

Tax Bills Dip Slightly after Unusual Budget Season



The 2020-21 budget season was like no other in history, due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Instead of a town-wide referendum vote, the Board of Selectmen was compelled to authorize the Board of Finance to approve the final budget.

Easton property owners will see a slight reduction in their tax bills this year. The Board of Selectmen set the tax rate at 31 mills, a decrease of 1.06% from the current 31.33 rate. The tax bill for an Easton house assessed at \$400,000 will therefore decrease about \$132 for the upcoming year.

The final budget is \$44,639,809, an increase of \$786,189 or 1.79%, which includes the Region 9 budget for Joel Barlow High School. Easton's portion of the Region 9 budget is \$11,123,653, an increase of \$893,626 or 8.74% due to an enrollment distribution shift between Redding and Easton students. Easton's enrollment is increasing from 42.39% to 45.68% while Redding's apportionment of 54.32% represents a decrease from the previous budget year.

The overall Region 9 budget is \$24,351,255 or a .9% increase, but because of the enrollment shift, Easton's portion is up 8.74%, accounting for the \$893,626 increase in Easton's share. Easton's percentage of students at the public high school is projected to

be an ongoing trend, which means Easton's share of the Region 9 budget is expected to continue to rise proportionately.

The town is using approximately 32% of the anticipated fund balance to lower the tax rise. This will leave more than 14% remaining.

First Selectman David Bindelglass fought hard to obtain permission from the state to hold a referendum on Easton's annual budget. But in an ongoing effort to protect public health and safety and mitigate the effects of the pandemic, Governor Ned Lamont on May 1 issued Executive Order No. 7HH, banning any town meeting or referendum with the purpose of approving the budget.

"This was a difficult year to formulate a budget and I appreciate the efforts made by the Board of Finance," Bindelglass said. "There was great uncertainty about the town's ability to collect taxes in the face of the economic downturn caused by the pandemic and subsequent lockdown.

"That being said, I think we short changed our children by again giving the schools less of an increase than they needed just to cover the increase in their contract obligated costs. This can not continue. There was much consternation about the undesignated or rainy day fund being too high. That fund balance was lowered by funding a slight decrease in the mill rate to property owners. I would rather have seen that money invested in our children's future."

Most departments, with the exception of Assessor, Emergency Management, Recycling and EMS will see a decrease in spending, Christine Calvert, town finance director, confirmed. The Assessor is in the beginning stages of the revaluation required by law, and Emergency Management has to replace radios which are also state mandated and the town is budgeting to replace an ambulance over a two-year period, Calvert said.

The final approved 2020-21 budget is available for viewing on the town website,

eastonct.gov.