

**TOWN OF BRANDON
MINUTES
EVENING MEETING MARCH 3, 2025**

Present at the meeting were select board members Chair Doug Bailey, Heather Nelson, Tim Guiles, Ralph Ethier and Brian Coolidge. Also budget committee members Jan Coolidge, Gabe McGuigan, Karen Rhodes, Barry Varian, and Tricia Welch, Moderator Bill Moore, Town Manager Seth Hopkins, Clerk Susan Gage and 69 attendants. A number of attendees watched the proceedings via zoom.

Moderator Bill Moore called the meeting to order at 7:01 pm. Scouts Lucia and Jon Carrara of Troop 110 led the assembly in the pledge of allegiance. Mr. Moore then read the annual report dedication. The annual report was dedicated to all the volunteers in town who contribute to committees, care for the gardens and dedicate themselves to various town activities. Mr. Moore then explained the procedures for tonight's meeting and stated that the meeting is in person with a virtual option to watch only.

1. To hear a presentation by the Select Board of its recommended budget for fiscal year 2025-2026. This budget and appropriations will be voted by Australian Ballot on March 4, 2025 at the Brandon American Legion Post #55, 550 Franklin Street, Brandon, VT, between the hours of 7 am and 7 pm.

Motion to address Article 1 by George Fjeld, seconded by Carol Fjeld.

Select board Chair, Doug Bailey recognized the volunteers on the budget advisory committee and departing select board members Heather Nelson and Tim Guiles. Mr. Bailey and Ms. Nelson then presented the budget for 2026. They began with an explanation of the budget development process. The goal was to find the area of common ground, places where everyone felt we needed to spend our time and money with input from the management team, Select board, Budget committee and general public.

The 5-member budget advisory committee was selected from a pool of 11 interested people. Bi-weekly meetings beginning in September were held to discuss needs, goals, and perspectives on various departments within the budget. Department heads worked with the town manager to develop budgets. The committee then reviewed the draft budget line by line, discussing whether each line item was necessary and if the allocated amount was sufficient. A proposed budget was developed using input from the select board and budget committee. Compromises were made to find common ground.

In addition to the operating budget the select board and management with a nod from the budget committee are asking voters to consider a capital fund appropriation which would put away funds for larger expenses, such as roads, bridges or vehicles.

The "Town Ask" is up 1.4% this year and the total budget is up 2.5%. The town portion of the tax bill is about 31%, with the school accounting for about 62%. The fire district is 4% and appropriations are 3%. The impact of the proposed town budget on property taxpayers is approximately \$22 a year on an average home in Brandon (house assessed at \$186,000).

In addition to taxes, the town has received additional funds from ARPA and the Local Options Tax for larger projects and activities. A major ARPA project is a \$340,000 roof for the town hall. ARPA also contributed to the new floor in the town hall, sewer pump station, sidewalks, fire district merger, and library project. Local Options Tax revenue must be used for capital expenses. It has been used to buy a backhoe, police cars, and snow plows. The local options tax has also funded several infrastructure projects.

Moderator Moore then opened the floor for questions from attendees. Devon Fuller asked about the increase in health insurance costs and the effect on the budget. Town manager Seth Hopkins stated that Health insurance costs increased roughly 11%. The town switched insurance companies to MVP to maximize savings. Blue Cross was looking at greater than 20% increase.

Mr. Fuller stated that an 11% increase is unsustainable for small towns and school boards and suggested asking our representatives to find a solution.

Cecil Reniche-Smith clarified that most appropriations on the ballot were also on the ballot in previous years, so voting yes is voting for the status quo, not an increase in taxes.

2. Shall the voters of the Town of Brandon exempt the buildings and property belonging to Brandon Senior Center located at 1591 Forest Dale Rd (parcel ID 0083-1591) from **municipal property tax and education property tax** for a period of five (5) years in accordance with the exemption clause for charitable and fraternal organizations as set forth in 32 V.S.A § 3840?

A motion to act on Article 2 by Wyatt Waterman, seconded by Jan Coolidge. Article 2 concerns exempting the buildings and property of the Brandon Senior Center from municipal and education property tax for five years. George Fjeld asked if the senior center has been tax exempt in the past. Clerk Susan Gage answered that the last time it was voted exempt was in 2020 and that it has been exempt for some years. Carol Fjeld asked how much they would be paying in taxes if they were taxed. Pam Douglas stated that the assessment is 257,800. The town tax would be \$2,167.84, and the school tax would be about twice that, so around \$6,000.

Ms. Gage explained that exempting properties like the Brandon Area Rescue Squad, the Senior Center, and the Masonic Association result in a "local agreement rate" on tax bills, where the rest of the community picks up a portion of the education tax that they are exempt from. Sharon Stearns, a local CPA, explained that nonprofits commonly apply for tax-exempt status to support their community service without adding to their operational costs. Taking it away would mean they would have to raise more funds.

The article was approved.

3. To transact any other business proper to be done when met.


A motion to accept Article 3 Jeff Haylon and seconded by Tom Kilpeck. Sharon Stearns thanked the select board, town manager, and town clerk for their transparency and hard work on the budget. She appreciated that taxes have been kept low so that people in the community can continue to stay in their homes.

Representative Todd Nielsen provided an update. He thanked everyone for their trust and support and noted that he is serving on the House Committee on Human Services. He mentioned several bills that he is following: H91, H46, H218, and H13. He is also listening to various agencies and discussing the FY 2026 state budget. He also asked attendees to pick up a survey on their way home.

4. Adjourn.

Motion to adjourn by Cecil Reniche-Smith and seconded by Wyatt Waterman. The meeting adjourned at 8:08 pm.


Susan Gage, Clerk


Bill Moore, Moderator