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Stonington voters defund police, return incumbents

March 05, 2026

BY JACK BEAUDOIN

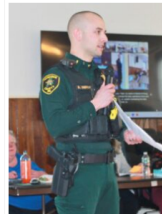


STONINGTON—Despite a high-profile act of vandalism at Burnt Cove Market only days earlier, voters at Stonington's 2026 Town Meeting on March 2 opted to end a policing deal with the Hancock County Sheriff's Office that would have contributed \$89,000 to the municipal spending plan.

Along with a morning referendum vote that denied a \$7,500 funding request from Opera House Arts, the voter-approved budget will come in at \$2,218,281, which is \$25,000 over last year's budget for the town. Having authorized the select board to use up to \$250,000 from surplus to reduce the impact on property taxes, residents are likely to see a reduction in the municipal portion of their tax bill. But officials cautioned that because tax bills also include both county and school budget components, an overall tax increase is still in the cards.

For the most part, the 65 or so residents who gathered for the annual town meeting endorsed the spending recommendations put forward by the select board. The first 16 articles—about half of which were procedural items that empowered the town to conduct business as usual—passed without debate. Attendees, for instance, didn't bat an eyelash at an appropriation of \$675,170 for the town's Administrative account, an increase of \$131,058.65. Smaller sums for Town Hall operations and Planning Board and Enforcement expenses were also approved without discussion.

Skip Greenlaw again served as Moderator.



Lt. Dakota Dupuis explains how the Hancock County Sheriff's Office staffs patrols according to its contract with Stonington. BY JACK BEAUDOIN



Voters ready themselves for the 2026 Stonington Town Meeting on Monday, March 2. BY JACK BEAUDOIN

Patrols cut

But debate heated up with Article 17, which asked if residents would "vote to raise and appropriate up to \$89,000 for law enforcement." Under an arrangement that has been approved at town meetings over the past several years, that figure would pay for three weekly, exclusive patrol shifts by sheriff deputies.

Resident Virginia Olsen asked representatives of the sheriff's office, including Sheriff Scott Kane, to explain why Stonington should continue the agreement.

Taking point, Lt. Dakota Dupuis explained that without the contract, Stonington residents would see fewer patrols because at any one time, there is only one deputy covering all of "Slot 1" in Hancock County—an area that roughly corresponds to the Blue Hill Peninsula and Deer Isle. "Stonington faces some unique challenges," he said, given its geographic position "at the end of the line." He said the contract has provided "additional coverage for a town that might not otherwise see as many patrols."

Canceling the contract would impact the visibility, response time and pro-active policing the town currently enjoys. "Under the contract, you know with certainty that a deputy will be here—not 40 minutes away—during contracted hours," he said.

But residents grilled Dupuis about the number of documented days the department was actually in Stonington, how many other communities had to pay for additional coverage, and whether or not the Sheriff's Office would enforce town ordinances.

"Would it be possible to have more weekend and evening coverage?" asked Select Board Chair Donna Brewer. "Because that seems to be when trouble happens."

Dupuis said the Sheriff's Office would be willing to meet with the board and hash out details like preferred timing and town ordinances. But when Mallery Reece pressed for specific evidence that the contracted patrols had an impact in Stonington, Dupuis admitted that he could not provide "a statistical number to definitely answer that question." That's because the contract has been in place long enough that it would be impossible to isolate the patrol's impact apart from larger trends. But, he said, "as far as reduction in crime goes, a police presence helps with deterrence."

Instead of the usual voice vote, resident asked for a secret ballot. After the balloting was completed and the votes counted, Stonington residents rejected the new contract 29-27. They later approved \$15,000 to pay for the first two months of 2026,

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since the contract operates on a calendar year.

Waste woes

Subsequent large ticket items passing with little or no debate included \$52,000 for economic development, \$119,200 for the Stonington Fire Department, and another \$120,000 to repair the current station's roof and overhead doors. Fire Chief Steve Rittmeyer said the investment in repairs and maintenance could add another 10 years to the building's lifespan, giving the town sufficient time to pursue grants for a new building.

Voters raised hard questions about the \$489,600 recommended for the transfer station and disposal of solid waste. They asked about recycling efforts, moving to a 5- or 6-day week, and pay-per-bag programs. Town leaders were receptive to ideas, especially around waste reduction, but they also said that Stonington's geography worked against it, as transporting recycling products, or waste to landfills, is expensive. Given uncertainty around Maine's landfill at Juniper Ridge and the area's waste-to-energy plants, Town Manager Kathleen Billings said the entire state is grappling with solid waste issues and the day of reckoning would soon be at hand.

Incumbents, unopposed

Earlier in the day, 109 ballots were cast in the morning referendum and elections. Travis Fifield was elected Selectboard chair for the coming year. Incumbents Brewer and John Robbins won re-election to the select board, while School Board incumbent Chelsea Torrey received 95 votes. All were unopposed.

Thirteen nonprofits placed funding requests on the ballot, with 12 passing. Only Opera House Arts failed to gain majority approval, with 43 voters supporting the request and 65 opposing it.

"We are disappointed by the result of the vote, given the ways in which the Opera House contributes to the economic vibrancy and the cultural life of the town," Executive Director Erika Sanger acknowledged. "Forty percent of our programs in 2026 are free or Pay What You Can. We have increased the number and types of programs available year-round and will continue offering that level of service as long as financially possible."

She added, "We are excited by the programs we have planned and look forward to seeing more and more people in our unique historical theater."

Bill Gross, a Stonington resident who supported the Opera House and is a regular attendee at its events, shared in the disappointment.

"I feel terrible about it," he said following the vote. "It's such an important asset in town."

Beyond the money itself, Gross said, local funding is often an indicator of public support required for large foundation grants. "They have some work to do to show the value they really do provide," he said.

While many of the requests passed handily with 3-1 and 4-1 margins, there were a few close results. A \$25,000 request from Stonington Public Library passed by a 61-46 margin, while a \$5,000 request from the Opiate Free Island Partnership passed 57-47.

Stonington election results

Select Board (two seats)

- . Donna Brewer – 88
- . John Robbins – 95

School Board (one seat)

- . Chelsea Torrey – 95

Third party requests

(Amount, Yes-No)

- . Island Community Center, \$13,000, 89-19
- . Opera House Arts, \$7,500, 43-65
- . Eastern Area Agency on Aging, \$3,500, 79-25
- . Healthy Island Project, \$12,600, 73-35
- . WIC (Women, Infants and Children), \$1,400, 77-28
- . Hospice Volunteers of Hancock County, \$1,000, 88-18
- . Stonington Public Library, \$25,000, 61-46
- . American Red Cross, \$750, 70-37
- . Project Launch, \$2,500, 73-31
- . Downeast Transportation, \$800, 93-15
- . Island Workforce Housing, \$6,000, 69-38
- . Aroostook Community Partners, \$422, 60-46
- . Opiate Free Island Partnership, \$5,000, 57-47

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Deer Isle-Stonington High School senior Iris Aldrich receives Principal's Award



Photo: No Kings brings big crowd to Deer Isle



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