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## Stonington town meeting seeks to balance existing services with affordability

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BY JACK BEAUDOIN



Stonington town hall as seen in summer 2025.

STONINGTON—With just 57 articles on the warrant, the 2026 Stonington town meeting will be an item-by-item examination of the proposed \$2.3 million municipal budget. Although a month ago town officials had hoped to present voters with sweeping updates to the town's land-use ordinances, those changes required more deliberation and "tweaking" before the select board and planning board were comfortable putting them on the warrant.

This year's meeting will be held on Monday, March 2 beginning at 3 p.m. A referendum election precedes the meeting, with voting at town hall from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m.

Perhaps the only article not directly related to the budget comes at the end of the meeting as the penultimate item. If approved, Article 56 would direct the "Board of Selectmen, or their designee, to enter into boundary line agreements with abutting property owners to establish, settle, and clarify the boundary line of any property owned by the Town, including the boundary lines of the rights-of-way of town roads, and to execute any and all documents to effectuate these."

At a recent Select Board meeting, Town Manager Kathleen Billings said the article would address a nearly two-decades long issue on Pink Street near the walking path that connects to the Island Community Center and Memorial Lane.

### Money matters

The 2026 municipal budget has been debated in meetings and public hearings for two months, although public participation has been meager, officials said.

Overall, the spending plan is 4.88 percent higher than the 2025 budget. The total expense is growing from \$2.2 million last year to \$2.3 million this year, an increase of nearly \$107,000.

Many of the increases can be attributed to inflationary costs on salaries and benefits like health care insurance, which drove the administrative costs at town hall up by 24 percent. Billings has noted that turnover in the office is making 2026 more expensive than usual, as new employees require significant training and onboarding in order to replace long-time public servants. Competition for experienced administrative staff with prior municipal experience of a background in accounting, bookkeeping and finance has pushed salaries upwards, as has inflation.

Big ticket items such as the transfer station, public works and road maintenance are remaining flat or even decreasing. In 2025, the budget allocated

\$483,590 for public works, the town garage and winter roads; in the proposed 2026 budget, that amount is just \$479,375, a decrease of \$4,215, or about -1 percent. The budget for the transfer station, which will cost the town nearly a half-million dollars to operate in 2026, is flat despite increases in the annual tonnage trucked a landfill.

Members of the select board are planning to use money from the town's undesignated fund balance to offset the overall increase in municipal spending. The final item on the warrant would authorize the board to use up to \$250,000 from the surplus, as it is known, to reduce local property taxes. But even if the municipal budget doesn't raise taxes, residents are still likely to

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experience a pinch when tax bills are issued in late summer because the property tax also includes the Hancock County budget and the CSD 13 School budget. Both are expected to come in above their 2025 amounts.

The select board has also been discussing whether or not the town should continue to pay for additional patrols by the Hancock County Sheriff's Office. This year, the budget allocates \$89,000 for three additional weekly patrols, but select board member Joseph Rackliff has questioned whether the town really benefits from them. Several of his colleagues were also skeptical about the impact of those additional patrols. Residents can decide that question early in the meeting when they vote on Article 17.

## Morning election

The other major area of scrutiny has been in third-party requests, most of which will be decided in the morning referendum.

At an early February public hearing, select board members circulated an information sheet that showed not only the 2025 and 2026 funding requests from 13 organizations, but also the local tax exemptions that four of those organizations—Opera House Arts, Stonington Public Library, Healthy Island Project and Island Workforce Housing—received as nonprofits with property in Stonington. While the requests are down slightly from 2025, three organizations are seeking increases: the Women, Infants and Children program (up \$400, from \$1,000 to \$1,400), the Eastern Area Agency on Aging (up \$500, from \$3,000 to \$3,500) and the Healthy Island Project (up \$3,600, from \$9,000 to \$12,600).

As reported elsewhere in this newspaper, select board members Donna Brewer (chair) and John Robbins are running unopposed in their re-election bids. CSD 13 School Board co-chair Chelsea Torrey is also seeking re-election without an opponent.

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