

**PUBLIC MEETING
SAGADAHOC COUNTY**



BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

Tuesday, February 18, 2025 – 3:00 p.m.
Commissioners' Meeting Room – Sagadahoc County Courthouse
752 High Street, Bath, Maine

A regular meeting of the Sagadahoc County Commissioners was held at 3:00 p.m. on February 20, 2025, at the Commissioners' Meeting Room, 752 High Street, Bath, ME.

I. Call Meeting to Order and Establish Quorum

At 3:04 p.m. Commissioner Charles Crosby established a quorum and called the meeting to order.

II. Public Comment

Kelly James, resident of Georgetown, asked to speak. First, she requested that documents from meetings be made available to the public when the Commissioners receive them so that when she comes to meetings and has comments, she would have knowledge of the topics that are going to be discussed. She continued that Public Comment occurs at the beginning of meetings, and then the Commissioners go through the agenda and make decisions, so if she has a question, she doesn't get a chance to address it until the following meeting.

She also commented that meeting minutes are always "in arrears," and that she was not able to see the last BAC meeting and was feeling a bit in the dark. She stated that she had sent an email requesting a copy of the budget at the meeting so she could look it over because it's easier to have it in front of you, and that this also happened last year. There was a lot of pushback of "I don't want it handed out," but she thinks that the public has a right to see the document from the beginning all the way through. "Public participation would be more effective if we had access to the information." Commissioner Crosby thanked her for her comments, and asked Administrator Amber Jones to note the request. Jones confirmed that she had, adding that she would be responding later in the meeting due to the influx of email requests for the preliminary budget, and that she had spoken with the County attorney.

Carol Grose, resident of Woolwich, then suggested to put the meeting schedule on the County website so that the public can see what days the Budget Advisory Committee will be gathering. She continued that it's kind of confusing for the public, and you [the County] wants transparency and to generate more interest in the budget cycle. To confirm his understanding, Commissioner Crosby restated: so, the suggestion is that we have the schedule for the Budget Advisory Committee meetings on the website? Administrator Jones interjected that the schedule had just been finalized at the last meeting and confirmed that she can publish it now that it has been finalized.

III. Amendments to the Agenda

Administrator Jones advised that there were three updates to the agenda: to table the January 21 meeting minutes, the Administrator's Report, and the Financials for January until the meeting the next week. She confirmed that she did have minutes from January 14 and November 13.

IV. Consent Agenda

Vote – Commissioner Steve August moved to accept the consent agenda as presented (including Meeting Minutes for November 13 and January 14). Commissioner McPhee seconded the motion, and it passed unanimously.

V. Department Reports

Sheriff Joel Merry began his report, pleased to say that 2025 has been off to a quiet start. Calls for service are slightly from 2024, so far only by a handful of calls, so no trends have developed yet. He advised that traffic stops were up, but that may be largely attributed to the start of a new year of highway safety and specialized enforcement details, so in January and continuing into this month, speed and distracted driving details are starting to take place.

Another notable piece from his report, under the inmate list from Two Bridges Regional Jail, is the number of people arrested on warrants. He thinks that it may be connected to the post-Holiday period, where the serving of some warrants was put off until after the holidays. Sagadahoc County currently has twenty-seven people in custody at the jail, twenty-two pre-trial and five sentenced, which is about on par with last year. In total, there are one hundred fifty-six inmates. That lies within their staffing plan and there are no anomalies to report. We still have twenty-four inmates from Waldo County, and Knox County has increased slightly, also having twenty-four. In programs, we only have four people that are under electronic monitoring, which is down a little bit.

Calls for Richmond and Phippsburg are trending down from where they had been in 2024. This is likely because Richmond now has an evening shift officer working at least five days of the week. There are also two new officers in Phippsburg, covering all seven days, and some evenings, so less calls for service to those areas are expected.

Lastly, he shared that the person that had been extended a conditional job offer decided to withdraw from the process, indicating that the timing wasn't going to be good for them. The department does have other viable applicants from that initial search that are still active, and they are starting to interview this week. Commissioner August asked if the position is for a patrol deputy, and Merry confirmed it is. August then asked who receives the fines that are paid by motorists who are stopped for speeding, etc.? Merry informed him that the state receives those funds. He continued that here is a certain percentage that goes to the Maine Criminal Justice Academy and another percentage that goes to Judiciary. None of it is returned to local law enforcement. August asked if 'local' meant the municipal police, and Merry responded municipal or County-- it's a common misconception that local law enforcement or their regions gets those funds. He didn't have data to share as far as how many of the traffic stops led to citations, advising he could get the information, but his guess would be a quarter to a third. Regarding warrants, August asked what FTA warrants are, and Merry shared that FTA stands for 'Failure to Appear.'

Administrator Jones reiterated that she had asked to table the Administrator's report until next week's meeting due to time constraints that prevented completion ahead of this meeting.

VI. Action Items

a. Board of Assessment Review request for application fee to be established at \$125 per application

Administrator Jones relayed that the Board's reasoning for imposing an application fee is so that their budget can contribute to the two things we spend money on in terms of assessment review. The first is that we must cover them under our insurance if they go on any site visits, and the second is that we must pay for their advertising when we get appeals. Just one advertisement is likely to cost as much as the proposed application fee. Commissioner August commented that in the discussion around a fee last year the worry was that it would have a dampening effect on the ability for folks to request [cell phone ringing muffled the end of his statement]. Jones confirmed she recalled that discussion, and that the Board thought that it might prohibit people from appealing. She is not sure if that is the case as we haven't had any appeals since she came on, continuing that it's almost happened a few times, but there are strict time limit requirements, and in each case, people ran out of time.

Commissioner Crosby commented that he had the same reaction to it, and that he wouldn't want to put anything in place that would make it look like the County wasn't willing to entertain an appeal. The barrier to proving unfair taxation is high. He continued that he doesn't have a problem with using money in our budget for advertising, as it's unlikely that anything that they advertise will be seen by the public anyway, especially if it's in print. He shared that he felt lukewarm about the request -- there wasn't a compelling argument because there's not enough money to be raised anyway. He asked how many we had had in the past three years, and Jones replied none. If it were to become a problem and the County was receiving a lot of applications, he felt like they could do more. He suggested that if the Board found it helpful, maybe we could assist with some outreach by putting some abatement information on the County website but added that residents would likely visit their town office first, and then the Commissioners if they feel wronged by the town. Jones noted that that would only be in the case where the town itself doesn't have a Board of Assessment Review.

Commissioner McPhee remarked that originally, they said they were trying to keep from having frivolous appeals, but if we haven't had any appeals, what is their expectation? He continued that he didn't see a need for it because if someone is going to appeal, it's going to be for a good reason, nothing frivolous. Crosby shared that during his first twelve years as Commissioner, they handled appeals themselves. The Commissioners would go to the property and view it, then go to the town office and the taxpayer would have their attorney or representative or represent themselves, and the County Commissioners would hear the case and make a judgment. The Board of Assessment Review has been appointed by the County to do that for us now. Crosby doesn't see it as a problem that needs to be addressed, and at this point unless there's another reason other than to put some money in a coffer somewhere, he would be fine putting money in a budget each year, \$1000 a year, \$500 a year, that pays for doughnuts, coffee, travel – whatever we need to do to thank them for their work.

Vote – Commissioner August motioned to table the discussion, with Commissioner Crosby adding that if it needs to be brought up in the future (i.e., if we get some appeals) then they could revisit. Crosby motioned again to table, it was seconded by Commissioner McPhee, and the vote was unanimous.

b. Opioid Settlement Fund: Naloxone Training & Access with Midcoast Hospital for \$50,000 and \$100,000 to hire a Sagadahoc County Community Navigator

Commissioner Crosby commented that those were the #1 and #2 items during the last discussion. He commented that he didn't want to vote on the items as a block but preferred to work piece by piece so if any Commissioner does not support one of the pieces, the other items aren't affected. Melissa Fochesato (Board of Health Chair and Director of Community Health) began by advising that one change had occurred since the previous meeting. There was an emergency request submitted by Tedford Housing to the Board of Health. Upon review by Fochesato and Administrator Jones, it was determined that the request did meet the guidelines for use of the opioid settlement funds. Due to that, Fochesato informed the Commissioners that the request had been added to the list for their consideration.

Fochesato added that nothing else had changed from how it was presented, however, they were able to look at the revenue and cost of the settlement as well as the predicted revenue for the Maine Attorney General which allowed for an analysis out to 2030 to make sure there was funding to support the staff position [of Community Navigator] and included information on how much would be left to contribute to other projects.

Crosby expressed concern about what has been happening nationally with program funds being cut and thinks that we have only seen the beginning of it. While knowing that these funds are not related to what has happened so far, he does think that when the nonprofits start getting cuts, they will go wherever the money might be. He continued that this is a pool of money that can't be touched by the Administration in Washington, but it's available for people to use for services which they'll lose in other programs possibly when things get cut and expressed that he felt much more conservative than he did a month ago with how the funds are committed. Because funding has been frozen or cut in several areas already, he thinks this will also increase the requests that are presented to the Commissioners, so they want to be sure that we are able to follow through with what we commit to. Regarding Tedford Housing, they get their funding from several places. They are also in Cumberland County even though they may serve some of our residents. The Warming Center feels like a bit of a stretch to him compared to the other items and projects on the list. He added that it also illustrates why he wants to address each item individually, as he's not sure he's 100% behind committing funds to the Warming Center but wanted to hear from the other Commissioners as well. Fochesato stepped in to add that part of the Warming Center planning did include all the city managers from Sagadahoc County, and the location was a joint decision as they wanted a centralized location versus separate Warming Centers. The space is next to the Gathering Place on Tenney Way in Brunswick, and is close to where the buses reach, and where the Transportation Center is. Crosby asked if they had reached out to Cumberland County for funds. Fochesato replied that they had asked Brunswick specifically because it is the, or one of the, only towns in that County that didn't have a Warming Center, so this one was created to serve both Brunswick and the entirety of Sagadahoc County. Commissioner McPhee asked if they had reached out to Harpswell—the Islands or Cundy's Harbor. Fochesato answered that she believes they have reached out to Harpswell in the past for funding, but she wasn't sure about this specific request.

Commissioner McPhee then asked if Cumberland also is getting payouts from the opioid settlement, and Crosby responded that they are, but with the size of their County (he added that he wasn't defending Cumberland County) and the number of services they provide—Harpswell hires Cumberland County Sheriffs to patrol. We patrol our County and don't charge our taxpaying towns to patrol. Fochesato wasn't sure if Cumberland County was getting settlement funds, and suggested Sheriff Merry might know. Merry confirmed that all Maine Counties were receiving funds. Crosby added that even though the town managers may support the Warming Center, it's still a lot of money to only give to that Center. You don't have to live in Brunswick, you could be

in Freeport or Portland and come to Brunswick. Also, he continued, it might be a little bit of a stretch to designate settlement funds to it, as you can be unhoused and not be using drugs.

Commissioner August stated that he would prefer for the request to be vetted by the Board of Health before and if it comes back to the Commissioners. He continued that the memo on the planning meetings over the summer that included the town managers was the first he had heard of any participation from Sagadahoc County and asked if there had been any communication from them about their commitment to this, or if it was more a voicing of support, let the County pay for it? Fochesato replied that she thinks that we're just responding to a memo from Tedford's. August continued that numbers were shared, but he didn't see numbers of Sagadahoc County folks that are engaged in the programming that Tedford does at the Gathering Place. He added that he is aware of the transitional housing facility that they have in Bath. Fochesato explained that it's difficult to obtain numbers from folks who are unhoused on where their last address was. Crosby added that they don't have to ask where someone came from, but that kind of data would be helpful, especially if they are asking the County to help support it. Fochesato responded that the concern is that it's an emergency request so she'll check with Tedford to see how the timing of that would work.

Moving back to the original list items, Crosby asked if there were any issues with the \$50,000 for the Naloxone training and access, \$100,000 for the Community Navigator and staff training – and we have enough money for that for the next 5 years, \$2,500 each to Bath and Topsham Police Departments and Sagadahoc County Sheriff's Department for youth education, \$18,000 to Sagadahoc County EMA for a crisis canine, and \$7,000 to Topsham Police Department for their own specialized animal. Crosby asked who would be handling the animal for EMA, and Director Phil Davis advised that he would.

Commissioner August stated that all the items (less the Tedford request) had been fully discussed by the committee and are recommendations to the Commissioners for support. The [Community] Navigator is going to be posted as a grant-funded position, so if funds get sparse, we can terminate the position. He went on to say that he sits in at the Board of Health meetings where they fully discussed the items, and he believes they are strong recommendations.

Vote – Commissioner August moved to approve use of opioid settlement funds in the amount of \$50,000 for the Naloxone training and access, \$100,000 for the Sagadahoc Community Navigator, Bath and Topsham PD and Sagadahoc Sheriff's Department funding of \$7,500, \$18,000 for Sagadahoc County EMA for Canine, and \$7,000 to Topsham PD for their own canine. The motion was seconded by Commissioner McPhee, and the vote was unanimous.

Before moving on to the next action item, Administrator Jones addressed the Commissioners to ask if it was too soon to add the question regarding Tedford Services to the next meeting agenda. Fochesato advised that the Board of Health only meets every other month, and the next meeting is not until March. She advised that she'd reach out to try to get some answers and numbers.

c. Job Description for the Community Navigator

Commissioner August asked why the Community Navigator reports to the Administrator because he recalled during the discussions with the Board of Health made it sound like it would be EMA. Jones replied that the main reason is because [EMA Director] Phil [Davis] was already going to be overloaded with responsibilities having to do with this whole endeavor. She does believe that the Navigator will be working closely with Phil, but she wants to lighten the load. Davis added that he thought another part of it is that with that person also having some responsibility for the County

employees, that they report to the Administrator. Crosby asked, then it's not strictly an EMA function, and Davis replied that it's kind of a dual role. Crosby asked August if that answered his question, and August said that it did, but added that he sees it more as a programmatic activity which is different than most of the folks that report directly to the Administrator. Typically, a position like this would be rooted in a department with a Department Head and a chain of command, while this would give Jones her first programmatic responsibilities. The discussion primarily focused on Phil and his ability and interest. Jones offered that she is happy to talk about it further.

Crosby asked the Commissioners how they felt about the job description apart from the question of who the Community Navigator would report to. Commissioner August responded that it works. Crosby added that it looked straight forward to him.

Vote – Commissioner McPhee motioned to accept the job description for the Community Navigator, with the reporting line to be discussed further. The motion was seconded by Commissioner August, and the vote passed unanimously.

d. Schedule an additional Commissioners' Meeting for Tuesday, February 25, 2025, to review wage adjustments and set annual COLA

Commissioner Crosby asked what time the proposed meeting would take place. Administrator Jones replied that she was considering the regular 3:00 p.m. meeting time but was open to other times as preferred by the Commissioners. Crosby advised he would be in town in the morning and suggested 9:30.

e. Set dates for the first three MCOG (Midcoast Council of Government) meetings with Executive Director Mat Eddy to look at Strategic Plan for the County

Administrator Jones informed the Commissioners that Eddy had advised of availability when given 2-3 weeks' notice. She furthered that it's tough to set a meeting like this during budget season, but her request is to schedule it during the third week of March. Commissioner August stated that the third week of March was a conflict for him. Commissioner Crosby expressed that he thought the meetings should be put off until after budget season, asking if that's usually in June. Jones answered that it is usually done by mid-April, then we have a public meeting that is also usually in April, and the official signing of the budget is in May. Crosby then suggested scheduling the first meeting for June. Jones felt that was reasonable.

VII. Discussion

Administrator Jones stood to address the group regarding the FY26 preliminary budget and began by advising that her introduction would be a bit longer than usual, due to the amount of public interest that has been expressed thus far in this budget cycle. Before reading her introduction, she prefaced by saying that no one had ever asked for the preliminary budget before. In fact, no one has ever asked for the proposed budget, which is the one that is presented at the public hearing for comment. She shared that she had emailed all of Maine's County Administrators and asked if they shared their preliminary budget. None of them do. She then reached out to the County attorney, and was advised that under 1 MRSA 402, the document in preliminary status is protected. Jones thinks that there is a constructive way for the public to engage and has some ideas.

She addressed members of the public watching the meeting, saying that Counties provide essential services. You call the County when you're having an emergency in many different scenarios. You see people in Probate when you're having a change of life occur, you're talking to dispatchers and sending law enforcement or emergency services where they need to go. She continued that she

wanted to counter that notion that County services are vague, because they are services we can't do without. She then read from her budget introduction: "Each office provides critical resources for residents and we're fortunate to have really excellent staff in every department and strong department leaders in every department. Sagadahoc County, while being the fourth most expensive County to live in, has been supported by County organization that has consistently expended well below the LD1 tax levy limit." Jones shared with meeting attendees that she gave training on LD1 that was recorded and available, "so if you want to understand LD1 and why our budget was increased by so much last year, it helps to look at the history of our expenses, particularly capital. What LD1 law does, or did and now municipalities aren't subject to it, but they were until last year, is cap spending at a certain percentage based on numbers provided by the state of valuations for each of the towns. Last year's budget, while it had an increase of 14.24%, we only spent 48.3% of what we could have raised the taxes. Not to scare you, but we could still legally have more than doubled them. This is a trend that is very different in Sagadahoc County than in other Counties." She thinks that it must be taken into consideration when looking at the budget.

The County has gone through some changes in the last few years regarding the budget format, having had to pivot when facing some critical concerns – a lot of capital items coming to a head at the same time. She shared that this will be her fourth budget for Sagadahoc, and tenth that she has done as an Administrator in general. The template we are currently using is called the GFOA (Government Financial Officers Association). Through discussion, the process has been revised and improved with the Budget Advisory Committee members and the Board of Commissioners. The notable addition to this year's format will be a page that aggregates all of the capital accounts and projects forward in those large summary numbers. The other major difference is there is a lot more narrative, which is essentially the logic behind why we are asking what we are asking for. A budget goals workshop was held on November 13 where there was a high-level discussion of the kinds of issues the County is facing and how we might approach those. It was recorded and available to view on the County website. There was also a budget training on budget format and LD1 so that there would be a reference that could be referred to, and that took place on November 21.

On public engagement, regarding 1 MRSA 402, our attorney who explained that the [preliminary] budget document that is protected, did want to add a caveat that if anyone found, in the law, language that contradicts that to please bring it to our attention. One member of the public asked what the best way to engage with the budget process is and Jones has been working to compile resources to share with community members with the same question.

On the budget itself, Jones advises that the way she approaches wage adjustments has been the same each year. Whether or not any wage surveys have been obtained, she aims for the middle. As the budget currently shows, the only thing added in that regard is 2.5% COLA. The reason for this is that she would like the opportunity to discuss wage adjustments with the Commissioners at the February 25th meeting.

The Administration budget as seen in the preliminary budget has increased by 5.66%. The largest increase to that budget is due to the inclusion of a new software platform called ClearGov, with which we are building a digital budget book. We are working with the capital module component of the software to project forward what our capital expenses will be. This year, because we have only purchased two of the software components (with plans to acquire the remaining modules in next year's budget) the company is inputting the data for us as we build the template. We don't have a copy of the book to share yet—it will be closer to the end of the process when we have that version to go by—so we'll still be using the GFOA template as we go through the budget this year.

In HR and employee benefits portion of the budget, it's up 15.28%. Health insurance costs have gone up by, we believe, 12%, which sounds horrifying, but when compared to how others are experiencing it this year it is far worse for them. Jones believes that being self-insured for medical expenses is still doing us a favor. The health insurance opt-out, which is only available to union employees, is decreasing due to increased enrollment in the County health insurance. The non-union fitness reimbursement decreased due to low participation. FSA (Flexible Spending Account) was added for \$3,000. The 457b retirement plans will see an increase based on participation. And we will be affected a bit by the new Paid Family Medical Leave Act in which we are currently paying 1% of payroll taxes to fund. The good news there is that once the program begins and employees can access it, we will be able to offload our short-term disability insurance, and it will be fairly balanced out cost-wise.

In Facilities, you will see 116.4% increase. While it is our largest increase, it is one of the easiest increases to explain. The BAC spent a lot of time last year talking about our capital needs, and while we have been working toward some large capital projects, as can be evidenced by the scaffolding around the building and work being done on the elevator, Jones believes there are three critical capital projects that she will be encouraging the BAC to invest in the projects this year. We delayed a lot of capital last year, and there is already discussion about delaying this capital again, but it's become urgent. We have a cooling tower that needs to be replaced, we have a flat roof over the 1986 portion of the building that is leaking, and we have a generator that is ancient. Because we have been delaying putting capital into these accounts, we need close to \$300,000 this year.

The next biggest increase we have is in the IT budget. We have a new Director, and he has been extremely diligent in going through our infrastructure. He has found a couple of things that need to be addressed ASAP. The most pressing issue is an ISP failover. If we lost our Internet connection – we run an emergency agency—we can't lose our Internet.

The District Attorney's budget increased by 11.48%. Dues and memberships have gone up. The biggest increase for them is also because of delayed capital for the Domestic Violence Investigator's vehicle. It is in bad shape. We are looking at other possibilities for a temporary solution, but our spending on vehicles has really decreased so we don't have a lot of wiggle room with this either. VOCA went up because we are getting less revenue toward that role, and Jones fears that will continue to occur.

The Registry of Deeds only went up 2%, and the biggest increase in that budget is due to a decrease in the anticipated revenue. They are our bank. Oftentimes their office makes the most money for the County. Home purchasing has slowed down immensely, so they aren't pulling in the fees that they were.

In Probate Court, their budget went down, and this is due to staff restructuring. In the Public Agencies, the funding request for the Androscoggin Valley Soil & Water increased and that is the only increase.

Jones advised that Finance Director Jill Flaherty would speak to the General Fund Reserves, which has an increase of 49.35%. Flaherty stated that the biggest increase would be funding the Accrued Employee Leave Reserve. Currently we have about \$68,000. Because we have a lot of people who are eligible to retire anytime, who have been here for many years and are highly paid, we need to start funding that account.

In the Communications budget, the increase was 4.29%. The biggest cause of the increase in this department is the rising costs of gasoline and vehicle maintenance and repair costs. The same increase occurs in the Sheriff's budget.

The other huge increase is in our EMA budget, which is 138.3%. All of that can be attributed to radio tower leases. When solidifying the radio tower project, we had to reconfigure which towers we were using. We are currently building three towers that will be County-owned, and this will provide another revenue stream, as we will be able to cell phone carriers. Additionally, we will be able to provide it as a reasonable option for other public safety entities to use. It has been mostly ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act) funded, and Jones believes it will have a long-lasting impact across the County. When we can start using our towers, we will also be able to let go of some of the leases we currently have, but right now we need to budget at the top end of what we expect the leases to cost us.

Finally, she advised that the Sheriff's and Transport Departments have minimal increases in their budgets: the Sheriff's by 2.55% and Transport by 2.27% respectively. In Transport, the biggest increase comes from shifting an employee who is partly paid through the Sheriff's Office and partly through Transport. That role will be covered entirely under the Transport budget, so it was an increase there, but a decrease to the Sheriff's budget. Sheriff Merry added that part of the increase to his office is in anticipation that the Maine County Commissioner's Association Risk Pool is going to change their deductible from \$1,000 to \$2,500.

In Debt Service, this is our last year paying on the jail bond, so you're seeing a decrease in the payment of 4.65%.

Commissioner Crosby noted that this was the first time that they had the preliminary budget the way it has been given to them this season, and he thinks it's good to have it in front of him. It's been an opportunity to meet with Department Heads and hear some of their input on things they want in the budget. He then asked Administrator Jones if she would be working on the budget as it will be presented to the BAC. She responded that we would still be using the budget template that we have until we have the digital budget book, but the book really won't be finalized until the end of budget season this year. The new format will need to be taught for next year's budget process. She continued that Commissioner August had some important requests when we were talking about budget goals. One of them was to give the aggregated capital, which we will do. Also, more narrative. She thinks they have done that but is willing to entertain going further. Crosby then asked when Jones expected the proposed budget to be ready to present to the BAC and the public. Jones responded that the BAC had already received the preliminary budget. The only change that she thinks needs discussion and isn't already in there is the potential wage adjustments and COLA. After those things are decided, she said, then we have our proposed budget. Crosby suggested maybe by the first week of March. Jones noted that the big, all-day meeting is February 28, so there are possible changes because of that. She then informed the Commissioners that the BOC asked that the Public Agency meeting be postponed and included in another meeting because it gets too long, and they start running out of time by the end.

County Treasurer Gail Eaton asked to speak in terms of public participation and from having been on several finance committees. You nominate people to review the budget and do the heavy lifting, to try to streamline the process. She is concerned that if the preliminary budget is presented that hasn't gotten to the point that everyone's kind of approved it, people may be commenting or objecting to things that might not be there in the end. Crosby then clarified that we aren't putting out preliminary budgets. The budget that is presented on February 28 will have added what the Commissioners decide will be the COLA number, and then that budget will be the same that is given to the Budget Advisory Committee the same day as the public. At that point it's fair game. Today, she [Administrator Jones] is just sharing what the preliminary budget numbers are, but we don't know the exact amount of the tax increase until we set up a COLA number. It might stay at

2.5 or it might be more. He continued that the following week there would be additional discussions and then after that the budget will be prepared for Friday's meeting. At that point, the BAC will have it, they can ask questions, the public are invited to come, and they can see the budget. Crosby asked Eaton if that was her concern, because it's always been available at that point in the process. She responded that if that day long meeting is open to public comment, the concern is that too many people may be coming in to comment on something that isn't vetted by both sides. Crosby pointed out that people can make comments, but nothing is going to be negotiated at that time. The Department Heads will be there and can talk about their budgets to both the BAC and Commissioners. Eaton reiterated that if there is too much questioning of the budget from the public that they'll be going until midnight. She added that she doesn't want to stifle public input but has concerns. Crosby advised he wasn't concerned about it, adding it hasn't happened in the past. Additionally, there may be some good questions that both the Commissioners and the BAC will get to hear, adding that as someone who must vote on the budget, he wants to hear everything and would rather have it public as it's a completely public process.

Next, Crosby referenced a chart included with the preliminary budget, saying that what Administrator Jones brought up was the truth. If you look at 2017, we were 74% below the LD1 limit. Last year we were 48.9%, and this year we are at 47% with our initial numbers. We're not even close to what we could raise taxes to. If we wanted to, we could vote to raise an extra \$12 million right now and not have a problem with the state saying anything to us. We are going in the right direction. Look at other Counties and where they're going. They are 10% or 15% below the limit. He admitted that he was not aware of that until Jones brought it to attention. In that context, not much will be different from last year—if nothing changes, it will be about the same increase as last year. There have been years when we have been lower than that, but we've never been at 1% or 2%. We do have some fixed budget items like the jail, and now we'll be budgeting over the next ten years to assist the jail with capital funding.

Commissioner August commented that after looking at the overview sheet, he thinks there is still work to do on this budget. Expenses are up, revenues are down, that's not the trend we want to see, obviously. To Gail's point, he sees the budget as an evolving document, and it's difficult enough in some ways to keep the BAC and others on the same piece of paper, so that everyone is working off the same page. The information that's spread out in terms of documents becomes dated very quickly – kind of like Gail was saying—and everyone could have moved beyond the point of what's on the paper, so folks may be referring to documents that are obsolete. The BAC is a representative group, it includes municipal officers as well as public members and that presents one of the more viable ways for the public to make input into this process—through the town or district representatives on that committee. It is just a question of keeping people organized and moving off the same data.

Commissioner Crosby repeated that the budget will be presented to the BAC and the Commissioners at the same time on February 28, and Department Heads are often asked to answer additional questions. The ultimate decisions on hiring and firing people are at the Commissioners level with our Administrator and not at the Budget Committee's level. He's not afraid to hear what anybody has to say and thinks the process will be better this year than last year because we are going to have a better handle on our capital. It's why our budget went up a little too much last year. We had to take some money out of surplus to pay for some capital items, which we'll have to replace in 2026. The Budget Committee Chair suggested that it was the way to do it. He may not be the BAC Chair in 2026, but we will be here, so we will remember what he said.

Administrator Jones stepped in to comment that it seemed like they had moved on to the next item for discussion: best practices for public engagement, advising she had just two things left to say as

the group had already talked a lot about it and both August and Eaton have touched on things she was going to speak about. First, she is compiling a public packet that includes the Bylaws that we must abide by in the budget process, and once complete plans to make it available on the website. Secondly, where we do have people that the residents have elected to be the people who review the County budget, maybe the best way to engage is to bring any questions or concerns to the BAC members from your district to bring those questions to a meeting. It's not that we don't want to hear from the public. We want to hear from the public in an organized way.

Commissioner Crosby shared that each district has two elected officials, and one public member. There are three districts, and nine members of the committee. The public is invited to attend any of the Budget Advisory Committee meetings. The process is to try and get this right and in an orderly manner and bring up anything we might have missed. Jones agreed, and informed that David Hennessey, at the last BAC meeting, did request to put public comment at the end of BAC agenda, so we're doing that, but there will be a time limit on public comment.

VIII. Commissioners' Comments

a. Commissioner Crosby – Coastal Counties Workforce, Inc. – no update.

b. Commissioner August – Two Bridges Regional Jail Authority Finance Subcommittee, District 6 Corrections Collaborative and Space Needs Committee

August believes that regarding TBRJ, a signed agreement with Waldo County for onboarding rate has happened. The Space Needs Committee has had some communication back from the Judicial Branch on plans to renovate the third-floor space and put together a workable list for ADA compliance. They are mindful that this could get expensive in an old building, and it will be approached in a practical and pragmatic way.

c. Commissioner McPhee -- MMCA (Maine County Commissioners Association) Executive Board and Risk Pool

There was a Zoom meeting last week and they have changed how they work on legislative rules and how the vote was going to be. They wanted to make it so that eight Counties must be part of approving any legislation and that was amended to nine, then it got voted down and set back at three. Sagadahoc County is where the annual meeting will take place this year, at Sebasco Lodge. The Risk Pool had five closed cases that added up to \$106,000 and fourteen new claims, 11 involving vehicles responding to calls. 8 were avoidable and two were deer. Other reasons: some did not use a turn signal, doing a U-turn, hit a first responder, rear-ended an ambulance, hit by other agency, and hit by gunfire. This was all the police. The Risk Pool will be putting on a seminar about defensive driving.

Prior to adjourning for executive session, Commissioner Crosby welcomed former Commissioner Carol Grose back into the Commissioners' Room for the first time since the end of her term, now as a member of the public.

Vote – At 4:27 p.m. Commissioner August motioned to Adjourn for Executive Session. The motion was seconded by Commissioner McPhee.