



# TOWN OF NEW LONDON, NEW HAMPSHIRE

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## NEW LONDON BUDGET COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES

Wednesday, December 13, 2023

Whipple Memorial Town Hall

6:30 PM

**BUDGET COMMITTEE PRESENT:** Chris Lorio (Chair), Colin Beasley (Vice Chair), John Wilson, Hannah Bianchi, Mark Christensen, Melissa Leintz, Charles Kelsey, Lou Bota, Bebe Casey, Selectman Representative

**MEMBERS ABSENT:** Lyndsay Harkins

**STAFF:** Kim Hallquist, Town Administrator, Lynn Lewis, Finance Officer

**ALSO PRESENT:** Rich Epstein; Police Chief Emily Cobb; Heidi Dunlap, PD Administrative Assistant; Adam Ricker, Planning & Zoning Administrator; Will Kidder, Town Clerk-Tax Collector; Fire Chief Jay Lyon; Steve Ensign, Chair of the Board of Firewards; John Ellis; Bob Bowers

Chair Lorio called the meeting to order at 6:30 PM.

**Approval of Minutes of December 6, 2023.** There was a discussion of corrections needed to the draft minutes. Approval of the December 6<sup>th</sup> minutes was deferred until the next meeting.

### Selectmen's Report

Selectman Casey reported that the Selectmen completed preparation for the "Winter Gathering" meeting that will be held at Colby-Sawyer College on Friday, December 15<sup>th</sup> at 8:00 AM. She listed the topics scheduled to be addressed and noted that it will be a busy morning.

John Wilson asked about the corridor study and asked how it will affect the sidewalks. Adam Ricker, Town Planner, explained that the study is in the CIP for FY2026. He noted that until it is completed it is impossible to say how the sidewalks will be affected. Mr. Ricker noted that the water main replacement project is expected to impact some of the sidewalks on Main Street but not all.

John Wilson asked about how employee compensation is handled in the budget with regard to steps and COLA as individual budget requests address the issue differently. Kim Hallquist noted that Lynn Lewis includes 2.5% steps in the department compensation lines however COLA's are not included yet as the Selectmen have not made a decision on what the COLA will be. Ms. Hallquist pointed to the last line in the Executive budget in the amount of \$150,000 that will be used for COLAs and any changes that result from the wage study .

### FY2025 Budget Review

#### Executive (Administration)

Kim Hallquist reviewed the Executive portion of the budget. Ms. Hallquist pointed out that the \$150,000 in the 'Salary-Wage Study' line will be used for COLA's and changes to individual salaries that the Selectmen will make as a result of the salary study. The selectmen previously adopted two changes in grades however the salary increases to bring those two employees to the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile have not yet been made, so those amounts will come from the \$150,000. Ms. Hallquist noted that the selectmen will be discussing additional grade

changes. There was a discussion of the Selectmen's discretionary account and whether it should be higher. Ms. Hallquist noted that the line is used for the employee holiday luncheon and for unexpected expenses including property appraisals the community meetings. Colin Beasley asked if the selectmen considered changing the timing of the awarding of steps from what is used now, anniversary dates, to all at one time, as a way to assist the Finance Officer. Ms. Hallquist noted that the change to anniversary days was made after the 2016 wage study as a way to save money to allow the selectmen to adopt the wage study recommended changes. She noted that switching back to awarding steps at the start of the fiscal year would be welcomed by employees as they would get raises earlier in the fiscal year however it would cost more than \$100,000 to fund the change. Mr. Beasley noted that he felt the selectmen should consider changing to alleviate the additional work required of the Finance Officer to make about 70 changes throughout the year.

Colin Beasley asked about a recent *Intertown Record* article that reported that the Newbury Town Administrator intends to keep the budget at, or lower than, current levels without impacting employees and he would like to know how she will accomplish that. He also noted that in the Town of Sutton it is the Budget Committee that has the responsibility to conduct the wage study. Mr. Beasley noted that salaries are about 60% of the budget and as such the Budget Committee should have some oversight.

John Wilson asked when the Budget Committee would know what the COLA will be. Ms. Hallquist noted that she hopes that the Selectmen will make the decision either at their next meeting or the first meeting in January.

Charlie Kelsey asked about how retirement funding amounts are arrived at and also does the town have any unfunded obligations or is it fully funded. Ms. Hallquist noted that the town is part of the NH Retirement System (NHRS) so it funds retirement expenses based on rates set by NHRS. Like most state retirement systems, NHRS not fully funded and the town will be obligated to pay its share of the underfunding if the state moves to fully fund it. Mr. Kelsey questioned if the Budget Committee should consider this issue and potentially set aside money for this potential future liability.

There was a discussion of employee health and dental rates. The town is given a 'guaranteed not to exceed' rate at the start of the budget preparation process and the final rate is given sometime around the public hearing. This year the rate is 14.6% and that figure was used for the budget. If the final rate is given prior to the end of the budget process, the budget will be changed to reflect the actual rate. The Town Administrator and Finance Officer are continually speaking with insurance carriers to see if comparable plans are available at lower costs. Mr. Kelsey noted that he is in favor of going out to bid to allow market forces to have an impact if possible. Ms. Hallquist observed that their past research into other plans has shown that they cannot compete with the benefits the pooled insurance carrier that the town, and many other municipalities, use.

### Assessing

Ms. Hallquist summarized Tri-town assessing by explaining that New London, Newbury and Sunapee share assessing services. The amount each town pays is based on the percentage of the total parcels in the three towns: Sunapee has the highest number of parcels followed by New London and then Newbury. The Tri-town assessing budget was not finalized when the town's budget process was started, it has since been adopted. Ms. Hallquist suggested that the requested amount could be reduced by \$1,000 to \$92,777.

### Legal

Ms. Hallquist noted that it is difficult to predict how many contracts, employee issues, planning and zoning cases, among other legal matters the town may need town counsel to handle. It was noted that while there have not been a large number of property appeals filed yet, such appeals could add to the legal budget since many large property taxpayers opt to file in Superior Court, which requires legal representation, instead of at the Board of Tax and Land Appeals, which does not require legal representation by the town.

## Police

Chief Cobb reviewed the police department budget highlighting the increases and decreases from the prior year. Increases: computer licenses & fees, new cruiser, professional services, equipment lease & rentals, travel & meals, and conferences & training. Decreases: telephone, general equipment and gasoline.

Chief Cobb explained that the Tahoe is a supervisor vehicle which is a marked cruiser with four-wheel drive. John Wilson asked if the town was moving away from sedans and now going to SUV's, noting that Tahoes appear to be more expensive than sedans. Chief Cobb noted that Chargers are no longer being manufactured, which was the sedan used by the police department. She pointed out that the state bid for this cruiser has also increased from last year. Colin Beasley asked how often the cruisers are replaced. Chief Cobb explained that the department used to get a vehicle each year however recently with the purchase of two vehicles in one year the department has changed the way it assigns and runs cruisers in the hope of extending the life of each vehicle. Chief Cobb noted that the vehicle being replaced in FY2025 is a 2018 vehicle with 93,000 miles on it. Mr. Beasley noted that Hanover buys Ford SUV Hybrid vehicles and budgets \$64,000 for it and asked if the Chief would be open to considering these types of vehicles. Chief Cobb noted that she would definitely consider it in the future however she would like to replace the town's Tahoe with a Tahoe in the FY2025 budget year. It was noted that the town would need to add the infrastructure in order to have hybrid and electric vehicles.

Mr. Beasley suggested that the Committee should discuss a change in the process of budget preparation because asking for research on an item, like switching to Ford SUV hybrid cruisers, can't be done in time to be considered by the Budget Committee when it is first discussed during the budget review.

Chief Cobb noted that the large decrease in general equipment is due to the fact that the prior year budget had new firearms and this year that amount is not needed.

Chris Lorio asked about overtime. Chief Cobb noted that she is not expecting more overtime hours, the increases are due to increased wages. Charlie Kelsey asked if the telephone bill is the same for other town departments. Lynn Lewis confirmed that the telephone is the same for other town departments. There was a discussion of the shift differential of \$1 per hour for third shift, the Chief noted that it has been expanded to include an entire 12-hour shift instead of just 10pm – 6am. There was a discussion of radio repair in FY2023. Chief Cobb noted that there was more than \$855 in expenses that year but the expenses had to be encumbered as the repairs were paid for after the fiscal year ended.

## Dispatching

Chief Cobb pointed out the increases and decreases in dispatching over the FY2024 budget. Increases: computer licensing and fees and miscellaneous and decrease in the equipment repairs and maintenance line.

Chief Cobb noted the largest change is in the computer licensing and fees line. She explained that the town is moving to a new vendor for the CAD (computer aided dispatch) and RMS (record management system). This cost includes the 20% maintenance fee. Some of this expense will be charged to the towns that New London dispatches for. How these fees will be shared with the other towns will be determined by the Selectmen. The Chief pointed out that she spent a considerable amount of time planning and adopting a vision of the town's dispatching center that will improve the service provided. The \$413,000 grant that was awarded to the town required a considerable amount of time in completing the application and providing information which she was able to do with the assistance of the Finance Office.

There was a discussion of how much of the computer fees would be paid by other towns. Chief Cobb noted that towns will be able to opt out of some of the features of the new software system so she would expect that they would not pay for services not used. She pointed out that New London currently pays about 67% of the dispatching fees so the other towns pay about 33%. She feels that it is a good time to revisit the fee structure, possibly changing the flat fee that all towns pay, while being mindful of not pricing the other towns out of the

service from New London. Chief Cobb expects that there will be efficiencies realized in the new system as communication between agencies (towns and state police) will be much easier.

Melissa Leintz asked about the Police K-9 and asked the Chief to speak to the value of having the dog. The Chief pointed out that Vilo will be 8 years old soon and noted there is value in having a police K-9. He is trained in multiple areas: drugs, tracking, evidence detection, and locating people including those trying to evade the police. She noted that a decision has not yet been made on whether she will request another K-9 when Vilo is no longer working. There is no reimbursement by other towns when the K-9 is used in mutual aid situations.

There was a discussion of time remaining and whether Fire should be delayed until next week. It was decided to begin with Emergency Management and time permitting go to Fire.

### Emergency Management

Lou Botta, Emergency Management Director, presented the Emergency Management budget. Mr. Botta noted that there is an increase in supplies as last year he decreased the line. He is looking to have a 3-day self-sufficiency of supplies so that in the event of an emergency the town can meet its basic needs. He pointed out that CodeRed and equipment repairs are up slightly.

### Fire

Chief Lyon noted that radio repairs is up due to radio battery replacement, pointing out that during Covid it was difficult to obtain batteries so they were not replaced when they normally would be. Other increases include fire gear which is \$3,400 to replace one set. Replacement of gear depends on the wear and tear on the gear, ie: outside fire firefighter who directs traffic or directs the scene versus an inside fire fighter.

Melissa Leintz asked what the cost of a battery is. Chief Lyon noted that it is \$224 per battery and the life depends on how many cycles the battery has been exposed to.

Chief Lyon noted that with respect to wages, the new full-time firefighter is very motivated and comes to a lot of calls so that must be paid for in the overtime budget. There was a discussion of where service for the various vehicles and apparatus is done as well as fuel. Chief Lyon explained that some repairs to vehicles are done locally and some can be done on-site, it depends on the vehicle. Fuel is either from the pumps at public works (diesel fuel) or at gas stations using the WEX cards which is the state price. He explained the training budget and the cost to send a person to level I and level II where the town pays for the training fee and the person attends the training on their own time. Training is also available to officers.

Colin Beasley asked about the volunteer fire fighters noting that the age of the fire fighters might suggest that going to a paid department is in the future. Chief Lyon agreed that it is a topic the Firewards talk about often and it is not only happening to call and volunteer departments it is happening in career departments as well. He noted that for many years he has been thinking about housing for fire fighters, particularly in light of the new property assessments, thinking about having the Fire Association get involved with housing to be able to provide for fire fighters to entice them to serve the town.

Melissa Leintz asked Chief Lyon if the Budget Committee asked him to shave his budget where would he do that and if they gave him more money where would he put it. Chief Lyon noted that if he had more money, instead of buying more stuff, he would look to the parttime employees and offer them more money, although he pointed out that people don't join the department for the money, he would look there if he had additional money. If he had to cut, perhaps he would suggest they would not do the HVAC system, pointing out that the membership already does the cleaning and plowing of the station. He would likely have to look at every single line item and cut each one so it wouldn't impact services. As an example, cutting one set of gear to save \$3,400, training one less firefighter, etc.

Steve Ensign, Chair of the Board of Firewards, informed the committee that New London is one of the unique

communities that have a board of overseers for the fire department which has five members and they vet the budget twice with the Fire Chief before it is presented. He questioned the value of asking how much can be cut as the Firewards judiciously look at the budget and the Chief will spend only what is needed to provide the services they are called on to provide. Mr. Ensign noted that if the question of cutting is going to be asked then it should be asked of all departments.

#### Firewards

The Firewards are not paid, the budget includes funds for a recording secretary. There were no questions for Mr. Ensign.

#### Other Business

Colin Beasley noted that he had additional questions for the library that he hoped could be answered by the Director before she leaves her position on January 5<sup>th</sup>. Mr. Beasley asked the Finance Officer to provide a 10-year view of the CIP (Capital Improvement Program) and asked that Adam Ricker provide the Master Plan tracking sheet so the Committee has the data for the reserves discussion.

The next meeting will be held on December 20<sup>th</sup> with the Library and Public Works.

**IT WAS MOVED (Lou Botta) AND SECONDED (Hannah Bianchi) to adjourn the meeting. THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

The meeting adjourned at 8:32 PM.

Respectfully submitted,  
Kimberly Hallquist  
Town Administrator

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, **NewLondon.NH.gov**, if more than the brief description contained in these meeting minutes is desired.