Andover • Andove

## Andover Budget Soars at Referendum

By Michael Sinkewicz

Andover residents resoundingly passed a spending plan on Tuesday for the 2023-24 fiscal year, signing off on a \$12.48 million budget — a \$246,671 decrease from current year spending; the mill rate is 31.33 — a 1.8% decrease.

According to the town clerk's office, the budget passed by over a 2-1 margin; the proposal passed by a 358-122 tally. Overall turnout topped the first budget referendum from last year, but fell just shy of the second vote.

Town Administrator Eric Anderson suspected that the proposal would go through, largely because of the resulting tax decrease and the general lack of controversy surrounding the budget this year.

"You always want more turnout," he said, but expressed that the town's municipal votes typically draw low numbers when the budget drivers are relatively simple.

Compared to some neighboring towns, Andover generated little debate with both its school and town spending. The town budget bottom-line is slated at \$3.51 million — a \$104,842, or 2.9% increase.

The Andover Board of Education budget is \$4.23 million — a \$182,000 or 4.5% increase from current year spending.

Perhaps most consequential was the savings resulting from the RHAM budget proposal. While the overall bottom-line increased, Andover's levy decreased by \$533,524 and represented just 4% of the budget, or \$4.49 million.

The large slash in spending helped combat rising inflation, and resulted in a minimal ask from Andover voters.

"We had some luck in our budget," Anderson said. "I'm happy we established a budget on the first go around; it makes everyone's live easier."

Due to a charter revision last fall, the budget would've been bifurcated if shot down after the first referendum — a mechanism town officials are happy to test during another fiscal year.

Along with the RHAM savings, the town was able to secure 100% grant funding for the

replacement of the Bunker Hill and Long Hill Road bridges, which helped balance the budget.

The Board of Finance recommended the purchase of a new Squad rescue Pumper Fire apparatus for the fire department that will cost roughly \$1 million over a 10-year period. Anderson said the town will put aside additional tax dollars into the permanent fire engine fund built-in the budget to cover future lease payments.

Another item that caused uncertainly in the budget was the additional expense resulting from early voting. After Connecticut voters approved of the measure last fall, municipalities speculated on the extend it would impact their spending; or how much it would cost them.

Anderson expressed that an early voting bill at the state level would likely increase town spending "pretty considerably," but the implementation will not take place this November.

Therefore, towns have more time to adjust and spend accordingly. Still, Andover, likes others, will "feel it in the following year's budget."

For infrastructure the construction of a new community center in town is 100% funded through APRA funds, approximately \$1 million. The town is designating \$125,000 from the multi-use building fund to furnish the building.

Andover received a STEAP grant for \$275,000

to cover the demotion of the old firehouse at 15 Center St. and replacing it with a new parking structure. An additional \$75,000 will be used to complete the project.

Road spending increased; the town plans on expending approximately \$600,000 for roads. State funding will cover \$193,000 with \$410,000 coming from the road improvement fund.

Andover Superintendent of Schools Valerie Bruneau told the Rivereast Wednesday she was "thrilled beyond belief" with the outcome of the referendum, especially with the lopsided result.

"The numbers showed that 75% of the vote was in favor of the budget and only 25% opposed," she said. "I believe that the people have spoken and they don't want to be divided any longer. The parents love the seniors and want what the seniors need. The seniors love the children and want what the children need."

She continued, "Over the past 12 months the community has become much more unified. I am grateful to the Board of Finance with its changes and to the Board of Education for both working hard to help understand our needs."

For Bruneau, unity was perhaps the key to this budget cycle.

"I really feel like this is a different Andover," she said.