



FAIRLEE NEWSLETTER

January 2022

TOWN MEETING

No floor meeting will be held in 2022. Ballots will be mailed directly to all active voters by February 9, 2022. The Town Report will be mailed on February 15, 2022.

Informational Meeting via Zoom
 Thursday, February 24 at 6:00 PM

Town Meeting Vote by Australian Ballot
 Tuesday, March 1
 10:00 AM to 7:00 PM
 Town Hall Auditorium

FROM THE SELECTBOARD

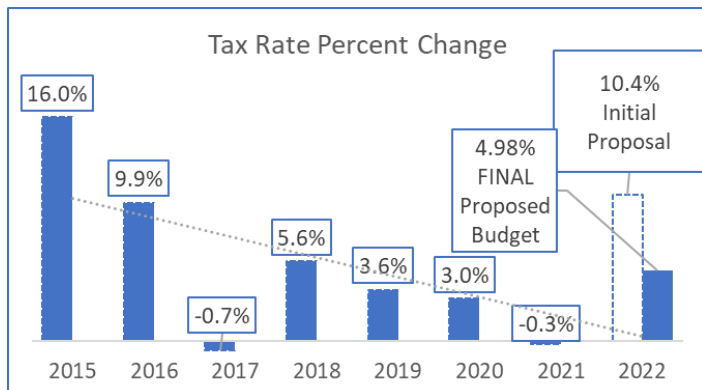
Budget conversations are tough. *Really* tough. This year is no different from other years.

The Selectboard’s goal is to seek *affordable* municipal taxes. We know that alongside Fairlee’s improving local economy and revitalization, we must acknowledge and appreciate new civic functions, needs and responsibilities.

The municipal budget is a living document. Our first run through generated an *extraordinary 10.4% tax rate increase* over last year, a step up that we recognized **as being too much for Fairlee taxpayers today**. After reviewing department budget proposals, it was evident that they were careful and reasonable—and not the outcome of wish lists or outlandish requests.

Additional civic needs and responsibilities accompany Fairlee’s improving local economy and revitalization.

After a number of warned meetings and with the help and rigorous review of the elected Budget Committee (Dan Ludwig, Stephen Bentley and Elizabeth Wilson), the Treasurer (Lisa Hinsley), and the Town Administrator (Tad Nunez), **we propose to Fairlee taxpayers a budget with a tax rate increase of 4.98%**. The 2022 Budget is on the Fairlee Web Site at fairleevt.org.



How did we get to 4.98%? Leftover funds—money that remains in hand after all 2021 expenses are paid—is a challenging aspect of budget decision making.

Some projects that were budgeted in 2021 were not completed for reasons having to do with the COVID pandemic and staff workload (among other things), leaving “cash available” at the end of the year.

In every budget setting cycle, the Treasurer and the Selectboard thoughtfully discuss what to do with the available cash. If we carry all of the available cash into the next year, it reduces the tax rate, returning the money to the taxpayers. This sounds great, yet one of its problems is that it can lead to peaks and valleys in tax rate change from one year to the next, instead of leading to steady and somewhat predictable change.

Year	Tax Rate Change in Cents	% Tax Rate Growth	Cash Carried Forward
2015	\$0.07	16.0%	\$112,966
2016	\$0.05	9.9%	\$63,344
2017	\$0.00	-0.7%	\$73,159
2018	\$0.03	5.6%	\$31,492
2019	\$0.02	3.6%	\$13,000
2020	\$0.02	3.0%	\$0
2021	\$0.00	-0.3%	\$25,000
2022	\$0.03	4.98%	\$69,000

Many Vermont towns retain leftover tax money and put it into an undesignated fund (something like a savings account or rainy-day fund) in order to stay within budget due to unforeseen events, projects and issues.

And that word—unforeseen—is the lynchpin. Who would have predicted that we would be looking at 5.7% inflation this year? Who would have predicted the COVID pandemic? In fact, who would have predicted the burst of energy in downtown Fairlee? In the end, unforeseen events, projects and issues, whether positive or negative, haunt budget decision making.

This year, the Selectboard has elected to **carry forward \$69,000, only a portion of the Town’s available cash, to reduce the tax rate hike from 10.4% to 4.98%. This reduction may lead to a bigger tax hike next year.** Regardless, we believe that we are in an unusual time with many things beyond our control. We hope that the following explanations will convince you that we have made the right municipal budget decisions.

PUBLIC SAFETY

In a relatively close vote last year, the Town voted against contracting with the Orange County Sheriff’s Department (OCSO) for increased police coverage. There was no hard data at that time that proved the need for increased policing. **This year, we have hard data.**

Our current contract with Orange County and coverage from the Vermont State Police (VSP) is open-ended; the result is that we receive coverage in Fairlee only as available. During 2021, there were 466 calls for service

from all three operations. **Sixty-seven percent (311) of the calls and 70% (1,087) of the total estimated hours were from OCSD and VSP—unscheduled, irregular, and only because officers happened to be available at that moment.**

	Non-Motor Vehicle Calls	Motor Vehicle Calls	Total Calls	Est. Total Hours
Fairlee	50	105	155	476
OCSD	32	24	56	304
VSP	174	81	255	1,384
Total	256	210	466	2,164

Alongside the hard data, Police Chief Jason Bachus compared Fairlee and Orford.

“Just across the river, Orford has one full-time police officer at 40 hours per week, 2,080 hours per year. Fairlee in 2021 had 9 hours of scheduled coverage per week—less than 500 hours per year—alongside unpredictable coverage from the Vermont State Police and the Orange County Sheriff’s Department.”

Altogether, this information has convinced the Selectboard that Fairlee is woefully under-protected. A new proposal from OCSD **will ensure 20 dedicated hours per week from one officer.** The guaranteed Orange County hours per week **adds \$30,000 to the police budget, which translates to 1 ½ pennies in the tax rate,** far less costly than the salary and benefits for one full-time police officer. Enhancing coverage in 2022 is a responsible way to maintain public safety and to prepare for Fairlee’s economic growth.

HUMAN RESOURCES

Fairlee is served by an outstanding staff. Many have tenures of over 30 years and are recognized as professional leaders throughout the State. We celebrate Tad Nunez (Town Administrator), Georgette Wolf-Ludwig (Town Clerk), Chris Brimmer (Zoning Officer), Lisa Hinsley (Treasurer), Noël Walker (Head Lister), Mike Wright (Road Foreman), Beth Reynolds (Librarian), Lance Colby (Chief Water Operator), Barry Larson (Assistant Water Operator), Squeak Brown (Custodian) and Frank Godfrey (Transfer Station Manager). The Selectboard is committed to retaining Fairlee’s superior elected and appointed Town staff. **It is far less expensive to retain good staff than to search for, recruit and hire new staff.**

Fairlee’s improving local economy and its revitalization bring with it additional and changing responsibilities for our team. For example, our success at winning large grants brings a bevy of financial tracking and reporting—more work stacked on the shoulders of Lisa Hinsley and Tad Nunez. As Fairlee grows and changes, the responsibilities of Town staff grow and change as well.

The Town introduced a retirement program in 2017 and in the past few months, the Selectboard confirmed an updated sick, personal and bereavement policy. Currently, the Selectboard is reviewing vacation and retirement policies to ensure equity among Town staff.

While not doing so this year—*but perhaps anticipating doing so next year*—the Selectboard is not recommending merit increases but is nevertheless in support of a 5.7% cost of living adjustment for all Town staff. **The 5.7% COLA for every Town employee totals \$25,500, which translates to 1 ¼ pennies in the tax rate.**

ADJUSTING TO CHANGE

A lot is going on in Fairlee. Fairlee has exciting energy. In five years, our Town will look very different.

A concerted effort to create a master plan will help Fairlee adapt for growth by adding housing, such as 501 Main with 9 apartments. Our stormwater grant will eliminate the lake-like puddles that stymie entry into Samurai, the Post Office, the Library, Lakeside Auto, Wing’s and Leda’s.

Sooner than five years, we hope that Fairlee’s businesses have full staffing. We hope that our busy restaurants and coffee shops will refresh our palates and address our caffeine cravings. We hope that art exhibits and outdoor concerts will draw visitors from throughout Vermont and New Hampshire. We hope that we will continue to look after each other, check in on our neighbors and reach out to those who need a helping hand. **We continue to support and honor the volunteers who devote time and energy to our special community.**

Along with change come additional responsibilities and needs. **We hope that you will support the proposed 2022 municipal budget.**

Comments or questions?

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