

A Message from the Town Manager: March 2023

Town Meeting & Budget

The development of the Town's recommended budget is one of the most important, challenging, and exciting responsibilities of the Town Manager. The annual budget is our largest and most significant policy document. It demonstrates our organization's commitment to top community priorities and shared values. The process leading up to its creation invites honest conversations about the critical functions we perform, areas of desired improvement or expansion, opportunities to achieve equity, and the role of local government.

I could not be more honored to present you with the 2023/2024 Recommended Budget. This spending plan reflects strong collaboration, thoughtful consideration, and some tough choices, with a goal of best supporting our community in the year ahead. The Department Heads, Budget Committee, Finance Director and the Selectboard put many hours into the development. Most of all, it centers the needs of the many types of people who make Plymouth so special.

Summary of the numbers at a glance:

- All mentions of impact to the Tax Rate are estimated on the current evaluation and do not reflect any changes to revenues.
- The overall budget, subject to review and approval at Town Meeting, is \$12,543,997 million across all funds, an 10.8% increase over the 2022/2023 Approved Budget. The estimated impact on the Tax Rate is an increase of \$2.47 without any changes to revenues.

As a summary to the increases:

- General Increases include 1.5% wage increase for Firefighters per their union contract and a 2.5% wage increase for all other town employees, inflation – impacting heating, fuel, electricity and the Final Pay alignment from the Wage and Salary study.
- 3 new proposed positions to include a Firefighter, Police Officer and Police Dispatcher, we have provided worksheets that are located online, in the back of the room and in the lobby of the Selectboard's office for review and justification in advance of Town Meeting.
- Capital Projects include the Capital Improvement Plan, Proposed Solar Array and a Bond for the South Main Street Drainage Project, again we do have worksheets that provide an overview and justification in advance of Town Meeting.

Key priorities:

This budget supports the many core services our community relies upon, such as public safety, planning & development, town elections, public works, recycling, parks and other outdoor spaces to enjoy, recreation programs, libraries, and more, while recognizing that challenges remain to maintaining service levels and meeting our community's high expectations.

At the same time, Plymouth, like many communities across the country, faces complex challenges that require bold and innovative solutions. The 2023/2024 Recommended Budget prioritizes the Town's limited resources with the following goals in mind:

Key Infrastructure Investments. This budget addresses key infrastructure needs, including Road Construction on New Hebron Road and Russell Street, South Main Street Drainage Project and the Proposed Solar Array.

Investing in Town staff:

There is nothing more fundamental to the ability of a municipal organization to provide basic services than the Town employees doing the work. It is imperative that we continue to invest in the Town's most important asset – the public servants who work day in and day out to ensure the delivery of community services.

The Recommended 2023/2024 Budget meets this commitment through continued investment in competitive pay; full restoration of staffing, especially in areas of high community demand; town wide activities to promote staff retention and competitive recruitment; and annual investments in employee professional development.

Changes in design and process:

In previous years, the Town has produced a lengthy budget document, created through a manual and time-intensive process. Frankly, the finished product was not generally accessible or interesting to the public. To address this challenge – and as a first step to increasing transparency and community participation – the Selectboard provided a detail summary at the Budget Hearings. Another Financial Management improvement is the Town now has a comprehensive Procurement Policy in place.

Both the 2023/2024 Recommended Budget and 2023-2029 Capital Improvement Program were developed with input from Department Heads, Selectboard, Planning Board and Administration. While significant steps were taken this year to improve the process to accurately measure our intended outcomes and understand the true community impact of all our investments over the next two or three budget cycles. As always, we appreciate your feedback.

The other area of improvement involves how we made decisions. This year's recommended budget is one that reflects our commitment to continuous improvement, we worked intentionally across departments, often bringing Department Heads to the table to discuss ways to collaborate and achieve complex, multi-departmental goals. This helped us become more aligned with Town wide objectives and priorities. We also asked departments to describe their desired Strategic Goals and outcomes and to continue establishing meaningful measurements that will help us determine whether projects and programs are achieving desired results.

Conclusion:

Recommendations about how to allocate funding must always demonstrate fiscal stewardship. But the best recommendations also reflect shared values, advance community priorities, address critical and emerging needs, build resilience, and improve the quality of life for all. I am confident the 2023/2024 Recommended Budget achieves each of these goals. I look forward to the thoughtful consideration at Town Meeting on March 15, 2023.