

TOWN OF DUDLEY
MASSACHUSETTS
Public Information Office



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For Immediate Release

July 26, 2023

Dudley Town Meeting voters reject town officials' balanced FY24 budget in favor of a grass roots amendment that ignores the \$901,683 deficit until the results of the August Proposition 2 ½ Override Election are known.

More than 430 voters attended a special town meeting on July 24 that town leadership had called to balance the Fiscal Year 2024 budget.

The balanced budget approved at the town's May 22, 2023, town meeting was a 10% cut to town services. Those services were to be restored through two attempts at Proposition 2 ½ Override elections, both of which were soundly rejected by voters.

That balanced budget was upended within days following the second failed override attempt when the Dudley-Charlton Regional School Committee voted to assess Dudley \$901,683 more than what was approved at the May town meeting. The town's proposed re-balanced budget before voters Monday, July 24 appropriated the \$901,683 for the school district by making deep cuts to town services, including public safety and the possible closure of the town library. By funding the additional school assessment, the town would have avoided the threat of a District-wide Town Meeting, commonly called a Super Town Meeting, to legally compel Dudley to pay the assessment.

A resident's amendment on the town meeting floor Monday night proposed small adjustments to the budget approved in May while ignoring the \$901,683 deficit for now with the "hope" that voters at the August 17 Special Proposition 2 ½ Override Election will depart from past practice and approve at least one of the five menu-style override questions on the ballot, specifically the increased school assessment of \$901,683.

The town's legal counsel described to town meeting voters Monday the risks of proceeding with such an amendment and the ramifications of closing the meeting with an unbalanced budget, as required by state law.

In opposition to the advice from town counsel and the Board of Selectmen, the amendment was adopted with 84% in favor. According to town counsel, the passage of this amendment over the town's proposed balanced budget will carry legal implications:

- The town's FY24 operating budget is still unbalanced. The amendment adopted Monday night did not remove or bridge the \$901,683 deficit.

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- With the defeat of the balanced budget proposed by the town and the adoption of an unbalanced budget amendment, the school district assessment increase of \$901,683 remains unfunded, which may force the school committee to contemplate the Super Town Meeting to legally bind Dudley to pay.
- A successful amendment on the floor of the Super Town Meeting by either a Dudley or Charlton resident could increase Dudley's assessment above the current \$901,683.
- If the override question for the school assessment fails, there is no legal basis or guarantee October town meeting voters will deplete or underfund town services to appropriate the money to the school assessment.
- The adopted amendment does not consider all five override ballot questions equally and does not preclude the need for budget adjustments at the October 16 Special Town Meeting, since revenues gained in the override election are not automatically appropriated into the budget.
- The public safety and highway department budgets were not level-service funded in the amendment.
- The state requirement for a balanced budget to certify Dudley's free cash and set the town's tax rate could be delayed past the October town meeting.
- The state Department of Revenue may rule the adopted amendment fails to sufficiently appropriate specific amounts to budget line items affected by the override outcome and voters may have to repeat the process at the October town meeting.

Failed override elections in April and June have town officials concerned that the August 17, 2023, Proposition 2 ½ Override Election will likely return the same results, or minimal approval among the five ballot questions, and therefore, no revenue relief will offset the present \$901,683 deficit.

“The Town had a simple, responsible and legally sound strategy: balance the budget and avoid the risk of a Super Town Meeting by funding the \$901,683 assessment on July 24; spend responsibly for three weeks until the community votes on the five override ballot questions on August 17; move forward with free cash certification, and with the override results in hand, balance the FY24 budget at the October Special Town Meeting with real money,” Town Administrator Jonathan Ruda said, adding, “What happened Monday night, however well-intended, has all but forced the school committee to consider a Super Town Meeting where Dudley loses control over its own budget. It did nothing to address the \$901,683 deficit and as such, did not restore public safety, highway or the library and I think it just confused the Town Meeting voters. What is even more disheartening, is that Town Counsel was present to advise the town meeting voters on what is legally true and what was not, and the voters rejected that legal advice. The only means of returning town services to adequate levels is through voter support in the override election to properly fund those services. When our free cash is certified and the tax rate is set, we will as a community, do what we do every year, adjust and finalize the budget at the October Special Town Meeting. How our community looks and functions after the August 17 election, and what

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level of services we will have is entirely a decision that each individual voter has to make at the ballot box.”

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