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Stonington weighs third-party request options: "When does it stop?"

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BY JACK BEAUDOIN



STONINGTON—The specter of budget busting third-party requests reared its head once more at the Nov. 17 Stonington Select Board meeting...

"Ten or fifteen years ago these requests might have amounted to \$40,000," Town Manager Kathleen Billings said.

"I don't think voters really understand that when they approve these requests, they are voting to raise taxes," board member Joseph Rackliff agreed.

The discussion arose after Billings informed the board that she had received three funding requests for placement on the 2026 Town Meeting warrant...

"All of this stuff doesn't effect every taxpayer," board chair Donna Brewer complained.

While the board had the option of adding the articles, they directed Billings to tell three groups that they would need to collect signatures via petition...

A nearly identical discussion took place at the Nov. 6 Deer Isle Select Board meeting. Board members there complained that once an organization collected sufficient signatures...

Billings said the hand-wringing wasn't limited to the island—she had just returned from a series of meetings in Augusta and reported that the impact of third-party requests on municipal budgets is a common refrain throughout Maine.

Like Brewer, most select board members said they didn't object to the work most requestors engaged in, such as workforce training, literacy, affordable healthcare and hunger prevention.

Select board member Travis Fifield asked if the town could provide more context on referendum questions.

Billings said while that might be feasible on warrant articles that are decided at town meeting, most requests are voted on by secret ballot at the referendum prior to town meeting.

Linda Nelson, Stonington's economic and community development director, is also a consultant to nonprofits and even ran the Stonington Opera House.

"Nonprofits that are double-dipping aren't really paying attention to what local taxpayers need," she said, pointing out that 7.7 percent of Stonington's property is owned by tax exempt organizations.

Billings is on the board of HomePort, a not-for-profit organization that grew out of the former Island Nursing Home and is converting that facility into affordable housing.

She said she wished more organizations adopted that philosophy.

"Even if you're a nonprofit, you still need the roads plowed and maintained," Brewer agreed.

Fifield said that he wished supporters of nonprofits would donate rather than seek taxpayer support.

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