



# TOWN OF NEW LONDON, NEW HAMPSHIRE

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## NEW LONDON BUDGET COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES Wednesday, May 8, 2024 Whipple Memorial Town Hall 6:00 PM

**BUDGET COMMITTEE PRESENT:** Chris Lorio, (Chair), John Wilson, Mark Christensen, Lyndsay Harkins, Lou Botta, Charles Kelsey, John Tilley, Karen Epstein, Megan Brown, Bebe Casey, Selectman Representative

**STAFF:** Kimberly Hallquist, Town Administrator; Lynn Lewis, Finance Officer

**ALSO PRESENT:** Robert Harrington, Department of Public Works Director; Police Chief Emily Cobb; Fire Chief Jay Lyon; Adam Ricker, Town Planner and Zoning Administrator; Putnam Kidder, Recreation Director; Will Kidder, Town Clerk-Tax Collector; Peter Ruth, New London resident

Chair Lorio opened the meeting at 6:02 PM. He welcomed the new members of the budget committee, Meghan Brown, John Tilley and Karen Epstein, and asked them to introduce themselves to the other members.

### Election of Chair and Vice-Chair

**IT WAS MOVED (Lou Botta) and SECONDED (Lyndsay Harkins) to re-elect Chris Lorio as the Budget Committee Chair. THE MOTION WAS APPROVED UNANIMOUSLY (Chris Lorio abstained from voting)**

John Wilson nominated Charles Kelsey and Lyndsay Harkins nominated Lou Botta for Vice-Chair. It was decided to have a show of hands and the member with the most votes would become Vice-Chair.

Charles Kelsey received two votes (John Wilson and Lou Botta), Lou Botta received five votes (Mark Christensen, Chris Lorio, Megan Brown, Bebe Casey, Lyndsay Harkins). Karen Epstein and John Tilley abstained from voting; Charles Kelsey joined the meeting after the vote. **Lou Botta was elected Vice-Chair.**

### Approval of Minutes

Approval of the February 21<sup>st</sup> minutes was deferred until the next meeting.

### Selectmen's Report

Selectman Casey gave an update from the Board of Selectmen including:

- A Police Facilities Advisory Committee has been formed and has had their first meeting. The recording and upcoming meetings are available online.
- The next Selectmen's Gathering will be June 27<sup>th</sup> at Colby-Sawyer College
- The New London-Springfield Water Precinct Main Street Water Main replacement project starts May 13<sup>th</sup>
- Twin Pines is moving forward with digging wells to supply water to the project
- Director of Public Works Bob Harrington is retiring July 31<sup>st</sup> and current Wastewater Supervisor Sam Clark has accepted the Selectmen's offer to fill the vacancy upon Bob's departure.
- Update on Coalition Cities 2.0, education funding: both cases (Rand v. State of NH and ConVal v. State of NH) have been issued stays. The legislature has tabled a few bills including one that would have codified the Rand decision, dealing with excess SWEPT funds.

Selectman Casey provided a brief synopsis of the history of state education funding but explained that it is such a complicated issue, it would be best if she emailed out links and reading material that give more detail. There are 27 towns which are members of the Coalition Communities 2.0, each with varying amounts of excess SWEPT funds, collected annually, that could potentially be redistributed to other towns rather than retained locally. The Coalition 2.0 towns/cities have retained legal counsel and when it was asked if they should be setting aside money to cover SWEPT funds in the event they are redistributed, they were advised not to. There was a conversation about how the excess SWEPT funds, and NH Education Freedom Accounts, impact funding and the local education tax rate.

### **Discussion of Training Opportunities**

Kim Hallquist explained training options for new or current members of the budget committee:

- The New Hampshire Municipal Association (NHMA) offers a full day training, typically in the fall, that covers a high-level overview of state budget law. There is a virtual option offered.
- Ms. Hallquist and Lynn Lewis could also present a more tailored presentation that would be more specific to New London's local budget and scheduled either one-on-one or as a group, at a time convenient for budget committee members.

Mr. Wilson expressed his appreciation for the online manual and encouraged other members to consider reviewing that material as a first step. Mr. Kelsey, considering his experience as a new member in 2023, would be in favor of a local group session to encourage discourse. Chair Lorio directed individual members interested in the live NHMA sessions to contact Ms. Hallquist directly but will coordinate with her for a scheduling a group session.

### **Timing of Meetings with Department Heads**

Chair Lorio explained that, historically, the Budget Committee has scheduled individual sessions with each Department Head to have informal conversations about their department and budget needs and members can attend any sessions they are interested in. Mr. Botta requested that committee members be respectful of the Department Heads' time and to be judicious with meeting requests. Ms. Epstein wanted more clarification on the timing of the individual sessions in relation to when the department budgets are prepared, and how the Department Heads form their budgets. Chair Lorio explained that the individual sessions typically fall before the formal budgets are ready, although they may be working on their numbers. Ms. Hallquist stated that Department Heads have always been encouraged to keep a tight budget but, since she's worked for the town, they have never been asked to limit their budget request to a predetermined percentage increase/decrease. Once the Department budgets are ready, there is a formal meeting where the budgets are reviewed by the Selectmen and the Budget Committee.

Mr. Kelsey noted he would like to make sure the schedule allows for an opportunity to gather some of Bob Harrington's institutional knowledge before he retires at the end of July. Chair Lorio will work with Ms. Hallquist to coordinate dates for the individual Department Head sessions. The Selectmen's full day review will be October 25<sup>th</sup>.

Ms. Hallquist provided a review some of the different approaches to process and timing that have been tried over the years:

1. The Board of Selectmen reviewed the finalized budgets over several meetings. After the Selectmen were done, they would finalize their budget and it would then be turned over to the Budget Committee and they would start their process then.
2. The Budget Committee and the Selectmen held joint meetings to review the budget together. Mr. Wilson noted that he was a part of the Budget Committee at that time and prefers the independence of separate reviews.
3. Most recently, the Selectmen had a full-day budget review and finalized the budget in that one day, before turning it over to the Budget Committee. Many Budget Committee members attended that review and were able to ask questions.

### **Meeting Schedule**

Chair Lorio noted that the first meeting last year was on November 29<sup>th</sup> and asked for feedback on the number of Budget Committee meetings, as well as the preferred time and day of the week. Ms. Hallquist advised that after the Board approves their budget, it takes some time to get that updated in the software so she recommended allowing at least a week and understanding that they may need more time for a decision. Chair Lorio asked about the status of the new budgeting software. Ms. Lewis reported that the data entry has been time consuming, and she believes the operating portion should be ready by the beginning of budget season although the personnel portion might take a little longer.

It was decided that starting earlier would allow for more breaks for holidays and give more flexibility if additional meetings are needed, or they may be able to wrap up sooner in the new year. Meetings will continue to be on Wednesdays, and they will start earlier than in past years, at 6:00pm instead of 6:30pm. Chair Lorio will work with Ms. Hallquist on potential dates.

Mr. Botta asked if it was possible to plan on making meetings available via Zoom so members who might be out of town can still attend. Chair Lorio recalled from last year that each meeting, the members present had to vote to allow the member who was away to participate via Zoom and then each vote must be a roll call vote. Ms. Hallquist explained that legally, Zoom meetings are only an option if a member cannot attend, not just because they don't feel like it, and she said it would be helpful for town staff to know ahead of time so they can plan accordingly for meeting setup. Chair Lorio feels that the most important meeting is the final meeting when the budget is voted on, so that should be prioritized for participation.

### **Other Business**

Chair Lorio asked that when Budget Committee members are reaching out the Department Heads questions in individual meetings, please be courteous to other members by letting them know what questions have been asked independently so they don't duplicate the same request. There was a discussion regarding requesting preparation of specific analysis and reports from Department Heads. Ms. Hallquist reminded the committee that general operating questions are fine to ask via email, however budget conversations should be kept to public sessions. Many committee members commented on the importance of civility and respect. Mr. Botta commented that the Board of Selectmen set goals for the town and the Budget Committee should be respectful of those goals and objectives.

Mr. Kelsey would like to see more supporting assumptions associated with individual budget line items. There was a discussion of the best way to respectfully, and efficiently, gather more information from the Department Heads. Chief Cobb noted the importance of Budget Committee members feeling confident in the budget they are voting on. She understands that new members especially may not understand the background of each line item and spoke to how Department Heads could reframe their budget presentations with that in mind. Chief Lyon appreciates the opportunity for casual, candid conversations and feels it's important for Budget Committee members to attend the individual sessions, even if that means holding more sessions to accommodate working members.

Mr. Wilson spoke on several topics including:

- Encouraging committee members to consider the impact of the budget on local property tax rates, and housing affordability
- The estimated 2024 increase in the town tax rate expected from last year's approved budget, based on informational packet provided at the February 7, 2024 Budget Committee Public Hearing.
- The importance and impact of reviewing the school budget closely and operating independently of the Board of Selectmen.
- The timing of the budget meetings and the advantages of an orderly process

Ms. Hallquist explained that it is the Budget Committee's budget that is presented at the Town Meeting. The last time there were two independent budgets presented was in 2014. It can be confusing for residents, so the

reconciliation process smooths that out. She reminded the Committee that once the budget is turned over to the annual Town Meeting it belongs to the voters and they can change it, as they did last year. She reiterated that although the operating budget was up last year, the 2024 tax rate is finalized by the NH Department of Revenue Administration (DRA) in the fall, so it is not known yet.

**IT WAS MOVED (Charles Kelsey) and SECONDED (John Tilley) to adjourn the meeting. THE MOTION WAS APPROVED UNANIMOUSLY**

The meeting adjourned at 7:33 PM.  
Respectfully submitted,

Cara Leone  
Recording Secretary

Note: RSA 91-A:2, II provides that “*Minutes of all such meetings, including nonpublic sessions, shall include the names of members, persons appearing before the public bodies, and a brief description of the subject matter discussed and final decisions.*” A video of the entire meeting may be available for viewing on the town website, [New London.NH.gov](http://NewLondon.NH.gov), if more than the brief description contained in these meeting minutes is desired.