



TOWN OF ST. JOHNSBURY

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Special Meeting of the St. Johnsbury Select Board January 8th, 2025 @ 6:00 pm

Present-

Select Board: Steve Isham, Frank Empsall, Tracy Zschau, Dennis Smith

Staff: Chad Whitehead, Rachel Waterhouse, Joe Kasprzak, Chief Joel Pierce, Chief Bradley Reed, Chief Joel Pierce, Lesley Russ (via zoom), Collin-Alan Gillespie

Public: Dana Gray, Jim Brown, Lauren (via zoom), Lauren Jarvi (via zoom), Mary Beth Furr (via zoom), Lynn Wurzburg (via zoom), Sheldon, Issaih, Sanford Boyle, Abraham Walters, Peter Van Stratten

Budget Presentation and Public Input:

- Chad Whitehead, Town Manager presented the proposed 2026 budget. He explained that the budget was developed by the management team and department heads. Reviewed with the Select Board and is presented to the public for comments. Once the budget is adopted by the Select Board it will become a yes/no question on the ballot for Town Meeting. The tax rates are then set in August by the Select Board. Chad also discussed the budget's revenues, including property taxes, pilot payments, and fees, which totaled 11,743,371. He highlighted the anticipated increase in zoning fees and the 3.8 million dollar revenue received from sources other than property taxes. Chad discussed the budget for various departments, including the zoning administrator, maintenance, code enforcement, public safety building, dog control, Board of Selectmen, dispatch center, fire department, highway department, cemeteries, and the Pomerleau building. The budget included an increase from \$50,000 to \$85,000 for the Recreation Department. He highlighted the addition of one new full-time firefighter and an increase in the animal control budget. Chad also mentioned the increase in the cemetery budget due to the acquisition of the St. J. Center cemetery. He noted that some of these budgets include revenue from fees and cost-sharing agreements. Chad also discussed the impact of the budget on taxes, stating that there would be a 3.79% increase for those inside the special services district and a 5.89% increase for those outside of it.
- Dana Gray asked the number of positions within the Police Department in the proposed budget. Chad explained that it is a State Police matter that is currently active within the courts. Dana asked if there was a possibility that Sgt. Johnson could return. Chad and Chief Pierce mentioned that the Town continues to work with legal counsel to discuss that.
- Sheldon asked about the reduction in the police department training funds in the proposed budget. Chad explained that the training the police department receives through the VT Police Academy doesn't cost the town and that is primarily where the officers get their training.
- Sanford asked why the out of town percentage increase was higher than within the special services district. Steve Isham explained that because outside of the special services district there are fewer people meaning the overall percentage rate increases however the tax rate is actually smaller.

- Sanford asked what the top 3 or 4 items were that caused an increase in taxes. Chad explained that there were a number of things that caused the increase including the increase in health insurance cost, increase in labor costs, increase in recreation department funds, and the reduction in use of reserves to offset taxes. Chad explained that the Town is bound to the current health insurance as it is written into the union contracts as such.
- Steve Isham highlighted that in some departments the increase in insurance was as high as 73%. He mentioned that the increase was not just in premiums but in those electing plans as well.
- Sanford asked if the Town has consider self insuring or pooling with other municipalities to receive discounted insurance and what if any the push back from the Union would be. Chad mentioned that there had been discussions in the past with VLCT regarding grouping and he believed that Burlington self insures but agreed it would be something to look into. He also mentioned that there hasn't been a discussion with the unions regarding changing insurance in while.
- Dana Gray asked about the proposed increase of \$35,000 in the recreation department. He mentioned that there was a comment from the Select Board in the past if it could appear as a separate item on the ballot. He inquired that if that was the case and the increase was denied would the academy continue to run the recreation program. Chad said he could not speak for the Academy but did not believe so. Peter Van Straten spoke on behalf of the Academy stating that they would not continue the recreation program without the \$35,000 increase. Sanford asked why the Academy was stepping away from the recreation program. Peter Van Straten said it was time to hand it back to the Town. Chad explained that he sees the Academy as a partner and that it will not be completely separate. Jim Brown mentioned that when he recently spoke with the Academy Headmaster and Assistant Headmaster who expressed their willingness to continue coordination with the Town regarding the recreation program.
- Isaiah asked about the big white shed as you come into town on the right-hand side. Chad explained that the building he was referring to is a State salt shed and is not owned by the Town. He explained that the only benefit the Town will see from that building is that we it is time for the Town to build a new salt shed we will not need one as big as we have access to salt locally now.
- Jim Brown asked if there was a budget for personnel safety and public safety in the proposed budget. Chad explained that the first step to addressing that is filling the vacancies within the Police Department. He mentioned that mental health and addictions continue to be a big thing and discussions have taken place with NKHS about an embedded worker within the Police Department. Working on resources at the state and federal level right now.
- Peter Van Straten asked if the issue with recruitment was a salary issue. Chad and Chief Pierce said that part of it is a salary issue, part of it is rural Vermont and part of it is the number of qualified individuals for the position.
- Steve Isham highlighted that the Town continues to host the Public Safety Task Force which includes social service agencies, the Police Department and the Town. The goal is to help reduce and prevent crime.
- Chief Pierce explained that the Public Safety Task Force has the ability to remedied some of the same calls that the Police Department continues to respond to.
- Steve Isham explained that the reason that St. Johnsbury was chosen for assistance from the PSET team was because the Town is so far advanced and that is why we were selected.
- Isaiah asked if the current budget projections presented accounted for the reward money for the arrest of Scott Mason. Chad explained that the budget projections were developed prior to the situation with Scott Mason. However since the investigation is being conducted by the Vermont State Police so it will hit their budget and not ours.
- Dana Gray asked if every agency that helped out with coverage has billed the Town. Chief said no not every agency only one Sheriff's Department billed the Town.

- Abraham Walters asked how non profits go about getting funding from the Town. Chad explained that there is a special form that requires signatures from residents to get on the special appropriations list. He said that he could obtain a form from the Town Clerk's Office Monday through Friday from 8 am until 4 pm.
- Abraham explained that he is the new director for the Kingdom Recovery Center and we hope to attempt to join the others. Chad explained that Ariel has been joining the task force meetings and she is a valuable resource.

On a motion by Frank and second by Dennis the board adjourned by unanimous decision.

January 8th Select Board Meeting Video:

https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/CQATzgRTkMP7ECZLcRTKIfV8XMRGwFnYyJPBkm_t0eGBFfGZb_uTHGhkR7fGyv8-.JkNOVcl77P1XnLo4

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