

TOWN OF HARDWICK
ANNUAL TOWN MEETING
MARCH 05, 2024

Orise Ainsworth, Moderator, called the meeting to order at 10:03 a.m. The voting audience included approximately two hundred people.

Article 1. To elect a moderator to govern said Town Meeting and for the year ensuing.
Orise Ainsworth nominated by Dave Shepard
Motion passed unanimously

Article 2. Shall the Town accept the Town Report, year ending June 30, 2023?
Motion by Dave Shepard
Seconded by Rob Lewis
Motion passed unanimously

Article 3. To elect all Town Officers and School District No. 26 Directors as required by the public laws of Vermont and the Town Charter. (Select Board and Union School District No. 26 Directors, to be voted by Australian Ballot).

First Constable 1-year term
Larry Hamel nominated by David Upson
Motion passed unanimously

Second Constable 1-year term
No motion or volunteers, office stays open

Town Agent 1-year term
Rob Lewis nominated by Rob Lewis
Motion passed unanimously

Surveyor of Wood, Bark and Lumber 1-year term
No motion or volunteers, office stays open

Tree Warden 1-year term
Geoffrey Fehrs nominated by Tracy Martin
Motion passed unanimously

Cemetery Trustees 1-year term
Main Street, Maple Street, Fairview, Sanborn, Hardwick Street, West Hill, Hardwick Center

Motion made by Dave Shepard to nominate the Cemetery Trustees as presented in
2023 Town Report
Motion passed unanimously

Fire Dept. Officers (can be voted as one vote) 1-year term
Motion made by Dave Shepard to nominate Fire Dept. Officers as presented in 2023 Town
Report
Motion passed unanimously

One Library Trustee 3-year term
Lauren Honican nominated by Jodi Lew-Smith
Motion passed unanimously

One Library Trustee 3-year term
Abrah Griggs nominated by Jodi Lew-Smith
Motion passed unanimously

Grand Juror 1-year term
Raymond Bellavance nominated by Dave Shepard
Motion passed unanimously

Vacant positions will be turned over to the Select Board to try and fill.

Article 4. Shall the Town have its current taxes collected by the Town Treasurer?
Motion by Kevin Moore
Seconded by Rob Lewis
Motion passed unanimously

Article 5. Shall the Town vote a budget of four million eighteen thousand eighty three dollars (\$4,018,083) to meet the expenses and liabilities of the Town and authorize the Select Board to set a new tax rate sufficient to provide the same?
Motion by Ron Wiesen
Seconded by Dave Shepard

Town Manager, David Upson, highlighted a few projects that are ongoing and gave an update on some of Hardwick's bigger projects.

He said that it has been 9 months since the flood and that efforts to recoup recovery spending from our federal partners are ongoing. Each week he has meetings with FEMA staff to follow up on and fulfill requests for essential elements of information for each of the projects that have been created by FEMA grant managers. He stated that there are several larger recovery projects that will take time to complete. Days and weeks after the flood, town staff requested hydrologic studies from our state partners for larger river crossings. The information requested in a hydrological study will allow us to request engineering services for the replacement and upsizing of culverts and bridges lost or damaged in the flood. The process Hardwick must follow is time consuming but essential to receiving reimbursement. As we work on recovery, some of our long standing projects continue to move forward.

David stated that the Yellow Barn has been fully leased to a development corporation to complete and operate. He said that many are mistaken when they think our property tax dollars are bankrolling that project. The investment that was made was by many and the payback is in the long game. He said Hardwick will be the beneficiary of that project for its lifetime through PILOT payments.

He said that the library project continues to move forward and will be a great addition to our community.

David believes this will be the year for the replacement of the pedestrian bridge. The July flooding changed some of the existing conditions but teams working on the project were able to adapt and continue to move forward. He hopes to be walking across that bridge by the end of this year! Next, David discussed the rebuilding of our wastewater treatment facility. He stated that the wastewater

plant is related to every form of growth and development in our village. He said if our plant cannot treat the waste streams it receives, we cannot continue to grow and without growth, the burden falls on the existing rate payers to keep the plant operating. He will do everything in his power to ring the bell for financial and technical assistance to rebuild and/or relocate the facility, making it more resilient for the future.

David said that they are working on getting the ACT 250 permit opened up and amended in order to blast and crush our own stamatt at Hardwick's Route 14 pit. He said that crushed gravel and stone are highly sought after resources for the rebuilding and resurfacing and it will be cost effective if we can produce it closer.

David thanked the many community members who year after year show up for the greater good of Hardwick and its residents. He also wanted to express his gratitude to the audience. He said their willingness to come to the discussion about the future of our community is what makes it strong. He said the most important thing for him to do in his position is to find solutions to community problems.

Eric Remick wanted to thank David Upson and staff. Eric addressed the motion on the floor, the budget. He stated that this was the biggest increase that has been proposed in his time on the Select Board, so he wanted to go through it briefly. He referenced the budget summary on page 11 of the Town Report and went through those figures. He said that the 7.55% increase originally started at 14%. They feel they have tightened to some degree but are still able to meet the needs of the town.

Danny Hale stated that the position increase hours is for the current position for flood/zoning administrator. Because of new regulations there is a ton of mandated paperwork, new maps that have to be made and more complicated permitting. Someone in the audience questioned whether that money can be recouped through grants, Eric said yes, there is a way to recoup.

Rob Lewis proposed a couple of ideas to lower the budget. He thinks the community is consistently being asked to bear the burden of tough times. He stated that historically our fund balance is maintained at approximately 10-15%. He questioned, looking at the 2023 balance, why it is currently at more than 20%. Casey Rowell, Business Manager, requested permission to answer as a non-Hardwick resident, there were no objections. She stated that at the end of 2023 the fund balance was just under \$980,000 which based on current budget is about 24%. The fund balance policy states we want to have a minimum of 15% for a goal of 20%, but there is a projected \$125,000 of the \$980,000 being used for current fiscal year budget and anticipate using another \$50,000 of that in fiscal year 2025 and also some of that money is committed to the pedestrian bridge. That would then put the balance at 15-18%.

Rob Lewis thanked Casey for that information, but he still disagrees with the 18%. He put a motion on the floor to take \$75,000 out of the capital budget to reduce taxes. He believes the Select Board should rework that number. On the fire department equipment budget, he would like to see \$25,000 taken from that and put back into the budget for a reduction of taxes and since the fund balance is almost \$1,000,000, he also proposed a reduction of \$200,000 come from the fund balance to reduce taxes for the people of Hardwick.

Eric Remick responded that the Select Board did spend a fair amount of time working on the capital equipment purchase schedule. They pushed out some purchases and decided we could wait on police cruisers and the small trucks. The capital equipment schedule, other than funds set aside for this year, is there for planning purposes. Nothing is committed to anything beyond this year, but to try and plan, they map out future years.

Rob Lewis understands that but thinks that some of these costs should be deferred to another year. He also asked if there was a mechanic in the town garage that maintains vehicles. Eric said no, that in the past mechanics were hired to come to the garage, but due to how computerized trucks are now, it is not feasible.

Larry Hamel wants to vote no on the budget. He stated that he hears from people that do not want to stand up and speak at Town Meeting but that they have had enough with the increases. He said that Hardwick has the highest tax rate in the Northeast Kingdom.

Steve Sampson asked if the budget is rejected when would the next opportunity be presented. Orise informed of options the floor has to make amendments to the budget. Steve asked again what opportunity the people would have to vote on the next amended budget. Orise informed that there would have to be another special Town Meeting.

Dave Shepard noted that in the Town Manager's opening statement that he said something about potentially moving the sewer plant, he would like to know where it could be moved to. David stated that the facility has flooded four times. Engineers have been hired to determine the substantial damage and if it is over 51% substantially damaged then we would be required to elevate it or relocate it and elevating plant would be considered relocating and that is the most cost effective.

Ray Bellavance stated the sewer plant leaks, but David corrected and said that the lagoons just went through relining, that the liners in them were not compromised but they had reached their useful age, and that facility is completely contained. He stated that where we do get ground water infiltration is the aging collection system. We can assume there is some leaking from the pipes that connect houses to the plant, but there is no evidence that the facility itself is polluting the ground water. Eric noted that the sewer plant and water are critical infrastructures but wanted to clarify that those are separate budgets, and they are paid out of water and sewer rents, that this is not part of the budget on the floor. He also clarified that the lagoons and sewer plant are not leaking, when it flooded in July the water did wash through there and into the Lamoille River. Ray asked why the water and sewer bill went up and Eric informed him that the water and sewer rents are set by the Select Board every July and if interested in helping with that process he invites anyone to participate. Meredith Holch felt that Eric's answer to Ray was evasive, and she would like an answer why rates went up. Eric stated that he did not have those figures in front of him because it is not part of today's meeting, but that the rates are to cover the costs of running system, regular operating cost, regular maintenance, and bond payment. Ray then questioned sewer overage rate when sewer is not metered, Eric said sewer cannot be metered so the assumption is what goes in must come out.

Rob Lewis made a motion that the Select Board revisit the budget and provide a reduction on the fund balance of another \$300,000. Orise asked Rob to clarify what he is proposing. Rob stated that he is proposing an amendment to take another \$300,000 off the almost \$1,000,000 that is in there. Orise said then the only thing that can be done is a non-binding straw poll, because legally all that be done is changing the bottom line of the budget. Rob asked for a straw poll. Eric cautioned that even though it looks like a large amount in the fund balance he wanted to point out that if an additional \$300,000 is taken from fund balance to offset taxes this year, which can be done and the same is done next year, that there would not be enough money to keep doing that and then it will be a pretty big bump in a future year.

Ceilidh Galloway-Kane asked if Casey could come up with a figure that would be appropriate to take out of the fund balance this year considering what is already committed.

Michael Lew-Smith asked if we could get an estimate of how much that \$300,000 change would affect the tax rate. Casey referenced page 9 of the Town Report and said that if Fund Balance Contribution to Offset Tax Rate is changed from \$50,000 to \$350,000 it shows an estimated decrease, because we do not know Grand List, of 1.99%.

Tracy Martin wanted to double check that the fund balance in the Town Report is from 8 months ago and we are currently not sitting on that money right now, Casey said that is correct.

Rob Lewis thanked Casey for the information, but he stands by his straw poll request.

Danny Hale wanted to thank everyone for coming to today's meeting but also wanted to remind everyone that the Select Board meets twice a month and that the budget is discussed often. He said if you have questions and ideas come to a meeting so you can have these discussions and try to work those ideas into the budget. He reminded that this budget started at 14% and that they as a group feel like they did a rather good job of getting to where they are still providing the essential services. If you really want to have influence on the budget come to the meetings before the Town Meeting. He stated that he knows of several communities that are now paying large interest rates on money they had to borrow to mitigate flood problems in July. Hardwick did not have to borrow money and not pay interest and were able to pay for the services needed right then, which is why we were able to open roads in two days. He asks the voters to consider not spending that additional fund balance money so that Hardwick is prepared if there is another catastrophic event.

Paul Fixx said that he agrees with Danny.

Cody Sisk wanted clarification on the proposal if that would be a net decrease or percentage off the 8%. Casey said net decrease.

Raymond Bellavance asked if Hardwick paid for all the flood damage repairs or if FEMA helps. Eric said that yes, FEMA does help but the money does not come right away. When a flood occurs, or any other event, money is needed on hand or to be borrowed. David gave additional details on how FEMA pays and percentages of what they pay, it is not 100%.

Orise called for a non-binding straw vote to give the Select Board direction to take additional \$300,000 from the fund balance to offset taxes. Nays won the straw poll.

Motion passed

Orise stated appropriations can be voted on as a block if in favor of and then particular appropriations can be pulled separately to be discussed. Orise asked if there was any objection to putting appropriations as a group. Larry Hamel objected. He stated that the few people in the room are going to decide on \$46,000 for the rest of the town and that there are things on the appropriations that he objects to. Most are consistent and they qualify but if they cannot take the time to be at the meeting and speak for groups, then they should have a no vote and believes we should take each one individually and have some discussion. Orise asked if voters wished to take appropriations as a block and thought the vote was 50/50 so she decided votes will be done separately. Orise also stated that all of the explanations of who was asking for money, how much and why are found in Town Report on page 26-35.

Article 6. Shall the Town appropriate a sum of money not to exceed five thousand dollars (\$5,000.00) for the support of Greensboro Nursing Home?

Motion made by Norma Wiesen

Seconded by Jennifer Laundry

Larry asked if anyone was here to speak for the appropriation. Sarah Morgan, former board member and current Medical Director at the Greensboro Nursing Home explained why they were requesting appropriation and gave information on what Greensboro Nursing Home offers and would be happy to answer any questions. No questions were asked.

Motion passed

Article 7. Shall the Town appropriate a sum of money not to exceed three thousand five hundred dollars (\$3,500.00) for the support of AWARE.?

Motion made by Dave Shepard

Seconded by Meredith Holch

Motion passed

Article 8. Shall the Town appropriate a sum of money not to exceed two thousand five hundred dollars (\$2,500.00) for the support of Lamoille Family Center?

Motion made by Dave Shepard

Seconded by Theresa Scott

Motion passed

Article 9. Shall the Town appropriate a sum of money not to exceed five thousand dollars (\$5,000.00) for the support of Hardwick Area Food Pantry?

Motion made by Ann Gilcris

Seconded by Dave Shepard

Motion passed

Article 10. Shall the Town appropriate a sum of money not to exceed two thousand six hundred dollars (\$2,600.00) for the support of Caledonia Home Health Care and Hospice?

Motion made by Dave Shepard

Seconded by Jennifer Laundry

Motion passed

Article 11. Shall the Town appropriate a sum of money not to exceed three thousand dollars (\$3,000.00) for the support of Hardwick Community Television?

Motion made by Ann Gilcris

Seconded by Dave Shepard

Motion passed

Article 12. Shall the Town appropriate a sum of money not to exceed three thousand four hundred dollars (\$3,400.00) for the support of Rural Community Transportation, Inc.?

Motion made by Dave Shepard

Seconded by Meredith Holch

Motion passed

Larry Hamel would like to know what Hardwick gets from RCT? He stated that he is right in the middle of town and watches traffic all the time and hasn't seen any buses or anyone using service. Orise stated that on page 34 in the Town Report is a description of what they do. Alex Jump stated that she personally experiences people needing rides to rehab and hospital. She stated that you have to make an appointment 24-48 hours prior and they will come, pick you up and bring you home. She stated that this is vital for folks who do not have transportation.

Motion passed

Article 13. Shall the Town appropriate a sum of money not to exceed four thousand five hundred dollars (\$4,500.00) for the support of Northeast Kingdom Council on Aging?

Motion made by Dave Shepard
Seconded by Kris Lance
Motion passed

Article 14. Shall the Town appropriate a sum of money not to exceed two thousand one hundred dollars (\$2,100.00) for the support of North Country Animal League?

Motion made by Dave Shepard
Seconded by Ross Connolly

Larry Hamel stated that in his capacity as the Animal Control Officer that NCAL has not taken one dog from him and he has tried several times., He also said that Town Manager has tried several times, and his predecessor Dean Mercier tried several times and they have not had any luck. He said that Justice for Dogs, however, has been quite helpful, and they have worked with them extensively. He is making a motion to give Justice for Dogs the \$2,100 appropriation instead of NCAL.

Dave Gross read what was stated in the Town Report from NCAL and is assuming people are bringing their animals or found animals directly to NCAL because he doubts that they are falsifying the document.

Shari Olmstead stated that she works for both organizations. She gave several reasons why NCAL needs the appropriation.

Emily Willems said that NCAL is a community partner with Hazen Union School and for many years special needs students get their first introductory work experience there.

Motion passed

Article 15. Shall the Town appropriate a sum of money not to exceed two thousand five hundred dollars (\$2,500.00) for the support of Craftsbury Community Care Center?

Motion made by Dave Shepard
Seconded by Ann Gilcris
Motion passed

Article 16. Shall the Town appropriate a sum of money not to exceed one thousand dollars (\$1,000.00) for the support of Justice For Dogs?

Motion made by Dave Shepard
Seconded by Kevin Moore
Motion passed

Article 17. Shall the Town appropriate a sum of money not to exceed three thousand five hundred dollars (\$3,500.00) for the support of Northeast Kingdom Arts Council, Inc. (NEKarts)?

Motion made by Dave Shepard
Seconded by Ross Connolly
Motion passed

Article 18. Shall the Town appropriate a sum of money not to exceed four thousand dollars (\$4,000.00) for the support of Center for an Agricultural Economy?

Motion made by Emily Willems
Seconded by Dave Shepard
Motion passed

Article 19. Shall the Town appropriate a sum of money not to exceed one thousand five hundred dollars (\$1,500.00) for the support of Salvation Farms, Inc.?

Motion made by Dave Shepard

Seconded by Deborah Hartt

Jessa Gebbie from Morrisville requested to speak on behalf of Salvation Farms, with no objections. She highlighted what they offer Hardwick and gave a brief description of the organization.

Motion passed

Article 20. Shall the Town appropriate a sum of money not to exceed two thousand eight hundred dollars (\$2,800.00) for the support of Hardwick Downtown Partnership, Inc.?

Motion made by Dave Shepard

Seconded by Kathy Unser

Motion passed

Article 21. Shall the Town authorize the Select Board, for the period of one year, to enter into contracts with new industrial and commercial owners, lessees, bailees, of real property, or with existing or new owners, lessees, bailees or operators who construct, acquire or renovate industrial and/or commercial real property, including additions to existing property for the purpose of fixing and maintaining the municipal rate applicable to such real property or for the purpose of fixing the amount of money which shall be paid as an annual municipal tax upon such real property pursuant to the provision of Title 24, VSA, Section 2741?

Motion made by Dave Shepard

Seconded by Kevin Moore

Motion passed

Article 22. Shall the Town authorize the Select Board, for the period of one year, to enter into contracts with operators of agricultural real property, or with existing or new owners, lessees, bailees, or operators who construct acquire or renovate, or who intend to construct, acquire or renovate agricultural real property for the purpose of fixing and maintaining the valuation of such real property in the Grand List for the purpose of fixing and maintaining the municipal rate applicable to such real property or for the purpose of fixing the amount in money which shall be paid as an annual municipal tax upon such real property pursuant to provisions of Title 24, VSA, Section 2741?

Motion made by Dave Shepard

Seconded by Larry Hamel

Motion passed

Article 23. To transact any other nonbinding business proper to be brought before said meeting.

Elizabeth Dow – President of Hardwick Historical Society wanted to mention that the Hardwick Historical Society chose not to request a \$3,000 appropriation this year because they knew it was going to be a hard year for taxpayers. She also gave a little history on tax rates.

Meredith Holch said that she only has one square left on her Civic Standard bingo card and asked if the woman Select Board member sitting next to Opie could say her name. Shari Cornish said her name and Meredith got BINGO.

Orise gave a run down of the organizations that are out in the lobby.

Deborah Hartt stated that she is going to miss Lorraine Hussey getting everyone all geared up for the corned beef and cabbage dinner.

David O'Brien stated that he and his wife were victims of the flood and he wanted to thank Opie, Kristen and other town staff who were amazing in assisting them through this complicated journey. Dave asked everyone to stand and thank Opie for all his work.

Eric Remick wanted to recognize Wiz Dow for her years of service on the Select Board, as she is not running for reelection this year.

Jennifer Laundry requested a straw vote approving a petition or whatever action is needed from the State of Vermont Department of Education for Hardwick to look into divorcing or leaving the forced merger for Act 46 and bring Hardwick Elementary back to an individual town school and our own school board. Meredith Holch asked if she could get a little background because she does not know anything about this. Jennifer gave a detailed explanation for her request. Meredith then realized that she did know about this, and recommended people read Greensboro's Front Porch Forum. It has different information, views, and figures from Karl Stein. Beth LeCours said that this is separate from what is being voted on and that this is for Hardwick going back to having control of its school rather than being split between four towns. Raymond Bellavance said he thinks Lakeview is going to close anyway because they just lost more teachers and that we should bring the money back to Hardwick and pay our teachers more. Orise said that again this is a non-binding straw vote on whether Hardwick voters would support taking back Hardwick Elementary School and diving the forced merger. Orise asked for a standing vote, after counting she said straw vote is for a yes.

Shery Lussier spoke on behalf of the Kiwanis and is requesting volunteers to help with Spring Festival.

The front table was asked to introduce themselves. The front table included Eric Remick – Select Board chair, Ceilidh Galloway-Kane – Select Board Vice Chair, Shari Cornish – Select Board member, Elizabeth Dow – Select Board member, Danny Hale – Select Board member, David Upson – Town Manager, Tom Fadden – Road Foreman and Fire Chief and Mike Henry – Interim Police Chief.

Deborah Hartt, the current coordinator for the Four Winds Program at Hardwick Elementary School, gave a description of the program and stated that they are looking for volunteers.

Paul Fixx from Northeast Kingdom Broadband, who was appointed by the Select Board to be our representative to NEK Broadband, gave an update on what is happening in their organization. Meredith Holch asked if he knew when it would be coming to East Hardwick. He does not have any details beyond 2024 yet.

Steve Fortmann, also known today as the Microphone Man, is requesting that we have a second microphone next year. He also wanted to thank the Hardwick Police Department for their efforts to combat drug related crime.

Dave Shepard was really pleased to see that the Town Report was dedicated to Jean Hackett.

At 11:52 a.m. our State Representative, Chip Troiano, took to the floor and discussed education and childcare. He shared his thoughts on Act 46 and school consolidation. He brought up Act 127, a law that was passed and is an act relating to improving student equity by adjusting the school funding formula and providing education quality and funding oversight. He also shared that last year the childcare bill was passed and his thoughts on that. He shared about his work on various

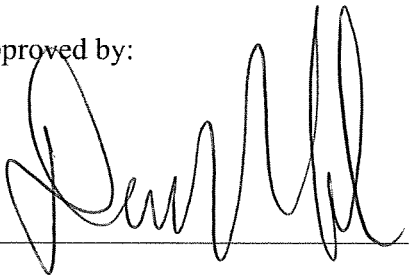
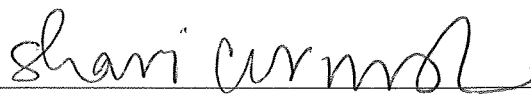
committees at the State House and gave people an opportunity to ask questions. Motion to adjourn meeting made by Kevin Moore
Seconded by Tracy Martin
Meeting adjourned at 12:08 p.m.

Minutes prepared and submitted by:



Tonia Chase, Town Clerk

Approved by:


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RESULTS OF AUSTRALIAN BALLOT VOTE FOR TOWN & SCHOOL OFFICERS:

Total Votes Cast: 620

Select Board- 3-year term:

Shari Cornish 532 votes (elected)

Write-In:

David Pudvah	1
Perley Allen	2
Danny Hale	3
Corey Barclay	2
Brenda Menard	1
Ken Davis	2
Helen Deveau	1
Ashton Allen	1
Mark Rowell	1
Blank/Spoiled:	74

Select Board – 1-year terms:

Eric Remick 533 votes (elected)

Timothy Ricciardello 367 votes (elected)

Write-In:

Stevey Jeney	1
Lucien Avery	1
Taylor Meyer	1
Derek Williams	1
Derek Richardson	1
Adam Gann	1
Garth Christensen	1
Blank/Spoiled:	333

Hazen Union School Director #26 – 3-year term:

Sabrina Morrison 533 Votes (elected)

Write-In:

Andrew Meyer	2
Katherine Lovinsky	1
Blank/Spoiled:	84

Hazen Union School Director #26 – Two 2 year remaining on 3-year term:

Remains Open

Write-In:

Andrew Meyer	11	Rose Friedman	5
Steve Jenny	1	Patrick Kane	1
Monica Morrissey	1	Tom Fadden	1
Casey Lussier	1	Neil Yurick	1
David Shepard	2	Travis Hill	1
Ross Connelly	1	Chris Ingram	1
Arthur Williams	1	Eric Remick	1

Jonathan Shapiro	1	Shelby Shatszer	1
Terry Vest	1	Kyle Foster	1
Randy Bledsoe	1	Alex Bottinelli	1
Phil Mercier	1	Deb Platka	1
Derek Richardson	1	Jenn Laundry	1
James Johnson	1	Kevin Moore Jr.	1
Adam Gann	1	Garth Christensen	1
David Kelly	1	Katelin Strong	1
Matthew Renaud	1		

Blank/Spoiled: 1194

Hazen Union School District # 26 (Submitted by Hazen Union District Clerk)
 Total Votes Cast: 1043 (Greensboro, Hardwick & Woodbury Co-Mingled)

Article 5 - Budget of \$8,535,233

636	Yes	Budget Passed
394	No	
13	Blank/Spoiled	

Mount View Union Elementary School District (Submitted by MVU District Clerk)
 Total Votes Cast: 1072 (Greensboro, Hardwick, Stannard & Woodbury Co-Mingled)

Article 5 - Budget of \$8,159,635.43

608	Yes	Budget Passed
426	No	
24	24	

Article 6 – Closure of Lakeview Elementary School

458	In Favor
556	Opposed
42	Blank/Spoiled