

Another Marblehead Town Meeting in the books

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Over 500 turned out to wrap up 46 Articles in just over 4 hours

Town Meeting approved a \$95 million budget, increased taxes and mooring fees, scratched the winter parking ban article and paved the way for a Green Communities designation all in just over four hours Monday.

More than 500 residents filled the Veterans Middle School Performing Arts Center and participated in the oldest form of local government in a mostly mild manner. Edward Friedman was briefly jeered for his opinion that climate change is a fallacy, but the moment passed and the meeting otherwise went smoothly. Here are the highlights.

Article 3: Approved

“I have to say this is my least favorite article, but we have to pass it,” said Town Moderator Gary Spiess. ”

The article states that the town will assume liability should the state highway department come in, do work in the town and damage property in the process.

“We get to pay for it,” he said. “We have to pass it or they won’t come in.”

Article 8: Approved

The town voted to spend \$468,538 on equipment, including four trucks with plows for two different departments, a sod cutter, two police vehicles, a student bus and a utility truck among other smaller items.

Article 9: Approved

The sum of \$463,596 will be spent on a lower roof replacement for the police station and a rubber roof replacement at Tower Way, radio and traffic light upgrades, one garage door for the Cemetery Department and two for Tower Way, windows for the Franklin Street Fire Station, a gym floor at the Community Center and hot water tanks at the high school among a few other things.

Article 10: Approved

Meeting members approved the typical \$7,500 to repair town walls and fences along with using \$45,595 left over from a previous Town Meeting article to be combined with a debt exclusion override for \$871,894 to fund repairs to sea walls damaged by a string of storms that hit the region earlier this year.

McGinn pointed out that damaged seawalls are impacting the structural soundness of the Front Street and Beacon Street respectively. And destruction to the rip rap and embankment at Fort Sewall is also making for a precarious situation.

“This is what is known as a no brainer,” said Finance Committee Chairman Ben Berman, speaking in support of the article. “We have to do it.”

Resident Biff Michaud suggested the town seek grants from the Seaport Council to defray costs.

“The question is if we get the grant will it be used to pay down the debt?” he asked.

“Yes,” McGinn said simply.

And when Judith Black asked if the seawalls would be built stronger, McGinn again said “the simple answer is yes, but I don’t want to wear that answer out.”

If approved at the ballot box in June, the financial impact on the median household would be about \$10 per year.

Articles 14-16: Approved

Approved was \$1,336,652 for Water Department construction and \$1,156,786 for Sewer Department construction to be funded through retained earnings and \$417,000 for storm drain construction to be appropriated.

Articles 19-25: Approved

All dealt with settling town employee contracts, union and non union. The three-year deals give firefighters, police officers and IUE/CWA union members a 2 percent cost of living increase in 2019. Administrative employees who are non union got the same deal at total cost of \$68,462. Traffic Supervisors got a collective \$2,872 boost, seasonal workers \$8,865 or 2 percent increase and the Town Clerk picked up an \$1,576.76 increase.

Article 28: Approved

This established a Special Education Stabilization Account funded with \$250,000 to be used to help defray the cost of out of district tuition. It will be run much like the town's Utility and Energy reserve funds, all possible line items must be exhausted before the School Department could dip into the account and it would earmarked for out of district tuition only.

"If the funding is not needed, it will not be used and can't be used for any other expense," explained School Department Finance Director Amanda Maniaci.

Article 29: Approved

Mooring permit fees were increased from \$6.50 to \$8 per foot for Marblehead Harbor, Little Harbor and Dolibers Cove. All other Marblehead locations anchorage will cost \$7 per foot. Working commercial fisherman will see their rate increase from \$3 per foot to \$3.50.

Gary Gregory, chairman of Harbors and Waters Board said it was simple, the commission needs to take in more than it's spending on upkeep and maintenance and it's not.

"Some pretty strong management has allowed us to go almost 18 years without raising fees but it's time," he said.

Article 30: Approved

The town will use \$7.9 million in free cash to pay down the tax rate. No argument was raised.

Article 31: Approved.

Town Meeting approved a \$95.4 million budget after one brief question about school spending and a discussion on potholes and snowy sidewalks.

Ben Crowninshield asked how much the School Department had earmarked for building maintenance and was told \$500,000.

Resident Biff Michaud called the roads deplorable and suggested the town needed to do a better job at repairing and repaving its streets. Frederick Settlemeyer agreed.

“The roads seem to be deteriorating faster than we can fix them,” he said.

Michaud suggested holding National Grid accountable for repaving the street every time it opens one to fix a gas line.

“I think we need to take a stand with National Grid. Someone has to do it and if you want me to do it, I volunteer,” he said to a loud round of applause.

Others were more concerned about the condition of the sidewalks and the fact that the town rarely clears them in the winter, making it dangerous for kids walking to school. McGinn told residents the town does have equipment to clear the sidewalks, but often lacks the manpower because priority is given to the roads. Resident Brenda Kelley Kim said she has never seen the equipment in use, but has seen PTO members, parents, principals and others shoveling sidewalks for students.

“If the town has the equipment, I think we need to see how we can use it more,” she said.

Article 33: Approved

This gives the Board of Selectmen the care, custody and control of the railroad right of way in terms of trail maintenance. The area known as “the tracks” runs from Bessom Street to Lead Mills in one direction and from Rockaway to the

Swampscott line in the the other and is used largely as a walking, running, bike and baby stroller path.

Article 34: Approved

Transfers at 13,664 square foot lot on Cressy Street from the Board of Selectmen to the Cemetery Commission to be used for veterans lots since space is running out in Waterside Cemetery.

Article 35: Approved

Acceptance of this article makes Barry Road a public way.

Article 36: Approved

The second of two debt exclusion overrides, Town Meeting agreed to fund \$8,982,963 worth of repairs to Abbot Hall through an override. Like Article 10 it still must be approved at the ballot box, but if it is the impact on the median family will be roughly \$62.73 per year for the next 20 years.

Only nine opposed the motion, which came down to tellers having to take an official count.

Article 42: Indefinitely postponed

The Planning Board took a bit of a beating on this article that sought to recodify and address technical corrections and revisions to the town's zoning bylaws. Board Chairman Robert Schaeffner said the board had been working on the changes for two years in open meetings and the changes had been advertised and posted in several locations, yet critics seemed caught unaware. Several called the 72 pages of changes too much to consider under one article.

Jay Michaud, a mariner, marine survey and lobsterman, pleaded with voters to put the article on hold, stating it would be a hardship to him and other home based businesses.

Phillip Axten said he was going to ask for an analysis of the changes but "Mr. Michaud convinced me," that the article should be indefinitely postponed for further examination.

General contractor Marc Liebman thanked the Planning Board for all its hard work and agreed the bylaws need clarification, but also felt the article was too unwieldy to handle in one sitting.

Zoning Board of Appeals member Bruce Krasker, reminded residents they had ample opportunity to weigh in on the changes.

“This didn’t happen overnight,” he said. “If you want to be involved then be involved.”

It was indefinitely postponed nonetheless.

Article 43: Approved

A three-page amendment to the fire prevention bylaws addressing fire lanes passed without comment.

Article 41: Approved

Critics tried to indefinitely postpone the adoption of the Stretch Code for Green Communities designation, calling it confusing, but supporters prevailed shooting down the motion to postpone and passing it with what Spiess called “a very strong vote in favor.”

Article 45: Approved

The town agreed to strive to reach a 100 percent carbon free energy goal despite Friedman’s assertion there is no proof that climate change exists.

“We don’t cause climate change, we can’t do it. All this is sheer nonsense,” he said before being heckled into his seat.

“I wasn’t even going to speak, but I was drawn up here by the previous speaker (Friedman),” said one resident. “We really need to stand for progress. To say it’s a fallacy, that climate change is not real is archaic.”

Article 46: Indefinitely postponed

Although both Fire Chief Jason Gilliland and Police Chief Robert Picariello were ready to oppose permanently lifting the winter parking ban, the article never made it to the floor. Sponsor John Liming was not present to present the article

nor did anyone else step forward to support it so it was indefinitely postponed and Town Meeting was wrapped at roughly 11:15 p.m.