

TOWN OF VOLUNTOWN

SPECIAL TOWN BUDGET MEETING

June 18, 2025

This public meeting is being held in person and will be livestreamed on the town YouTube channel which is: Town of Voluntown, CT-Government, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCXdF6kZQMhDVNetgjDX2MAQ>. Eligible residents and electors must be present in person to participate and vote.

The electors and citizens qualified to vote in the special town meeting are hereby warned that the Special Town Budget meeting will be held on Wednesday, June 18, 2025, at the Voluntown Elementary School, 195 Main St, in Voluntown, CT, at 7:00 pm for the following purposes.

1. To appropriate the funds necessary for the Board of Education Budget for the fiscal year 2025-2026 in the amount of \$7,399,999.
2. To appropriate the funds necessary for the Board of Selectmen's Budget for the Fiscal Year 2025-2026 in the amount of \$2,754,794.
3. To appropriate the funds necessary for the Capital Projects Budget for the Fiscal Year 2025-2026 in the amount of \$220,000.

The meeting was called to order by Tracey Hanson with the Pledge of Allegiance and reading of the Notice of Town Budget Meeting.

Pamela Theroux, Town Clerk, served as clerk for the meeting.

The Clerk called for a moderator. A motion was made by Ronald Millovitsch to nominate Tracey Hanson as moderator, which was seconded by Jack Wesa. No other nominations were made. All were in favor of Tracey Hanson serving as moderator.

First Selectman, Tracey Hanson, explained the challenges in budgeting due to state mandates, such as the 100% disability exemption and changes in vehicle tax assessments, which affect revenue without providing reimbursement. Despite challenges, cuts were made across all budgets, resulting in a \$192,797 total expense increase. To counter this and revenue loss, \$210,000 was appropriated from the undesignated fund, aiming for a zero-mill rate increase for the proposed budgets. She also explained the reasons why the Town chose not to have a referendum and vote at a Town Meeting instead. Tracey then went over the meeting rules and read the Notice of Town Budget Meeting.

The moderator asked for a motion to dispense with reading the call of the meeting again. Ronald Millovitsch made a motion to dispense with the reading of the call of the meeting again. Joseph Miller seconded it, and all were in favor.

Item #1: To appropriate the funds necessary for the Board of Education Budget for the fiscal year 2025-2026 in the amount of \$7,399,999.

Louis Garella made a motion to accept Item #1 and Scott Davidson seconded it. Item #1 was opened for discussion. Kate Beauparlant, BOE Chairman, explained that the decrease of \$50,000 included a \$17,000 decrease in construction services related to the asbestos project due to lower bids.

Approximately \$20,000 was taken from the maintenance account and the remaining amount came from various accounts. The increase is now 1.35%, making it one of the lowest in the state. She also explained that the BOE budget cannot be decreased below last year's budget without major penalties, but there is really nowhere else to cut. Questions were asked regarding food service and special education costs. Adam Burrows, Superintendent, explained that the 415% increase in the school lunch program was due to the loss of federal Covid-related grants. A question was asked as to whether or not all 4 school buses needed to be leased this year. Kate explained that while the board discussed the need for 4 new buses despite the high costs. The group also addressed concerns about a fire panel replacement, which could cost between \$200,000 and \$500,000, and discussed special education tuition fluctuations, noting that recent family moves out of town had helped reduce costs. Questions were also raised about the increase in Special education tuition. Mr. Burrows explained that this is a highly fluctuating and often unbudgeted expense, sometimes increasing by hundreds of thousands of dollars due to new student placements or retroactive tuition requirements, with the town legally required to educate special education students until age 22 and 264 days. The cost per pupil and changes to the ECS grant were also discussed.

Joseph Miller made a motion to close discussion and Scott Davidson seconded it. The majority were in favor and discussion was closed.

Lisa Rix made a motion for paper ballot. Scott Davidson seconded the motion. The majority were in favor.

Belinda Wiese and Forrest Rix counted the paper ballots 103 in favor and 108 opposed.

Item # 1 Failed.

Item#2: To appropriate the funds necessary for the Board of Selectmen's Budget for the Fiscal Year 2025-2026 in the amount of \$2,754,794.

Louis Garella made a motion to accept Item #2 and Joseph Miller seconded it. Item #2 was opened for discussion. Tracey Hanson explained that the Board of Selectmen's proposed budget of \$2,754,794 was reduced by \$68,939, primarily through wage and salary cuts, and by removing proposed additional paid staff for recreation, the public library, and weekend fire/EMT services. However, planned increases for fire department stipends and weekday paid staff were not cut, as attracting and retaining firefighters is challenging due to lower pay compared to other towns. Prioritizing the senior van service led to a budget increase to secure a matching DOT grant of up to \$21,000. Grants are actively being sought for weekend fire and EMT staff, and for PPE, to ease the burden on taxpayers. Tracey explained that while the mill rate was planned for zero increase, some property taxes will rise, and some will go down due to the revaluation. It was explained that lowering the mill rate further would require cutting over \$300,000, with more than \$200,000 coming from the Board of Selectmen's non-mandated services, as 75% of town government services are mandated. She further explained that the wage

increases were the result of a salary study conducted by an outside consultant to ensure compliance with federal minimum wage requirements, benchmark against surrounding towns, improve competitiveness in the job market, and update job descriptions to reflect multi-role responsibilities that had accumulated over the years. The study was paid from existing contracting services in the budget. Tracey also cleared up the misinformation about the budget and explained that the water project is not in the budget (it is a grant-funded study), the blight ordinance was voted down and no longer exists and affirmed that there are no plans for a trash incinerator and the Town is actively fighting the dead chicken composting site. Tracey also explained the new "Vision for Voluntown," to better inform residents about ongoing projects and initiatives, including forming a Public Safety Committee to address the costly future of fire services (e.g., regionalization, fire tax, grants for bunk rooms). Other visions include establishing the senior transportation van, improving pedestrian safety through sidewalks and grant projects (like the 100% state/federal funded Forge Hill Bridge), and implementing "Vision Zero" for traffic safety. Citizens voiced various concerns including the inconvenience of the town meeting voting format vs referenda (which Tracey had already explained), the outsourcing of tax bill mailing (which was explained by Giselle Neri, Tax Collector, to save the town \$1,000 annually due to bulk mailing discounts), and the \$1 million grant for Congdon Road. The First Selectman clarified that the Congdon Road grant is a Small-Town Economic Assistant Program grant, secured with advocacy from Senator Heather Summers, intended to address drainage and width issues to meet state standards, and not related to the chicken composting site. Concerns were also raised about salary increases for the First Selectman being moved to the Public Works budget lines, which was clarified as a recategorization based on the salary study to reflect the First Selectman's role as Public Works Director and the 24/7 nature of the job. Many residents expressed gratitude for the hard work of town officials and emergency services, emphasizing the need for community cooperation given rising costs and the essential nature of services like the fire department.

A motion was made by Clifford Schwery to close discussion seconded by Walter Mitchell. The majority were in favor and discussion was closed.

Deborah Maynard made a motion for paper ballot. Jack Wesa seconded the motion. The majority were in favor.

Belinda Wiese and Forrest Rix counted the paper ballots 94 in favor and 102 opposed.

Item # 2 failed.

Item #3: To appropriate the funds necessary for the Capital Projects Budget for the Fiscal Year 2025-2026 in the amount of \$220,000.

Louis Gardella made a motion to accept Item #3 and Scott Davidson seconded it. Item #3 was opened for discussion. Tracey Hanson showed a slide show explaining that this capital budget includes \$200,000 for the Congdon Road grant match and \$20,000 for town hall computer upgrades (cybersecurity firewalls), with money for ambulance and fire alarm systems removed but planned for future investment from separate savings.

Scott Davidson made a motion to close discussion seconded by Joseph Miller. The majority were in favor and discussion was closed.

Louis Gardella made a motion for hand count. Jack Wesa seconded the motion. 78 were in favor and 40 Opposed. The vote will be conducted by a hand count.

Tracey called for a vote by hand count 82 were in favor and 43 opposed.

Item # 3 passes.

Walter Mitchell made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Scott Davidson seconded it, and all were in favor. Meeting adjourned at 9:37 P.M.

Attest:

Pamela E. Theroux, Town Clerk, MCTC, CMC