

Town of Hartford/Hartford School District
Budget Discussion and Candidates Night
Monday, February 26, 2024, 7 PM
Hartford High School Auditorium or Zoom
<https://zoom.us/j/549799933>

1. Call to Order

Chuck Wooster, Town/School Moderator, opened the meeting at 7:04 PM and reviewed the ground rules; speakers must be residents, employees will be allowed to speak.

He announced that there are Town Reports available with the town on one side and the school on the other.

He announced this was the first of three meetings: tonight budget and candidates night, Town/School District meeting day on Saturday, and the third is the voting day, Tuesday, March 5, 2024. He explained the purpose of each meeting. The second formal bond hearing will be held on Saturday, March 2, 2024. There will be time to discuss the proposed Charter changes on Saturday as well, voting takes place on that on Tuesday.

He thanked the Town/School District Meeting Committee for their work. He thanked the volunteers and welcomed new volunteers, read about the possibilities in the Town Report.

He thanked the audience for attending.

2. Town Budget

Select Board Chair, Mike Hoyt, and Town Manager, John Haverstock introduced themselves. Mr. Hoyt explained the budget process. Mr. Haverstock explained the specific guidelines given to the dept heads for the budget preparation. The Select Board reviews the drafts, discusses and debates priorities, finalizes the proposal, outside agency petitions are received, and budget is adopted.

Mr. Hoyt presented: current budget \$19,244,123 and proposed budget of \$21,655,825.44 (a 7.2% increase to be raised by taxes), non tax revenue increase, increase in grand list, the tax rate history from FY2020, FY25 unassigned fund balance of \$2M, and Local Option Tax of \$455,000. He shared a lengthy list of funding obligations. He explained some factors behind the budget increases: end of ARPA funding (paving), reincorporated library support, new positions, impact of 2023 compensation study, 4% wage increase effective July 1, 2024, and health insurance premium increase of 14.2%(calendar year 2024). He reviewed the Fire, Police, and Dispatch Department increases.

Mr. Wooster entertained questions. The Town Manager and Dept Heads answered the questions.

Subject of questions: Bugbee Senior Center accessibility, Lyman Point Park renovations/update with Local Option Tax, Flooding from summer 2023 impact, community nurse position office vs travel out to community, level funding of taxes, water supply in Wilder, and a congratulations to the Town employees, especially Gail, for their work in putting together the budget.

3. School Budget Update

Kevin Christie, School Board Chair, addressed the body. He gave a quick overview of how we got here and where we are. The budget process was started in the fall with varying numbers from the Agency of Education. Act 127, for July 2024, was supposed to reweight all the students across the state, was in place and supposed to level the funding across the state. There are several categories of students with differing weights. There was a 5% override of tax caps in the state with the per pupil spending level at 10% or less. On Dec 1, 2023, the treasurer projected an 18% increase in the tax rates. However the state couldn't support this level. A committee bill, H.850, gave each school district an option of rescinding their budgets.

Hartford administrators and the board will be working over the next few weeks to calibrate the school budget.

Mr. Wooster recapped, the school board rescinded the budget and bond, the votes will be tabulated but not publicized even though they will be on the ballot due to early printing.

Town Clerk Lisa O'Neil announced that there will be a second election for the school budget and bond vote. Everyone will get the same ballot, there were 800+ mailed out, and the ballots that will be handed out on Tuesday. All ballots will be processed. If you requested a ballot for this election you get a new ballot mailed to you for the second election, no additional requests needed.

Mr. Wooster entertained questions. Questions were answered by board members.

Subject of questions: supporter of education, community support for programs, \$21M bond proposed/ \$9M interests payments; state way of funding, long time problem

4. Candidate Presentation

Mr. Wooster announced that each candidate will have a four minute opportunity to address the body. There will be a question period following.

School Board:

Nancy Russell introduced herself: 3 year term, has served for 8 years, VSBA state service, resident of town since 1997, ran a licensed child care center, shared her community service, very involved with the community, children are her passion, she asked for support.

Garrett Wilson introduced himself, IT/personal trainer at UVAC, running for 2 yr seat, HHS alumni, lived here whole life, Hartford taxpayer for 10 years, 2 young children, making changes to school district will benefit all kids in Hartford, provide a top notch education for all, wants to participate in the search for new superintendent, pay teachers well, work with teachers/administration, HACTC resources, look at standardized testing-work with all to increase scores, he thanked several folks and the audience.

Select Board:

Ida Griesemer, 3 year seat, Wilder, thanked several, grew up in Lyme, WRJ very special to her while growing up due to Northern Stage, interested in making the community stronger, important to listen to each other and respect all views, works as a scientist at the VA to support veterans core needs, overarching goal learn from citizens of Hartford, priorities: infrastructure, affordable housing, supports community nurse position, grateful to live here, committed to town.

Patrick Danaher, 3 year seat, Dothan Hill, Hartford village, shared a Kennedy quote, shared voting record of citizens over last ten years, citizens need to become active, want to feel safe, a clean environment with good schools, time to go back to common sense, priorities: support lower taxes, smaller government, invest in infrastructure, clean environment, are boards working for us or themselves? Time for change, has history, ideas, and ambition, work with him to make a difference.

Rocket, 2 year seat, finishing up first two year term, grew up in California, came to VT in 2007, Putney School, Middlebury and Vermont Law School, last time ran unopposed, last two years been active and colorful, divisive term and unprofessional- apologized for that, will speak his truth, recognized that he has a lot to grow with process, greatest achievement is hiring new town manager and dept heads, great leadership can now focus on the budget, per household tax burden needs to go down.

Brandon Smith, 2 year seat, lives near Dothan Brook School, 4 years ago came to VT to build houses, the needs and wants are at the center, board meetings need to be shorter, town website is important, tax and spending incentivise very important, affordable rent should be $\frac{1}{3}$ of

minimal wage, disincentivize buying up housing, get more people here, places for them to live and jobs for them, boost housing supply, housing section of town policies will be revamped, BrandonSmith.com website, please check that out, planning and development department have been doing good work, should be able to walk to center of activities.

Aaron Warner, 2 year seat, grew up in Portland, Oregon, Hartford resident 15 years, auto detail garage and personal training, father of 5, grandfather, shared a story from hometown visit, Black Lives Matter movement ridiculous that you have to state that, political wins follow the west coast movement, Hartford has a D+ crime rating, stated some board member activity, vision: keep an ideology of the west or attract working Americans for safe roads and streets and competent citizens.

Susan Buckholz, unable to attend, Jim Dow, spousal partner, spoke on her behalf, decided to run, overwhelmed by the support since she announced her candidacy, concerned about where we're going as a town, have had good discussions with other candidates, what Hartford needs- emphasis on respect for each other, honor each other, we need to make things fair, work with Select Board who puts aside pet peeves, can have disputes and disagreements, need discussions in a respectful and open atmosphere, litigation lawyer, asked for all to support Brandon and Ida as they share the same ideas as she does. Jim will not be answering questions on her behalf.

5. Questions and Answer Period

Mr. Wooster entertained questions. He will have all candidates address the same questions.

Question subjects: standardized testing, all students need to feel valued; HMMS weak link- my high level children plateaued and digressed in middle school, glad for a young parent to serve; beneficial health resources/gaps for Hartford seniors; asked how many have read the Town and Regional plan; finances- Montpelier, reevaluation needed, inflation, pay rates, look at every penny spent; clarification of Mr. Danaher's opening speech; Hartford's growth, potential employers and housing availability; lived in home since 2008, taxes have doubled, state funding formula problem and bond proposal, pleaing to school board members to present a smaller bond to address the urgent need; thanked candidates for running, Mr. Warner's hateful speech; appreciates Rocket's apology tonight, asked Rocket what his trainings have been and what liaisons would he be keeping; role of Select Board/policy governance model; racial problems successfully addressed at DBS, thoughts of DEI at town level

going on?; town budget increase for board and commission stipends; school district problems, PCP levels; school debt service payments, stipends for commissions, local option taxes; compensation study used an independent firm for over \$17,000, May 2, 2023 meeting presentation didn't show that employees were underpaid, 4% increase not accurate some are getting more, is this the year for salary increases?

6. Close of Meeting

Mr. Wooster closed the meeting at 9:55 PM. He thanked all the candidates for attending.

He reminded the audience of the purpose of the meeting on Saturday.

Respectfully submitted,
Cherrie Torrey
Hartford School Board Recorder