

MONTAGUE FINANCE COMMITTEE
Wednesday, February 19, 2025 at 6 PM
This meeting was held via Zoom and recorded:
<https://vimeo.com/982262386>

Finance Committee Chair Dorinda Bell-Upp called the meeting to order at 6:01 PM.

Finance Committee members present: Chair Dorinda Bell-Upp, Vice Chair Fred Bowman, Jennifer Waryas, Leigh Rae, and John Hanold

Finance Committee members absent: Chris Menegoni and Francia Wisnewski

Others present: Assistant Town Administrator Chris Nolan-Zeller, Town Accountant Angelica Desroches

The meeting was recorded by MCTV as well as by Angelica Desroches

Meeting minutes:

Mr. Hanold moved to approve the minutes of February 19, 2025. Seconded by Mr. Bowman and approved.

Mr. Hanold requested more information be added to the change from level 2 to level 3 in the rural aid.
Bell-Upp – Aye, Bowman – Aye, Hanold – Aye, Waryas – Aye, Rae – Abstain

FY2026 Budget Discussion with Selectboard Recommendations:

- Ms. Desroches presented the Selectboard's recommended budget. The budget recommends a lower excess capacity. The budget also recommends moving the payroll software conversion to January 1, cutting the Ave A planter project from Highway, no adult services position adjustment, topping off the DPW discretionary account at \$75,000 instead of \$100,000, not adding to the Town General Stabilization because the Town already meets the financial policy, and an increase to the GMRSD affordable assessment.
- Mr. Hanold questioned the reason behind not adding to the Town General Stabilization this year. Ms. Desroches reported that the stabilization is already meeting the 5% requirement of the financial policy. With the stabilization meeting this financial policy Mr. Hanold was satisfied with this decision.
- Mr. Hanold inquired about the cut to the discretionary account. He was curious what the reaction from DPW was regarding this adjustment. Mr. Nolan-Zeller reported that he did not know the exact reaction to this change, but that so far this year there has not been a large amount of spending from the discretionary account.
- Mr. Hanold then inquired about deferring the staff changing at the library and what the reaction was to that. Ms. Desroches stated that the plan was delayed due to the future of the building changes. Discussed following up about these last two points at next week's meeting.
- Ms. Bell-Upp questioned the special article related to the wage and class. Ms. Desroches answered that currently due to the unknowns of the current negotiations it is not possible to budget each individual staff so for now it is being budgeted as a special article. The hope is that in the next month it may be possible to get this into the individual budget lines.

- Mr. Hanold brought up the two recent retirements in the Assessor's and Town Clerk's departments. He wanted to ensure that the retirement buybacks will be in FY25 and will not be carried forward into FY26. Ms. Desroches reported that both would be paid out in FY25.
- Mr. Nolan-Zeller discussed that all the Selectboard's current recommendations are captured in the summary reported to the Finance Committee. Discussed that the Selectboard is holding off on making changes related to the Hero Act until a later date.
- Mr. Nolan-Zeller gave a brief overview of some of what CIC will be presenting next week. Discussed funding sources are still up in the air.

GMRSD Budget and Affordable Assessment:

- Ms. Bell-Upp wondered about how to distribute free cash to the school. For the past few years, she has wanted to know how much of the free cash is related to Town operations and how much is related to unanticipated revenues that should be shared with GMRSD.
- Mr. Hanold reported that the free cash that was generated was primarily created by the non-school side of the budget, so he feels confident in spending it on the non-school side expenses. Using the free cash on DPW and sewer also benefit the school because it is part of the Town as a whole.
- Mr. Nolan-Zeller stated that the school has not submitted any capital requests this year. They are still working on completing some of the capital requests they have made in previous years. Mr. Nolan-Zeller is going to help the school with completing these older articles. Mr. Hanold and Ms. Waryas both discussed that they are surprised that these were not completed with the urgency they were requested, and both were concerned for the cost increase the delay could result in. Ms. Waryas wanted to know who it is that is supposed to get the school projects completed.
- Ms. Bell-Upp gave a brief update from the 6 Town meetings on school consolidation. She stated it would budget neutral and that it doesn't look like it will be an increase to the budgets. Mr. Hanold had some concern about what will happen at the end of the consolidation and how it will affect Montague's budget as the largest Town in the consolidation.
- Mr. Bowman would like to see the school come in next year, presenting a flat budget with less reliance on state aid.
- Mr. Hanold and Ms. Rae had some concerns with future federal funding. Mr. Hanold brought up the ESSER funds and said that the GMRSD used ESSER funds to add staffing and services to help with an adjustment back to school. He discussed concern that adding heads under this temporary funding was not sustainable and that if the funds end, then the added positions and services should have come to an end as well. Ms. Waryas supported Mr. Hanold's point that the increase in staffing without a future funding source does seem to create a problem.
- Ms. Waryas and Mr. Hanold brought up the recent discussion around revisiting the affordable assessment. Mr. Hanold discussed that the conclusion was that changing the affordable assessment could have a large impact on the Town side funding.

Mr. Hanold moved to approve the affordable assessment at 12,663,178 for a 4.28% increase over FY25. Seconded by Ms. Bell-Upp and approved.

- Ms. Desroches stated that this vote only locks in the revenue budget, it does not finalize the expenditure side.
- Ms. Waryas questioned why the Finance Committee is voting on the affordable assessment if it is not the total amount of what the school needs. Mr. Hanold explained that we are voting to

lock in our affordable assessment after an adjustment to the excess capacity. He discussed that this is the Town's way of helping support the school side with their current problem, but that he does not want the Town of Montague on the hook for every request from GMRSD above the affordable assessment.

Bell-Upp – Aye, Bowman – Aye, Hanold – Aye, Waryas – Aye, Rae – Aye

Next Meetings

- a. 2/26/25 – Vote non-CIC articles, CIC Updates
- b. 3/5/25 – Final Vote Sch I & Sch II
- c. 3/12/25 – CIC/FC/SB meeting – capital requests, CIC report, votes
- d. 3/19/25 – FCTS, SB/FC reconciliation, vote remaining articles
- e. 3/26/25 – FC Final Votes and report

Topics not anticipated within 48 hours of posting:

Adjournment

Mr. Bowman makes the motion to adjourn at 7:21 PM. Seconded by Mr. Hanold and approved.

Bell-Upp – Aye, Bowman – Aye, Waryas – Aye, Rae – Aye, Hanold – Aye

Respectfully submitted,
Angelica Desroches

Documents and exhibits:

Minutes of February 5, 2025