

TOWN OF DUDLEY
MASSACHUSETTS
Public Information Office



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For Immediate Release

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Dudley voters to decide the fate of municipal and school services at a special town meeting and special election this summer.

The Fiscal Year 2024 “non-contingent budget” approved at the May 22, 2023, town meeting level funded the Dudley-Charlton Regional School District and included a 10% overall cut to municipal services. Several departments were cut deeper than 10% to lessen the impact on public safety, yet police and fire were still affected with some layoffs delayed to the midpoint of the fiscal year. It is the budget under which the town now operates and will stand until such time as town meeting votes to amend it.

That budget included \$10,036,308 in level funding for the school district assessment. Today, the school committee is seeking \$901,683 more than what was approved at town meeting. That demand throws the town budget out of balance. If the town does not approve a new budget that funds the \$901,683, the school committee will likely pull Dudley voters into a Special District-wide Town Meeting, also known as a Super Town Meeting, with Charlton voters and could, by simple majority vote, take the money.

“With the reduced budget already stressing town services, the additional \$901,683 assessment increase voted by the school committee not only throws the budget approved by voters in May out of balance but funding it will necessitate an unacceptable level of cuts in public safety, highway, town hall services, and our library,” Town Administrator Jonathan Ruda said. “With the failed overrides in April and June, the town has insufficient sources of revenue to do anything but cut critical services.”

The town is legally bound to balance its budget prior to November, when the FY24 tax rate is set. Town counsel, the state Department of Revenue and the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education have all confirmed that the next step should be a Dudley Special Town Meeting where voters will be presented with a new version of a balanced budget. That meeting is set for July 24.

With the failed override elections in April and June, and the school district demand of \$901,683 above our balanced and approved FY24 budget, Dudley voters will be asked to vote on a new, balanced municipal budget. That budget will propose \$10,937,991 for the school district, which is the previously approved level funding plus the additional \$901,683. To balance this budget proposal, decimating town service cuts will be presented to bring the budget back into balance, as legally required to by the state.

“There are three options at the Special Town Meeting: amend, approve or disapprove the budget presented. None of these options provide revenue to restore services and two of the options will likely

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trigger a Super Town Meeting,” Ruda said, adding, “All indicators suggest the additional \$901,683 for the school district will be part of the FY24 budget.”

Note: At a recent meeting of the school committee, it was stated that the additional \$901,683 funding from Dudley would provide a nearly level-service budget that would reinstate the programs and staff recently cut. It was said that the school district would ultimately lose the vacant assistant superintendent position and one science teacher at the high school. For the town, funding the \$901,683 without increasing taxes will equate to debilitating cuts to municipal services, public safety and potentially the closure of our library.

If town meeting voters on July 24 reject the proposed balanced budget, the town will continue to operate on the balanced budget approved at the May town meeting. If town meeting voters amend the proposed budget to restore town services, the school assessment must then be reduced to again bring the budget into balance. Any school district appropriation less than \$901,683 will likely trigger the school committee to call the Super Town Meeting. The vote at this meeting is legally binding and the approval of the \$901,683, or higher amount if amended on the floor, would throw the municipal budget, once again, out of balance.

Background note: In 2018, the towns of Dudley and Charlton both passed a combined \$3 million override for the school district, which, at the time, was forecasted to cover assessments for three years. It did. Three years from 2018 landed us in the middle of a pandemic. During those pandemic years, and through this current fiscal year, the town applied eligible federal ARPA money to the municipal budget and gave a large amount to the school district to keep services funded and afloat until a climate existed when the town could propose a Proposition 2 1/2 override.

A Special Election set for August 17 will place menu style Proposition 2 ½ override questions before Dudley voters. As an example, if the question that seeks \$901,683 to fund the school district’s increase passes, that amount would be freed-up and re-applied to municipal services. It would thereby bring the budget back into balance at the 10% reduction level approved at the May town meeting.

The other menu-style questions on the ballot are for public safety, town hall departments, the highway department and the library. As an example, if the library question passes, that department will be returned to full, level-service funding. In other words, no cuts. The FY23 level of services would be maintained.

“The goal of the override election is to give voters options and let them ultimately decide the level of services they want to fund in FY24,” Ruda said.

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If some or all of the ballot questions pass, Dudley voters would be asked to re-balance the budget at the October Special Town meeting.

The July 24 town meeting warrant, the August 17 special town election ballot, and the tax impact of each question will be published next week.

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