



FINANCE COMMITTEE MEETING
Town Hall, 2nd Floor Meeting Room
173 Main Street Groton, MA 01450
Saturday, February 28, 2026 – 8:30 AM

The Finance Committee met jointly with the Select Board.

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

Also Present: Town Manager – Mark Haddad, Town Accountant – Patricia A. DuFresne, Tax Assessor – Katie Kazanjian

Select Board members – Chair – Matt Pisani, Vice Chair – Becky Pine, Alison Manugian, John Reilly, Peter Cunningham

The meeting was opened at 8:30 AM.

MEETING MINUTES:

- The Committee discussed the approval of minutes and agreed to postpone to the following meeting.

TOWN MANAGER PRESENTATION:

Town Manager Mark Haddad provided a summary of changes to the FY2027 budget since its submission.

Operating Budget Updates:

- The Nashoba Tech assessment came in \$9,000 higher than budgeted.
- The bond bid for the Florence Roche School was finalized, and debt service numbers were updated to reflect the current interest rate, resulting in a lower figure than originally projected.

- The use of free cash and the Fire/EMS fund transfers were both reduced as a result of lower debt service.
- Health insurance came in at a 6.24% increase. The Town had been carrying 14%, resulting in approximately \$90,000 in savings. The average this year was 8.39%, and Groton came in below average due to a younger workforce that is using less of the resource.
- State aid was adjusted to reflect the Governor's budget, which carries approximately \$20,000 more than previously budgeted.
- The overall budget decreased from the January submission. The Town is currently \$85,159 under the anticipated levy limit for FY2027.

Levy Limit and Fiscal Notes:

- Town Manager Haddad stated that he does not wish to commit the \$85,159 surplus at this time to anything specific. Potential uses include: addressing the upcoming quinquennial revaluation, offsetting the snow and ice deficit, and keeping it for the first 50% payment toward the regional dispatch center in FY2028.
- Dunstable is carrying a number in their budget sufficient to match Groton's assessment (based on their share per the regional agreement) and is not planning an override.

COUNTRY CLUB PRESENTATION:

The Country Club Director, Shawn Campbell, presented the FY2027 operating and capital budgets.

Operating Budget:

- The overall budget reflects an increase of approximately \$2,000 over FY2026.
- Summer camp sold out in 26 minutes after opening on January 15th. All 400 spots were filled, with 275 children on a waitlist. Space and driving range capacity are the main constraints. Three additional driving range bays were added last year, allowing the camp to expand from 36 to 50 spots per session.
- Salaries: Buildings and Grounds are increasing by approximately \$15,000 to add one part-time seasonal staff member for the summer.
- The pool budget is increasing by approximately \$12,000 to support additional lifeguards. Group swim lessons have doubled in revenue.
- The pool heaters experienced a flow issue at the end of last season, believed to be pump-related. Pump maintenance is scheduled for this spring. Worst-case cost for heater replacement is estimated at approximately \$10,000.
- The ground superintendent position is year-round.
- Revenues reached \$1 million for the first time in FY2026. As of the meeting date, revenues are approximately \$50,000 ahead of the prior year.

- Non-resident membership rates were increased 10% for FY2027. Resident rates, greens fees, and park fees remained unchanged. Summer camp rates increased slightly to offset new software costs.
- The budget is balanced and does not require taxpayer subsidy. The general fund was subsidizing approximately \$250,000 annually when the Town Manager arrived. Over the last several years, more than \$200,000 has been returned to the general fund and certified as free cash.

Enterprise Fund Discussion:

- Town Manager Haddad reiterated his opposition to converting the Country Club to an enterprise fund, stating his preference to keep any surplus flowing to the general fund. He noted that the Country Club is tracked as if it were an enterprise fund for accountability purposes, though it is not formally designated as one.
- A Select Board member raised the question of whether enterprise fund designation would provide greater clarity. Town Manager Haddad disagreed, comparing it to other estimated local receipts such as motor vehicle excise and building permits, which benefit the Town by closing to free cash if they bring in a surplus.
- Several members expressed support for keeping the current structure to allow surplus revenues to benefit the general fund, noting the significant demand at the club suggests it may be undercharging relative to market.

Capital Budget:

- Golf Cart Fleet Replacement: The prior lease has been paid off. The fleet will be traded in for a new lease following Town Meeting approval. Carts will be gas-powered. An evaluation of electric carts was conducted, and GELD determined the required \$150,000 infrastructure investment would take approximately 100 years to recoup through electric rates and declined to support the project. The four existing electric carts will be kept. A request was made for the Town's energy and sustainability staff to explore grant opportunities.
- Irrigation System: \$100,000 per year is in the capital budget awaiting receipt of bids. The first payment on the debt service is expected in FY28. The new system will expand from approximately 75 heads to 295 heads and will incorporate drainage improvements. A Conservation Commission site walk is scheduled. Water is sourced from the on-site pond. An emergency tie-in to the town water supply exists but is not routinely used.
- Greens Equipment: Includes lease payments for the Truckster and greens mowers, plus new fairway and rough mowers, totaling approximately \$20,000 per year over five years.

LIBRARY PRESENTATION:

Library representatives (Vanessa Abraham & Mark Gerath) presented the FY2027 operating and capital budgets.

Operating Budget:

- Following a request from the Town Manager, the Library Trustees agreed to increase the allocation from the Trust Commissioners for books and materials from \$70,000 to \$90,000 for FY2027. The Town Manager asked that this be made a permanent increase but the Trust Commissioners agreed to review it year by year.
- The Trustees voted to use approximately \$30,000 in accrued state aid to fund Sunday hours (costs of approximately \$20,000) and for additional services that would otherwise have been eliminated due to budget reductions. The Library currently receives approximately \$17,000 per half-year in state aid (\$34,000 annually). The trustees acknowledged that continued state aid at this level is not guaranteed and that this approach will be discussed annually.
- The Library is \$8,300 above the Municipal Appropriation Requirement (MAR) threshold, maintaining eligibility for ongoing state aid. A total of approximately \$50,000 is being funded through alternative sources, allowing the Library to deliver a budget without additional taxpayer appropriation.
- Salary increases reflect union contract obligations only. The summer reading wages line was removed from the operating budget as those hours are now funded through state aid.
- The electric budget has decreased by approximately \$10,000 per year as a result of Green Community Grant improvements, including lighting upgrades and weatherization.
- Electronic materials costs continue to increase. Libraries pay five to ten times the consumer price for e-books and audiobooks. The Library participates in a consortium to maximize access and reduce costs.
- Programming attendance continues to grow. People counter data shows 600–700 children visiting on school half-days. The Library is legally prevented from charging fees for most programs.

Capital Budget:

- Interior Repainting: Deferred to FY2028 following rear door repairs funded in the current fiscal year.
- HVAC Rooftop Unit Replacement (FY2029 and FY2030): Eight rooftop units; most recent date to 2014-2015 and will be approximately 15 years old by the time of replacement. Staff hope to pursue Green Community grant funding.
- Elevator Modernization: Recommended by the elevator service company due to increasing difficulty sourcing parts.
- Garden improvements and AV/children's room upgrades will be funded through Trust Fund endowments.

A member raised a safety concern regarding the absence of a stop sign at the intersection of Playground Road and Broadmeadow Road. Town Manager Haddad referred the matter to DPW Director for installation.

POLICE DEPARTMENT PRESENTATION:

Chief Michael Luth and Administrative Assistant Joan Tallent presented the FY2027 operating and capital budgets.

Operating Budget:

- The department is authorized for 20 officers but will fund 19, leaving one patrol officer position vacant following a September 2025 retirement. Current staffing: Chief, Deputy Chief, four Sergeants, four Duty Officers, and 13 patrol officers. The department is authorized for two SROs but currently staffs one.
- Of the 13 patrol officers, seven would have three years of experience or less. The Chief described this as a significant liability concern. The most common basis for federal lawsuits against police departments are failure to supervise and failure to train.
- The Chief's major initiative is an additional Sergeant. This represents a shift from prior years' requests for an investigator and is driven by the change in workforce experience levels.
- Of 21 weekly shifts, four Sergeants can cover 16 without overtime under ideal conditions. Adding training, sick time, and vacation, hundreds of shifts per year are currently unsupervised. If the 20th position were funded, the Chief would designate it as a fifth Sergeant.
- Six officers have left within their first six years in recent years. The most recent departure was to the private sector for higher compensation.
- Patriot Regional Dispatch (Pepperell): The Chief reported the department is satisfied with service. Needs are being met and the director is well-regarded.
- Fuel is handled at DPW and charged directly to departments based on key card usage.
- The upcoming UMass emergency room facility is anticipated to significantly increase Police Department workload. The Ayer Police Department responded to the NVMC emergency room 160-185 times per year. The Chief expects a comparable level of demand in Groton. UMass Police will have primary responsibility for security but are not expected to be stationed at the facility. Members recommended proactive coordination with UMass on security planning before the facility opens.

Capital Budget:

- Cruiser Replacement: Ongoing replacement program, in the second year of a two-year agreement.

- Police Minor Capital: Includes second year of Flock camera system agreement, rolling body armor replacement (six soft vests, two heavy vests), and approximately \$2,000 to remove aluminum-lined insulation from the Gibbet Hill Communications Tower room following a July 2024 lightning strike.
- Electronic Control Devices/Tasers: Third of five annual payments. A state grant covers half the total cost.
- Body-worn cameras are not funded in FY2027. The Chief expressed support for future purchase and noted significant town liability protection benefits. Key barriers include high data storage costs and estimated six-figure equipment costs. The Chief indicated body cameras are a priority within the next three to four years and that grant funding will be needed. He stated his current priority is a fifth Sergeant before cameras.

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC WORKS PRESENTATION:

DPW Director Brian Callahan presented the FY2027 operating and capital budgets.

Operating Budget:

- The DPW is down two highway positions. One was eliminated last year and a second vacancy from a retirement has not been filled due to a hiring freeze. Current staff: The Director, a highway foreman, two mechanics, one stormwater technician, one landscaper, two transfer station staff, and four road workers (reduced from six). Two custodians, a transfer station desk administrator, and a stormwater/highway administrative assistant are funded in separate budget lines.
- The three most recent hires did not have CDLs, limiting the pool for sanding routes. CDL training for those employees is planned for this summer.
- Winter impact: With seven people on the sanding rotation, crews have been on call for six consecutive weeks at a time. Director Callahan has been personally plowing a route all winter.
- Summer impact: Mowing requires two people. Pulling one highway worker for mowing will effectively reduce the project crew by three. Town Manager Haddad expressed serious concern about the department's capacity to maintain services this summer. The fully loaded cost of one additional highway position is approximately \$95,000.
- A consultant has been engaged through Chapter 90 funds and a LEAP grant application to complete a Main Street assessment.
- Tree Warden budget was substantially reduced in FY2027. The DPW will remove fewer dead trees than in prior years. The Director identified a contractor capable of removing 50+ trees in two days at approximately \$4,000 per day.
- Municipal Buildings: Town Hall will require furnace replacements. An updated Green Community plan is in development to add buildings to grant eligibility. The fire alarm system upgrade at the American Legion is included in this year's capital budget.

- Solid Waste: The recycling market is self-funding. The DPW purchased its own roll-off trailer hauler, saving approximately \$10,000 per year. Glass grinding saves disposal costs; Pepperell's glass is also processed for a fee. A New Hampshire sandblasting company is piloting the ground glass product.
- Snow and Ice deficit is projected at approximately \$300,000 for FY2026 (typical year: \$100,000–\$150,000). The Town Manager identified funding from set-aside free cash and reallocation of the Country Club irrigation capital item to cover approximately two-thirds, with additional free cash being used as needed.
- A Finance Committee member requested that the Town Manager prepare a document summarizing budget cuts made over the past two to five years, outside the context of any override discussion, to support more productive public conversation about service levels and resource constraints at Town Meeting.

Capital Budget:

- Dump Truck: Replacement ordered over two years ago; expected to arrive within the next few months.
- Truck Painting (\$25,000 – Capital Asset Stabilization Fund): Fleet sandblasting and repainting to extend vehicle life. A pilot truck was completed last year with good results.
- Municipal Buildings Minor Capital: Increased from \$90,000 to include \$30,000 for fire alarm system upgrade at the American Legion.
- IT Infrastructure: Annual allocation for ongoing technology replacement and upgrades.
- Prescott Center Renovation (\$5,000,000 placeholder in FY2029 – Bond/CPA): A building committee study estimated a full renovation at approximately \$5 million. This is a recurring placeholder that advances one year annually.
- Transfer Station: No capital needs in FY2027. Trash trailers, refurbished 10-15 years ago, will likely need replacement in FY2028.

FIRE DEPARTMENT PRESENTATION:

Fire Chief Art Cheeks and Deputy Chief Terence Gardner presented the FY2027 operating and capital budgets.

Operating Budget:

- The FY2027 budget reflects no change in staffing. At the Town Manager's request, scenarios for adding two or six additional firefighters were modeled to illustrate cost impact but neither is included in the budget. The current full-time staff is 10 firefighters plus the Chief, Deputy Chief, and an administrative assistant.
- Call firefighter membership has declined from 50+ to approximately 19-20, with roughly 7-8 reliably available for response. The department experiences consistent turnover as call staff

seek full-time positions elsewhere and functions as a feeder program for other departments.

- Overtime: The department is contractually obligated to maintain minimum staffing. When call firefighters and per-diem staff are unavailable to fill gaps, full-time firefighters work overtime. The overtime shift coverage line and the call firefighter/EMT line are managed as a single wage bucket.
- Software maintenance costs continue to increase due to federally mandated reporting requirements.
- New UMass Emergency Room Facility: The Chief described the facility as a community benefit but cautioned its impact on call volume will be more than anticipated. The facility cannot admit patients to a connected hospital, is expected to reach capacity and divert calls frequently, and cannot handle all medical emergencies (e.g., cardiac catheterization, OB, major trauma). Transfers to Worcester will create ambulance coverage gaps. Coastal has been contracted by UMass for interfacility transfers. The Chief is seeking a meeting with UMass leadership and area chiefs to discuss operational planning.
- Patriot Regional Dispatch: Overall service has improved. The centralized system allows simultaneous notification of multiple mutual aid departments, reducing response times. An ongoing inconsistency is call categorization: dispatcher prompts can trigger higher-level responses than the call ultimately requires, leading to frequent mutual aid cancellations.

Capital Budget:

- PFAS-Free Structural Gear: Final batch to complete full department compliance. Supply delays continue due to fabric manufacturer setbacks and increasing multi-state demand. A January 2027 labeling mandate applies to all PFAS-free gear vendors.
- SCBA Replacement: New gear arrived the day before this meeting. The bond authorization was obtained at Fall Town Meeting without bids in hand; the final cost came in at \$379,000 versus the \$500,000 authorization. The bond will be reduced by \$121,000 at renewal.
- Ambulance 1 Replacement: Ongoing annual payment.
- Ambulance 2 Replacement: A bond authorization will be sought at Spring Town Meeting due to an approximately two plus year lead time. Funds will not be borrowed until needed.
- Portable Radio Replacement: Removed from the FY2027 capital warrant. State grant funding will cover full replacement. Existing radios are approximately 15 years old and do not comply with P25 interoperability standards. The item will appear in next year's capital budget as a grant-funded expenditure and does not require a Town Meeting appropriation.
- Technology Upgrade/Fire HQ: Covers phone systems, internal technology, and training equipment. A portion of the state radio grant has also been earmarked for station technology.

SCHOOL PRESENTATION:

The school budget was presented by School Committee Members Lacey McCabe and Rosanne Casavecchia as Superintendent Dr. Geoff Bruno and Sherry Kersey were unable to attend. Any unanswered questions would be relayed to the Superintendent for follow-up.

District Goals and Context:

- The FY2027 budget is grounded in the district's improvement goals: ensuring student achievement for all, fostering a culture of continuous improvement, enhancing partnership with both towns, and maintaining full and consistent communication.
- The district has lost 35 positions over the past three fiscal years. The budget was built with the goal of maintaining current services as efficiently as possible.

Efficiencies Incorporated into FY2027:

- Worked with Dee Bus to streamline routes and eliminate one bus, generating \$86,000 in annual savings.
- A maintenance vacancy was filled with a licensed electrician, yielding savings on outside contractor costs.
- Several positions were not filled, including two student services positions.
- The K-8 Math Coordinator position was replaced with a math interventionist at lower cost.
- Content area coordination at the middle and high school level was shifted from an administrative role to teacher stipends.
- A special education teacher was replaced with an adjustment counselor at the high school, which was identified as a necessary service for students.
- Under the new collective bargaining agreement, employees will absorb an additional 2% of health insurance premiums, reducing district costs.
- Sherry Kersey has been working to improve fee collection systems for kindergarten, athletic, and activity fees, with early positive results.
- A scheduling consultant (grant-funded) is reviewing middle and high school schedules for consolidation opportunities.

Requested Positions Not Funded:

- BCBA (Board Certified Behavior Analyst): vacancy unfilled for approximately two years
- 4th Grade Teacher at Florence Roche School: consistently requested in prior years
- Administrative Assistant
- HVAC Specialist: noted as having long-term savings potential through reduced outside contractor reliance
- Additional Groundskeeper and Maintenance Position

Budget Scenarios:

- Scenario 1 (Superintendent's Proposed Budget): 6.46% increase. Presented to demonstrate true district need to the state but not anticipated to be funded.

- Scenario 2 (Balanced to Dunstable's Capacity): 4.68% increase, requiring a \$907,891 reduction from the Superintendent's proposal. Requires Groton-only funding above Dunstable's contribution.
- Scenario 3 (Both Towns Can Fund): 4.08% increase, requiring approximately \$1.2 million in reductions. Currently anticipated as the most likely outcome. Groton's FY2027 operating assessment: approximately \$29,468,000. Dunstable's: approximately \$9,063,000.
- The presentation was based on an assumed \$150 per pupil minimum aid increase. If the Governor's budget of \$75 per pupil holds, district revenue decreases by \$169,500, raising required reductions to approximately \$1.1 million (Scenario 2) and \$1.4 million (Scenario 3).

Revenue Assumptions:

- Chapter 70 represents 24.6% of the district budget. Groton funds 56.5% of the budget; Dunstable 17.4%; miscellaneous 1.5%.
- For every \$50 added to the per-pupil minimum aid amount, the district receives approximately \$110,000 in additional revenue.
- The state's minimum required contribution formula increases the combined towns' obligation by \$909,743, while the Governor's budget increases state funding by only \$169,500.
- Transportation reimbursement: Governor at 80%; FY2025 was reimbursed at 85%. Each additional percentage point adds approximately \$13,000.
- Excess and Deficiency use in the budget is planned to decrease from \$400,000 to \$300,000 but may be revised as the state revenue picture clarifies.

Capital Budget:

- Capital assessments: Dunstable \$125,000; Groton \$424,500.
- Capital items include computer leases, routine maintenance, and security improvements to the middle school entry. The main office has no line of sight to the front door, which parents and School Committee members have raised as a concern. No safety incident has occurred, but the design is acknowledged as a vulnerability.
- Additional items include parking lot repaving, maintenance truck replacement, bathroom renovations at Boutwell, snow equipment, and sidewalk repair.
- Dunstable has been accepted into the MSBA program for roof repair at Swallow Union School. Groton has no students at Swallow Union so future repair costs will be Dunstable's responsibility.
- A Capital Stabilization Fund contribution of \$250,000 (Free Cash) is included for FY2027, with \$500,000 per year planned for FY2028–FY2031.
- A CPC application for playground renovation at Boutwell School is pending before the Groton Community Preservation Committee.

Chapter 70 State Advocacy:

- The School Committee developed a QR code-based letter-writing campaign targeting state legislators, with customizable letter templates available. The QR code is posted on the Town's website and will appear in the Groton Herald.
- State Representative Margaret Scarsdale has confirmed that letters and phone calls are effective and valuable. The Select Board is scheduled to vote on Monday to send a formal letter of support.
- Groton-Dunstable is one of 272 minimum aid communities in Massachusetts not funded to the appropriate level. The district is coordinating outreach to other minimum aid towns to encourage parallel letter-writing campaigns ahead of Ways and Means hearings and House and Senate budget deliberations.
- The long-term ask is a revision to the Chapter 70 funding formula, not simply additional one-time funding.

Finance Committee Discussion:

- Finance Committee members noted that Groton-Dunstable is not an outlier in spending compared to similar districts. The growth problem is structural – the state is not growing its revenue share equally.
- A Finance Committee member stated that an efficiency audit is not the solution. One-time cuts reduce spending, but do not address the structural growth rate. He asked the School Committee to focus on what drives natural budget growth, 80% of which is contractual wages, salaries, and benefits, and whether this can be discussed through collective bargaining to slow growth while maintaining competitiveness as an employer.
- It was acknowledged that this is being worked on as they enter a contract negotiation cycle. Ms. McCabe noted that surrounding districts such as North Middlesex have taken steps including closing an elementary school, increasing class sizes (average mid-30s at the middle school level), using paraprofessionals in library positions, eliminating foreign language, streamlining bus routes, and not funding capital stabilization. Some of these options are being considered by the district; others, such as eliminating foreign language, would require significant deliberation.

ADJOURNMENT:

- A motion was made and seconded by both the Finance Committee and the Select Board to enter Executive Session for matters pertaining to collective bargaining, not to return to open session. All in favor. Motion carried.

Respectfully submitted by Andrea Rollo, Per Diem Minute Taker