

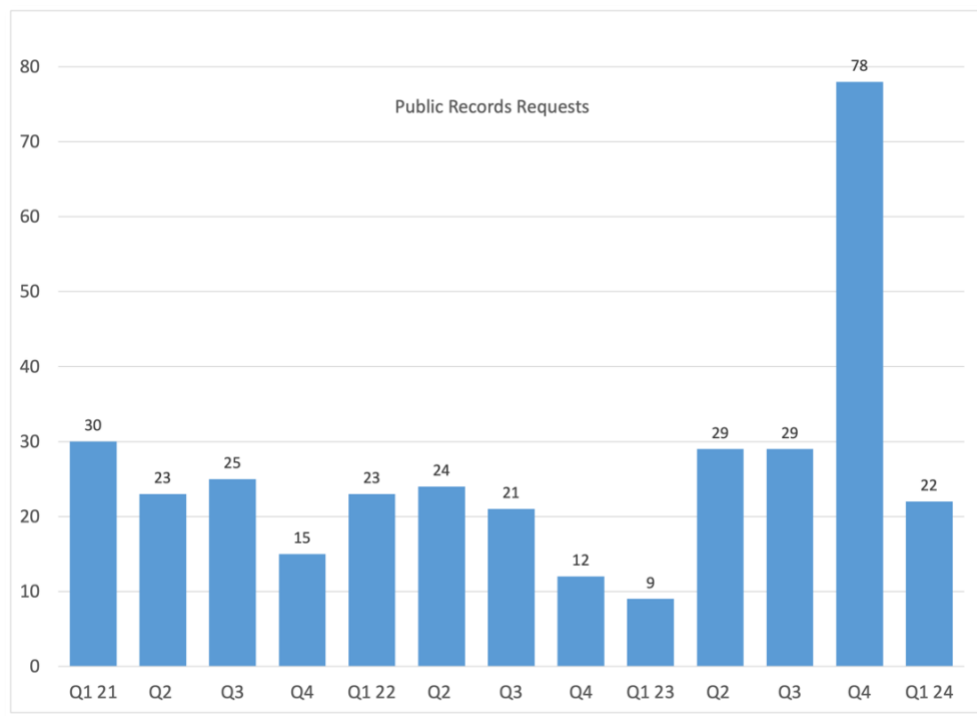
# Why Did We Have So Many Public Records Requests in Q4 2023?

(updated April 3, 2024)

A Town Manager request last year for \$10,500 in a town with a \$25 million budget seemed like a non-issue to me. Certainly not worth analyzing the request for additional funding. But my curiosity was peaked when, later in the same meeting, the Town Manager stated, *“I’ll be frank with everybody. Most of the people who are making the records requests are the same people that are concerned about taxes and staff of this town. So, there’s a little bit of irony behind the fact that’s where a lot of this is coming from and the increase in staffing. If we can’t pay for this, there’s going to have to be a discussion about reducing the discretionary services in town because we cannot. We can’t afford to continue to do this, so it’s a pretty serious issue with the entire staff. Half of our staff is discussing how to better this process. And this is a stopgap request right now. Just to try to fix this.”*

I am one of those citizens referenced by the Town Manager. I have submitted PRRs, and I have talked about the growth in the budget and the growth in staff. At the same time, I believe that Town citizens should question Town officials. I believe in what William Francis Galvin states in *A Guide to the Massachusetts Public Records Law*: *“The founding fathers of our nation strove to develop an open government formed on the principles of democracy and public participation. An informed citizen is better equipped to participate in that process.”*

I needed to understand more about this spike in PRRs. So, I submitted 2 PRRs, one for a copy of the 2023 Public Records Log and the other for the 2022 Public Records Log. My goal was to compare the volume of PRRs to 2022. Also, to see if there was a common element that drove this increase in PRRs. **UPDATE:** I received the Log for Q1 2024 (Jan-Mar 2024) and have updated the data.



In 2023, we had 65 more PRRs than in 2022. This growth in requests occurred in Q3 (not a large increase from 21 to 27) and Q4 (large increase from 12 to 80). Prior to this, the 2023 numbers were trending down from 2022 levels. What caused this spike in PRRs in Q4?

In Q3 and Q4 of 2023, the Town was fully engulfed in chicanery. We had:

- Select Board investigation of Susan Areson or “WhistleGate” – Jun 28
- Town Manager contract renewal – Jun/Jul
- The resignation of the Board of Registrars - ? date unknown
- The interviewing and selection of Board of Registrars (2 Republican seats) – Oct 13
- Town Voter files 66 Voter List Challenges - Oct 17
- Special Town Meeting 1st Continuance - Oct 21
- Special Town Meeting 2nd Continuance – Nov 13
- Special Town Meeting 3rd Continuance – Nov 28
- Special Town Meeting 4th Continuance – scheduled for May 4
- Board of Registrars first meeting on the 66 challenged voters – Nov 6
- Re-appointment of the Board of Registrars (2 Republican seats) – December

For a small community of 2,400 citizens, one must wonder what was in the air or water in Q3 and Q4 that resulted in so much turbulence? Was this natural or planned or mismanagement? We will never know. We do know that the volume of PRRs was a natural reaction by the voters wanting to make sense of these events. If you read the requests, you will note:

- 43 requests in Q4 2023 can be directly attributed to the voter challenges submitted by Raphael Richter. On Oct 17 at 3:56 PM (based on the registrar’s stamp) Raphael Richter challenged the voter status of 66 voters on the voter list.
- Many of the Q4 PRRs requested similar information to Richter’s PRRs. If this information is public, why isn’t it posted on the web on a quarterly basis? Why do we have to request it? I would add to the above list of information that should be posted on the web is the Balance and activity to any Trust account managed by the town.

In closing, I have no problem with the request for \$10,500 from the Town Manager to help with the one-time spike in PRRs resulting from Richter’s challenges. What I take objection to is the labelling of citizens who want information about government decisions. These citizens are not responsible for the increase in town staff and the growing yearly budget. 2023 was a wonderful year to be a consultant.

We had consultants on the Economic Development Committee, the Walsh Property Community Planning Committee, the Housing Authority, and the Local Comprehensive Plan Committee. We had an expensive Lawyer present in town for countless meetings and every challenged voter hearing. We had all this EXTRA spending with no concern for the Budget and Town Staff. But the increase in PRRs was the Budget Breaker. The PRRs are the reason the Town budget is at \$25+ million and growing. Really!!

**Q1 2024 Update:** The “wildfire” of requests sparked by the Richter challenges seems to have burned itself out now. In Q1 2024 there were just 22 PRRs, back down to around its historical level. The graph above tells the tale so clearly.

Yet now the Town Manager is asking the voters to fund, via this year’s budget request, a quadrupling up to \$40,000. That appears in the Free Cash Town Meeting Warrant Article 3, line k.

Really??

-Michael Forgione