4312-707 through 01-4312-999; seconded by R. Mitchell. R. Mitchell commented that new equipment must mean less repairs but they are more expensive to repair. DPW listed their equipment including two 550 trucks, three pickups, dump trucks, grader, skidsteer, bobcat, trailer, attachments and more. It takes money to maintain the equipment. *Motion passed unopposed (13-0).*

Ron Mitchell moved to approve the Highways & Streets budget of \$1,346,509.00 as recommended by the Selectmen. The motion was seconded by M. Roberts and passed unopposed (13-0).

Street Lighting & Highway Block Grant (1):

R. Mooney moved line 01-4316-220; seconded by M. Roberts. TA Jipson explained this is the monthly bill for street lighting. It used to include a loan but that was recently paid off. Finance Director Steve Forster completed an analysis of the account averaged out and this is the amount needed. Director Clairmont commented that the loan has already paid for itself. The LED lighting is better and less expensive. *Motion passed unopposed (13-0).*

R. Mooney moved line 01-4319-001; seconded by M. Roberts. The Highway Block Grant are funds were updated by the State recently and the correct amount is \$197,367. *Motion passed unopposed (13-0).*

R. Mitchell moved to approve the Street Lighting and Highway Block Grant budget of \$211,767.00. The motion was seconded by R. Mooney and passed unopposed (13-0).

Water Department (2):

Assistant DPW Director Brian Jackes presented the Water budget.

This is a user-funded program. People who use the system pay the fees to fund it. This year ARPA funds were used to replace well #1. We use Pennichuck for treatments and other operations. Town employees complete final readings, interior problems and quarterly meter readings to save on Pennichuck costs. There are 365 daily checks at the well house and everyone is cross-trained. It helps protect the Town and helps us be as lean as we can be. The Director and Assistant Director have their water licenses and some of the other employees are taking an exam for water treatment. They are trying to be prepared and protect the town. There was some discussion about the two different water systems in Belmont; the Village area and "Belmont North" by the Laconia town line.

R. Mooney moved lines 02-4331-101 through 02-4331-875; seconded by M. Roberts. All of the costs for this budget are covered by user fees. When you look around the state, our rates are affordable. This is a warrant article, but voters think this is paid for by taxes. Jessi Fleck asked what happens if the \$25,000 for the well cleaning does not pass. Assistant Director Jackes said they have some capital funds they could use, but they try to budget appropriately. They will alternate larger maintenance items to spread them out over multiple budgets instead of having a larger hit in a single year. The proper well cleaning hasn't been completed recently

because well #1 does not have enough water to cover the whole town. Next year a tank cleaning will be required. *Motion passed unopposed (13-0).*

J. Fleck moved to approve the Water Department budget of \$338,941.00 as recommended by the Selectmen. The motion was seconded by M. Roberts and passed unopposed (13-0).

Sewer Department (3):

Assistant DPW Director Brian Jackes presented the sewer budget. There is one full-time employee and the Director and Assistant Director for backup. There are 8 pump stations in town. They perform as much maintenance as possible every year and clean and camera 5,000 feet of line every year. They report on deficiencies and clean 8 wet wells every year. Many people flush things that should not be flushed. They have learned a lot and save the users a lot of money by rebuilding pumps and completing other maintenance. The village and Winnisquam stations all send material through the WRBP lines to Franklin.

R. Mooney moved lines 03-4321-101 through 03-4321-888; seconded by M. Roberts. T. LeClair asked about Route 140. An engineer has been hired to review the situation and plans. The WRBP costs are offset by user fees, not tax dollars. The 2025 WRBP amount has not yet been determined because the State has a different budget cycle. This will be brought back to the Committee in the future. Motion passed unopposed (13-0).

R. Mitchell moved to approve the Sewer Department budget of \$732,759.00 as recommended by the Selectmen. The motion was seconded by M. Roberts and passed unopposed (13-0).

Parks & Rec and Beach (4):

Parks & Rec Director Danielle St. Onge presented these budgets. She is a homeowner in Belmont and developed the budget knowing that she will be paying for it. She has been here almost 2 and ½ years and was moved to full-time last budget cycle. Her goals are to offer new events and programs and sustain the existing programs. She hopes to expand current programs and events, increase attendance, network, and extend the summer camp program to 8 weeks and work within a limited budget. Everyone is invited to come visit the office or see the programs any time.

R. Mooney moved lines 01-4520-102 through 01-4520-999; seconded by M. Roberts. T. LeClair liked the breakdown shown in the budget books because it is helpful to see what you can do with a little bit of money. There was some discussion about the summer camp program, which is funded through fees. The additional 2 weeks will be a smaller program housed on the second floor rather than at the school. It will help close the gap at the end of summer for 5-10 year olds. This year the program coordinator and park attendant positions were combined and it worked very well. We have someone with an education background. We should be able to get licensed and start going after grant funds. Summer camp staff is easy to find. That program and other programs take in fees that offset expenses. She looks for donations where ever she

can, and tries to work with other towns on programs as well. J. Fleck likes that the summer camp program is being extended. We are grateful the school allows us to use their space. *Motion passed unopposed (13-0).*

R. Mooney moved lines 01-4521-101 through 01-4521-506; seconded by M. Roberts. There are three lifeguards this year and the beach is manned for longer. They are all returning so there will not be any new certification fees. Summer camp uses the beach on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Don Hurd asked about the buoy expansion. The Town is permitted for a larger area and some swimmers want to swim out past their chest level. This would allow a second set of buoy lines for those swimmers, while still keeping younger swimmers in the smaller more shallow area. D. House suggested leasing out space at the beach such as for a kayak kiosk. *Motion passed unopposed (13-0).*

R. Mitchell moved to approve the Parks & Rec and Belmont Town Beach budgets of \$198,945.00 as recommended by the Selectmen. The motion was seconded by M. Roberts and passed unopposed (13-0).

Patriotic Purposes (5):

Parks & Rec Director St. Onge noted the Old Home Day line is down \$4,500 because they ran a volunteer event with donations last year. They are trying to bring in fundraising and reduce that Old Home Day line to zero. She is trying to bring it back to a volunteer/donation event like it was originally. There is an additional line for the Good Citizen Award because it has previously been funded out of the Old Home Day line item. If there is no Old Home Day budget, the scholarship line may still be funded.

R. Mooney asked about fireworks. The last quote was \$13,000 for the same show that was held two years ago, but she made a conservative plan for \$9,000.

R. Mitchell moved lines 01-4583-453 through 01-4584-999; seconded by M. Roberts. J. Fleck stated we are struggling to pass a good budget and should not spend money on fireworks. R. Mooney commented that is not the full cost because we also need fire and police personnel and the Highway department to work and clean up the event. It would not bother her to get rid of it. They were removed from the default budget. The Police Department is also not fully staffed so it would be overtime to have someone there. TA Jipson commented that a motion to amend the line item could be made if there is a desire to remove the fireworks.

J. Fleck moved to reduce line item 01-4583-454 for fireworks from \$9,000 to \$1; seconded by Marsha Campbell. R. Mitchell commented that leaving \$1 in the line means that it can be revisited later if money needs to be put back into the line. D. House asked about donations. Parks & Rec Director St. Onge explained it was difficult to manage on her personal time and the committee was very small. It is hard to get help but some people are willing to give money. R. Mitchell suggested a light show instead of fireworks. It is pretty and quiet. TA Jipson added that they are looking at increases to vendor fees and for the parade. Donations have to be treated properly and accepted by the Board of Selectmen and they decide how to

proceed. Most donations were geared towards a specific activity to make the process smoother. T. LeClair had concerns that the residents will say no to the whole budget because fireworks were cut again. Members can revisit this line item later after getting feedback from others.

Motion passed (9-4). T. LeClair, F. Wells, M. Roberts and D. Hurd opposed.

A. Akerstrom moved to approve the Patriotic Purposes budget of \$9,001.00 as recommended by the Selectmen. The motion was seconded by M. Roberts and passed unopposed (13-0).

Other Old Business: None

Next Meeting: The next meeting date will be Tuesday, November 12, 2024 at 6:30 pm.

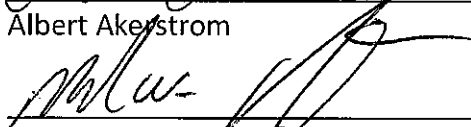
Adjournment:

R. Mooney moved to adjourn at 8:52 pm; seconded by F. Wells and the motion passed unanimously.

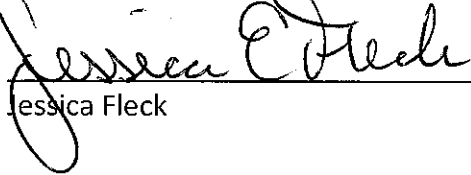
Chairman Tracey LeClair



Albert Akerstrom

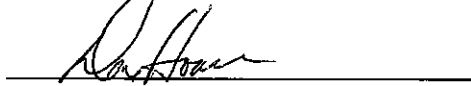


Mark Roberts



Jessica Fleck

Marc Zimmerman



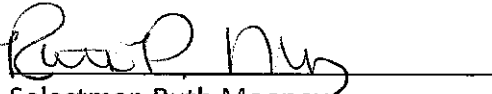
Don House



Paul Maggiori




Vice Chair Ron Mitchell



Selectman Ruth Mooney



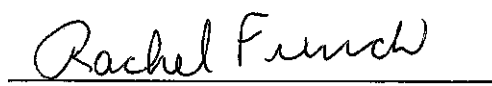
Marsha Campbell



Fred Wells



Don Hurd



Rachel French