

Town Administrator's Budget Proposal Reduces Spending by 0.42%

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Spending on the non-education part of the town budget (which is only about a quarter of total town spending) would go down 0.42 percent under the proposal Town Administrator Kathleen Buch presented to the Board of Selectmen on Monday night.

"The town budget's flat," Buch said. Total spending would be \$45,980,169 — down \$194,463 from last year.

(That amount would knock 0.02 from the mill rate, if everything else were equal, such as an education budget that was no larger than this year's. Buch said it takes about \$85,000 to reduce the tax rate by one one-hundredth of a mill, which is the amount of taxes for every \$1,000 of assessed residential property value.)

Buch pointed to several factors that allowed overall spending to decrease:

- **Debt service** this year is down by \$925,721, since the town hasn't been borrowing as much as it used to.
- **Capital project funding** is down by \$430,553 from last year.

- **Dental insurance** is down a bit — by \$23,402.

While those expenses shrank, some others rose. Buch highlighted these increases in funding:

- **New personnel, including benefits** (General Fund Impact) \$75,103 — this includes three new civilian dispatchers for the Police Department (those dispatchers cost more than that — about \$150,000 for the upcoming fiscal year and about \$300,000 after that; it wasn't clear why the \$75,103 was so low or what was off-setting that cost).
- The annual **Darien Library grant** has a proposed \$89,697 increase (up 2.4 percent from the current fiscal year). Buch said that all she gets from the library is a number. The library, a semi-independent entity, gives a detailed presentation to the Board of Selectmen, so Buch said she would not recommend a budget amount and leave any decisions about the library grant to selectmen.
- **Medical insurance** is up by \$333,802.
- **Retirement fund contributions** are up \$212,952. This includes the town pension fund, the police pension fund and retiree medical contributions.

Personnel costs are the biggest single part of the budget, accounting for 61.2 percent of the total (almost exactly the same as last year).

Buch proposes adding three civilian dispatchers in the Police Department, part of a longstanding program to replace police dispatchers over several years. Rather than hire the dispatchers at the beginning of the next fiscal year (which starts July 1), Buch proposes hiring them half-way through it (on or about Jan. 1, 2019).

"Should I be the one to halt the program, or is that a policy decision that I should leave to the Board of Selectmen?" Buch said. She chose to let the selectmen decide. "In the end I do believe [...] we should be moving to civilian dispatchers and freeing up our police personnel to higher and better uses."

The Police Department is finding that the work its clerks do in the records division is increasing. Buch proposes transferring the department's commuter parking activity to Town Hall, where a part-time receptionist would get added hours and be available full-time.

The transfer will help the police records division with its workload, she indicated. Currently, parking matters are spread among three departments: Parking ticket processing at the Police Department, and other parking records in Town Hall, split between the Town Administrator's Office and the Department of Public Works.

Sometimes, Buch said, people object to getting a parking ticket by saying that they have a parking permit — something that can't be looked up at the Police Department, only Town Hall.

New capital projects in the budget include:

- A new vehicle and a new defibrillator for the paramedics now based in town.
- Repairs to the front of Darien Fire Department.

- The beginning part of a project to convert the Noroton Fire Department to gas heat.
- Improvements to the "drill grounds" area where town fire departments practice.
- Preparing construction drawings for Pear Tree Beach.

Buch and First Selectman Jayme Stevenson had directed town department heads to come in with budget proposals that were either flat or had very strong justifications for any budget increases, and the department heads did a good job of that, Buch said.

"There are things we could do" to cut the budget further, Buch said. Services could be eliminated or reduced, or they could be provided "at a less responsive level than we do now," she said. "I hope you don't."

Maintenance Mystery at the Three Town Fire Departments

Buch mentioned the town's ongoing policy in recent years of going through the three budgets of the town volunteer fire departments to find places to save money and make operations more efficient.

She said that in doing so, she found that maintenance costs for the three buildings varied quite a bit, and the cost of maintaining the biggest of the three buildings was actually the smallest. She doesn't know why that is, but the costs will be given more scrutiny, she said.

"What I'm really finding is, we need a lot more information from them. We need to work with them more, and we need to look for standardization of some items. [...] We'll continue to work with the fire departments to refine and improve their budgets."

Buch said she recommended that town officials have two considerations they should keep in mind in working with the Fire Department budgets: First, that firefighters are town residents who volunteer their time to keep the rest of us safe, and they may risk their lives at times as they do so; and second, that taxpayers' money is on the line, and town officials have a responsibility to make sure it gets spent wisely.

Budget Presentation Slides

These slides will be posted on the town government website.

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