

Joint Select Board And Finance Committee Meeting Agenda

March 9, 2026 Meeting Minutes

PRESENT: Select Board Members Mark Mathews and Chuck Walkovich; Town Administrator, Andrew MacLean; Executive Assistant, Tracie Looney

Finance Committee: John Ladik and Quinton Cutler

Pledge of Allegiance

The meeting was called to order by John Ladik for the Finance Committee and Mark Mathews for the Select Board. Both boards confirmed they had quorum present. The meeting was being recorded for re-broadcast at Pepperell Community Media.

1. DISCUSSION / ACTION ITEMS

1.1. Departmental Budget Reviews

The boards reviewed six different department budgets, with officials noting they had reduced the town's budget deficit from \$510,000 to \$502,000 following receipt of insurance information for liability coverage. They continued working to identify additional savings, including a favorable variance in insurance costs where they had budgeted for a 3% increase but received only a 1.25% increase.

Inspectional Services - Bob Garside

Bob Garside, Building Commissioner, presented his department's budget, which showed an overall increase of just over 1%. The budget included only a wage increase for the administrative position, with all other items level-funded. Mr. Garside explained his wages remained the same, and the small overtime budget of approximately 10 hours annually was rarely used.

Board members inquired about the department's interaction with planning board activities and zoning bylaw revisions. Mr. Garside confirmed his office works closely with planning and will become more involved when zoning bylaw updates begin. He praised the town's online permitting system, noting Pepperell was ahead of most communities in automation.

Discussion arose about potential changes to town hall hours. Mark Mathews asked whether building services could accommodate more limited public hours, such as 10 AM to 2 PM instead of 7 AM to 6 PM. Garside explained contractors typically call ahead rather than walk in, and inspectors could work around modified hours since they primarily need to collect inspection slips and don't require extended office interaction.

When asked about inspection activity trends, Mr. Garside noted a winter decrease, attributing it to market uncertainty. He described how construction projects follow phases, with current focus on three-season porches and kitchen renovations, some costing upwards of \$120,000. Solar installations had decreased after tax credits ended.

Mr. Garside highlighted challenges with annual inspections and noted Pepperell conducts an extraordinary number of zoning interpretations compared to other communities, approximately 5-6 weekly. The fee structure for electrical and plumbing inspections covers inspector costs, with fees designed to be revenue-neutral for the town.

Police Department - Chief Blain

Chief Blain presented a level-service budget with a 4.32% increase, which he characterized as modest and needs-based rather than a wish list. The increase included replacing a retiring officer and adding one cruiser back into the budget that had been removed from FY26 due to budget constraints. Without the cruiser, the increase would be approximately 1.2%.

Addressing concerns about having "too many police," Chief Blain defended the department's staffing levels, explaining they provide essential services including house checks, building security, emergency response, and school safety programs. He noted that in 2009, the department had 18 officers, dropped to as low as 13

(which proved insufficient), and currently operates with 17 officers. State and federal guidelines suggest 22 officers per thousand residents, while neighboring communities have 21-26 officers compared to Pepperell's 17.

John Ladik questioned the overtime budget, suggesting it could fund four patrol officers. Chief Blain explained overtime is necessary to maintain minimum staffing of two full-time officers per shift as required by the collective bargaining agreement. When officers take vacation or respond to emergencies, backfill coverage is mandatory.

Mark Mathews noted that detail work, while visible to the public, is paid by private companies and separate from regular patrol duties, which can create misperceptions about officer numbers.

Quinton Cutler, participating remotely, asked about deferring the new cruiser. Chief Blain explained the fleet consists of older vehicles that haven't received new additions in two years, running 24 hours daily with significant idling time. Deferring the \$85,000 cruiser could result in \$55,000-60,000 in annual repair costs. The department gets approximately three years from each cruiser due to high mileage and continuous operation.

Discussion of hybrid vehicles revealed fuel savings, though they require more frequent service for electronic components. The department cannot use fully electric vehicles but hybrids perform well for most applications, except for vehicles requiring heavy towing capacity.

Assessing Department - Maureen Bolger

Maureen Bolger, Town Assessor, presented a budget largely unchanged from the previous year. John Ladik suggested she conduct more frequent tax presentations to help residents understand why businesses and residential properties are taxed at the same rate. Ms. Bolger agreed this might be beneficial for public education.

Conservation Commission - Paula Terrasi

Paula Terrasi, Conservation Administrator, presented the conservation budget, noting that three-quarters of her salary comes from conservation funding and 25% from public works for environmental management duties. Most grants shown are related to Department of Public Works projects.

Ms. Terrasi explained that Pepperell has achieved 28% protected open space, meeting the state's 2025 goal, with targets of 30% by 2030 and 40% by 2045. The state is providing significant funding for climate change-related infrastructure projects including culvert replacements, dam removals, and stream restorations.

The department has been managing several major projects: the solar installation on Bemis Road with tree clearing restrictions due to bat habitats, cross-country transmission line upgrades requiring extensive environmental oversight, PFAS filtration system installation at Jersey Street, and sidewalk projects from Nashua Road to Mill Street involving river disturbance areas.

Ongoing water chestnut treatment costs \$50,000-75,000 annually through DCR partnership matching funds, with Ms. Terrasi securing matching funds from outside sources. Current priorities include two culvert replacement projects on Sheffield and Sartell Streets. The Sartell project, prioritized by the state, involves replacing a 1937 box culvert estimated at \$750,000. The Sheffield Street project is more complex due to utilities and could cost \$1.2-1.5 million, but substantial grant funding is available.

Ms. Terrasi serves on multiple boards including the Nashua River Watershed Association stewardship council and Squannacook Trust, which provide matching funds for projects. She emphasized the collaborative approach with organizations like Trout Unlimited contributing significant funding.

The department successfully passed flood plain bylaws at town meeting, maintaining residents' eligibility for National Flood Insurance Program coverage. They're also permitting Accessory Dwelling Units and managing numerous smaller projects while pursuing available grant funding, though grant management requires substantial unreimbursed administrative time.

John Ladik suggested better publicizing grant funding received to help residents understand how state and federal tax dollars return to benefit the community. Regarding National Grid's transmission line work, Ms. Terrasi confirmed extensive restoration requirements are planned following completion of infrastructure improvements.

Mark Mathews praised the grant work but asked about increasing grant volume. Ms. Terrasi noted the challenge of limited time and expertise, emphasizing the importance of partnerships with organizations that can provide additional grant writing support and matching funds.

Emergency Management - David Querze

David Querze, Emergency Management Director, presented a modest \$14,625 budget, with 45% covering his stipend and remainder supporting vehicle operations, equipment, uniforms for the growing CERT program, and training expenses.

The department typically receives a \$3,500 annual grant, reduced to \$3,250 this year, which would fund replacing the 10-year-old generator in the response trailer with a quieter inverter model, transferring the current generator to DPW for better utilization.

Mr. Querze noted grant funding has decreased, with allocations based on population rather than actual needs. While Lowell receives funds for an \$85,000 vehicle, Pepperell's smaller population limits available resources despite having specific needs like water buffalo tanks for areas without well water during power outages.

The department faces challenges with emergency shelter operations at Varnum Brook Elementary, which cannot remain open when school is in session due to security requirements. During recent storms when schools remained open but half the town lacked power, sheltering options were severely limited. The senior center could serve as a warming center but lacks shower facilities for overnight sheltering.

Mr. Querze suggested eventually installing showers at the senior center (requiring only one each for men and women) to create a proper emergency shelter. Peter Fitzpatrick School was discussed as an alternative, but it has similar limitations with minimal shower facilities designed only for gym staff.

Mark Mathews suggested pursuing earmark requests through state representatives for emergency management equipment. Mr. Querze emphasized the ongoing need for water supply solutions and proper emergency sheltering facilities as key priorities for community resilience.

Accounting Department - Sandy Kupcho

Sandy Kupcho, Town Accountant, presented an accounting budget increasing only 1.25%, covering herself and approximately half of another employee's time. The department has implemented new policies and procedures, working closely with treasury to ensure smooth workflow. All state filings are completed on time, revenues posted timely, and weekly warrants and payroll processed consistently.

The budget showed decreased costs for payroll services and fees, including ClearGov and Harpers systems, as the department has gained proficiency and requires less support and training. The AUC (accounting software) costs increased, but they negotiated a lower rate than initially proposed.

Mark Mathews praised the department's work, noting improved communication and earlier delivery of payroll and warrant information to the Select Board. The ClearGov implementation has been particularly beneficial for transparency and ease of use.

Additional Budget Information

The session concluded with updates on two budget-related issues. Regarding the Board of Health budget, Nashoba Associated had imposed a 30% increase, representing a significant portion of the health budget. While historically the Board of Health budget remained stable, Nashoba Associated fees have averaged 13% annual increases since 2019, more than doubling from \$43,000 in 2013 to nearly \$90,000 currently. Despite the cost pressures, regional health services remain more economical than individual town operations.

On timber tax questions, the town administrator clarified that no timber tax exists for tree removal. Forest land can qualify for 61A agricultural exemptions, resulting in lower taxes rather than additional revenue. The solar field tree clearing does not generate timber tax revenue as suggested by some residents.

The boards scheduled their next meeting for Thursday night to review fire department and remaining departmental budgets. They expect to receive the North Middlesex School Committee's decision on the Finance Committee's budget recommendation by Thursday, as the school committee was scheduled to vote on Tuesday evening.

2. ADJOURNMENT

Motion: John Ladik moved to adjourn the Finance Committee portion of the meeting. Motion seconded and approved.

Motion: Mark Mathews moved to adjourn the Select Board portion of the meeting. Chuck seconded. All in favor.

The meeting adjourned with thanks expressed to all department heads for their presentations and budget preparation work.

These draft minutes were created using Clerk Minutes, an AI-powered platform that transcribes meetings, identifies speakers, and generates professional minutes.

Respectfully reviewed and submitted by,

Tracie Looney, Executive Assistant

APPROVED:

Mark Mathews, Chair

Tony Beattie, Clerk

Chuck Walkovich, Member

Approved: March 25, 2026

