

October 7, 2024

## Will We Have to Vote NO on the Budget This Year?

During the past several Select Board meetings, members of the Select Board and the Town Manager have made statements that lead me to believe they acknowledge that Truro's budget has grown too fast. At the same time, our Town Manager during the Tax Classification Meeting on Sep 24, 2024, stated *"So the year-rounders approve our budgets, the budget for the town ... they are the people that have every right to voice or to line-item veto things, do whatever. But they have approved our budgets over these years, so there is where we are at."* Robert Weinstein, our Select Board member has made similar statements. They reason that under our form of government, no money can be expanded without Voter Approval. So, if you are not happy with the growth in the Budget, you, the Voter, are to blame for it.

We are a Legislative (Town Meeting) form of government and spending cannot happen without Voter Approval. So, Town Voters are to blame. But wait, how can a statement that Voters own 100% of the responsibility be true? Did I stumble into another Double-Speak by Town Officials?

I fully understand that Voter approval for increased spending was needed. But do they (the Select Board, the Town Manager, the Finance Director, and FinCom) believe they have no blame? Keep in mind that the Town budget starts with a Select Board Guideline for the department managers; the Town Manager asks the Department Heads to forecast their needs while staying within the guidelines; the Finance Director pulls together these Departmental needs and creates a draft budget; the draft budget is refined by the Budget Task Force meetings and presented to the Select Board, at this point the Finance Director and Town Manager make last minute changes before FinCom reviews and approves the draft budget. Finally, it makes it to the warrant where the Voters are told to Vote for the Budget.

The growth of the Town Budget has several key stakeholders that should share in the accountability:

1. **Elected Officials:** Elected officials are ultimately accountable to the residents of the town for the financial decisions made on their behalf.
2. **Town Administration:** They oversee day-to-day financial operations and ensure that spending aligns with the priorities set by elected officials.
3. **Financial Officers:** They provide analysis, support informed decision-making by elected officials and town administrations.
4. **Residents and Taxpayers:** Residents have a stake in holding their elected officials and town administration accountable for budget growth.

At some point, the Select Board requested a Financial Management Review from DLS (Division of Local Services, MA Department of Revenue). A great decision and they should be recognized for it. The document was published on Jan 2, 2024 (see <https://www.mass.gov/doc/truro-financial-management-review-2024/download>). The Select Board never mentions why they

requested this Financial Management Review. I assume the Select Board wanted to gain an independent, objective assessment of its financial health, identify areas for improvement in budgeting, spending, revenue collection, and overall financial practices, ensure responsible use of taxpayer funds, and promote long-term fiscal stability by uncovering potential issues before they become major problems. Given the budget situation, it seemed like a prudent thing to do.

The Financial Management Review document made seven recommendations. I have an opinion on some of these recommendations. But I am not an expert. At the same time, I do recognize that someone thought an external review of Truro Finance was necessary.

We all seem to acknowledge that yearly Budget growth increases are not sustainable. Many Voters feel that the size of Free Cash is too high. Voter Fatigue with the year-after-year 2.5 overrides. At the same time, this Financial Review document recommends seven changes in these same specific areas. It has been nine months since the report was published.

Has the Town Manager, FinCom, or the Select Board discussed and agreed on what to do with these recommendations? Have we done anything with the report? Again, I ask, why did we ask for a Financial Management Review from DLS? We are about to issue a Budget Guideline to the Department Heads — have we included any of these recommendations?

In closing, All Truro Residents need to recognize that the budget's growth in the past 5 years is not sustainable, and we should work together to minimize this future growth. Divisive statements from our leaders in the hope of shifting blame for the unsustainable budget need to stop. Residents and Voters need to participate in the budget process, and ask questions, and if you disagree with the proposed budget, don't be afraid to vote NO.

- Michael Forgione