



## **Town of Dunstable Board of Selectmen Meeting Minutes**

**Tuesday, April 16, 2024**

**In attendance: Chairman Ron Mikol, Vice Chair Basbanes, Selectman Kieran Meehan, Town Administrator Jason Silva, Exec. Assistant Sue Fayne, Chief Erik Hoar, Chief William Farrell, Advisory Board Members Jake Lewon, Matthew Naughton, Clinton Kenney, Harold Simmons, and Robert Rafferty.**

*The meeting was called to order at 10:01 am by Chairman Mikol.*

*Advisory Board called meeting to order at 10:01am by Jake Lewon*

### **FY2025 Operating Budget Discussion**

Chairman Mikol began the meeting mentioning that there is one item on the agenda, and that is to discuss the FY25 Operating Budget due to the failed override. The Board met last week, and part of that meeting included a discussion regarding the urgency to act now that the override has failed. Chairman Mikol continued, explaining that when the budget work began back in August, the Board discussed holding a Special Town Meeting and Special Town Election for the FY25 Budget and separating it from the Annual Town Election and keeping dates and strategies in line with the Town of Groton. Initially the hope was to have the meeting in March. He stated that the purpose of having a "March vote" was to have an opportunity to rebound with a second vote in May during our Annual Town Election if the override failed. He continued that in the previous meeting, there were lengthy discussions focused on listening to what the voters had to say. Although not everyone voted for the override, many voters who voted against the override stated they would vote to fund an override for the municipal side. Chairman Mikol said that he's not looking for a "re-vote" of the previous amount, but instead an amount that will support the municipal side of the budget and public safety. He shared his concerns about how we move forward. He shared that the overall financial health of the Town is not good and the risk that our credit rating with Moody's could be downgraded. His opinion is that the residents have said that they don't support more money for the school district. He summarized by saying that he wants to do the right thing, which is collectively decided by both boards and in the best interest of the town, and his suggestion is an override request in the May Town Election that would strictly fund the municipal side of the town budget.

Advisory Chair Lewon took the opportunity to share his perspective. He stated that the Advisory Board is split down the middle: 3 members supported discussing a municipal override and three did not support one. He explained that as a town, we've provided detailed information to the voters to show and explain what we need, and why. We've held forums, meetings, appealed to our State Representatives and for the second time in a row, the voters declined to support a budget override, with the prior vote declining to fund public safety. It's an unfortunate situation but he feels that we're continuing to ask the same question, and for the same support, and expecting different results. In addition, the town has worked hard to build goodwill and positive relationships with the School Committee, School District, and the Town of Groton. To fund just the municipal side while they make deep cuts could have a significant negative impact to the work we've done. The voters have spoken, they don't want to pay any more in taxes, so we need to listen and work on our path forward.

Approved April 23, 2024



Chairman Mikol shared that the Town of Plympton went to the ballot 5 times to get their override passed. In our case, his opinion is that our residents thought that the Town would “figure it out.” He believes that the votes reflected the schools’ request and not what they wanted for the municipal side. The message that has been sent previously is “just say no, and they will figure it out.” He’s concerned that public safety will continue to feel the impact.

Advisory Chair Lewon stated that, as the Advisory Board and Board of Selectmen, the residents have not been listening to us. They don’t think that we really need more money. In his opinion, until they see the results of not voting for the overrides, we will not gain additional support.

Advisory Member Matt Naughton shared his opinion. For the first time in many years, the GDRSD School District asked us how much we could afford. He reiterated what Chairman Lewon said about building and maintaining goodwill with the towns. The way that we plan and move forward is by continuing to work closely together. In FY26, we are most likely going to need an override, so we have a better chance of it passing if we hold off on asking for more now.

Selectman Meehan then stated that the residents are telling us what they expect from our boards and ultimately, it's the same bucket of money. The residents have told us succinctly that they do not want to pay more in taxes. And 3 years ago, they were unhappy that we went back a 2nd time for a Capital Request override for the School District when the first one failed. He stated that he does not support an override this year, in his opinion it's not a plan, it's a reactionary measure that doesn't have any long-term benefits.

Advisory Member Robert Rafferty shared, 44% voters said yes to the full override. His recommendation is that we go back to the schools and have a detailed itemized list from them, and from the Town, to identify an amount for a second override vote. He does not support a municipal only override but does support a second override vote.

Lacey McCabe, Dunstable School Committee representative, shared her thoughts. She stated that they have put great work into putting together an effective model for working across towns, boards, and the School District. There is still work to be done, but there has been significant progress this year. Lacey stated that she feels the voters in both towns may view the budget approval process as a negotiation, which is not an effective approach. The residents need to be able to trust the numbers, the data, the expertise presented to them as part of the school assessment. They need to be confident that what is being asked for are the actual needs of the district and not just a starting point for a negotiation. She also wanted to make it clear that although she represents the schools, she also cares deeply for the community as a whole. She shared that she is not in favor of going back to ask for a municipal override at this time, not because she doesn't care to fund it, but because it doesn't care for us in the long term.

Robert Rafferty shared that he has received anecdotal feedback from residents that the 3-year override amount was too much. They would prefer something less expensive, a middle ground, that covered the town and schools. Vice Chair Basbanes stated that we can find middle ground next year. Her opinion is that she is not in favor of going back and asking for another override request this year. She shared that, in her opinion, picking and choosing what to fund out of one pool of money breeds bad blood.

Chairman Mikol stated that if we request an override for FY2026, people are going to say no again, and that's risky. He stated that if the Boards collectively decide that this is what we need to do this year, he



will follow along, but he's concerned that 2026 will have catastrophic consequences if an override is voted down again next year.

Resident Niki Rockwell shared a few comments. She said that at the School Committee meeting there were only 2 members that spoke disparagingly about Dunstable. The rest were overwhelmingly in support of working together. She also spoke about the consequences we face when people don't understand what the impacts of their vote means. The schools will suffer significantly along with the municipal operations.

Police Chief Hoar stated that he has been in support of the override, but what he doesn't want to see is the Police Department in a position where we pay for an officer to go to the Police Academy, and all the other items and money that goes along with that, to only have that position cut the following year. If we go for a second municipal override, can we say we will have stability in the department and we won't continue to be up and down with staffing? He's concerned for his department, as it is a morale hit for the department not to have stability and consistency.

Advisory Member Clinton Keeney shared his opinion that moving forward with a 1-year municipal override would just be a Band-Aid. In his opinion, a 1-year Band-Aid doesn't address the larger structural problem with the budget.

Chairman Mikol asked Town Administrator Silva to share his thoughts. TA Silva stated that the budget needs a long-term fix and if we go for a small municipal override, we still have a problem in FY26 and FY27. If the school projections hold, we will have to go back to request an override in FY26. Without the override in FY25, making reductions will be painful, but it will put the town in a better financial position next year. We won't be using as much free cash, which means we will have more to carry over in future years. In addition, it's difficult to try to do an override for just one side of the budget. He mentioned that, in his opinion, if we were going to do a municipal override, it would need to be a multi-year override. Finally, in summary, as others have mentioned, there is currently a positive working relationship between the town and the district. We need to be able to work with the Groton School Committee members, stay positive, and continue to work hard to maintain this relationship.

Jeff Rosen asked if there are any long-term repercussions by not doing an override this year? For example, closing the library or selling a town building. The answer was no, not this year.

Joan Simmons shared her thoughts: The town must get back to our 3-4% increases. The huge budget increases are not going to fly and are unsustainable. Our Town Administrator has stated that Dunstable could have afforded a 3-4% increase, so whatever must be done on the school side to get that in line needs to be done.

On a motion by Vice Chair Basbanes and seconded by Selectman Meehan, it was voted to adjourn the meeting. The vote was unanimous, and the meeting was adjourned at 10:55am.

**Respectfully Submitted,**

**Sue Fayne  
Executive Assistant to the Town Administrator  
and Board of Selectmen**

Approved April 23, 2024