

Hanson Board of Selectmen
Whitman-Hanson Regional High School Auditorium
Tuesday, April 20, 2021, *About 6:00 p.m.*, After Executive Session
Public Forum

Members Present: Kenny Mitchell, James Hickey, Matthew Dyer, Laura FitzGerald-Kemmett, Wesley Blauss
Others Present: Sean Kealy, Hanson Town Moderator; John Stanbrook, Town Administrator; Greer Getzen, Executive Assistant, Todd Hassett, Town Accountant; Kevin Sullivan, Finance Committee Chairman; Jerry Thompson, Fire Chief; Mike Miksch, Police Chief; Mary Collins, Elder Affairs Director, Karen Stolfer, Library Director; Jamieson Shave, Interim Highway Director; Chris Howard, Corinne Cafardo, Melissa Valachovic, Daniel Starutman, Amada RubinsJeff Symaniak, Superintendent of Schools

FY22 PROPOSITION 2 ½ OVERRIDE PUBLIC FORUM

Overview

Hanson Town Moderator Sean Kealy asked those Town officials present to introduce themselves. Mr. Kealy stated that the purpose of the public forum is to discuss a \$1.85M Town override ballot box vote to take place on Saturday, May 15 from 10 a.m. – 5 p.m. at the Hanson Middle School. He said there will be early in-person voting at the Town Hall and Town Clerk Beth Sloan can be contacted for dates and hours.

Mr. Kealy explained that Proposition 2 ½ is an override authorized under Mass. General Laws Chapter 59, Section 21G. He said that the Board of Selectmen decides to place the Proposition 2 ½ on the ballot. Mr. Kealy continued to say that if the majority votes for the override, it passes and becomes a permanent increase in the Town's property taxes.

The proposed override, Mr. Kealy stated, will result in an increase of about \$125 per year per \$100,000 of assessed value. As an example, he said that an average home valued at \$367,700 will see a property tax increase of about \$460.00 for the year.

Mr. Kealy explained that the override is needed primarily because of changes to the Whitman-Hanson Regional School District assessment calculations. He said that effective for FY2021, there is now a statutory method used to calculate the amount that each town owes to the school district, noting that previously for many years, there was an alternative method used, which was approved by each town annually.

Mr. Kealy described that last year Whitman was insistent that the statutory method be used going forward, which was approved at Hanson's last Town Meeting.

Mr. Kealy stated that a \$1.85M budget reduction would affect all Town service budgets, impacting personnel the most. He said it is estimated that it would eliminate seven full-time police department positions, four full-time fire department positions, one highway department position, two positions at

town hall, and some COA [Council on Aging] and library positions. He said it will also necessitate a \$100,000 Camp Kiwanee Enterprise Fund budget reduction.

Mr. Kealy said to use one-time funds, such as the Stabilization Fund or Free Cash, for this shortfall would only mask the revenue problem and eventually deplete those funds.

Department Head Impact Statements

Fire Chief Thompson was invited to speak about his budget reduction concerns. He detailed that for the last four years, they have been able to maintain four fire fighters on duty for every shift, which he said was a years-long effort to achieve. Chief Thompson said that this brings them close to the NFPA industry standard of four fire fighters answering initial calls to fight fires, allows them to staff a lieutenant on each shift for supervision and gives them the ability to answer medical calls in less time.

Chief Thompson explained that the suggested fire department budget reduction would eliminate four fire fighters and return them to twelve fire fighters—three per shift. He said that reduced staffing increases the chance that outcome and response time may be affected and jeopardizes their ability to run a second ambulance. Chief Thompson also expressed concern that the 200-units of occupancy proposed and underway in Town will likely increase the demand for runs. Prior to the potential loss of staff, he said the Department had already been in the process of planning a staffing increase for FY2023 with the use of federal funding. Chief Thompson noted that if and when the need for more fire fighters returns, those laid off will have secured other employment and there will be recruitment and training costs associated with hiring new staff.

In response to question from the floor, Chief Thompson explained that response-time delays will occur in the event of a second ambulance that would have to travel from the nearest available town, stressing the time-sensitive nature of medical calls.

Chairman Mitchell addressed online question from Hanson resident “John,” asking why the school budget isn’t being cut. Chairman Mitchell read prepared response from similar question previously received regarding the schools paying more:

“The Whitman Hanson Regional School Committee votes on the school budget and they are the only ones that can lower the assessment to the members towns, being Hanson and Whitman. A lower assessment may pass at Hanson Town Meeting, but the school committee can call a special joint meeting of the towns of Whitman and Hanson to reconsider the budget. That budget, if passed, would become the budget for the district regardless of the capacity of the towns to pay the assessment. The ability of the regional school committee to call a super town meeting to pass a higher budget makes it very difficult to make the school’s pay more.”

Chief Thompson responded to question from resident Melissa Valachovic, 372 Holmes Street, asking if the override and budget cuts will affect fire department accreditation and eligibility for grants. He said that he does not believe so, but said that it would affect the insurance company classification. Chief Thompson said that the classification was recently improved from ISO Class 4 to ISO Class 2, which is based upon staffing, fire prevention, dispatch and water supply. He said if the repercussions from a budget reduction were to affect the town’s ISO class, it would potentially affect commercial and residential insurance rates in town.

Police Chief Miksch expressed that an override that does not pass will result in a \$615,000 personnel loss to his department, which translates to seven officers. He described that their loss would mean a station that is not open to the public, noting that there are 300 walk-ins to the station per month by those who need the assistance of a person. Chief Miksch continued that officer reduction would necessitate understaffed call responses, which can be dangerous and quickly escalate, and prevent the staffing of a sergeant 24x7, which is needed in a supervisory capacity.

Chief Miksch agreed with Chief Thompson that officers who are laid off will not be back, especially difficult at a time when low numbers are seeking out police work.

Chief Miksch lastly pointed out that area towns can be called upon for help when needed, but he cannot depend on them to staff his department.

Responding to question from the floor, Chief Miksch explained that when the Town transitioned to regional dispatch, there was no loss of police coverage on the street. He said they were able to hire four officers to replace the five full-time and one part-time civilian jobs.

Mrs. FitzGerald-Kemmett asked the Chiefs how the budget cuts will affect their succession planning. Chief Miksch stated that the impact will be gradual in that officers laid off would be the youngest, which would reduce those interested in advancing in this department. Chief Thompson stated that eight of his department members were hired in the last five years and the department is young. If four were laid off, he said, he worries about others leaving for more stability. Chief Thompson hopes for as many as possible to stay and grow in the department.

Mary Collins, Director of Elder Affairs, spoke on how the proposed budget cuts would impact the senior center. She said that their budget consists of her position, a part-time assistant, a part-time custodian and a full-time van driver. Ms. Collins stated that the reduction to their budget would eliminate the full-time van driver. She said that this impacts residents who are elderly and/or disabled who have relied upon Elder Affairs for rides to medical appointments during the pandemic, saying that pre-pandemic, this was performed by volunteers when it was safe to do so.

Library Director Karen Stolfer said that the proposed budget reduction for the library is \$23,500. She said that firstly it will affect their personnel in that their staff is already spread very thin—down fifteen hours from a previous budget cut. Ms. Stolfer said that understaffing creates delays in service and affects quality of service. She said her primary concern is not meeting the qualifications for state aid, which funds all of their programming and reciprocal borrowing.

Interim Highway Director Jameson Shave explained that the Highway Department cut is estimated to be about \$142,000. He said the amount represents 12.5% of their personnel, 25% of the active work force on the road and a 16.5% overall department cut. Mr. Shave cited the Department's work in conjunction with the police and fire departments; its presence in emergency situations such as snow storms and hurricanes; road maintenance; mowing; and tree removal. He said that a cut of this size will strain a department that is already stretched thin and working on a tight budget.

Question & Answer

Finance Committee Chairman Kevin Sullivan responded to question by Chris Howard of Equus Drive to say that 92% of Hanson's tax levy is from residential taxes, which he said is the highest of the surrounding towns. He said that of those towns (Halifax, Whitman, East Bridgewater, Rockland, Pembroke and Hanover), Hanson has the 2nd lowest tax rate.

Mr. Sullivan pointed out that the aforementioned numbers are available on the Town of Hanson website and tax rate data on Mass.gov.

Mr. Sullivan answered to question that Whitman's tax levy from residential is about 89%. Anticipated Interim Town Administrator Lisa Green, a Whitman resident, added that Whitman does not have a split tax rate and the current rate for commercial, residential and industrial is \$15.38.

Hanson resident Corinne Cafardo cited town services that personally affect her, saying there has been the need for ambulance at her home in the last few months, and she needs to know that it will come when called. She stated that a young relative of hers is on the Hanson Police Department and described her concern if he or others were to lose their jobs. Ms. Cafardo lastly said that she is the chairman of the library trustees and described the loss community-wide if library state aid was eliminated and library hours cut.

Mrs. FitzGerald-Kemmett asked Superintendent Jeffrey Szymaniak what the impact would be to the schools if the override does not pass and what has been done to reduce the budget as much as possible bearing Hanson's situation in mind.

Mr. Szymaniak said that he doesn't know the specific impact as yet on the staff and cuts because he has not been provided the numbers. He reviewed that 19.2 positions have been cut since he has been superintendent and four have been brought back. Mr. Szymaniak said that federal ESSER [Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund] money enabled special education implementation and student regression assistance as the result of COVID-19 for about \$775,000, allowing him to remove it from the school budget in order to lower the assessment. He said that the budget increased 2.6% this year, which consisted of normal payment of bills as well as unemployment for sixty-two employees last year because there was not a budget by July 1. Mr. Szymaniak emphasized the great product delivered by the school district on a tight budget and lastly described the district's heavy reliance on emergency town services as well.

A Hanson resident directed question to Mr. Stanbrook asking about 1) department head meetings held for the purpose of identifying finance issues, 2) department head reports that alert him to budgeting issues, 3) if personal assignment reviews occur in order to review and re-align responsibilities if needed, and 4) if there is a process for vendor contract reviews. Mr. Stanbrook said that department meetings are held monthly and department heads are required to submit a report to him at that time.

Finance Committee Chairman Sullivan answered that many of the town departments are very small and their budgets consist largely of their personnel. He said all department budgets have been trimmed of excess and operate at a bare minimum of expenses. Mr. Sullivan stated that unencumbered expenses at the end of the year are transferred to the General Fund as Free Cash or available for appropriation, but in

total this only amounts to a few thousand dollars per year. He said that the deficit facing the Town at this time cannot be overcome by trimming budgets except for that of personnel.

Asked how the Town got to this point, Mr. Kealy stated Whitman had the votes of the school committee to force the statutory method calculation that required Hanson to pay more. Mr. Sullivan added that the Town accepted the statutory assessment at last year's well-attended Town Meeting, and concern was raised at that time of the consequences if there was not an override last year. Mr. Kealy reviewed that the understanding had been that the Town would be obligated for half of its assessment last year with the full amount required this year.

Mr. Sullivan stated in response to question that the \$1.85M override will fill the budget and allow the Town to fund the departments next year.

Asked from the floor to speak about the statutory method, Mr. Szymaniak stated that the statutory method is the state preferred method of assessment, and is the method used to pay for South Shore Vocational Technical School. Mr. Szymaniak said that the regional agreement in place had stipulated the "per pupil" method, which was a 60/40 split between the towns. He said that Whitman brought up the statutory method for discussion by the school committee, which is based upon minimum local contributions that are assessed by the state to the towns. Mr. Szymaniak said that he informed the Hanson Board of Selectmen that these discussions were taking place.

In the course of discussions, Mr. Szymaniak said that it was proposed that the statutory method be used for FY2022 and going forward, but a split of the cost of the assessment between the towns occur for the year prior. He noted that the proposal was approved by large turnout of support at Hanson Town Meeting. Mr. Kealy commented that the Town approved the measure, but were not necessarily in support of it.

Concerning 1/12 budgets, Mr. Szymaniak said that if the Town of Hanson does not vote approval of the regional school budget in May, and the Town of Whitman does, the result is an impasse. He continued to say that if there is not an assessment agreed upon by July 1, there is no school budget, and he has to contact the Commissioner of Education and request a 1/12 budget. Mr. Szymaniak stated that while they could have operated on a 1/12 budget through December, they were only on the 1/12 budget for one-month last year as both towns approved the assessment in July. He said that if agreement is not made by the towns by December 1, the state takes over all fiscal responsibilities of the school district and the Commissioner sets the assessment.

Daniel Strautman of Monponsett Street cited the recent vote of the school committee to reduce the amount of Hanson's assessment by \$305,000 and asked if the Board of Selectmen will vote to reduce the override by that amount. Mr. Sullivan answered that the decision had been made ahead of the school committee's vote to factor that reduction into calculation of the \$1.85M and there will be no additional reduction.

Amanda Rubins of Reed Street asked for clarification of the tax bill increase as a result of the override. Mr. Sullivan said that the \$38.00 increase per month, \$115 per quarter, is based upon about a \$300,000 home valuation and that the average bill will go up about \$567.00 per year.

Online question from “Matthew” was directed to the Town Accountant asking about the impact to the capital expenditures matrix items voted at last year’s Town Meeting should the override fail. Town Accountant Hassett explained that the five-year capital plan adopted at the last Annual Town Meeting outlines the capital needs of the town as just over \$4M. He said that Town Bylaw requires the approval of a minimum of 1% of the budget toward capital, and would amount to about \$300,000. Mr. Hassett said that there are a couple of essential projects that would cost about \$300,000, but otherwise the Board has voted to defer for the most part the remainder of the \$4M to a later date.

There was question from the floor asking about the process in which the additional override monies would be collected from the taxpayers. Mr. Hassett responded to say that taxes are invoiced quarterly and the first quarter applicable to the override would be due August 1, for which an average homeowner might see a \$115 increase. He continued that the first two quarters of the year are preliminary amounts, during which time valuations are being determined. Mr. Hassett said that the last two bills are after the valuations have been certified by the State and there might be a slight shift in the figures. He affirmed that the increase as the result of the override will be apportioned over the four quarters.

Chairman Mitchell stated that in Executive Session, the Board voted to approve an employment contract for Lisa Green as Interim Town Administrator.

MOTION by Mrs. FitzGerald-Kemmett, seconded by Mr. Dyer, to appoint Lisa Green as the Interim Assistant to the Town Administrator followed by the Interim Town Administrator. ***Voted 5 – 0***

Mr. Kealy noted that Town Meeting will be held on May 3 at 7:30 p.m. at the high school in the gym.

ADJOURNMENT

MOTION by Mrs. FitzGerald-Kemmett, seconded by Mr. Hickey, to adjourn. ***Voted 5 – 0***

Respectfully submitted,

Shirley Schindler
Minutes Clerk