

Town of Bridgewater

Board of Selectmen

Spring Newsletter

The 2024 Town Meeting was very well attended. About 35% of the voter checklist attended the meeting. In general, most town meetings throughout the State generate about a 20% attendance ratio. It was gratifying as the main issue of the evening was a warrant article to withdraw from the Newfound School District. It was approved in the affirmative by a 96% plurality. (209/28) The Town of Groton had a similar turnout and a 95% positive vote as well. Hebron will vote in early May. The BHG Steering Committee continues to keep communications lines open with the Hebron Select Board and community until the final vote. Nothing is being taken for granted. This issue is greatly important to all three communities. See: [Town Meeting Minutes 2024](#). It was the largest turnout in the history of Bridgewater.

Some observations and concerns”

“The 730pm time was difficult for parents to attend” That has been the historical meeting time for over 60 years.

“There were no questions from those attending!” That was true and, admittedly, unusual. Those who attend a Town Meeting are considered a legislative group. It’s their meeting. The Moderator gave ample time after the warrant article was moved and seconded to allow for debate. There was none.

“The Select Board was asked by the Moderator if the Board wanted to speak to the article. The Board indicated they had no comment”. After two years of meetings, multiple newsletters, legislative attendances and multiple local public hearings, we believed there was nothing we could add to the issue. Coupled with no questions from those in attendance, it appeared that it was time for the vote.

This is the last part of a journey that began over 20 years ago when the Bridgewater Hebron Village School was funded and built outside of SAU4. The first part of that course was spectacular, we have some outstanding teachers, high achieving students and a building proudly maintained by town of Bridgewater and Hebron taxpayers. We are now on the second part of our trip, a course correction to our original destination of transforming the school to a K-8. Our goal is to expand the excellent education provided through the 5th grade to 6th, 7th, and 8th graders.

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In the near future, we will be asking for volunteer help. For the remainder of 2024 and into June 2025, there will be no students in the newly formed district. (Assuming a positive vote in Hebron) and the focus will be constructing the new district infrastructure. **Our 3 towns student's will remain in SAU4, effectively, until September of 2025.** Much of this migration will be highly technical work. A background in budgeting, contract negotiation, project management, finance and/or some school committee services are preferred.

Other Town News:

In other Town Meeting updates, the requested appropriation budget was presented as \$1,813,000 and, at the request of the Select Board, was amended and increased by \$40,000 to \$1,843,000. The Board asked for the additional funds to adjust for the anticipated increase cost of the new ambulance. The original chassis was rejected by the Town as the gross vehicle weight (GVW) did not meet our specifications. The two- and one-half year delay has resulted in this dilemma. The net cost for the ambulance will net out to about \$340,000. We have encumbered \$300,000 in cash from private donations and grants.

Last year, we repaved roads throughout the town at a cost of \$500,000 and replaced a high maintenance cost highway truck with a new truck for \$109,000. Those funds were voted out of surplus. Those decisions will help us buffer other costs and, after June 2024, the town will have no long-term debt. We quite mindful of the increase costs of goods and services which were mostly derived from the COVID years and supply issues. We are “trimming down” as best we can to mitigate those increased costs without sacrificing our established infrastructure.

Reassessing. We are sure you are aware of the sky rocketing real estate prices. The 2000 reassessment has declined from 100% of market value to 56% in four years. Every town in NH is impacted by this reality. This revaluation matter is mostly overseen by the State of New Hampshire based on local property sales. We will be reassessing all property values this year. We anticipate a lowering of the tax rate as the town values increase. However, because Grafton County and the State Wide Property Tax are based on **equalized real estate valuations**, it's very difficult to accurately determine the overall local impact. We have weathered this problem before and will keep you informed as the revaluation progresses.

Equalization (EQ) is a process carried out annually to ensure common property tax burdens are distributed fairly and equitably among taxpayers. This is accomplished by conducting an annual ratio study using sales from a period of October 1 through September 30 of the following year. The information derived

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from the ratio studies is then used to calculate each municipality's total assessed value used for **Grafton County apportionment and the state education tax**. Many cooperative schools use equalized property values as well to distribute costs across member towns. SAU4 currently apportions its local costs to member towns only by average daily membership (ADM) This was one important, but not the only, factor to withdraw from SAU4. Some towns in the district wished to move to an assessment-based system which was not in our collective interest.

When we last reassessed in 2020, that set the EQ ratio at 98% of market value up from 74%. This process adjusts the assessed value of your real estate value. EQ has declined to 56% this year indicating property values have declined and are underassessed relative to the sales of similar properties. The total Town valuation of all assessed land and buildings in 2000 was \$465,422,300. Its new 2023 valuation is \$827,947,258

Good news – Your equity in your home will go up and your “wealthier”

Bad news – Your house doesn't produce income. You do!

“I checked a comparable assessment on a house in another Town, to my house. It was considerably lower than mine. How come?” Property values are based on a number of factors. Age of the dwelling, obsolescence factors, types of heating, number of bedrooms, location and what a **similar property sold for in Bridgewater**. (Among many, many other factors) That type of comparison across towns is difficult. We reassessed in 2020 to bring values to 98% of market value in Bridgewater. Another town's property assessment may have been done 4 years earlier and valuations are currently at 78% of fair market values for that town. The State Constitution and the DRA require reassessment to be done every 5 years to adjust to market factors. Given the current economic factors, it is truly a “sellers' market.” All of the property valuation/reassessment are reviewed by NH Department of Revenue Administration.

This issue of apportioning costs to pay for services such as education, state wide education property tax (SWEPT) and county (Grafton) is complex. NH appears to have an overreliance on property taxes and a disconnect from income measures. Bridgewater belongs to a group since 1999 trying to address this matter to the NH legislature. One step was accomplished years ago by the formation of a State Education Trust Fund established in 1999 and modified over the years. The SWEPT raises revenue to support the State adequate education grants; in FY 2017, it raised about 39 percent of all funding necessary to support these grants

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statewide. Most municipalities do not raise enough to fulfill the amount required for adequacy grants, so money from other State tax revenue sources fills the gap. See the following **link** and scroll to the section “**Taxing Property Statewide and Keeping It Local**” It’s involved

<https://www.nhmunicipal.org/town-city-article/how-we-fund-public-services-new-hampshire>

For the record, Bridgewater and Hebron have **NEVER** qualified for Adequacy Grants. Towns with large school age populations and low property values get aid from the state. SAU4 has as total of 1150 students. Bridgewater, Hebron and Groton are comprised of 180 of those students. 5 of the 7 towns receive Adequacy. As said – it’s complicated.

Cyber security

Primarily focuses on protecting computer systems from unauthorized access or being otherwise damaged or made inaccessible. SAU4 and other school districts have been attacked. The school lost all financial data and any computer connected to the server was impacted as well. Student data was left unharmed as it resided in a “cloud based” application. All backup data was lost.

We have always had a robust security protocol but we moved our future security updates to this year. The internet firewalls were updated. Automatic backups were enhanced and encrypted. We outsource our network and security system analysis to companies’ expert in that area.

“Does this mean we are safe from attacks/” No. However, the cost to reconstruct and recover our operations is greatly enhanced. If we lost our data, the cost to reconstruct would be really, really pricey!!! This upgrade greatly reduces that problem. (Recently, our postage meter failed because of an apparent hack on the company supplying the meter. It’s connected to the internet.) Safe is a relative term on the internet!

Sincerely,

Terence Murphy
Selectmen

Maurice Jenness

P. Wesley Morrill, Jr