

Select Board Members
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Peter Hood, Chair
<input type="checkbox"/> Mary Just Skinner, Vice Chair
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Phil Hyjek
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Steve Martin
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Liz Scharf

**MIDDLESEX SELECT BOARD
SPECIAL MEETING
Tuesday, January 11, 2022
REMOTE VIA ZOOM + Town Hall
Middlesex Town Clerk's Office
5 Church Street
Middlesex, Vermont 05602
(802) 223-5915**

MINUTES.

PRESENT VIA ZOOM: Chair Peter O. Hood, Vice Chair Mary Just Skinner, Board Members Phil Hyjek, Steve Martin and Liz Scharf. Treasurer Dorinda Crowell. Budget Committee Members Elias Gardner (who was at Town Hall), Mark Harris, Bill McManis and Randy Drury. Road Commissioner Vic Dwire. Select Board Assistant Sarah Merriman took the minutes and was present at Town Hall, which was open to the public.

Call to Order, Welcoming Guests, Amendments

Peter called the meeting to order at 5:04 PM. There were no amendments to the agenda.

Approving an FY23 Budget of \$1,503,408

Peter recapped where the Board was in the budget process and that it now reflected a 9.56% increase due to an additional \$963 in the estimated Washington County budget. Peter said the Budget Committee recommended reducing the proposed 4% COLA increase for Town employees to 3%, which would reduce the budget increase to under 9%. Dorinda proposed recommendations that would bring the budget to 8.91%. Her suggestions included reducing a line item for maintenance of some Town property, since most mowing is captured under Recreation. She recommended reducing grant matches by \$2,000. She said the Planning Commission has enough money for grant matches. She suggested cutting \$3,000 out of the budget for Town Hall repairs; last year repairs were only \$2,000 and until the Board decides what to do in the future with Town buildings, it's unlikely there will be many significant repairs. Finally, Dorinda proposed a happy compromise of a 3.5% COLA.

Peter agreed the 3.5% is a good compromise. If the 4% is maintained, the Board would need to find \$2,500 to cut. Dorinda referred the Board to her comparison between what employees were making before the mid-year pay raises (FY22) and what the employees will be earning in FY23. Dorinda said a half a percent in COLA isn't going to break anyone and it would be nice for the budget to be under 9%. Peter reminded the Board that a budget is just a plan.

Elias said the Budget committee discussed employee raises at length noting that raising pay one year and flat lining the next doesn't make sense. Peter said the Board understands that. Liz described the budget as a mixture of "needs" and "wants." She suggested downgrading the Recreation budget, limiting it to mowing and not hire a Recreation Director who costs \$6,000. It's not ideal, she said, but if looking to cut programs that aren't vital to the Town, maybe not funding a Recreation Director or reducing mowing on Town fields or not funding repairs of the tennis courts might be the way to go. People would see that the grass was overgrown and learn that this was because of budget cuts. She noted that, unlike the much larger education portion of the tax bill, there is no income sensitivity on the municipal budget. She classified recreation as a want vs a need at this point in time, especially since many people will not avail themselves of the Town's recreation fields, etc.

Steve said the Board and the Budget Committee have worked hard to get to these numbers. He proposed a 4% COLA. Cutting the Recreation Department would be a backstep. Therefore, he would remove another \$2,500 from roadside mowing since there is currently money in the budget to mow in June. That way, you could maintain the 4% COLA.

Mary asked about the \$10,000 in for the tennis courts. Didn't the Board agree to reduce that to \$5,000? Dorinda said the tennis court fund was just set up the year before. Mary said she would go with 3.5% or 4% COLA, whatever the Select Board thinks. She noted it's the first time a Budget Committee in recent history has made recommendations; in the past, the Budget Committee has rubber stamped the Board's decisions. She said either being a little bit above or below a 9% increase doesn't really matter to the voters who look at the final number and decide whether it's too high.

Mark said he researched budgets in last five years and this is the second big increase. It's important to remind voters this is less than a quarter of the total tax bill the taxpayers pay and will add 4.7 cents per \$100/assessed value. Over 75% of the tax rate, the Board has no control over. The Budget Committee recommended adding wording on the ballot about the increase which will give voters of a frame of reference. Peter responded that the budget article is standard. He suggested putting this percentage in the Budget Committee report and the Select Board report. There will also be an informational meeting before the Australian ballot vote, noted.

Mark said for a \$300,000 house, a budget with a 9% increase would add roughly \$141 to a tax bill. He said it's "our responsibility" to serve the least-informed voters who are not going to read the annual report or come to an informational meeting. Therefore, it's incumbent on the Board to provide a frame of reference. Liz said a 9% budget increase can seem huge to voters who may not understand that their tax bills are not going to increase by 9%. There can be a disconnect. Liz said the Town cannot afford to lose employees. The only way to get Road Crew and a bookkeeper to work for the Town will be to pay them. She suggested a one-page handout to voters explaining the effect the budget would have on their taxes.

Vic said there are many places to cut, but disagreed with a 3.5% COLA increase. For those with a \$700,000 house, they will be hit more. Randy supported mentioning on the ballot and in the handout that the budget represented a 9% increase. Phil said there's little fat in the budget to trim. His recollection was that the Board recommended cutting \$5,000 from tennis courts. He recommended incorporating Steve's cuts and maintaining the 4% COLA.

Steve proposed adopting Dorinda's suggestions: reducing Town Property Maintenance (line 14) by \$1,500, reducing Grant Matches (line 26) by \$2,000, reducing the Town Hall Building Repairs (line 62) by \$3,000 and cutting \$5,000 from the Tennis/Basketball Rehabilitation (line 233), but keeping a 4% COLA for Town employees. That would leave a FY23 budget of \$1,503,408, an 8.73% increase over the FY22 budget.

Dorinda's changes. 4%. Reduce tennis court to 5,000 that would bring it to 8.73%

MOTION: Steve moved presenting to the voters at the March 1, 2022 Town Meeting a municipal FY23 budget of \$1,503,408 for an 8.73% increase over the FY22 budget; Phil seconded. The motion passed.

The Board and the Budget Committee discussed what should be included in their annual reports. Mary asked that the report include the budget breakdown normally distributed at in-person Town Meetings, which will probably be unlikely this year.

The meeting adjourned at 5:50 PM.

Respectfully submitted by Sarah Merriman, Select Board Assistant

THE ABOVE MINUTES WERE APPROVED AS A WARNED AGENDA ITEM AT A REGULARLY SCHEDULED MEETING OF THE MIDDLESEX SELECT BOARD ON JANUARY 18, 2022.

PETER O. HOOD, CHAIR

MARY JUST SKINNER, VICE CHAIR

PHILIP HYJEK

STEVEN MARTIN

ELIZABETH SCHARF