

# Tri Board Town Meeting Minutes

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Tuesday, January 17, 2023  
6:00 pm  
Woodstock Middle School Cafeteria

A recording of this public forum can be found at: <https://youtu.be/s-6MidFou1s>

## 1. Call to Order

- a. First Selectmen Jay Swan called meeting to order at 6:09 pm
- b. Roll Call
  - i. Board of Selectmen Members Present
    1. Jay Swan, Chandler Paquette, Charlene Perkins Cutler (via Zoom)
  - ii. Board of Finance Members Present
    1. Michael Dougherty, Fred Chmura, David Fortin, Michael Bernardi, Jeffrey Kelleher, Michele Woz, Philip Parizeau, Asa Scranton, Julie Marcotte
  - iii. Board of Education Members Present
    1. Hans Frankhouser, Holly Dearborn, Sonia Greene, Anthony Gronski, Emily Hayden, Adam Keser, Daryl Manbeck, Amy Vinal
    2. Superintendent of Schools Victor Toth, Woodstock Public Schools Business Manger Janice Thurlow

## 2. BOS, BOF and BOE Tri Board Discussion of FY 24 Budget

- a. Jay Swan asked that anyone who speaks state their name for the record and use a microphone.
- b. Board of Education Chair Hans Frankhouser thanked everyone for coming and passed the microphone to Superintendent of Schools Victor Toth.
- c. Victor Toth reviewed a Board of Education Financial slide show presentation which noted the following-
  - i. CT General Statute 10-34 states that “any Town in which a high school is not maintained shall pay the whole of the tuition fees of pupils attending such school or academy”. This tuition cannot be restricted by local ordinance. The financial arrangement in for high school education in Woodstock is the only on of its kind in the State, if not the Nation and places tremendous limitations on both the educational and municipal budgets. He noted that providing for our youngest students and maintaining public safety are the two most important responsibilities of any community.
  - ii. Woodstock is ranked 87<sup>th</sup> of 169 median household income, 147<sup>th</sup> in equalized mill rate and 164<sup>th</sup> in per pupil expenditure. The ranking of median household income and equalized mill rate will result in \$901,000 in State Education Funding to be eliminated by 2030. All of this reduction in funding will have to come from the PreK-8 budget.
  - iii. The 2023-2024 Budget Projection includes the following:
    1. \$490,000 increase in contractual obligations
    2. \$66,000 increase in heating oil
    3. \$63,000 increase in transportation costs

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4. loss of \$128,000 in education state aid
  5. Woodstock Academy tuition increase of 5% resulting in total cost of \$18,845 per pupil
- iv. Victor Toth reviewed losses in schools since 2012 which include the following: 14 Classroom Teachers, 13 Regular Education Paraprofessionals, WMS Librarian, WES Librarian, WES Computer Program, WMS 7<sup>th</sup> Grade Spanish, WES Gifted Program, WMS Gifted Program, Language Arts Coordinator, Math Coordinator and Technology Coordinator. All Woodstock Public School sports have been removed from budget and are now Pay to Play teams.
  - v. Other impacts to the quality of Education in Woodstock due to finance restrictions to consider are: The education budget is unable to budget for any capital expenditures, the buildings and systems require regular maintenance and upgrades including the Public Address Systems, HVAC systems and structural maintenance. Budgetary limitations cause the School System to wait until something fails, and then fund it as an emergency expense and Campus Safety cannot even be addressed.
  - vi. In conclusion: Nearly one third of Education budget is controlled by High School costs that Woodstock has no control over because of the state statute. The brunt of all budget limitations is absorbed by PreK-8 Schools and Municipal budget. There is currently no room to maintain or improve services and voters currently do not have the ability to approve or decline a reasonable budget request.
- d. Hans Frankhouser noted that budgeting has been over 10 years of a balance act and with the addition of COVID-19 after effects, there is no ability to bounce back.
  - e. Jay Swan noted that 80% of collected tax goes to schools and 20% to general government.
  - f. Jay Swan shared that Woodstock EMS staff have diligently worked to provide adequate 24/7 coverage to Woodstock residents. Jay Swan has been working with other towns to monitor how their ambulance services are working out. There is a state law that states: towns must fund EMS for residents. Thompson and Putnam have formed a collaborative EMS program but currently are not able to absorb another town into that program at this time.
    - i. WVFA President Russ Downer Jr. reviewed the progress made toward 24/7 coverage with Woodstock EMS to date. The number of EMS personnel available to staff Woodstock has been at an all-time low for 4-5 years and much of this was due to offered pay rates. Changes have been made to raise pay rates and hire new staffing. Since December 3<sup>rd</sup>, no first duty call has been missed and 10 new hires have been onboarded.
    - ii. WVFA Chief Eric Young shared that the old rate was lowest pay rate in the area, which greatly impacted filling EMS shifts. The WFVA is currently borrowing funds from their own ambulance savings to start and fund the new 24/7 program with increased pay. All shifts through February are currently filled with the exception of 42 hours.
    - iii. \$262,614 is the proposed increase to budget requested that would go directly to the payroll to continue the new improved EMS 24/7 coverage.
    - iv. Jay Swan noted that DKH is currently having ambulance coverage concerns. There are currently many regional ambulance coverage issues.
    - v. Jay Swan noted that the Town Hall is currently closed on Friday as an effort to save money for tax payers. There are some town offices that are open part time trying to

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provide services to the town. Many employees will leave (or already have left) Woodstock for full time jobs with better pay and benefit in other towns. These are some of the items that the Town is dealing with.

- vi. Karen Fitzpatrick introduced herself and in her role as Finance Director is tasked to find ways to pay for the items in the budget. She noted that every year of her 17 years in Woodstock has included budget struggles. She shared the proposed increase needed for EMS staffing is between \$260,000 and \$280,000 in addition to the \$215,000 currently supported in our budget. She noted that there are regulations to protect personnel/employees that do not allow for volunteer hours of paid employees. Karen discussed the problems Woodstock faces paying for infrastructure maintenance and capital projects with the CNR funds balance not keeping up with rising costs of projects. There is a \$600,000 projected increase in just debt and EMS services for the upcoming year. She reviewed Prop 46 (*Prop 46 states "the Town shall limit the increase in the town's combined annual budget to revenue generated by growth in the Grand List, in State and Federal assistance, and in other income, except for increases, voted upon by town meeting, necessary to cover debt service on legal obligations, court judgements against the town, State mandated programs and emergency expenditures. In the event of property revaluation, the actual dollar increase in the combined town budget shall be limited to the dollar amount of increase in the preceding year's budget or the average amount of increase over the preceding three years, whichever is lower"*) and its effect on the Town Budget. She noted that Town of Woodstock funds are limited, and this meeting is to get input from residents on what is important to them to take into consideration for budget decisions. The Grand List will be complete by January 31<sup>st</sup> and at that time the upcoming budget amount will be determined, and discussions will begin to determine where money will be allocated.
- vii. BOE Vice Chair Adam Keser added that a person commented at a BOE meeting that the BOE always seems to manage fine with the cuts made to annual budget and wondered why more money is needed. He stated that our schools in relation to others are failing the students. We have wonderful teachers but less of them. Our numbers are trending negatively every year because the town has the ability to pay but not the willingness to pay. Prop 46 does not allow you to fund schools and town as you may want to fund them, and this will continue to get worse every year. The BOE is currently making do and not getting better as it should.
- viii. John Navarro noted he has many expenses in the Highway Department budget that he cannot control including fuel, repairs and maintenance (grease, oil, tires, etc) and contractual obligations. One of the teamsters may step up, as Superintendent, when John retires and the town may not be able to replace that member. This would require union re-negotiations as part time employees cannot be hired unless there is a full crew of full-time union employees. This would translate to a loss of 2 people at the highway department. He noted that the Transfer station could be affected by upcoming budget as well.
  - 1. Wendy Costa asked if it would be beneficial to the town to lock in all fuel as 1 entity instead of separate BOE and General Government fuel purchases. John Navarro noted his past good and bad experiences with locking in pricing of fuel.

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2. Wendy Costa also asked for a revenue vs expense comparison of transfers station funding. Karen noted that there is approximately \$50,000 difference between current budget and the Transfer Station becoming self-funded. The town has discussed it being self-funded and is working to increase prices gradually.

### 3. Open Public Forum

- a. Ed Higgins is serving as moderator for the public forum. He asked that anyone with questions line up along the wall and keep comments to 3 minutes.
- b. Dave Elliot, Chief of Bungay Fire Brigade echoed that volunteerism is at an all-time low. Fire Departments depend on EMS Ambulance for calls and 24/7 coverage is critical for safety in the Town of Woodstock. Bungay Fire is in full support of Woodstock EMS. Without in town EMS, mutual aid will lengthen response times and impact the safety of our community.
- c. Jim Dunlea stated he is new to town and has joined one of the Fire Departments. He is amazed at the number of calls in this town and cannot imagine the waiting length of some calls in the past. He asks that you think of your loved ones when deciding EMS coverage. He also noted that this concern is not unique to Woodstock.
- d. Wendy Costa asked how actively we pursue grants and if we have a grant writer on staff. Karen Fitzpatrick noted the struggle of not having a staff grant writer. The Town relies on individual employees to assist with grant writing but those employees do not have time for many grants. She does feel that the town is missing out on monies that are available with grants and is working with the Selectmen to add this into to budget in the future. The Fire Departments and the school system do not have a grant writer on staff and face the same struggles. The school system uses the Business Manager for grant writing and does currently have grant funds in use (some of which expire this year). The school system is constantly looking for grants but most educational grants are based on community needs and the Town does not qualify for many of those grants. Karen Fitzpatrick did review the ARPA funding and how it works for the Town of Woodstock as well as briefly describe town aid road grants and municipal aid grants that are given for being a municipality. Jay Swan followed up with the comment that citizens often bring up issues and not solutions. He would like to talk to anyone with grant writing experience that wishes to be part of the solution.
  - i. Russ Downer Jr. state that all 3 fire departments have received grants in recent years for various items. Bungay has gotten ½ million in last 10 years that has benefitted taxpayers. Muddy Brook also has gotten grant funding to save town spending on fire department expenses. He noted that Fire Department grants are very competitive.
- e. Megan Bard Morse asked when the grand list number will be received. Karen Fitzpatrick noted by January 31<sup>st</sup> the town will have grand list number unless the assessor applies for extension. Megan wants to know: what is a reasonable deadline for citizens to offer suggestions. Karen noted all budget requests should be in by end of January and budget discussions begin from there. Megan requests that he Town use its available resources to figure out how requests can be met to let the people know about the findings. Megan asked where funds for current EMS operations are coming from (Karen Fitzpatrick noted that the funds are coming from the WVFA ambulance savings fund) and what the plan is to repay that fund and pay for EMS in the future.

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Megan noted for the record that there is not a lot of time to make these budget decisions and wants to know how this all will be addressed.

- i. Karen Fitzpatrick noted that the budget process has been a struggle for years. When she started working on budget there used to be rooms filled with residents just like this one. That has changed over time to only board members and a few guests. She feels there should not be a deadline as citizens should actively give suggestions and participate. She noted the other services that could be cut if people do not participate by voicing their opinions in the budget process including open space, libraries, personnel, etc.
  - ii. Hans Frankhouser noted that understanding the budget process is important and that is what this meeting is all about.
- f. John Dlugosz stated he is tired of hearing community leaders blame citizens for the problems at hand. He feels the leaders need to come up with solutions and Prop 46 is a huge part of the problem. Limitations of Prop 46 for the future of education does matter. He also feels that the town should have better zoom and better press releases from the town.
  - i. Hans Frankhouser noted that over the years Prop 46 has gone out to vote and been voted down. It is a decision that needs to be made by voters. That is what this discussion is for tonight.
  - ii. Karen Fitzpatrick noted that the town and schools have sought legal advice around Prop 46 many times and the people have to make the change with the town.
- g. Glen Lessig thanked everyone for attending. He would like to hear from the Chair of the Board of Finance as he could give some good projections for revenues in upcoming year. This would allow the conversation to move forward with some numbers reference.
  - i. Board of Finance Chair Michael Dougherty said he does not see funds coming from anywhere to increase the budget number as we have lost grants and property values are now dropping. He does not expect to see the grand list generate any additional revenue this year and noted that \$168,000 is the highest value generated in last 10 year by grand list. In the last 10 years, the budget has gone to the maximum all but 3 times. Even if the budget did go to the max last year, the difference would only be \$603,000 higher and that would not solve the problems at hand. There is a problem in the Town of Woodstock and the Board of Finance cannot do its job unless they can present something reasonable to vote on. Prop 46 currently limits the options.
- h. Glen Lessig noted that we have heard that we need solutions. He would like the Board of Selectmen to schedule a second meeting after grand list to share ideas/solution to the public.
  - i. Adam Keser noted that there is only one solution and that is dealing with prop 46. It must be decided as a town if we have an appetite to pay for what we can afford?
- i. Cindy Alberts inquired about the Bowen Fund monies, specifically when they are available for use. Karen Fitzpatrick noted that the Bowen Fund matures in May of 2027 and there is \$6.2 million currently in that fund that fluctuates with the market. When that fund matures it needs to be handled as a spending endowment and only earned interests can be spent which must go directly towards lowering tax rate per the restrictions of the fund.
- j. Sue Connor of West Woodstock Library noted that the Town of Woodstock's current spending rate towards the libraries is \$14 per capita and state average is \$56. She feels that a wonderful service is provided by the libraries and is now in jeopardy. She also volunteers as the municipal

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Agent for the Elderly and noted that we have basically no services for our elderly population. The Town of Woodstock has the means to provide for seniors but cannot under Prop 46 limitations.

- k. Russ Wilmont asked if the WES and WMS properties are owned by town and if the teachers are town employees. Victor Toth noted that the Town owns all property in school system and employees of the Board of Education, are paid with Town funds.
- l. Neil Warner feels that we need to keep prop 46. He and his wife home school 6 boys and feel prop 46 is a community problem not government problem. This community needs to come together to care for each other and solve problems as community.
- m. Myron Stachiw is very happy that this opportunity has arisen to discuss these concerns. He feels that the public needs to understand what is needed to address these issues. He suggests workshops to inform residents what avenues are possible to make these changes.
  - i. Michele Woz wanted to note that boards are governed by state statutes that outline responsibilities. She wants it clear that boards are limited in what they can do in many situations.
- n. Mark Puliafico knows how well the town tries to responsibly spend money. All boards are very conscientious about spending. These people in town are listening to us as residents. Years ago, a fire tax was overturned by 3 votes which would have taken fire service monies out of budget. We (the Town) are in a reaction plan at this point- not an action plan. Our problems are not going away, and we currently have the lowest mill rate in the area. The Town of Woodstock is in need of a plan and to move forward in progressive manner.
- o. O'Neill (via zoom chat) asked if radio system is new, why are there still areas lost in town. The new system does have dead spots in town but now has much larger communication area with less dead area. It was noted that there was a situation of car accident in snowstorm that allowed communication between rescue and highway resulting in sand immediately delivered.
- p. Jessica Weaver Boose noted that even if we (the Town) got rid of Prop 46, the citizens still have the power to say no at the polls. This all gets back to involvement, and we all have to do the work.
- q. Chuck (via zoom chat) inquired to the BOE- What the ratio is of teacher to students and support to student in the different schools.
  - i. Victor Toth responded that PreK and Kindergarten classes average 16-17 students per class, grades 1-8 range in class size from 18 to 24 kids and Special Ed is mandated by statute and changes on a year to year basis depending on student needs.
- r. Abigail (via zoom chat) asked if there is anything that can be done surrounding the Woodstock Fair to support the town as they do not pay taxes.
  - i. Jay swan noted that the Woodstock Fair is separate entity and has no ties to the town operations.
    - 1. John Dlugosz noted he researched and found that the Town may be able to charge entry fee tax on fair tickets.
    - 2. Fred Chmura noted that the fair is non tax by statute.
    - 3. Russ Downer stated that the fire and EMS negotiate yearly contracts with the Fair.
    - 4. Richard Baron noted there is an ordinance in town that allows billing for services for events along with building official.



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- 5. Jim Dunlea noted that Woodstock Fair runs on mostly volunteers/community service.
- s. George McCoy stated he can attest to high call volume in town as he lives next to the WVFA. He used to be part of a department in California and the department was disbanded due to lack of volunteers. He asked if he heard correctly that federal law prohibits volunteers.
  - i. Russ noted that the choice was made to go to a pay for service operation and there is a statute that states you cannot volunteer for the entity that you are paid to work for pertaining to EMS personnel.
  - ii. Karen Fitzpatrick clarified that you can volunteer for the town of Woodstock. No Town employee can volunteer additional hours to complete their specified job.
- t. Megan Bard Morse read questions/comments of other citizens noting the following:
  - i. Grant writers often work on percentage of the grant and would not cost the Town money from budget.
    - 1. Karen Fitzpatrick noted that payment to the grant writer depends on the grant.
  - ii. Personal trash service runs approximately \$700 per year
    - 1. Transfer station permits are currently priced at \$200 per year for Woodstock Residents or \$105 for Seniors.
  - iii. What was cost of Lebanon Hill improvements?
    - 1. \$350,000 is the estimated total for the project. John Navarro stated that there is still work to be done in the spring for this project.
  - iv. When there was a reduction in town hall hours, did payroll reduce?
    - 1. Karen noted that hours were reduced for employees when town hall closed.
  - v. What happens with the insurance reimbursement that comes back to the EMS?
    - 1. \$190,000 was brought in by billing for ambulance service. This money goes to back to EMS to cover expenses for services.
  - vi. To the School System- how do you address students from outside towns?
    - 1. Any student that establishes residency is entitled to education
    - 2. Adam noted that there is a committee to address this concern and please let the BOE know if you know of these people that are not Woodstock residents in our school system.
- u. Megan Bard Morse asked how the community will know when/if a follow up meeting is scheduled.
  - i. Jay Swan will publicize future meeting on Facebook and website. The general public present at this meeting wishes to have a second meeting.
  - ii. It was noted that zoom was limited to 100 and many could not attend. This should be changed for the next meeting.
- v. Megan Bard Morse asked what happens of budgets that are overspent when we are at the max of Prop 46.
  - i. Karen shared that would be violation of a statute and a plan of action would have to be submitted to the state. But the bill would still have to be paid.
- w. Melissa Fox noted the change in class size and the effect on students. She wants to express thanks to the EMS and fire and is concerned that we have to nitpick at budget items where we should be willing to pay more to provide needed services and not lose any additional services or

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teachers. She is seeing teachers that are burning out because of too many kids and not enough help. We need to move from being less to being what this town is admired for.

- x. Dawn Williams asked about the building up of the Woodstock Academy.
  - i. Hans Frankhouser is the sending town rep for WA and sits on WA committees. He notes that the WA has the same increases in budget and challenges to deal with as any other school system.
- y. James Blond asked if it would be beneficial to combine to one central location for Fire and EMS in Woodstock.
  - i. Dick Baron noted there are a lot of factors including that Woodstock is one of largest town in state and there is not a water supply system with hydrants. He noted that all chiefs do meet and work together for apparatus and training.
  - ii. Russ Downer added that EMS has worked with fire departments to ensure all ambulances and rescue vehicles are adequately equipped.
- z. Myron Stachiw suggested setting up zoom meetings by people examining possible strategies to inform people on budget happenings.
- aa. Carole Eckholm asked if Woodstock Academy pays taxes for houses/properties they own.
  - i. This question could be best answered by the assessor. Most independent homes that were owned by the Academy have been sold as they were no longer needed with purchase of dormitory on South Campus.
- bb. Matthew (via zoom chat) asked if Air BnB/bed and breakfast tax revenues have been addressed as there are many surfacing in the Town of Woodstock.
- cc. Erin (via zoom chat) asked if inflation has been discussed? If town budget does not increase by the current inflation amount, then spending power decreases.
  - i. This is the problem with our current budget and the reason that we are here.
  - ii. Michael Dougherty stated that the last 10 years cumulative increase in inflation was 29.27 percent and our budget has increased by 21.17 percent. We need an additional 6 percent to keep heads above water from previous increases.
- dd. Greg Kline noted that he sees many cars with out of plate license plates at the Transfer Station and this means that we are losing tax revenues via motor vehicle tax.
  - i. Jay Swan noted that there are many reasons for this including Woodstock residents driving company cars. Permits are the revenue collected by transfer station and residency and registrations are checked when permits are issued.
- ee. Chandler Paquette noted that Prop 46 is called 46 because that is what the mil rate was in 1976. At that time, all fire service was self-funded and it is time to take care of the people who take care of us. If people want to change/modify Prop 46, the work is outside of this room. The support of a larger group needs to be found to change Prop 46. More people need to be involved and engage to make change.
- ff. Karen Fitzpatrick noted that many do not understand this town's budget. She is always available for questions. She reviewed that for the last 3 years the general fund has been used for tax relief and the town cannot do that anymore- it is not the answer. It is time to face reality and support the budget without dipping into savings.
- gg. Ron Braaten voted for Prop 46 but feels that anything can change. He feels we need to understand the reasons for the creation of Prop 46 and hopes that an amendment can be made as it seems to be needed. Mandates are tying hands of our local boards. He wants a



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representative on the state board of education from our area. He thanked the town very much for this evening as he learned a lot from the boards.

#### 4. Adjournment at 8:58 pm

- a. Michele Woz made a **\*Motion to Adjourn. \*Seconded** by Phil Parizeau. **\*The Motion Passed Unanimously.** Meeting Adjourned at 9:00 pm.

Respectfully submitted by Amy Monahan, Recording Secretary.