

What's Going on in Dunstable?

THE DUNSTABLE SELECT BOARD'S QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

FEBRUARY 1, 2024

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Next Year's Budget Deficit: \$763,266

The Town Administrator has prepared his FY25 Recommended Operating Budget.

As expected, the FY25 budget is reliant on a \$763,266 general fund override to balance. It includes the restora-



tion of the second per diem position in the Fire Department and second overnight police officer position. As you may recall, both of these important public safety positions were cut from the FY24 budget due to the override failing. Fortunately, a gener-

ous donor came forward to cover the cost of the per diem firefighter in FY24.

The major driver of the override request is the growth of the Groton Dunstable Regional School District operational assessment which is increasing by slightly under 12% in Dunstable.

Over the course of the last several months, the Town has held numerous meetings between all stakeholders, which started much earlier than is typical with the anticipation of the impending budgetary gap. Most recently, the Advisory Board Chair and Town Administrator have been meeting with representatives of the Town of Groton and the School District, and School Committee, to coordi-

nate budget processes and do our best to reduce the deficits in both communities.

As a result of this work, the School Committee recently voted to utilize a reduced amount of Excess and Deficiency Funds in the amount of \$500,000 (down from roughly \$900,000 in FY24) and phase out the kindergarten fee rather than removing it entirely in FY25. These actions have reduced the assessment increase in Dunstable from 14.5% to 11.7% but a deficit in the amount of \$763,266 remains.

Read more inside (pages 4, 5 and 6) to learn more about the FY25 Town Administrator Recommended Budget and, to view it in its entirety please visit the Town Administrator's webpage on the Town website: dunstable-ma.gov.

Resident Survey Results

The Town conducted an online resident survey during the month of December. The purpose of the survey was to seek feedback from residents about their priorities for the Town, their experiences with working with the Town and its employees, and their general, overall opinions of the Town and Town government. The plan is to use this input to help shape Town goals and priorities over the course of

the coming year and assist in decision making moving forward.

A total of 232 surveys were completed. To view a summary of the survey results, please visit the Town website at dunstable-ma.gov/surveyresults.

In summary, the results highlights are as follows:

- Overall opinion of Town Government: 24% very satisfied and 46% satisfied with 5% dissatisfied and 2% very dissatisfied.
- Single biggest issue facing the Town: In ranked order—town budget and finances, followed by school budget and finances with taxes in 3rd.
- People liked the rural

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Survey Results Available

Continued from Page 1

- Respondents believed that, in ranked order, Police, Fire, Schools, and maintenance of

roads and infrastructure were most important Town services.

- 42% of respondents were very satisfied and 24% were satisfied with the interaction they most recently had with a Town official. 6% were very dissatisfied

and 3% were dissatisfied.

- 83% of respondents believed that Dunstable is a great place to live, 13% ranked Dunstable as average, and 7% as not a great place to live
- 89% would recommend Dunstable as a place to live.

Walk Dunstable Final Report

The Town has completed its *Walk Dunstable* project by using a combination of AARP Community Chal-



lenge Grant funds and funding through the Northern Middlesex Council of Governments (NMCOG).

The Town, working with NMCOG, conducted a walkability study in Dunstable Town Center, chiefly

through a series of walk audits and meetings with stakeholders, seniors, and other community members. Through the walk audits and additional research, this project identifies improvements and alternative funding sources or grant programs that could be used to help extend the existing walk network, enhance the

quality of Town Center for a broader array of visitors, better define Town Center as a place, and improve safety and comfort for pedestrians in the area. The study built on and incorporates previous efforts to improve the streetscape, namely Dunstable's Complete Streets Prioritization Plan and the work of Dunstable's Safe Pathways Committee.

Thank you to NMCOG and AARP for their support and guidance throughout this project.

Stay updated on what's happening in Town!

Stay updated on what's happening in the Town of Dunstable and the work of your local government! There are many ways to stay informed:

- Sign-up to receive email notification on our website, [\[ma.gov/subscribe\]\(http://ma.gov/subscribe\), provide your email in the appropriate fields, and check off any notices you would like to receive.](http://www.dunstable-

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- Follow us on Facebook: [@dunstablema](https://www.facebook.com/dunstablema) and Instagram: [@townofdunstable](https://www.instagram.com/townofdunstable)

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Bandstand Repairs Complete

More improvements planned for later this year

The initial round of repairs to the bandstand at Town Common are complete.

The project included: replacing the cedar shake shingle roof; replacing floorboards as-needed, replacing horizontal tread boards of stairs and railings on both sides of stairs; replacing the wood skirting base; and scraping and painting the structure.

The original plans also included replacing the crown molding, however, it turned out that the crown molding was in better shape than anticipated and, as a

result, the total project cost was reduced to \$38,500.

This round of repairs was paid for through a state budget earmark in the amount of \$75,000 and therefore no cost to the Town. Including the electrical improvements to the bandstand, this leaves a balance of approximately \$30,000 for additional improvements which need to be completed by FY26.

Over the coming months the Town will begin to plan for additional improvements, develop a scope of work, and issue an Invitation for Bids.



Town to join Regional Dispatch Center in Pepperell

The Dunstable Select Board has approved joining the Patriot Regional Emergency Communications Center (RECC) located in the Town of Pepperell. Both Dunstable and Groton will join Patriot, along with the existing member communities of Ashby, Townsend, and Pepperell. This decision comes on the heels of efforts to regionalize the Town Clerk and Treasurer/Collector positions with the goals of saving money and enhancing service to the public.

The Patriot RECC employs a director and 9 full time employees. It is overseen by an Executive Board made up of 3 representatives from each member community. Each community has an equal vote, it is not a weighted vote based on size, financial contribution, etc.

The Executive Board of the Patriot RECC has voted to support Groton and Dunstable joining the RECC, now the Select Boards in each member community must vote to approve.

As part of the transition, the Patriot RECC plans to increase staffing by 5-6 dispatchers to accommodate the call volume of Groton and Dunstable.

The early estimate on cost is \$98,000 per year initially, however, because the state encourages the regionalization of dispatch services, the state offers incentive grants for new communities entering RECCs

which allow both Towns of Groton and Dunstable to pay ZERO for the first three years of the agreement. In the fourth year, the Town will be charged a 50% reduced rate and in the fifth year, the Town will be charged a 25% reduced rate.



In addition to the new dispatch positions, Patriot also plans to hire a second IT professional, which would serve each community's public safety departments,

enhancing services in that area, as well.

The Town has begun the transition discussions and the current plan is to have the RECC up and running including both Dunstable and Groton by July 1, 2024, the beginning of the new fiscal year.

FY25 Town Administrator's Recommended Budget

FY2024 Budget Review

In FY24, this current fiscal year, the Town of Dunstable was forced to make difficult budgetary decisions due to the failure of a general fund override in the amount of \$301,162. As a result of the override failing, reductions were made in public safety, highway, and general government.

Due to the reductions described above, in FY25 the restoration of both the police officer and per diem firefighter positions are included in the operating budget.

FY25 Budget Revenues

The FY25 operating budget plans for FY24 level local receipts and state aid revenues are based on the Governor's budget.

The FY25 budget also continues the Town's past practice of utilizing its free cash to balance its operating budget. The FY25 operating budget relies on a total of \$474,343 or slightly over 71% of the Town's estimated certified free cash balance. Over the last 5 years, the Town's reliance on free cash to balance its operating budget has increased significantly. Since free cash is the result of the spending and collection activity within any given fiscal year, relying on it in this way can be unsustainable because there is no guarantee the free cash used to balance this year's budget will be available for next year's budget expenses. It also suggests that the Town has a structural budget deficit using one-time revenues to fund ongoing operating ex-

penses, especially since the free cash being used to balance the budget has progressively increased from FY19 to FY24 and, because of this, for FY25 the Town has reduced its reliance on free cash by \$100,000 based on guidance from the Advisory Board and Board of Selectmen. Over the course of the next 3 years, the Town intends to continue to phase out its reliance on free cash to fund operating costs, \$100,000 annually.

The Town Administrator's recommended FY25 budget relies on the following:

- The statutory 2.5% increase on the Town's tax levy and projected new growth of \$110,000 which combine to generate approximately 3.5% increase in tax revenues to fund municipal and school services.
- Local receipts remain at estimated FY24 levels.
- State aid increases by \$11,550 based on the Governor's proposed budget.
- Decrease in free cash from operating budget revenue from \$574,343 to \$474,343.
- \$318,070 in taxes to fund previously approved excluded debt payments.
- A general fund override in the amount of \$763,266.

FY25 Budget Expenditures

On the expenditure side, general expenses are largely level-funded with some exceptions based on projected need and actual costs:

- Health insurance budget is estimated to increase 5%.
- Pension assessment is increasing by 6%.
- Liability insurance is estimated to increase by 10%.
- The Groton Dunstable Regional School District operational budget assessment is estimated to increase by 11.73%. Capital expenses were reduced by \$101,547.
- Total municipal operations budget is increasing by 2.97%; municipal operations and debt expenses are increasing by 2.68%.
- Total municipal salaries are increasing by 5% largely due to the restoration of a police officer position and per diem firefighter position.
- Debt service expenses are based on FY25 debt schedule. Except for the last payment of the salt shed project in FY25, all other debt service is debt excluded which means that it is outside of the normal 2.5% levy limitations as voted and approved by the Town residents.

Updated FY25-FY27 Budget Forecast

As part of the budget development process, the Town has forecasted revenues and expenditures for FY26 and FY27 based on the Town Administrator's recommended FY25 operating budget. The forecast for these 2 years are based on the following assumptions for expenditures:

- Salaries: 2% increases year over year
- General expenses: 1% increases year over year
- Contract services: 3% increases year over year
- Energy: 3% increases year over year
- Utilities: 3% increases year over year
- Repairs and maintenance of buildings, vehicles and equipment: 3% increases year over year

- Dues and memberships: 2% increases year over year
- Nashoba Associated Boards of Health: 7% increases year over year
- Nurse Assessment: 6% increases year over year

For the Groton Dunstable Regional School District, the spending projections in FY26 and FY27 are based on assessment growth numbers provided to the Town by the District. For FY26, the School District projects their budget assessment to the Town of Dunstable will increase by 10% and, in FY27, it will increase by 8.15%. For capital expenses, FY26 and FY27 are funded at FY24 levels. For revenues, the

FY26 and FY27 projections are consistent with growth projections in FY25:

- The statutory 2.5% increase on the Town's tax levy and projected new growth of \$110,000.
- Local receipts remain at estimated FY24 levels.
- State aid increases by 2% year over year.
- Decrease in free cash from operating budget revenue by \$100,000 annually.
- Excluded taxes raised based on previously approved excluded debt payments.

Based on the assumptions above, the general fund deficits in each of these years are in the amount of \$755,518 and \$555,567, respectively.

FY25-FY27 General Fund Override and Impacts

As stated above, the FY25 Town Administrator's recommended operating budget relies on a general fund override in the amount of \$763,266.

In order to balance FY26 and FY27, an override in the amount of \$755,518 and \$555,567 will be needed, respectively. The total override amount needed to balance all 3 years is \$2,074,351.

Using information provided by the Town Assessor, below please find an analysis of the impact to the average single family tax bill which is based on the FY24 average as-

essment and tax rate. The average single-family assessment for FY24 is \$641,400 and the tax rate is \$13.96. The average single family tax bill, including the 3% Community Preservation Act (CPA) surcharge, is \$9,222.56.

- In FY25, with the additional \$763,266 general fund override amount, the average single family tax bill, including the CPA surcharge, would be \$9,843.57. That is an increase of \$621.01.
- In FY26, with the additional

\$755,518 general fund override amount, the average single family tax bill, including CPA surcharge, would be \$10,464.57. That is an increase of \$621.

- In FY27, with the additional \$555,567 general fund override amount, the average single family tax bill, including CPA surcharge, would be \$10,920.41. That is an increase of \$455.84.

All total, over the 3-year time period, the single family tax bill would increase by an estimated \$1,697.85.

Coffee with the Town Administrator

Have a question about Town government or the budget? Need help with Town services? Want to learn more about what the team at Town Hall is working on? Join the Dunstable Town Administrator Jason Silva for coffee and conversations at the Farmhouse Cafe, Thursday, January 18 from 10 AM to 11 AM. The coffee is on him!

Special Town Meeting Planned for Tuesday, March 26

Special Town Election Planned for Tuesday, April 2

The Town of Dunstable is planning a Special Town Meeting on Tuesday, March 26 at 7 PM at the Swallow Union School. The purpose of the Special Town Meeting will be to seek approval of the Town's FY25 Operating Budget and for approval to request a general fund override to balance the FY25 proposed budget, and FY26 and FY27 operating budgets based on spending and revenue estimates described earlier in the newsletter.

The Special Town Election will take place on Tuesday, April 2 from 12 PM to 8 PM at the Dunstable Public Library.

As reviewed earlier in the newsletter, the Town's FY25 budget has a \$763,266 deficit based on the Town Administrator's recommendations. It's important to note that the deficit could change based on feedback and recommendations from the Advisory Board and Select Board.

At a high level, for FY25, this includes the restoration of a po-

lice officer position on the over-night shift and a per diem firefighter position during the daytime shifts. This budget also includes an approximate 11.7% increase in the Groton Dunstable Regional School District operational assessment. Capital decreased by slightly over \$100,000.

On the revenue side, the Town has proposed to reduce its reliance on one-time revenue streams, namely free cash, by \$100,000 to balance its budget consistent with the Department of Revenue recommended best practices.

Based on estimates for the FY26 and FY27 operating budget, the general fund deficits in each of these years are in the amount of \$755,518 and \$555,567, respectively. Due to this, the Town is preparing to request a 3-year general fund override. This request will allow the Town to maintain level services and fund the regional school district to maintain the current level of edu-

cation being provided to our students.

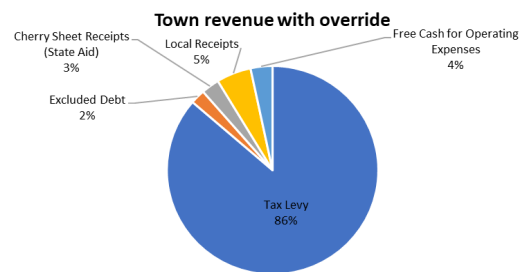
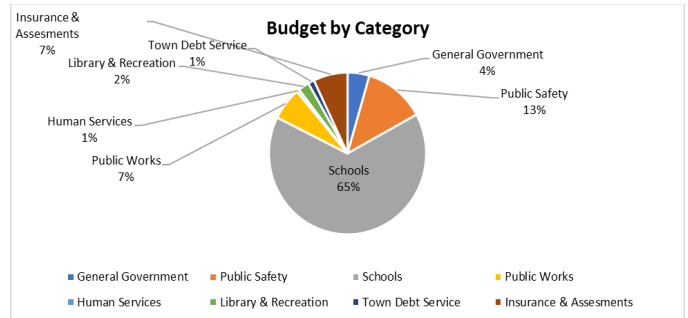
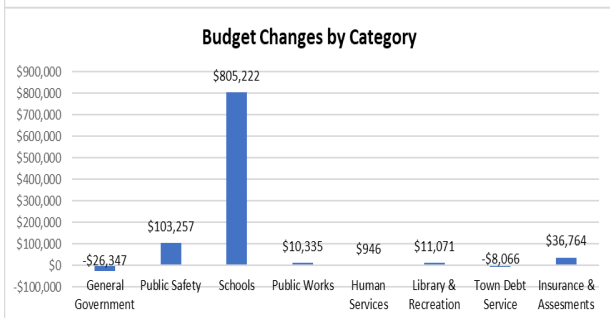
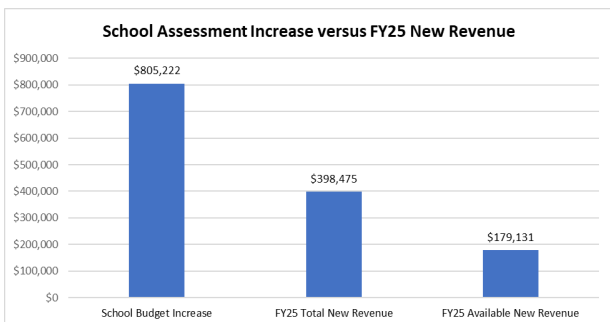
Over the last year, the Town has sought out areas to save money by regionalizing services through combining positions in the Town Clerk and Treasurer/Collector Departments, and also by joining the Patriot Emergency Communications Center.

The Select Board has created committees to assist the Town in considering options for economic development and land use opportunities and initiating the process to implement recommendations of our master plan.

Lastly, the Town is pursuing avenues to increase revenues by conducting municipal fee surveys with surrounding communities to determine if current fees charges are appropriate.

If an override fails to pass, it is anticipated that significant reductions in services will be necessary in order to balance the budget in most municipal departments.

FY25 Budget at a Glance



New Library Director Begins

As we bid farewell to Mary Beth Pallis, who served as the Town's Library Director for 24 years, we thank Mary Beth for her dedicated service to the Town of Dunstable and we

also welcome the Library's new Director, Maureen Strauss.

Maureen is a long-time Dunstable resident and has always

had an avid interest in the library. If you find yourself in the neighborhood of the library, we hope you'll stop in and welcome her to Town!

Volunteer for the Town!

The Select Board has created 3 new committees—Economic Development, Land Use, and Master Plan Implementation Committees. The Board has made appointments but there is still an available seat on the Economic Development Committee!

The Economic Development and Land Use Committees are comprised of seven members and, ideally, members will have experience and expertise in real estate, business, finance, farming, planning, historic preservation, construction, conservation, and land use.

The purpose of the Economic Development Committee is to implement the Economic Development section of the Master Plan. The Land Use Committee has been created to research town land, determine its suitability for future uses, and make recommendations to the Select Board.

Lastly, the purpose of the Master Plan Implementation Committee is to serve as a facilitator and coordinator of the implementation process and to advocate for the implementation of the Master

Plan recommendations. The Board will be made up of 13 members, with 12 being representatives from Town boards and committees and one at-large resident member.

Other volunteer opportunities include the Affordable Housing Trust Fund Board of Trustees, Capital Planning Committee, and Memorials and Monuments Committee.

If interested in any of these opportunities to volunteer for the Town, please send an email to bos@dunstable-ma.gov! We hope you'll apply to serve!

Town awarded Information Technology Grant

The Town of Dunstable has been awarded \$29,979 through the Community Compact Information Technology grant program for disaster recovery and server replacement. The grant will allow the Town to replace

servers at both Town Hall and the Police Department and will also have access to virtual backup recovery in case of a disaster. The existing Town Hall server is planned to be relocated to

the Police Department as a backup.



Union Building Reuse Process Continues

The Union Building Rehabilitation Committee is conducting a study to determine how to use the historic Union School building after it is no longer needed by the Groton-Dunstable School District. Through this study we are evaluating potential uses, necessary repairs and upgrades, and grant and funding opportunities for supporting the

adaptive reuse of the building,

As part of this process, we want to hear from Dunstable residents about what types of activities and uses they would like to see in Dunstable Town Center, and particularly at the Union School. You can take a survey to offer your opinions at NMCOG.ORG/UNION. The survey is open through

January 13. The Town will also be hosting a public meeting on February 8 at Dunstable Town Hall.

Survey feedback will be considered along with market demand, physical characteristics of the building, funding source availability, and other considerations in determining a final recommendation.

Regional Transportation Earmark Awarded

Work has begun with Town of Pepperell to locate Electric Vehicle Charging Stations

The Town of Dunstable has been working with Northern Middlesex Council of Governments, the Town of Pepperell, and a vendor, All Pro Electric, to identify locations in each of our communities for siting electric vehicle charging stations.

We have received a \$42,000 earmark from state ARPA funds for regional transportation improvements to support this project. At present, in Dunstable, we have identified 3 possible locations: Town Hall, Public Library, and Swallow Union

Elementary School.

We are working with the vendor, who is now evaluating locations in both the Towns of Dunstable and Pepperell and also reviewing other potential state funding sources to pay for the project in full.

Recognizing our dedicated volunteers and employees

On Friday evening, December 1, 2023, the town had an opportunity to recognize and celebrate the many Dunstable residents who volunteer their time and expertise by serving on one of Dunstable's many boards and committees.

With a small, but dedicated staff, the Town can only function with the help, guidance, and support from our volunteer community.

This event provided an opportunity for all of us to come together and show our deep appreciation and gratitude for the volunteer service of which we all

benefit.

If you haven't already, you can view the pictures from the night on the Town's YouTube channel.

In addition, the Town has created a program, Making a Difference, a peer-to-peer recognition program each month to recognize and acknowledge the amazing work taking place within the walls of Town Hall, and outside of Town Hall, to make a difference in our community.

Many volunteers and employees have been recognized through this program, nominated by a colleague, a volunteer member of a board or committee, or a supervisor to recognize the difference they are making in the community.



Police Station Floor Replacement

The Police Station floor is over 10 years old and is beginning to crack and tiles are dislodged from the sub floor. In one location, several tiles have completely broken apart and the sub floor has been exposed. Last year, the Police Department purchased new furniture and had the interior of the building painted. Replacing the floor will complete the interior upgrades and maintenance of the station. The plan includes the installation of heavy-duty vinyl tile in the lobby, kitchen, and bathroom areas. The main area of the station floor will be replaced with carpet tile. So that, in the future, when certain tiles suffer damage, those tiles can be removed and replaced internally, rather than replacing the entire carpet or hiring a company to make a repair. This project is currently out to bid; it's currently posted at Town Hall, on COMMBUYS and the Town's website, and was also posted in the Central Register. Proposals are due January 16, 2024.

Town Hall Roof Repairs Completed

Town Hall experienced roof leaks in the attic over the past two major rain storms. The Town is currently working on repairs to the interior ceilings in the attic.

Because of the leaks in the attic roof, before the ceiling work was completed, the Town coordinated necessary roof repairs. The roof work is currently being completed in the two areas of the roof that were leaking. The repairs were paid for through ARPA funds.

New ways to conduct business with the Town of Dunstable

Payments for dog licenses now online!

The new Town Clerk has worked to establish a new dog license database, which will help improve the tracking of dog licenses, and also has worked to allow for dog licenses payments to be made online.

New Payment Dropbox for Town Hall

There's now a new, secure, locked payment drop box located at the side entrance of Dunstable Town Hall. It's clearly marked and affixed below the handicap sign for easy access. If you choose to use this lock box, please note a few important guidelines:

- Please make sure to place your payment in an envelope and, please, checks only, no cash payments.
- If you would like a receipt returned to you, please include a self-addressed stamped envelope and the remittance copy of your bill.
- The drop box is emptied every business day that Town Hall is open – Monday through Thursday.
- All payments dropped off will be credited on the next business day.

Both of these service improvements have been made with the goal of making it more convenient to conduct business with the Town.

Select Board creates review process for LIP Affordable Housing Proposal

A private developer has proposed a Local Initiative Program 40B affordable housing project at the former Dumont property, 41 Lowell Street. As currently proposed, the development includes 156 housing units in a 55+ community, with a mix of 1, 2, and 3 bedrooms in a combination of single-family homes, townhouses, and in multi-unit buildings with 25% of the units being affordable.

The Select Board has created a review process for the developers to follow in advance of the Board's full consideration. There have been several public meetings with the developer to review and learn more about their proposal at 41 Lowell Street, which is part of the review process. The plan is for the process to take 60-days; the target date to complete the review is February 23.

The review process will also include a review meeting with representatives from relevant boards and committees, and municipal departments. The Planning Board and Affordable Housing Committee have been asked to hold a non-binding review meeting with the developers and then for each to offer comments and make a recommendation to the Select Board, as part of this process. Following this, the Select Board will then formally consider the proposal. In order for the developer to submit a LIP application, the Town must agree to jointly submit the application.