

Save the Date!

Annual School District Information Meeting

Tuesday February 27, 2024 7:00 pm

Proposed Budget for the
2024-2025 School Year

An increase of 15.51% or
\$1,550,070 from last year

May result in a Tax Increase
of \$431 per \$100,000

A Tough Year

Summary: This is an extremely challenging budget year statewide, Hartland included. As of writing this report, our biggest challenge is a significant increase in our property values which in turn has lower our Common Level of Appraisal (CLA) to 69%. This alone is projected to add \$0.35 to our property tax rate which is the equivalent of a 19% tax increase before we even apply changes to the school budget. Changes to the school budget at the time of this report are expected to add another \$0.07 to the tax rate for a total increase of \$0.42.

Our former Secretary of Education wrote a summary of the challenges facing almost every town in the State. Please read her comments to understand some of the issues facing Hartland and schools across the State. In her list of challenges, I put “Hartland” next to the ones that are our specific challenges.

Program/Budget Changes: In all budgeting discussions, the board looks at the kids served by our district and tries to find the best solutions to address their needs while maintaining an appropriate budget. There are no direct changes in programming except that we are losing funding for 3 needed positions. Two teachers were paid out of COVID relief funds that will now be paid out of local funds and an Instructional Coach who would have been paid out of Title 1 funds which address poverty. We lost some of our Title 1 funding due to the new universal meals shift. Our student population has not changed. The needs are still there, but the funding is no longer available to us. Additionally, our 25+ year old playground is broken and so out of date we can not replace parts. Sections of the playground are now roped off. This budget requests funds to replace the playground with equipment that is accessible to all students and meets reasonable safety standards. It will hopefully become a gathering location for families after school or on the weekends.

Summary of State-wide Challenges

Written by Former Secretary of Education Rebecca Holcombe (January, 2024)

Recent news about high levels of anticipated education spending statewide have raised concerns about high tax bills in all our school districts. People are also asking hard questions about what their schools will look like in the future. I want to start by acknowledging that worry.

Act 127 bill was designed to increase the tax capacity of districts that serve less-wealthy districts, so that they could meet the critical needs of the children in their care. A lot of this year’s increase is due to these previously underfunded systems now being able to buy the supports they feel their children need. However, as has now been widely reported, Act 127 is not working as the Governor and the legislature anticipated at the time that they changed the funding formula. In addition, it is not increasing the tax capacity even for the districts that were the intended beneficiaries. Our communities are looking at much

bigger tax bills due to statewide increases in spending. Difficulties in implementation of Act 127 has been compounded by a perfect storm of events that are outside the control of our school boards.

The challenges districts face include, but are not limited to:

- Years of double digit increases in health care rates, which are driving up costs in every budget in the state (Hartland)
- Years of no state construction aid and lack of action in the legislature on any rational approach to addressing years of deteriorating infrastructures bills that are now all coming due at the same time (Hartland next year)
- Difficulties counting students in poverty associated with the shift to universal meals (Hartland)
- The inadequacy of the state mental health system and challenges accessing primary care, which is driving costs back into the education fund (Hartland)
- Discovery of PCBs in some buildings, with no clear strategy for mitigation
- Expansion of school responsibility for prekindergarten (Hartland)
- Unprecedented volatility in the Common Level of Appraisal (Hartland)

In addition, boards are making hugely consequential decisions in the absence of basic information. For example, when you vote this March, you are voting on a “possible” tax rate, and trying to tie that back in inconsistent, sometimes unpredictable ways to the tax bill you will receive. Your actual bill won’t be clear until the legislature officially sets the yield and statewide average tax rate in June. To the extent the legislature “pulls levers” at the state level, it can adjust local tax bills, but cannot do anything about spending, outside the state programs the state chose to mandate out of the Education Fund.

In response to the incentives written into law, some school districts leaned into longer-term affordability by using this year’s cap increase to find ways to permanently buy down tax rates in the long term, including by investing in energy efficiency and other long-delayed infrastructure repairs. However, perversely, this decision by multiple districts at the same time across the state is contributing to unprecedented education spending this year— increases that end up hurting everyone, including most painfully, the districts that were supposed to benefit.

This is a shared problem made more challenging by the factors above. Our school boards are not responsible for the convoluted process in which they have to make decisions this year. They have been put in a challenging if not impossible position, because there are factors outside their control that they have to react to, but which they cannot fix on their own this year. We are trying to serve their communities in a convoluted and broken funding system.

We need to come together around the idea that every child deserves equitable opportunities, no matter where they live or who their parents are. AND we need to advocate for stable, affordable, long-term solutions that do not overburden our communities financially and put our boards in crisis mode, year after year.

There are no good answers this year— only better answers. But I appreciate how hard and how seriously our communities are working to do the right thing this year. They are all addressing needs that they all have, and that historically you have voted to support.

Separately, many in the legislature will continue to advocate for policy changes that make sure every child has a fair chance, AND that our communities are places where people can live, work and retire safely.