BUDGET COMMITTEE PUBLIC HEARING
TOWN OF EPPING, NEW HAMPSHIRE
WEDNESDAY, MAY 13, 2026
PUBLIC MEETING

ATTENDANCE
Vice Chair Matt Hehl
Member Mark Vallone
Member John Cody
Member Amy Rich Crane (joined meeting at 6:07 PM)
Member Michael McInerny
Member Justin Paynter
Member John Van Dolson
Member Kenna Lee Fudge
Member Cassie Hojaboom
Select Board Representative Caitlin McCormack
School Board Representative Matthew Puglielli

OTHER ATTENDEES
Jake Roger, Town Administrator
Kenneth Berkenbush, Fire Chief
Cindy Mulcahy, Recording Secretary

Call to Order at 6:00 PM.

Pledge Allegiance to the Flag

M. Hehl welcomed the two new members of the Budget Committee.

Public comment

None.

Election of Chair and Vice Chair

MOTION by M. Vallone to nominate Matt Hehl as Chair of the Budget Committee. **SECOND** by J. Cody. ***MOTION carries 10-0.***

MOTION by M. Vallone to nominate Amy Rich Crane as Vice Chair of the Budget Committee, with the condition that if she declines that the issue will be reconsidered. **SECOND** by J. Cody. ***MOTION carries 10-0.***

Brief Review of Budget Committee Rules and Procedures

M. Hehl said that the Committee is responsible for setting the bottom-line budget for both the Town and the School. The Committee meets multiple times with Department Heads and other involved parties in a lengthy process which lasts until Deliberative Session. Many materials are posted in Sharepoint for reference and education and he asked members to review how the Committee is governed by RSAs and other documents including the Committee's Rules & Procedures. M. Hehl reminded members not to Reply All to Committee emails as group discussions may not take place outside of public meetings (members should email the Chair only). M. Vallone stressed the importance of attendance and J. Roger said that it is part of both statute and Town policy that four unexcused absences constitute removal of a member from the Committee. J. Cody recommended the NHMA (New Hampshire Municipal Association) training for new Budget Committee members.

A. Crane joined the meeting.

J. Roger asked if anyone knew where the name plaques were as they went missing after the School Deliberative Session.

Fire Department – Replacement of vehicle

J. Roger explained that the Chief has been working on a CIP (capital improvement plan) and has completed the vehicle replacement portion with many costs being funded by the Ambulance Fund (a revolving fund funded by ambulance revenue). Two vehicles are needed for this year: the Forestry Vehicle and Car 3. The Select Board has approved the purchase of the Forestry Vehicle and the old one will be used by the Highway Department. Although the Budget Committee does not have oversight of the Ambulance Fund, they were asked about the purchase of Car 3 to assess their support and to give the picture of the whole Town. This information helps determine the operating budget and warrant articles. J. Roger explained that Car 3 (currently the Prevention Officer's vehicle) would be auctioned off and the new one would be given perhaps to the Assistant Chief.

K. Berkenbush stated that he took on the 20-year CIP project for replacement of larger items (over $80,000) after having to ask the Select Board to replace non-functioning physio monitors last year which were well over their life span. He said that the CIP will be a living document to be updated as growth happens in town. K. Berkenbush said that he needs to update the Forestry F-600 information as Highway will receive the old truck (Highway was authorized to buy a new truck via warrant article). He said that there is a version of the CIP with a 5% per year cost escalator that he will provide to the Committee.

The CIP shows the life cycles of equipment and vehicles and K. Berkenbush pointed out that the current ambulance will be at the end of its 10-year life cycle in 2027. By 2030 a ladder truck will be necessary as developments will have taller buildings (the tallest ladder right now is 35′ and because of the necessary angle, it does not reach the top of a 35′ building). To accommodate a ladder truck K. Berkenbush would get rid of heavy rescue and Engine 2 to make space in the Fire Station. Right now the cost for the ladder would be $1,125,000 ($2,125,000 less about $1,000,000 in impact fees, developer contributions, etc). The CIP reflects averages for expenses and estimated revenues from previous years. K. Berkenbush said that recent changes in insurance rules reflect about 7% of the Town's payer profile ($28,000-$40,000) but he has not factored in this projected increase in revenue yet. Estimated expenses (typically $118,000-125,000) have been estimated on the high side due to rising costs.

A. Crane asked if there is a charge for calling mutual aid and there is not. Raymond has a ladder truck but it is not functioning most of the time. The three other closest towns with a ladder truck are Exeter, Hampton and Newmarket.

J. Cody asked why it was necessary to replace Car 3 when previously a cruiser with life left in it that would've fetched only $6,000-10,000 at auction had been rotated in. K. Berkenbush said that reusing a police cruiser can become a money pit and quoted a Federal DOT equation stating that every hour that a car idles equals 30 road miles. He also said that police have a driving style which wears on cruisers and his preference would be to not reuse a cruiser. The life cycle of a cruiser is about 5 years. J. Cody asked for invoices of what was spent on Car 3 and K. Berkenbush will provide them. It was noted that the Fire Inspector, who is an AEMT, does go on runs. K. Berkenbush said that his intention is to make the vehicle a pick-up truck available in which Academy trainees can carpool and carry their equipment.

M. Vallone asked to add the Purchase Date to the CIP spreadsheet for future reference. J. Cody wanted to know how many times Fire has triple calls as there are three ambulances. Although the ambulances are funded out of the revolving fund, J. Cody feels that money used out of the fund takes away from the potential to buy another piece of apparatus and impacts taxpayers. J. Van Dolson asked if there was a plan to purchase a new ambulance and K. Berkenbush said that an ambulance was purchased in 2022 and again in 2023 and the need would be decided later.

J. Paynter advocated for the use of an electric vehicle (EV) whenever appropriate because their total life-cycle costs are low. He noted that a used electric Ford F-150 with low mileage could be purchased for $40,000. He said that there are many myths around electric vehicles and K. Berkenbush said he did not have a lot of concerns over smaller EVs but that the option wouldn't work for larger vehicles (i.e. Ford F-600). C. Hojaboom asked if Car 3 were replaced with a truck instead of an SUV what the cost difference would be and K. Berkenbush said that they are similar in price.

A. Crane asked if any items for Fire are purchased through the budget and K. Berkenbush said that all items are funded by the Ambulance Fund. She also asked if there was a planned minimum balance and K. Berkenbush said he would like to leave $750,000 in it. J. Paynter thanked K. Berkenbush for buying BK radios over Motorola for cost-savings measures.

J. Roger noted that the estimate for installation of repeaters at the School is anticipated in June with the work to be done over the summer. There is no Homeland Security funding for the project.

J. Roger asked for a motion to show Committee support for replacing Car 3, which will be considered by the Select Board. J. Cody reminded the Committee that the Town almost leased a police cruiser last year and that he doesn't see common sense in getting a new fire vehicle when a cruiser can be recycled. He noted that the necessary outfit (lights, cap, etc) for a vehicle is also costly. A. Crane said that K. Berkenbush felt that the Car 3 expense would be adequately covered and J. Cody stated that the Ambulance Fund should not be considered a "piggy bank" and is Town money.

MOTION by J. Paynter to recommend the purchase of a new replacement vehicle for Car 3. **SECOND** C. Hojaboom. ***MOTION carries 9-2 (J. Cody, J. Van Dolson against).***

J. Roger asked the Committee to take a vote on the electric vehicle issue since three years ago there was zero support. M. McInerny voiced support for an electric vehicle as long as it met the driving needs of one of the Fire Department members. J. Van Dolson said that EV costs would be substantially lower than a gas-powered vehicle and that use for Fire seems more appropriate than for the Police Department.

MOTION by A. Crane to recommend researching the use of an electric vehicle for the Fire Department. **SECOND** by J. Paynter.

J. Van Dolson said that it this motion played out that he would switch his vote on the previous one. J. Cody said he would be very cautious about having an EV for an emergency vehicle and warned that it is very difficult to put out an EV fire. J. Paynter said that there is a lower rate of fire in EVs than gas-powered vehicles. Fire Departments in Nashua and Kittery, ME have both used EV vehicles and J. Cody said he would like to hear input from those towns' mechanics. J. Roger noted that the lower costs of EVs make a good argument but that some people may view the purchase of an EV as a "luxury".

MOTION carries 10-1 (J. Cody against).

Discussion on 2027 budget targeting process

At the end of the last budget season the Committee voted to have a formal discussion on whether to aim for a target percentage to give to Departments as in past years. M. McInerny said that he felt the Committee was doing less than should be done as far as directing the budget. He also called for doing a comparison of simple metrics of some adjoining towns. He also thought the Committee should ask each Department Head for a capital asset management draft with explanations. He wanted the Committee to look at a formula that former Budget Committee member Joe Trombley had mentioned and J. Roger said that it was a municipal cost index.

M. Vallone commented that the Rockingham County budget increased 13%, the largest jump in a long time, owing partly to decreased Federal and State revenues. He said that target-setting can be good and would be worthwhile discussing but that he, like A. Crane, does not want to spend multiple meetings hashing out a particular number. J. Cody did not agree with setting a target percentage and would rather ask Department Heads to present a reasonable budget backed by evidence. J. Cody said that 10-12% annual increases are unsustainable and that decisions should be based upon "needs" vs. "wants". J. Cody wants the Department Heads to present an overview to the Committee with detailed information including how many patrols are in each shift, what hours are worked, overtime, etc. A. Crane said that Departments should also provide case-based scenarios for what their plan would be if the Town budget went to default .J. Cody said that some towns have consolidated efforts to share costs and J. Roger said that there have been some cost-savings measures between the Town and the School and that there are examples of towns banding together (i.e. Primex). J. Cody suggested that Town Administrators meet quarterly to brainstorm cost-savings.

J. Paynter would like a picture of how allocated money has actually been spent versus how it was planned and presented to the Budget Committee last year and what expenses may have been made that had not been discussed. J. Cody mentioned that the School had purchased a new van which was not discussed at all last year.

J. Cody said that the median house cost in the state is $675,000. A. Crane noted that housing costs have increased 160% in the State while income has only grown 30% and that salaries are the largest part of the Town's budget. J. Cody agreed that the Town needed to remain competitive to attract employees without trying to be the best. He also noted that the Town needs an additional well in addition to the wastewater plant upgrade and J. Roger said that the Town has received a grant for exploratory drilling.

C. McCormack said that it is important to keep a baseline in mind but that it wouldn't make sense to apply the same one to both the School and the Town. A Crane recommended that each Department develop its own individual target percentage. C. McCormack said that fiscal austerity is crucial owing to the wastewater upgrade in 2028. A. Crane said that she was against setting a target and that she wanted Departments to simply demonstrate to the Committee the best they could do with their budgets after allowing for inflation. C. McCormack said that the Committee should also know of any drivers to bring the budget down (i.e. expiring contracts),

M. Vallone said that instead of using a hard target maybe a target number could be used as an internal lens. He recommended coming up with 3-4 questions on how the Town is getting value out of the budget. Department Heads could consider how they can save money over the summer. He reminded members that there are also considerations on the revenue side and the Town is in the running for a possible grant.

A. Crane noted that the Committee should discuss their views on the addition of warrant articles each year. J. Cody noted that warrant article positions that the Town votes for legally cannot be cut. J. Cody also advocated for getting the Ambulance Fund back into the budget. M. Vallone said that Departments should think about whether warrant articles are funded by capital reserve funds and whether they affect the tax rate.

M. Hehl recapped that the Committee seemed to agree on staying away from a hard-and-fast target but to instead use an internal target as a lens and to set guidelines on how budget numbers would be presented to them. The guidelines would require the presentation of more detailed data (including CIPs, any expected increases, fund balances and expectations for the funds, etc.) and back-up for any budget asks as compared to the last three years. The Committee will also request metrics from other towns, along with drivers and history, and information on Epping's projected growth. The Committee will prepare a formalized guide at the end of the next meeting that J. Roger can take to the Town and that M. Puglielli can take to the School. It was agreed that an Operational Summary and an Operational Projection should be requested from each Department. This would be some additional work but M. Hehl said that Departments should be asking themselves these questions to be successful.

J. Paynter said that Epping is becoming the new Exeter and that whether the Town is budgeting responsibly for that growth needs to be explored. He thanked A. Crane for asking the Budget Committee to have this important discussion. M. Hehl said that additional concerns could be emailed to him before the next meeting.

Calendar review

The next meeting will be on 6/10 at 6:00 PM. There will be a summer break and the next meeting will be on 9/9.

J. Roger said that he saw no reason why warrant articles could not be presented earlier in the year to assist the Budget Committee and M. Hehl asked to get the full-year meeting schedule as soon as possible.

Public comment

None.

Old/new business

M. Hehl confirmed that no action needed to be taken on some minutes leftover from the previous budget season.

MOTION by to M. Vallone to adjourn the meeting. **SECOND** by J. Cody. ***MOTION carries 11-0.***

Meeting adjourned at 7:53 PM.

Matt Hehl, Chair	Amy Rich Crane, Vice Chair
John Cody, Member	John Van Dolson, Member
Michael McInerny, Member	Justin Paynter, Member

Kenna Lee Fudge, Member

Cassie Hojaboom, Member

Matt Puglielli, School Board Rep

Caitlin McCormack, Select Bd Rep

Mark Vallone, Member