

TOWN OF GROTON
PUBLIC HEARING – PROPOSED BUDGET
February 4, 2025

In Attendance: John Rescigno, Tony Albert, Ron Madan, and Sara Smith (Administrative Assistant)

Audience Members Present

John called the Public Hearing on the Proposed Budget and Warrant Articles to order at 6:00pm.

John explained that this public hearing is to go over the budget and warrant articles. We will start with the budget.

Budget

John reported that the Operating Budget of \$1,052,656 which increased by \$132,182. The entire budget increased \$114,926 from last year. John said we will just go through the budget and over some of the highlights of the budget and discuss any increases and decreases but the majority of the increase came from the Fire contracts.

General Government

John mention that the General Government totals \$374,921 which increased by \$10,413 from last year.

Executive

The proposed budget is \$89,291, an increase of \$2,304. There were yearly wage increases and increase to the moderator salary.

Election, Registration, Vital Statistics

The proposed budget is \$74,730, an increase of \$4,740. There increases here was to give due to the town clerk and the deputy wage increases. John explained the decrease on the Supervisors is due to less elections this year. Ruth wanted to comment that the increase in election supplies has to do with the tablet that we have, which allows disabled people to vote, has to be programmed and that costs \$600.

Financial Administration

The proposed budget is \$25,125, which decreased by \$450 due to changing companies for the Town Report.

Legal Expenses

The proposed budget is \$13,000, which stayed the same as last year.

David Darlington said that total wise we are way underspending for the legal lines. He asked why we don't reduce the legal lines due to this. John explained that this is a hard one to change. John said unfortunately, with legal, you are always under until you have to contact an attorney and then you will probably be over. David said he doesn't think we should budget for the worst case. John said it is a roll of the dice and using an attorney once for a legal situation could put you over the \$13,000 depending on what is needed. He said that whatever money is not used will go back to the general fund and this money can help offset the taxes. David said that we really should keep other expenses down this year since we have not got to the big increases like the ambulance. Sara explained that the Select Board did work hard to keep the lines down and cut things where they could. Sara said for legal, the reason this was not decreased is because

there are some issues that we have been dealing with that we know come Spring there will be legal costs for site visits, court dates, etc. regarding some junkyard issues and flood plain issues, etc. Sara said one of these visits and court dates will be costly.

Personnel Administration

The proposed budget is \$99,000, which is an increase of \$4,382 due to increase in Health Insurance and retirement. John explained that NHRS increased and health insurance increased but there is really not much we can do about those things.

Planning/Zoning

The proposed budget is \$8,448, an increase of \$376 due to the increase for the Planning Board legal costs. Dave Darlington asked about the legal line for this. He said he doesn't know what else they can do and why they would need to increase the legal line. asked if they are making changes to zoning again. Sara explained that they are not making any zoning changes that she is aware of but they are revising the procedures, subdivision and site plan regulations.

General Government Buildings

The proposed budget is \$24,600, a decrease of \$1,500.

Cemeteries

The proposed budget is \$6,182, a decrease of \$2,000 which was Cemetery repairs and maintenance.

General Insurance

The proposed budget is \$22,750, an increase of \$2,511 which was an increase in costs for 2025 for Property & Liability Insurance which went up \$2,032 and the Workers Compensation line went up \$479. These are also areas that are out of our control.

Advertising and Regional Associations

The proposed budget is \$4,600, an increase of \$150.

David Darlington said we should reduce these costs and think about taking some of the nice to have things out. John said we were over on this line last year so we cannot decrease it. David asked what GHS and NLRA are. Sara explained that GHS is Groton Historical Society and we provide them with money every year. They do a lot in town to preserve the history of the town. David asked if they have their own budget. Sara said they do not. David asked about NLRA. Sara said NLRA is Newfound Lakes Region Association. They work with the town to help keep the brooks/rivers in town clean that feed into Newfound Lake. They have also helped us get grants and fundings for other projects. Sara explained that every year in the Town Report there are write ups from any of the places we give money to which explains not just what they do but what they did to help Groton in the last year. John said that anything we do with the waterways, NLRA is there to help us with knowledge and grants. David said that he doesn't see anywhere the income that they brought in. John said it is not a line that produces income. David said we said they are giving us money to work on things. John said they help us with grants to pay for things but they do not pay us anything. They assist us when we need help and assist us with getting grants for projects.

Other General Government

The proposed budget is \$7,192, a decrease of \$100.

Police

The proposed budget is \$79,019, a decrease of \$420.

Miles said he noticed that dispatch is trending downward and asked the Chief to explain what is going on with that. Chief Bagan said that the call volume has been lower and it is prorated to your call volume. As years go on and the call volume reduces, they recalculate and reduce the costs.

David Darlington asked about the advertisement line and what the Police Department advertises for. John explained if we have to advertise for an open position or something like that. David asked if we are going to do this. Chief explained that he has put it out there regarding recruitment efforts to try to get someone part time but there was no interest but who knows if this could come up again. Most of his efforts did not cost because he was making calls or sending letter, etc. Sara also mentioned that we don't want Chief to go anywhere but if he did, we would have to prepare for that. John said that they do try to run a tight budget without wasting money but sometimes if you cut too much, you hurt yourself in the long run. David said the total budget has gone up 23% over the last two years. This year the operating budget is going up 3.5% without the fire and ambulance. John said which is a lot better than the national inflation which went up about 11%. Stacey Darlington said that the rest of us only got 2.5%. David said the government said you should be able to live with 2.5%. David said we need to take \$8,000 out of the budget to get it to the 2.5% and stay with what people can afford. John said they will look at it.

David said we have a 20% override when we do the taxes. Sara asked if he is talking about the overlay? Sara explained that overlay is for abatements for anyone that files and abatement but we were expecting that tax money. That does not have to do with the budget itself and what we need money for.

Fire and Ambulance

The proposed budget is \$218,750, which increased \$103,815.

Also, we do a three-year contract with Hebron so it hasn't increased in three years. It increased this year by \$43,000 but this will stay the same for the next three years. This is what they are charging us and it is what it is.

Tony explained this is a three-year contract. Stacey asked him to explain that. She wanted it clarified regarding the \$43,000 and the three-year contract. Tony said the payment will be \$125,000 for the next three years. He explained that he is the new fire chief in Hebron. The wage line has to go up. He has to start hiring people because they are at only four people on the ambulance. The wage line was \$90,000 last year and it is going to \$190,000 this year. He has to hire a bunch of people and increase the wages. They also have to purchase \$150,000 worth of breathing apparatuses this year. They also just purchased a \$360,000 ambulance. Tony said this is a bargain, trust him.

Stacey asked if it will be \$43,000 for the next three years. Tony said no, it went up \$43,000 this year to \$125,000 so the Hebron budget will be \$125,000 for the next three years. Sara said next year it will be the same, at \$125,000 each year.

David asked about the percentage that is. Tony said he doesn't know what the formula is that they use. David asked him what the total budget for the Fire Department is. Tony said this year is \$231,000 just for his operating budget and it will be \$400,000 next year. Bubba wanted to point out that Groton is half their calls and someday we are going to have to pay half the bill. Sara said this is still way cheaper than it would be to have our own fire department.

The Rumney line is \$72,735. They want us to contribute towards the fire truck they are purchasing and our share is \$57,333.50. This is a one-time expenditure for this year only. Tony said the new fire truck they just bought was \$500,000 and we only have to pay \$57,333.50 towards that. John said next year it will go back down to the \$15,000.

Miles said he knows in the not-so-distant past we have had major issues with Rumney not fulfilling their responsibilities and not responding to calls and asked if this has all been rectified. Tony said it is much better now. They have new people in and on the fire side they are much better. On the ambulance side they are having some issues but he was talking to the Rumney Chief and they are supposed to have two new EMT's coming on so hopefully that will improve as well. Tony said they work well together.

John mentioned the mutual aid has also increased \$3,080.

Emergency Management

The proposed budget is \$1,278, which stayed the same as last year.

Highway Administration

The proposed budget is \$93,170, an increase of \$2,818 due to wage increases.

Highways and Streets

The proposed budget is \$129,301, an increase of \$10,000 which is for Groton Roads Repair and Maintenance. David asked if we can talk about why this is going. Bubba explained that this is due to the fact that we are going to have to start grading and putting more time into taking care of Province Road each year, whether we like it or not, because the bridge will be going in next year. When it is open, there will be significantly more traffic than there is now so that means more maintenance. Bubba said we actually own most of the road and to be honest he is not thrilled the bridge is going in. Miles said he is. It is the fastest way to get to Canaan. Stacey said that means we have to maintain it now. Bubba said we have always maintained it but not to the degree we will have to. Tony said that we have been getting away with grading every other year but will have to do this every year along with other yearly maintenance. David asked for the date when the bridge will be open. Bubba said he cannot remember the exact date but sometime in 2026. Sara said they already started working on it and will be in 2025 with the plan to have the bidding starting early 2026 and the bridge to be open in 2026. Bubba said if we don't spend the \$10,000 this year then it will be more next year. David asked if we spend the \$10,000 this year if it will go back down. Bubba said no, it will remain this amount going forward since we will have to do the yearly maintenance every year.

Streets and Lighting

The proposed budget is \$1,540, which stayed the same

Sanitation

The proposed budget is \$127,040, which is an increase of \$4,590.

Sanitation – Monitoring

The proposed budget is \$127,040 which is an increase of \$1,390. The monitoring is going up because there is some testing and reporting that we found out we were supposed to be doing that we were not doing.

Solid Waste Disposal

The proposed budget is \$112,850, an increase of \$3,200 which is mostly due to wage increases but also the increase for the telephone/internet line and the backhoe maintenance line.

David Darlington wanted to talk about the backhoe maintenance line which is \$3,000. He said that they were told that we would keep the second backhoe. Sara said that is what that line is for. The Transfer Station has the second backhoe. He said the new one is going to be right across the street from it. Bubba said it will be a while before that happens. Sara mentioned that is just for the normal maintenance such as oil changes, tires, etc. Bubba said it had to a flat tire and we had to pay \$500 just to fix that. David said they were told that we weren't going to put any money into it including maintenance. Bubba said he doesn't believe anyone ever said that. Sara said there was a maintenance line last year too which shows we were always planning on putting money into maintenance. Bubba said it will be different once the backhoe is across the street but that will be awhile. David said the backhoe should be across the street before the bridge is put in. Bubba said maybe not. David said the backhoe will be up here this year. Sara said not necessarily. David asked if we think it will take them a year and half to do it. Stacey asked when the building will be done. John explained we are hoping for mid-summer/fall. Right now, it has slowed things down because of the cold. The doors should be installed this week but then it will be on hold after that. David said so it will be completed this year. Bubba explained the building will be but that does not include the salt and sand shed. Until the salt and sand shed are up there, we will not have the backhoe up there, which could be another year or two. Stacey thought that was included. David said we could still move the salt up here. Bubba said not we cannot, the salt has to be under cover. Sara said we would be paying more money to replace the salt because it won't be covered and protected from the weather. David said there is no shed down there now for it. Stacey told him that is for the sand and explained they are talking about the salt.

Stacey said she misunderstood the whole garage thing. She thought that included everything from down below up to there. She asked if there will be more costs coming our way to do this. John said we are looking into grants for the salt and sand shed. Sara said this has been discussed before. Tony said they brought this up at the last town meeting that to bring the costs down, we had to cancel the salt and sand shed. Bubba said the sand shed was never on there, it was always just the salt shed but then that was removed as well. Sara said she is applying for grants right now. Bubba said Sara applied for a grant already so we have some money for it already, not a lot of money. Sara said the one grant they have been approved for so far was \$19,000 but she is applying for more. Bubba said the problem with the USDA grant is that until you have spent 80% of the funds on the current one, you cannot apply for another one.

David Darlington asked why there was \$500 for the brush hog when we didn't use it this year. Sara explained it has to do with cleaning up the landfill which is required.

Stacey said it may sound like they are nitpicking but you increase the budget considerably and she understands most of it is for the fire department but we still have to pay for it. She said they only got a 2.5% increase. Here is a factoid that you can talk to people about. There was a recent survey that was published. The top 20 most expensive towns in the state were listed and Hebron is a part of that. She asked if the Select Board is trying to get Groton up to that as well. John said that in all the time he has been here, it doesn't seem like they have done anything even close to that since the taxes have been pretty much the same. David said the town rate went up by \$1.00 from the year before, which he said is like 300%. Sara said that she doesn't think people understand the way the town rate works. The Select Board work to bring this number down by using the money from the unreserved fund balance. It depends how much money is in there and how much money the Select Board can use of that to apply to offset the tax rate. So, if we are comparing year to year, our true numbers from what the DRA sets as the Towns rate, was almost the same from last year to this year and was over \$2.00. Both years, the Select Board applied money to bring this number down but the amount they applied was different. David said there is always money in the unreserved fund balance. Sara said yes but sometimes there is not a lot, one year it

was really low. John said their goal for every year they try to maintain the overall tax rate to be pretty close to what it was the year before and we apply money from the unreserved fund balance to do so. John said this money comes from the money we raised that was not used, so if we cut everything down to the bare minimum and do the cuts David is requesting, we will not have any money to apply towards the tax rate because nothing will be going back into the general fund which is the unreserved fund balance. David said yes, we want to do these cuts and keep the taxes low. John said you really cannot do both. David said if we have a slower starting point then you wont really have to use much. Tony said that they are doing their best to keep the tax rate low, it was \$10.00 last year and it is \$9.69 this year. David said that is the overall rate, that is because of the schools, not the town rate. John said it does. Sara said it does because if money was not applied from the unreserved fund balance the tax rate wouldn't have gone down, it would have gone up. David says he understands that it is money from this fund balance, selling property and other things that go into it but he thinks keeping the operating budget down to at least the 2.5% would be better. John said they will take that into consideration.

Health Administration

The proposed budget is \$2,803, stayed the same.

Health Agencies and Hospitals

The proposed budget is \$6,996, an increase of \$800 due to a few of the health agencies going up.

Miles asked why domestic violence and Lakes Region Mental Health went up. He said GHS and NLRA have all stayed the same for years so why did these go up. He wanted to know the thought process here and how they determine the winners and losers especially since domestic violence doubled and Lakes Region Mental Health went up 31%. John explained that they look at it two ways. One, they look at what they are requesting and two, how much they assisted our town. They weigh those factors in and determine how much they are going to give them. Miles asked if they realize that these types or organizations never have enough and will always want more. John said of course. Tony said that they have asked for more than what we give them every year. Miles asked what they have requested. Sara said that this year we gave what they asked for but the last few years they requested this but the Select Board denied it. Miles said his overriding question is why they gave to them but not others. Sara explained that the others did not ask for an increase, only these ones did. She said that the others asked for the same thing as the previous year. Sara pulled up the information and the taskforce did ask for \$1,100 this year but they have been requesting it the last few years. Lakes Region has asked for \$1,050 the last three years but the Select Board only approved \$800 but this year agree to give them what they were asking for.

Welfare

The proposed budget is \$4,951, which stayed the same.

Culture and Recreation

The proposed budget is \$12,887, an increase of \$166.

Parks and Recreation

The proposed budget is \$10,690, an increase of \$166 which is which is mostly due to the increase from Tapply Thompson Community Center.

Library

The proposed budget is \$2, which stayed the same as last year.

Patriotic Purposes

The proposed budget is \$100, which stayed the same as last year.

Conservation

The proposed budget is \$2,095, which stayed the same as last year.

Other questions on budget:

Miles said that last year at the budget hearing, he had made a suggestion to the Select Board to try to reach out to the windfarm to get some sense as to where they are at regarding either decommissioning or repowering the wind farm in just over three years. Sara said that the Select Board did reach out and talked to the gentleman that is in charge of this. He stated that there are no current plans to decommission the facility, they are looking into repowering many facilities and Groton would be a potential candidate for repowering. Currently, Avangrid intends to continue to own and operate the facility in current form. As far as the PILOT since the current agreement expires in 2028, he felt it was too premature to discuss this but we have set up a reminder to reach out in early 2026 to start these discussions. Miles feels that is too late from a tax payers' perspective. He thinks that the conversations should start now and they should start looking at plans now. He said it is up to the Select Board and they should not wait until it hits us in the face and hope is not a plan. He doesn't think too many people appreciate how much of a financial change the town would face if they choose to decommission the wind farm. He thinks the PILOT is about half the budget now so in his opinion the Select Board need to come up with a financial plan and not just ignore it until it hits us in the face. John said that is something we are looking at and is why we have been working hard to get the town into such a good position such as getting the Town garage in, replacing the compactor, getting the roads and culverts done so that when it does end, we are only maintaining these things instead of having to replace these things. This is something that is in the back of their minds when they are creating the budget. Miles said that we should plan for the worst but hope for the best. Stacey said that we should require them for a budget comparison. John explained that they don't have control over the budget. Stacey said the budget will increase by this amount. John said the operating budget is the operating budget and doesn't have any wiggle room, it is the warrant articles that are the extras. Stacey said he is misunderstanding what she is saying. She is saying that should the windfarm remove itself from the Town of Groton, then this budget will go up 50%. Sara said that it will not increase the budget itself, as these numbers show the actual budget costs without any revenues applied. However, it would increase the amount of money we would need to raise from taxes if we no longer had this revenue. David said that if they cover half the budget then the tax rate will double. Bubba said that would put Groton back to where it was in 1997. Sara said there was some that were in the 20's that were not even that far back. David said it is not the Select Board that needs to prepare for this, it is the townspeople. John said but the Select Board lives in the town. Miles said he can give an example of what we are facing. In 2008, when he was on the board of selectmen, they were lucky to get \$30,000 to maintain the roads and we could be back there if we lose that windfarm revenue. That is why he is for the Select Board having a better focus of protecting the town residents financially. Sara said we can reach out and see if we can start meeting this year.

Warrant Articles

John mentioned that we are going to go over the warrant articles. Article 1 is a ballot article that will be voted on at Town elections.

Article 2: Operating Budget \$1,052,656

This was already gone over above.

Article 3: HMGP Grant for North Groton Road Culvert

To see if the Town will vote to raise and appropriate the sum of **five hundred thousand dollars (\$500,000)** for the purpose of the North Groton Road culvert project with the amount of **four hundred fifty thousand dollars (\$450,000)** (90%) being offset by a federal Hazard Mitigation Grant the Town applied for and the remaining town's share of **fifty thousand dollars (\$50,000)** (10%) to come from general taxation. (Majority vote required).

John said this is for the culvert near North Groton Road Cemetery to replace the current culvert with an open bottom box culvert like we did on Sculptured Rocks Road. Miles asked if this is the one that Glen did some work on a few years ago. Bubba said he doesn't think so. Tony said this is the one where the dry hydrant is. Sara mentioned this is a unique grant offering 90/10, these grants are usually 75/25. That means right now the town only has to come up with 10% of the costs. Bubba said we could have waited a few years to replace it but we wouldn't get this 90/10 grant if we wait. He said this is the last large culvert in town that needs to be replaced, besides the ones on the State Road. David asked if this is the road we just paved. Bubba said it is the road we just chip sealed. David asked if this will cover the cost to put the road back to the condition it was. Sara said it does. David said will it leave a big bump like the others they dig up. Bubba said we have never left big bumps in Groton.

Article 4: \$137,500 for previously established Capital Reserve Funds

To see if the Town will vote to raise and appropriate the sum of **one hundred thirty-seven thousand five hundred dollars (\$137,500)** to be added to the previously established Capital Reserve Funds. (Majority vote required)

Public Works CR Fund (Dec. 31, 2024 balance: \$3.38): \$50,000
Disaster Relief CR Fund (Dec. 31, 2024 balance: \$191,441.90): \$30,000
Truck/Sander CR Fund (Dec. 31, 2024 balance: \$32,751.72): \$20,000
Heavy Equipment CR Fund (Dec. 31, 2024 balance: \$22,079.17): \$10,000
Police Cruiser CR Fund (Dec. 31, 2024 balance: \$37,955.47): \$10,000
Town House CR Fund (Dec. 31, 2024 balance: \$26,715.06): \$10,000
Assessing Reval CR Fund (Dec. 31, 2024 balance: \$27,032.28): \$7,500
Total Capital Reserve Funds \$137,500

John said that the we put \$50,000 in the Public Works so we have the money in there if there are any other costs associated with the building that are unforeseen right now. John went over the other amounts and said this is pretty much what we put in there every year. David said except for the disaster relief. Sara said last year we put \$50,000 and this year we are only doing \$30,000. David said it looks like it already has enough in there. Sara said that in our experience, one storm can cause up to \$250,000 in damage and we are not always guaranteed FEMA money. David said we could scale this back. John said we could but then if there is a storm we would be in a predicament. David said that is why you have the unreserved funds too.

Article 5: Chip Sealing

To see if the Town will vote to raise and appropriate the sum of one hundred **thirty-nine thousand dollars (\$139,000)** for chip sealing. Bubba explained that this is from where we left off to the Town line on North Groton Road.

Article 6: Pasquaney School District/SAU 108

To see if the Town will vote to raise and appropriate the sum of **fifty thousand dollars (\$50,000)** to contribute to the costs of the Pasquaney School District/SAU #108. John explained we are putting money into there as we are not certain if there will be a start up cost and there might be so we want to have a

cushion if there is one that we have money to fall back on. Stacey asked if there are no start up costs, will this amount be able to be used towards our overall costs of the school. John said we are trying to have it written that way but he doesn't think that it can. If not, it will go back in to the general fund. Sara said the way that it is written right now, since it doesn't say start up costs, we are trying to make it so if there are any other costs for the Pasquaney District this year that it can be used for that but we are waiting to hear back from DRA regarding the wording. John said if the money doesn't get used towards anything, it would go back to the general fund which can be used to offset the taxes. David said they are having their budget hearing next week so we should know more. Sara said that is correct so it could be amended if needed. John said we will have a better understanding come town meeting.

Miles asked for the status on the school. John said that they are working on the final budget. Everything else is pretty much ironed out. Miles asked if it was definitely decided to leave SAU4. John said that has been done and they are at the point of working out bus routes, working on the curriculum, the budget is being created. Sara said all towns voted in favor at town meeting last year. She said this is the last year we are with SAU4 and starting in August/September with the new school year it will be SAU108. Ruth said we will not have a ballot with SAU4 this year, it will all be for SAU108.

Article 7: Conservation Commission portion of Timber Tax

To see if the Town will vote to raise and appropriate the sum of **five hundred twenty-nine dollars (\$529)** for deposit in the Conservation Fund, with said amount to come from the unassigned fund balance. This sum represents 3% of the Timber Tax revenue received in 2024. (Submitted by the Conservation Commission) (Majority vote required)

Article 8: Transact any other business that may legally come before the Town

Deliberation

The Selectmen deliberated on the following items.

- Sara said that we are still waiting to hear back from DRA on the wording for the school. Once she hears back, she will make changes if needed. She will also make the changes to the budget and warrant from this meeting and she will let the Select Board know when it is ready to be signed. Also, the MS-636 will need to be signed. **John motioned to come in and sign the warrant and the MS-636 once it is ready, Tony 2nd, so voted.**
- The Select Board said that they are keeping the operating budget as is but will look again to see if there are any other areas they can cut back on.
- The Select Board discussed changing warrant article 4. They agreed to change the amount we are putting into the Disaster Capital Reserve fund to \$25,000 instead of \$30,000. Sara will make this change.

Having no other business to conduct, John motioned to close the public hearing on the Proposed Budget and Warrant Articles at 6:44pm, Tony 2nd, so voted.

Respectfully Submitted,

Sara Smith
Town Administrator