

Increases in Allenstown Budgets

Important Facts About Town Budget Increases

On the Allenstown town web site (<https://www.allenstownnh.gov>), 2024 Town Meeting Budget, if you review the "2024 Town Budget Overview" and the "2024 Proposed Municipal Budget," several large increases are evident. The **town budget** is increasing by 16.9% to \$5,516,375. The **school budget** (on the SAU53



Allenstown Grammar School circa 1878, now Town Hall

web site) is increasing by 5.5% to \$13,658,612. The **sewer department budget** is increasing by only 1.2% to \$2,707,225. Residents must decide on three budgets and numerous warrant articles at the general election on Tuesday March 12.

The default town budget is \$4,819,200 but selectmen insist that the town cannot function on that lower amount. They said that a vote for the default budget could lead to severe cuts in services. Residents get to decide on these budgets and several warrant articles on March 12th.

If the proposed town budget is approved, the town tax rate will increase from \$6.34 to \$7.66/\$1,000, a \$1.32 increase over 2023. This rate was calculated by deducting the estimated Non-Property Tax Revenue of \$1,496,670 from the proposed budget, dividing by the total property valuation (almost \$525 million), and multiplying by 1,000.

The following paragraphs explain several of the large budget increases.

The Unassigned Fund Balance. In the past several years, the Town has used the Unassigned Fund Balance (UFB) and Non-Property Tax Revenue to help reduce budget increases. The UFB includes unspent tax funds and additional revenue which the Dept. of Revenue Administration (DRA) advises keeping 5 to 17% of general operating revenues for critical cash flow needs.

\$225,000 for AES conversion. It was decided that there was not enough in the UFB to reduce the budget. But \$278,000 from the UFB is to be used to some fund Capital Reserve Funds, with \$225,000 going toward converting the elementary school (AES) into new town offices. That fund already has \$100,000 added last year. Several town officials have opposed the haste to increase that funding, preferring a proposal to sell the Dupont School (ARD) ASAP and use those proceeds to renovate AES.

Increased Health Insurance Costs. The increase of \$131,200 (+48%) for health insurance resulted from increased insurance rates and hiring four new Fire/Ambulance personnel. There was a mandated increase of \$45,000 for Fire Dept. Retirement.

Increases for AES and ARD Maintenance. The two items totaling \$43,050 for both AES and ARD are needed to cover the cost of utilities and maintenance once the town takes over the two schools in May.

Increased Fire and Ambulance Budgets. In 2022 the Select Board reviewed the rising costs of the Tri-Town EMS Service (Tri-Town) which had more than doubled in 10 years from \$562,794/yr to \$1,203,998/yr. This provided one 24-hour ambulance and one part time ambulance. To better serve Allenstown, the Select Board voted to leave Tri-Town and transition to a **Fire-Based Ambulance Service** where ambulance staff is cross-trained to operate fire apparatus. This will provide Firefighters & EMTs for both services at a lower cost and allow direct collection of revenue for ambulance transports.

Part of the 2024 budget increase pays for the final six months of Tri-Town (until July 1st) concurrent with the first half year of the new Allenstown service. With the recent growth of the town due to new residents at Hillsbrook Village and 25 Canal, the town will experience more service needs and more revenue.

Fire Chief Eric Lambert put it succinctly:

“(Fire Dept. 2024 Proposed Budget, \$803,450) minus (Billing Revenue, \$186,750) equals Total budget of \$616,700 (to provide both fire and ambulance services).”

Chief Lambert assures that, with this budget, “you get full-time 24/7 coverage from your Fire Department for a lower cost.”

Increased Solid Waste Disposal. The 10 year contract with Casella's ends August 31st and post-contract disposal costs of about \$110/ton for trash AND even more for recycling had resulted in an increase of \$134,405 (+55%). A cost cutting measure to eliminate curbside recycling for a savings of \$25,000 this year was approved at the Feb. 3rd Deliberative “Smackdown” Session.

New Accounting Software. A budget entry of \$40,000 is to replace old software at Town Hall but the Town Building Capital Reserve Fund may be an alternative source.

The town warrant contains 13 articles for zoning ordinances, the town budget, sewer budget, an \$11.5 million bond for new sewer dept. clarifiers, funding for capital reserve funds, an ordinance to regulate the Pelissier Boat Launch, and three articles dealing with the Treasurer and Tax Collector.

Important Facts about School Budget Increases

School budget details can be found, with a little difficulty, at <https://sau53.org/en-US/allenstown-9c32396e> . It also shows a sizable increase:

The proposed FY 2024-25 budget is \$13,658,612 while the default budget is \$13,613,467. This includes a sizable increase of \$709,146 or 5.5% with the default budget only \$45,000 less. The major increases are for Special Ed (+\$414,042) and the tuition rate to Pembroke Academy for high schoolers (+\$141,710). An unanswered question is why are 25% of the students coded for Special Ed? Three warrant articles add money for various trust funds.

Current enrollment is 487, which is a cost of \$26,590 per student/yr including an \$811K bond payment for the new K-8 school building). In contrast, tuition at nearby private schools averages \$5,600-\$14,000/yr with Trinity Christian School in Concord at \$5,600/yr. (www.privateschoolreview.com/new-hampshire)

If the proposed school budget is approved, it will raise the school tax rate from \$13.19 to about \$13.91/1,000, a \$0.72 increase over 2023.

Important Budget and Election Dates

From **November 2023 to January 2024**, the Selectmen reviewed budgets with town, sewer, and school department heads, and approved a warrant article to raise and appropriate \$11,500,000 for new clarifier tanks at the Allenstown Wastewater Treatment Facility.

On **Saturday, January 13**, the school board and the town budget committee presented their budgets at the AES school, 30 Main St. Less than 50 people attended with most of them being town and school officials. A few residents questioned and criticized the large budget increases.

On **Saturday, February 3** at the Deliberative Session at the AES school, one resident gained approval from most of the 70 attendees to eliminate curbside recycling for a \$25,000 reduction in Solid Waste Collection costs. The last two Selectmen-drafted warrant articles were to minimize service interruptions by separating the Town Clerk/Tax Collector positions. This met opposition by status quo proponents whose rewording of Article 12 forced the Selectmen and town attorney into a sudden huddle. A majority of selectmen and a few other officials criticized the 15-12 vote on Article 12 as mangling a simple yes/no question into an ineffective advisory one. An attempt to amend Article 13 failed.

The Town Election is Tuesday, March 12 from 8:00- 7:00 at St. John the Baptist Parish Hall, 10 School Street. Outside the hall, you will probably be greeted by local candidates seeking one more chance to get your vote. Inside you can vote for the best qualified candidates. Afterward you can chat with town officials or with friends and neighbors you might meet.

By the next day, the Town Clerk will post the election results on the town web site. That's two elections down, two to go.