

**SELECT BOARD SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES
TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 2026
APPROVED**

Select Board Members Present: Matt Pisani, Chair; Becky Pine, Vice Chair; Peter Cunningham; John Reilly;

Select Board Members Absent: Alison Manugian, Clerk

Finance Committee Members Present: Bud Robertson, Chair; Mary Linskey, Vice Chair; David Manugian; Kristina Lengyel; Gary Green

Finance Committee Members Absent: Jamie McDonald; Scott Whitefield;

Also Present: Mark Haddad, Town Manager; Kara Cruikshank, Executive Assistant to the Town Manager; Patricia DuFresne, Assistant Finance Director/Town Accountant; Megan Foster, Principal Assessor; Katie Kazanjian, Treasurer/Tax Collector; Melisa Doig, Human Resources Director; Fire Chief Arthur Cheeks; and Members of the Fire Union.

Chair Pisani called the Select Board meeting to order at 7:00 p.m. and reviewed the agenda.

Chair Robertson called the Finance Committee Meeting to order.

Meeting in Joint Session with the Finance Committee to Discuss/Approve a Plan to Study/Improve the Fire Department Staffing

Mr. Haddad thanked the Boards, Fire Chief Arthur Cheeks, and members of the Fire Department for attending that evening to discuss his concerns about staffing within the Fire Department. He sent a memorandum to the Select Board and Finance Committee outlining his concerns about addressing staffing levels and the increasing number of calls the department is receiving. He also had asked them to consider placing an override on the ballot to address these issues. Mr. Haddad said that he met with Finance Committee Chair Bud Robertson, Select Board Chair Matt Pisani, and Fire Chief Cheeks to discuss possible options. He explained that the Town of Groton has received a \$1 million state grant for communities impacted by the closure of the Nashoba Valley Medical Center. During their meeting, they discussed establishing a trial by staffing the Fire Department with overtime and scheduling as many shifts as possible so there are four (4) firefighters on every shift. This will allow the Town to evaluate the impact of full staffing. However, there are concerns about burnout. Mr. Haddad held a meeting with the Firefighters' Union, which committed to the plan and will try to fill as many shifts as possible. Mr. Haddad outlined the staffing needs for each shift and explained that the Fire Chief has a rule prohibiting firefighters from working more than 48 hours in a row.

The proposed plan runs from March 1, 2026, to September 1, 2026. During this period, they will work with call firefighters and use per diem staffing to cover as many shifts as possible, while closely tracking data. Mr. Haddad said the Finance Committee wants evidence supporting the need for additional staffing. He believes conducting a six-month experiment and collecting data over that period will help demonstrate that need. Mr. Haddad emphasized the importance of prioritizing firefighters' safety. He wanted to discuss the proposed plan that evening, have it approved by the Select Board and Finance Committee, and confirm their commitment to review the numbers after six months to determine whether to return to the 2026 Fall Town Meeting to request funding for six additional firefighters. Mr. Haddad explained that there is

currently a vacancy in the Fire Department and that they have received over 100 resumes. He believes it will not be difficult to find six firefighters.

Finance Committee Member Mary Linskey asked whether the \$1 million grant is a one-time or recurring revenue. Mr. Haddad said the funds are one-time revenue, and Mr. Pisani stated that those funds must be spent by June 30, 2027. Chief Cheeks said that since 2019, they have been trumping the issue of staffing and that there is no way they could be successful without the call department. He said the department's safety is the most important part of this. The Chief stated that the new Satellite Emergency Facility (SEF) will not be the solution and is not a place of definitive care.

Lieutenant James Crocker, Union President of Local 4879, was in attendance for the discussion. Lt. Crocker said the Chief has laid out the data well. In 2024, the Chief himself worked 641 extra hours (80 extra days). He stated that if this doesn't prove they need additional staffing, he wasn't sure what would. Lt. Crocker discussed the overlapping calls they received and reviewed the department's staffing needs. He said burnout is real and that they are losing people and institutional knowledge. Mr. Reilly said you never see the union president pump up the Fire Chief, and you don't see the Chief pumping up the Union President. Mr. Reilly hopes the message is that there has to be a plan moving forward to make the community and its staff safer. Lieutenant Chase Lundgren stated that they need a plan moving forward. He said everyone has families to go home to, and there is burnout. Mr. Robertson agrees with the Fire Department and believes the study will prove the need (response times should come down). Mr. Haddad said that one thing about overlapping calls is that response time to the second call will drop dramatically, as employees will be at the station. Mr. Haddad stated that employee safety is the most important aspect. Ms. Linskey said this six-month period is about getting the townspeople's buy-in. Finance Committee Member Gary Green stated that they need a strong, provable case to bring to the townspeople. Mr. Green said he supports this, but it's important to set success measures. He suggested forming a Working Group. Mr. Haddad said he wants to sell this to the town and wants to move forward. Ms. Pine spoke with Finance Committee Member Scott Whitefield, since he couldn't attend that evening, and agrees that an analysis is needed. She said they may ask for some slightly different data or recorded in a different way. Ms. Linskey said it's more about strategy and when to get the buy-in from the town.

Mr. Chris Braun, a full-time member and a previous call member, said they have a marketing problem, not a data problem. He said marketing is about telling stories and told the Boards that the Fire Department needs their help telling those stories. He said there are only so many hours you can work without compromising safety. Mr. Cunningham asked how many call members do per diem shifts. The Chief explained that a solid five are per diem. Lt. Crocker said that, in addition to calls, each member has a different role that has taken a back seat due to increased call volume.

After a spirited discussion, Mr. Haddad stated that he would like to put together a marketing plan to reach the public and a statistical plan to present the data. He wants to start on March 1st. Mr. Robertson told the Chief that he has the data; it's just the marketing piece that supports it.

Select Board

Mr. Cunningham moved to proceed with the plan, using the \$1 million state grant to fund overtime for fire department shifts from March 1st through September 1, 2026. Ms. Pine seconded the motion. The motion carried unanimously.

Finance Committee

Mr. Green moved to proceed with the plan, using the \$1 million state grant to fund overtime for fire department shifts from March 1st through September 1, 2026. Mr. Manugian seconded the motion. The motion carried unanimously.

Mr. Haddad thanked everyone for their time that evening.

The Select Board and Finance Committee adjourned at 8:06 p.m.

Respectively submitted by Kara Cruikshank, Executive Assistant to the Town Manager.