

## **It Will Be a Tight Fiscal Year, But Proposals for More Spending Will Need To Be Aired, Selectmen Say**

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Taxpayers are feeling financial pressure from the removal of federal tax deductions for local taxes, and at the same time as property values for some homes are down, First Selectman Jayme Stevenson reminded her fellow selectmen in a discussion Monday night about next year's budget.

"The biggest message that I heard during this last election cycle is 'Please don't raise my taxes' and [...] I will go out on a limb and say it's impossible to do with the contractual obligations that we have, both on the town side and the Board of Education side," Stevenson said.

"Certainly the Board of Education is the primary driver of mill rate increases in town," she continued. "So, as a new board [a board with three new members out of five], we always say that if we want to make a meaningful impact or look to mitigate cost increases, you have to begin to look at what services you might not wish to deliver, and why.

"And so far, our community has not expressed a desire to change or limit the services that we provide, and department heads have done an extraordinary job of really being efficient with the money that they spend, typically not spending their entire budgets by the end of the year. But it's certainly something that's up for conversation with a new board.

"If there's things that we do that maybe we should be out of the business of doing, that's an important discussion during the budget season, so I would be remiss in not sharing that," Stevenson said.

But selectmen also agreed that when town department heads have strong opinions that more money needs to be spent on something, they should bring it up with the board. If something can't be financed this year, it may be approved when times get better, or by some community group or foundation, Selectman Christa

McNamara said.

The board discussed what general directions Town Administrator Kathleen Buch should give to department heads who are about to come up with budgets to present for the next fiscal year, which starts on July 1, 2020.

Buch and department heads come up with a proposal for the Board of Selectmen late in every calendar year, and the budget (together with the Board of Education budget) goes on to the Board of Finance early in the following year, and then to the Representative Town Meeting, which approves the budget, usually in May.

With the financial pressures on next year's budget will mean selectmen need to watch spending in the part of that budget under its control, she said at the board's meeting.

The Board of Selectmen controls less than a third of the town's spending, with nearly all of the rest in the education budget, which the Board of Finance and Representative Town Meeting ultimately approve before setting the town's future tax rate.

The Finance Board and RTM also control how the town borrows money. But the selectmen influence those decisions, and they talked about bonding as part of a discussion on providing budget direction

"From a big-picture perspective, we have to remember that folks are probably really just digesting the full impact of not being able to deduct their state and local taxes —and for many, property values are down," Stevenson said. "So it's our job to remember all that when we're looking at our spending plan. People's ability to pay certainly isn't what it used to be in my opinion."

Stevenson added that she'd spoken with Jon Zagrodzky, chairman of the Board of Finance, who told her "he doesn't believe that this year's budget direction, from the Board of Finance perspective, will deviate from last year's."

There aren't a lot of capital projects being proposed for the upcoming budget, Stevenson said. She mentioned only two: The proposed Ox Ridge School building and proposals for Pear Tree Point Beach.

Without a lot of capital projects, she continued, "I think our focus should really be on technology and building in efficiencies for the use of technology in our departments, kind of as a hedge for the future, against personnel growth, if you will, and I know that [we're] making efforts to do some analysis on the software.

"In my mind, I'd like to try to leverage the professional expertise that our department heads have, doing their jobs day in and day out: What would they like to see? What would make their lives easier? How would they do their jobs easier? What could be automated, if you will? I'd like to really begin to think in a more innovative mindset, and I'd like to focus all our initiatives in that direction."

"We have held the line for this town budget quite well over the last few years," Buch, the town administrator, said. "We did have a bump in employees last year," she added, saying she couldn't remember how long ago it

was before that that the Board of Selectmen approved several new employees. The increase mostly came from adding civilian dispatchers to the Police Department's staffing.

"It was unusual for us to experience that kind of [staffing] growth, but we still came up with a very responsible budget."

Stevenson responded: "I don't anticipate that we're going to have many personnel requests this year. Perhaps requests for more civilian dispatchers." The Police Department's long-term plan was to slowly increase the number of civilian dispatchers (replacing police officers), and the remaining police officers doing dispatching duties are on the overnight shift.

But Buch said she wasn't sure what the new police chief, Donald Anderson, would ask for: "I haven't seen his request yet. It may not follow what the original proposal was for."

Other department heads may request more money for part-time help, she said.

"The one personnel item that will be important for me, before we talk about any additional personnel in the Police Department is to understand where we are with [an additional] narcotics investigator," Stevenson said. "That was something that was promised [by the Police Department] going to the day shift."

Buch said the Police Department had gone a while without its full complement of 51 officers, due to the gap between retirements and adding new personnel, so that filling the narcotics investigator position might have been delayed.

About \$13 million in the town budget consists of debt payments for school projects, sewers and past spending projects approved by the Board of Selectmen, and paying for those bonds is a fixed cost out of the control of selectmen after a past project is approved, Selectman Kip Koons pointed out.

Stevenson said that the payment period for some bonds can be fixed at 30 years rather than the usual 20, but that decision is up to the Board of Finance.

The state has regulations on how long a bond can be set, and it's tightening them for many projects (with the exception of schools and sewer projects, both of which result in infrastructure that tends to last 30 years).

Stevenson said concrete sidewalks also tend to last longer than 30 years and are an example of a project that should be bonded for a longer time. Selectman David Martin said that's a sound practice that businesses often follow when borrowing: Try to set the payment period to the period of use so that actual costs are paid when the benefits are received.