

Budget Task Force - Meeting Minutes			
October 20, 2025, Senior Center/Hybrid, 6:00 p.m.			
<u>ATTENDANCE</u>			
Voting Members	Present	Staff	Present
Andrea Miles	no	Lisa Wong, Town Administrator	yes
Kevin Mcallister	yes	Chuck Romboletti, Assistant Town Administrator	yes
Dan Luis	yes	Jamie Doolittle, IT Director	yes
Gena Lomelin	yes	Missy Couture Rimbold, Associate Assessor	yes
Emily Young	yes	Joe Rodio, Library Director	
Hector Lomelin	yes	Andy Rogers, Human Services Director	
Forrest Bowlick	yes	Julie Pearce, Council on Aging Director	
Nicholas Gingras	yes		
Nicholas Prentis	yes		
John McCarthy	yes		
Charles Miles	yes		

1. **Call to Order:**

Nicholas Gingras called the meeting to order at 6:01pm.

2. **Approval of Minutes**

Motion: Nick moved to approve the meeting minutes of **September 22, 2025** and **October 6, 2025**.

Second: Dan Louis.

Vote: Motion carried unanimously (no abstentions).

3. **Project Updates**

a. **Education / Historical Context**

Lisa provided an update on the Massachusetts Municipal Association (MMA) Fiscal Crisis Report, which found that expenses are rising faster than revenues across municipalities statewide. The report discussed issues such as Proposition 2½ constraints, levy limits (which most municipalities have reached), and the increasing frequency of override attempts. A second part of the report will be released in November, which Lisa will share with the group.

4. **Departmental Overviews**

Building Department

Lisa presented an overview of the Building Department budget and operations: Recent building code updates and increased enforcement requirements, such as new Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) and sprinkler systems, have raised workload demands. The department handles a high volume of inspections for a Town our size, and uses OpenGov software to streamline and track electronic permitting. Budgeted revenue and expenses are approximately balanced at \$250,000.

Dan Luis asked whether the department is intended to be self-sustaining. Lisa Wong explained that while the department covers its costs, it cannot generate excess revenue or operate like an enterprise fund. John asked if the department budget is considered an enterprise fund. Lisa responded that it does not, and clarified that only specific activities can be established as enterprise funds under state law. Kevin: Noted that we shouldn't view the inspectional services like profit-seeking entities, as there are restraints and restrictions on how to use revenue, the Town cannot maximize revenue to fund other services/departments.

Lisa added that recruiting and retaining Building professionals within the office has been difficult due to the State regulatory and licensure requirements, which is creating difficulties in communities throughout the Commonwealth. Dan Luis expressed the positive impacts that the current Building Commission has had on the Town and feedback he's heard from other builders, and commended his work and noted that he's an asset to the Town.

John asked about regional service-sharing opportunities for the building department and others generally. Lisa explained that collaboration has been explored over a number of occasions for building and other services, but in most cases the other communities have typically required more support than they could reciprocate, not making it beneficial for the Town. Prior analyses showed minimal additional revenue and significant coordination effort by the Town needed to implement.

Library

Library Director Joe Rodio provided an overview of the Library's budget and operations, joined by members of the Library Board of Trustees. The Library is operating at a *level-service deficit budget* while maintaining state certification by keeping the Town's contribution slightly above the Minimum Municipal Appropriation Requirement (MAR)—this year by approximately \$14. The Library anticipates a \$40,000–\$45,000 budget deficit in the next fiscal year, which will likely be covered by state aid (the Town received \$60,000 last year).

Joe explained that the Library has explored various cost-saving measures, including the potential closure of the Gaylord Memorial Branch, which was originally incorporated into the Town's system about eight years ago through an agreement with the Gaylord Trustees. The Gaylord building and grounds are privately maintained by the Trustees, while staff and operations are funded by the Town.

Closing the branch would save an estimated \$40,000–\$50,000 in operating costs and \$70,000 in staffing, but would have significant service impacts. The Gaylord Branch provides critical children's programming, early literacy initiatives, and community meeting space and hosts over 1,400 events

annually. It has also absorbed additional demand following reductions in school library staffing and the closure of the South Hadley Family Center.

Dan Luis asked whether the Gaylord Branch or other library operations are subsidized by Mount Holyoke College or sustained through fees. Joe clarified that Mount Holyoke College is not involved, and that while overdue fines were eliminated to promote accessibility, revenue from lost book and replacement fees remains minimal.

John McCarthy asked whether the Library began the year with a deficit and whether cost waivers could be pursued. Joe explained that rising operational costs, including vendor tariff fees, required the use of state aid to maintain a balanced budget. He added that maintaining state certification is essential to ensuring residents' access to reciprocal borrowing privileges across the Commonwealth.

Emily asked whether reducing hours or days at the Falls Library could be quantified in terms of community impact. Joe explained that the Library serves as a vital part of the Town's social infrastructure, providing a safe and inclusive space for residents who might otherwise fall through the cracks including seniors, veterans, job seekers, students, and immigrants. He noted an increase in patrons seeking job preparation resources and other forms of support. A Library Trustee added that youth use has increased by 25%, and since the closure of the South Hadley Family Center, the Library's Children's Room has become an important site for early literacy and family engagement programs, offering free, accessible opportunities for caregivers and young children.

Lisa noted that even small reductions in the Library budget can result in significant losses in state aid, as seen when a \$15 cut led to a \$40,000 reduction in funding. She emphasized that closing an entire branch yields minimal savings compared to the broader community impacts, and that the upcoming community needs assessment should help quantify the Library's role as a critical part of the Town's social safety net. Kevin McAllister expressed strong opposition to reducing the Library budget, describing the Library as a critical community service that contributes to overall quality of life in Town.

Joe shared that South Hadley patrons borrowed over 22,000 books from other libraries last year while circulating 11,000 from its own collection. Losing certification would eliminate interlibrary loan privileges, limiting access to local holdings and making re-accreditation a lengthy process. Lisa noted that many communities are facing similar pressures, and that the State's funding formula for libraries may need to be reevaluated.

Assessors Department

Town Associate Assessor Melissa "Missy" Couture-Ribold provided an overview of the Assessor's Office operations and responsibilities, accompanied by a presentation and PowerPoint. She explained the property valuation process, exemptions, and comparisons of workload, staffing levels, and parcel counts with other districts.

During discussion, Emily asked whether the Town could apply a higher tax rate to higher-value properties through a "stepped" tax system. Missy explained that such a structure is not permitted under Massachusetts law, and confirmed that no municipalities in the state use that approach. Emily also noted

that the property tax system is inherently dependent on growth, which can be difficult to sustain over time.

Information Technology (IT) Department

Jaime Doolittle, IT Director, provided an overview of the Town's technology operations. Staffing levels have remained largely unchanged, with one full-time Director position since 2012 (previously two staff in 2007). Software and licensing costs have been increasing significantly each year, creating budget pressures. He explained that while there is some collaboration with the School Department, the two maintain separate IT systems and staffing. In response to a question from Charles about cybersecurity, Jaime confirmed that the Town's systems are secure and actively monitored.

Human Services

Andy Rogers, Director of Human Services, provided an overview of the newly formed department, which includes the Council on Aging (COA), Recreation Department, and Veterans' Services. The department was created to improve coordination and efficiency by aligning community-focused programs and reducing duplication of services.

Julie Pearce, COA Director, explained that the COA's operations are partially supported by the State's Formula Grant, which has increasingly been used to cover staffing costs. The COA also generates revenue through class and activity fees, donations, and volunteer support, at approximately \$52,000 in fees and \$50,000 in donations last year, with over 200 volunteers assisting in programs and services. Despite rising needs related to aging and dementia, the COA's overall budget is six figures lower than when the senior center building first opened. Staffing cuts, including the elimination of the Community Programs Coordinator position, have placed additional strain on remaining staff.

Transportation remains a potential cost concern, particularly for in-town services not covered by federal Title III grants. The COA continues to focus on outreach, social assistance, and congregate meal programs, with increasing demand as the senior population grows.

Andy noted that the Recreation Department has expanded its programming and financial capacity in recent years, with popular offerings such as hiking and outdoor activities. The department operates through a revolving fund, where user fees and sponsorships directly cover expenses, including program supplies and uniforms. The annual fireworks event also operates on a break-even basis, supported by user fees and sponsorships, and contributes to community engagement and local economic activity.

Nick and Emily discussed the potential for modest fee increases to sustain programs if necessary, while Hector raised questions about promoting multigenerational housing to reduce reliance on Town services. Kevin highlighted that much of the Town's quality of life stems from the programs and services provided by Human Services staff.

Hector questioned whether MassHealth funding could be received to offset any services provided. Julie explained the services provided at the COA are not eligible for any insurance reimbursement structures.

The meeting concluded with appreciation from the Task Force for the Human Services Department's broad community impact.

Adjourn

At 9:10pm pm, Nick Gingras called for a motion to adjourn the meeting, so moved by Nick Prentis and seconded by Emily Young. The motion passed unanimously. The meeting adjourned.