

Minutes of Joint Meeting of Brandon Selectboard and Budget Advisory Committee
18 November 2024, Brandon Town Hall

Attendance
Selectboard present: Doug Bailey, Heather Nelson, Tim Guiles, Ralph Ethier, Brian Coolidge.
Budget committee present: Janet Coolidge, Gabe McGuigan, Karen Rhodes, Barry Varian, Tricia Welch. Public present: Seth Hopkins, Bill Moore, Tom Kilpeck, Jackie Savela, Andy Jackson, Steven Jupiter, David Kachajian, Pam Douglass, Faith Daya, Jeff Cohen, Cynthia Cohen, Cecil Reniche-Smith. By Zoom: Todd Nielsen, Brian Kilpeck, Jordan Martin.

Selectboard Chair Doug Bailey called the meeting to order at 7:02PM. On motion of Ralph Ethier and second by Brian Coolidge, the posted agenda was adopted by the selectboard 3-0 (other two selectboard members not yet present).

Selectboard
Remarks
Doug Bailey advised this workshop would be dedicated to consideration of the police department budget. Brian Coolidge conveyed his assessment that the current FY25 police budget of \$864,000 was not accurate as the department has exceeded its budget in FY24 and FY23 and early on in FY25 set itself on pace to exceed its FY25 budget by greatly overspending its overtime allotment.

Police
Department
Budget
Seth Hopkins brought to the meeting three of seven different staffing scenarios Chief Kachajian had developed. These represented an option cutting \$100,000 from the FY25 police line which would provide service by a Chief plus three full-time officers and one part-time officer, requiring significant on-call (not on-duty) hours; an option with level funding which would provide service by a Chief plus four full-time officers and one part-time officer facilitating increased coverage; and an option adding \$150,000 to the FY25 police line which would provide level service at 24-hours on-duty coverage by a Chief and six full-time plus two part-time officers.

Several members of the selectboard and budget advisory committee as well as several members of the public present offered input. A message of affordability being a primary concern expressed by voters in the March and April Town and school budget rejections in Brandon and in the November legislative elections in Vermont generally was highlighted. The fact that during no-coverage hours the Vermont State Police would be unable, due to their own staffing level, to offer a degree of response that would be acceptable to community expectations was discussed. The current level of service is not supported by the current budget, nor is the prior level of service supported by the current budget as implemented. A budget advisory committee member stated she was shocked that a cut was under consideration given the advisory ballot question result last year. The mixed-message of the voters in simultaneously voting in favor of the advisory article regarding additional police coverage while rejecting the budget led to consideration of separating out the police budget in some way for additional voter control of the matter. A base level within the budget plus option(s) in appropriations article(s) was discussed as it was consensus that it would not do to have the police budget on its own rejected and then have to conduct another election(s) to get to voter approval. The chief fielded questions regarding when it was safe and appropriate to have one officer rather than two on duty / on call.

In the second hour, the chief of the rescue squad and the fire chief and others spoke to the interdependent way in which emergency services personnel work to respond to calls for service

and called attention to the rising incidence of mental health situations. Rescue calls in general are up 40% over recent years. A community member echoed by a budget advisory committee member and a selectboard member encouraged education of the public regarding the actual facts of emergency response, what is required, and how the budget addressed those needs. Selectboard members explored the concept of triage as it might be applied to police response as well as learning from mistakes and learning from the community. Chief Kachajian related current prioritization/triage practices in the department and his commitment to holding to the voter approved allocation for his department. A community member asked the town manager to give a sense of how the Town budget has been stable or has grown in recent years; the town manager read from tonight's budget draft rollup sheets (distributed) that the amount raised by taxes was \$2.712M in FY23, \$2.737M in FY24, and \$2.737M in FY25. Inflation across those years was (uncompounded) greater than 18%. Last year's online "tax estimator" was held up as a useful tool in hopes it could be redeployed for this year. The town manager estimated that the three police department budget options under consideration tonight, for a household in an average-value assessed home [~\$186,000] would result in approximately a decrease of \$50, a flat figure, or an increase of \$75, respectively. A community member recommended pre-Town meetings to gain broad community input while the budget process remains open, and the board chair indicated that is his intent. Two different selectboard members offered their recommendations for a base level of police funding within the budget plus one or more options beyond that to achieve actual incontrovertible community input.

Executive
Session

The meeting was recessed at 9:03. On motion of Heather Nelson seconded by Ralph Ethier and voted unanimously, at 9:13 the selectboard entered executive session per 1 VSA § 313 (a) (3) regarding the evaluation of an employee. The board returned to public session at 9:58. No action was required.

On motion of Brian Coolidge seconded by Tim Guiles and voted unanimously, the board adjourned at 9:58PM.

Respectfully submitted,



Seth M Hopkins, town manager