

FY25 Washington Budget Details

The total operating budget in the Town's FY25 budget is \$2,341,118. This is a net increase in the town's budget of 3.38% over FY24.

Our CBRSD school operational assessment went down this year slightly, \$1,016 due mostly to a Rural School Aid grant received by the school district and distributed to the member towns. Our CBRSD capital cost assessment was relatively flat (down \$494), but the good news is that this will be the last year for the Becket/Washington Elementary School renovation payments.

Our costs for sending students to out-of-district vocational education schools has increased again this year as we are anticipating 7 students for FY25 going to 3 different schools. Tuition for these students is \$136,595, up \$17,606 (almost 15%) from last year. The hard part to budget for is the transportation of these students. We currently employ a very complicated mix of bus company contracts and the use of our town-owned student transportation vehicle to get 7 students to 3 schools in a timely manner. We currently partner with Becket on sharing costs to get all of our students to vocational education school. The budget difficulty comes from uncertainty about the number of students from each community that are accepted to the various schools and what the final breakdown of costs will be. Further complicating this year's calculations is a late push for a regional (all 7 CBRSD towns) bus contract agreement and the capacity/viability of our older school bus to transport students to McCann and Taconic. The budget number we are proposing for FY 25 is our best guess of the worst case scenario for Washington's share of costs for transporting our vocational education students. The total is \$62,924 (a 6% increase). If we need to continue using our own school bus, we will look to find non-tax money to handle the necessary repair or replacement. Again, state reimbursement for vocational education transportation costs (which should be 100% "*subject to appropriation*") will be totally inadequate this year in the proposed state budget, so speak to your representatives about this issue.

The FY25 budget incorporates a 3% cost-of-living-allowance increase for all town wages. The Highway Department budget this year is \$663,243, down 1.2% from last year despite inflation. This is primarily due to the great work our treasurer Ben Gelb has done in sourcing out a different health insurance plan that is not only less expensive, but provides our employees better coverage.

There are several new expenses that have impacted the budget this year. The grant that helped pay for our shared town administrator is over, and Washington will be paying for our full 50% share of his salary this year which is \$41,200. It appears as \$82,400 on the warrant, but Middlefield reimburses us for their half share which is reflected in the tax rate. Washington is also entering into an agreement with Becket to provide primary coverage for ambulance service. Our previous agreement with County Ambulance had expired and they were not able to renew the agreement due to staffing and logistical issues. The new agreement is a use-based model, and we are budgeting \$12,000 to cover estimated possible costs for the ambulance coverage based on the average number of calls in recent years.

Another new expense is \$1,900 for a yearly subscription to an online building permit service used by most Berkshire County towns. This will make it easier to apply for building, electrical and plumbing permits and will be a more efficient way to share permit information between inspectors and assessors. To offset these new expenses the Finance Committee worked hard to find savings in historically underspent accounts.

Using a little known rule, the Select Board was able to have our free cash (excess revenue from previous years) recertified to include the recent payment of back taxes owed by the Bucksteep property. This obscure rule allows us to appropriate the money this year instead of having to wait for certification next winter. We are budgeting some of that money to reduce the effect on the tax rate of the new borrowing to finance the new Highway Department heavy duty plow truck that was approved at last year's Annual Town Meeting. If all goes as planned that truck can be ready for use in the next winter season.

The state budget has not yet been finalized. The actual tax rate won't be known until this summer when all state aid, local revenue and final property values are known. Using conservative revenue estimates, the tax rate is currently estimated to be \$15.87/thousand which is up 3.64% from last year.

David Drugmand, Finance Committee Chair