

**TOWN OF RYE BUDGET COMMITTEE
MEETING AN PUBLIC HEARING
2024 TOWN BUDGET
Thursday, January 11, 2024, 6:30 p.m.
Rye Town Hall & Via Zoom**

Budget Committee Present: *Chair Scott Marion, Vice-Chair Jeff Ross, Clerk Steven Borne, Kate Dumas, Doug Abrams, Rye Beach District Rep Shawn Crapo, and Selectmen’s Rep Bob McGrath*

Others Present on behalf of the Town: *Town Administrator Matt Scruton, Finance Director Becky Bergeron, Town Clerk/Tax Collector Donna Decotis, Recreation Director Dyana Martin, Fire Chief Mark Cotreau, Deputy Fire Chief Kevin Wunderly, Police Chief Kevin Walsh, Building Inspector Chuck Marsden, and Sewer Director Lee Arthur*

I. CALL TO ORDER AND PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Chair Marion called the meeting to order at 6:37 p.m. and led the Pledge of Allegiance.

II. PUBLIC HEARING – 2024 TOWN BUDGET

The purpose of the Hearing is to consider the proposed Town Operating Budget for 2024 and Warrant Articles.

At 6:38 p.m., Chair Marion called for a motion to open the public hearing. **So moved by Shawn Crapo. Seconded by Steven Borne.**

Hugh Lee, 220 Pioneer Road, expressed his concerns on the amount in the proposed budget for the Conservation Commission, which has been recommended by the Select Board and Budget Committee for \$146,650. He urged the Budget Committee to reduce the Conservation Commission’s budget to \$100,000 or less for 2024, based on the track record over the past four to five years.

Member Crapo commented that he doesn’t believe those years had as much property maintenance, as the Goss Farm maintenance was not in the budget or paid differently at that time.

Chair Marion noted that the Budget Committee hears the concerns. The Committee has also heard from the Conservation Commission and they’ve been responsive. He pointed out that if the money is not spent it drops down into the fund balance.

Dominique Winebaum, 52 Cable Road, spoke in regard to the key points in a letter that was sent to the Budget Committee: 1) Concern about the 25% increase in the Planning Department Budget. 2) A lack of disclosure for a \$35,040 contract for a circuit writer for the Planning Department for the period of July 2023 to June 2024. 3) Another \$35,040 for the same circuit writer in the Planning Department's budget for July 2024 to January 2025. 4) The circuit writer's scope of work in the contract is up to 40 hours of assistance to perform tasks previously preformed by the Planning/Zoning Administrator. 5) The yearly salary of the Planning/Zoning Administrator is \$90,615 with an added \$55,624 for benefits. The salary falls in Grade 12, but much assistance is needed to run the department with a total of \$57,040 for consulting fees. 6) The process of updating the Master Plan started three years ago and the Town is still in the visioning process. This is adding to the cost of running the Department when the plan should have been completed by now. The makeup of the details of the Planning Department Budget lacks transparency, and value for the taxpayers' money. The significant increase needs to be justified and explained.

Chair Marion confirmed that the letter was received and reviewed by the Budget Committee Members.

Member Borne commented that he does not believe the Town is structured correctly for the amount of work that needs to get done around planning, conservation, and the building inspector. With the growth of the Town, it could probably be structured better to handle the growth. He pointed out that it's not the Budget Committee's job to figure this out, but he does agree that the Town keeps on growing and adding head count. In 2022, Rye had 55 employees with benefits and that number keeps adding up. He thinks it would be a good exercise to step back and look at the work that needs to be done, the level of expertise, and the most efficient model to get that work done.

Member Crapo pointed out that in this budget it's a contract that was added. It's a fixed rate with no benefits on top. Instead of proposing another assistant, it's a contract that can be cancelled. With some of the consulting fees, he believes it's the same as zoning. If something is sent out for peer review, there has to be a budget item in order to be able to send it out for review; however, that cost is often paid by the applicant.

Selectman McGrath commented that the increase in revenues is following the increase in need for additional assistance. He agrees that it's always better to get a contracted service. The Town has no idea what the workflow is going to be next year and what kind of resources has to be dedicated to each one. So, it's better to be renting a person rather than employing.

Joe Cummins, 990 Washington Road, expressed his concerns.

No further public comments were heard.

At 7:03 p.m., Doug Abrams made a motion to close the public hearing. Seconded by Shawn Crapo. Vote: 7-0

ARTICLE --. Shall the Town raise and appropriate as an operating budget, not including appropriations by special warrant articles and other appropriations voted separately, the amounts set forth on the budget posted with the warrant or as amended by vote of the first session, for the purposes set forth therein totaling twelve million, nine hundred twenty-nine thousand, four hundred fifty-five and 00/100 dollars (\$12,929,455.00)? Should this article be defeated, the default budget shall be eleven million, eight hundred eighty-nine thousand, eight hundred fourteen and 00/100 dollars (\$11,889,814.00) which is the same as last year, with certain adjustments required by previous action of the Town or by law; or the governing body may hold one special meeting, in accordance with RSA 40:13, X and XVI, to take up the issue of a revised operating budget only. (Majority vote required.)

NOTE: This operating budget warrant article does not include appropriations in any other warrant articles.

This article is/is not recommended by the Select Board
This article is/is not recommended by the Budget Committee

Note: *The Article for the Town’s operating budget has not yet been voted on by the Select Board, as of the date of this meeting.*

**Motion by Shawn Crapo to recommend the Operating Budget Article.
Seconded by Jeff Ross.**

Member Abrams stated that he has heard some of the concerns of the people present. He reminded everyone that the Budget Committee is made up of volunteers who are trying to do the best work for the community with what is presented from the Department Heads. In the future, when the budgets are being presented and there is a concern, it might be a great time to hear those concerns; when the budgets are being built.

Mrs. Winebaum commented that she thought that public comment is not allowed during those work sessions.

Chair Marion noted that this year, the Budget Committee allowed a lot of public comment.

Member Abrams pointed out that the Town’s tax rate is still far more favorable than a lot of other communities and there’s a quality of service that’s being provided. He takes it personally that the Committee is “rubber stamping” anything. He has done this for many years and doesn’t feel that any budget that’s presented is just passed. He pointed out that a lot of people move to Rye because of the tax rate and the quality of services.

Member Crapo pointed out that many of the members have been on the committee for a few budget cycles and have seen the trends. There's a continuum and a lot of the members have the institutional knowledge that doesn't need to be repeated.

Chair Marion stated that if the Budget Committee was "rubber stamping" the meetings would be a lot shorter. He doesn't think the Committee is rubber stamping anything.

Sam Winebaum, 52 Cable Road, stated that he thinks Mr. Lee and his wife have brought up very valid points. He believes that what they brought up should have come up earlier in the Committee's earlier discussions with the various departments. He agrees that they have very low taxes for a Town of this complexity; however, it doesn't mean they shouldn't be wise with their dollars. Maybe they should be spending more in other areas and less in others. He knows it's a lot of work, but asked that they take it to heart and question some things more closely.

Chair Marion pointed out there were questions about Conservation. The Conservation Commission actually reduced their initial request for legal considerably. The Budget Committee already had a discussion about it. The Committee also had long discussion with DPW about a contracted or employed town custodian. The point is, the Committee does discuss these things.

Mr. Winebaum commented that he's just asking for more rigor in the details because there are millions in dollars left over every year.

Vice-Chair Ross explained that the unassigned fund balance has been used historically in Rye to pay down the tax rate even lower. This year, Rye has about 1.3 million in culvert and bridge projects that are going to be funded out of the unassigned fund balance. These are things that would have needed a warrant article to be funded, had the Town not had that fund balance.

Selectman McGrath noted there are two full day work sessions for the budget; one with the Select Board and one with the Budget Committee. The details of the budget are reviewed with every department head.

Member Borne noted that there were a number of warrant articles that the Town historically puts money to that were not presented. There was a big effort by the Select Board and the Department Heads to make concessions to keep those expenses out of the budget before the Budget Committee even saw it. He pointed out that this was done by the School Board also. He commented that he would love to come up with ways to get more people involved in the process.

There was some discussion on the Budget Committee process and looking at how it can be improved.

Chair Marion commented that he agrees with looking at ways to perhaps improve the process. However, the Committee doesn't get to dictate the whole process. The State dictates a lot of the dates and a lot of the requirements. That's the challenge.

Hearing no further comments, Chair Marion called for a vote on the motion to recommend the Operating Budget Warrant Article.

Vote: 7-0

III. OTHER BUSINESS

- Meeting Minutes – 12/14/2023

The following correction was noted:

- Article G: Should say this is in addition to the Town's operating budget.

Motion by Shawn Crapo to approve the minutes of December 14, 2023 as amended. Seconded by Doug Abrams. All in favor.

At 7:26 p.m., Chair Marion reopened to public comment.

Mike Steinberg, 17 Sea Glass Lane, asked about the number of roads that are going to be paved during the year.

DPW Director Jason Rucker noted that the Select Board opted to increase the budget for paving. If the budget is passed, it's expected that more paving will be done in 2024. The list of roads that are going to be paved is not finalized at this time.

Mike Thiel, 34 Brackett Road, commented that he's shocked to see a fourteen percent increase in the budget.

Member Crapo pointed out that some of the figure includes the warrant articles, not just the operating budget.

Finance Director Bergeron noted that two of the large warrant articles have no current tax impact, as they're coming from the unassigned fund balance. She pointed out this is just expenses only. It isn't predicated on any revenues being received to offset the budget.

Mr. Thiel encouraged the Budget Committee to think really hard about the taxpayers in town and the amount of money that's being spent on a variety of things. There may be better ways to do some things.

Chair Marion noted that every town, board, and commission that deals with expenses and revenues thinks about the impact on the tax rate.

No further public comments.

Motion by Shawn Crapo to adjourn at 7:39 p.m. Seconded by Kate Dumas. All in favor.

Respectfully Submitted, Dyana F Ledger