



TOWN OF NATICK MASSACHUSETTS

MELISSA A. MALONE
TOWN ADMINISTRATOR

MEMO

To: Board of Selectmen
From: M. Malone, Town Administrator
Cc: Town Administration, J.Townsend, B.Chenard, & S.O'Brien
Date: September 13, 2019
Re: Financial Indicators & Four-Year Projections

Executive Summary

The Four-Year Financial Projections provide a comprehensive overview of potential revenues and expenditures for the upcoming fiscal years. The intent of providing the forecasts is to have a realistic outlook that will highlight town-wide operating trends and facilitate productive financial planning. Based on the financial indicators at this time, Natick is in a stable financial position, which helps to ensure strong credit ratings and short-term financial flexibility.

Under Proposition 2^{1/2}, the levy increases are dependent on New Growth to increase the tax base to support budget increases. While local receipts and state aid help, they provide a smaller percentage of the revenues and have greater variances as compared to property taxes. It is imperative that we build and follow a strategic budgeting plan. This means balancing the immediate needs of the Town with our long-term values and visions for our community. With budget constraints, prioritization and compromise are required to ensure every Town department has the tools it needs to succeed.

Further, as we prudently plan we must take into account the very real possibility of a slowing economy. Based on our analysis if there is a recession similar to 2007-2009, the Town would be able to sustain its budget for an additional 18 months.

Forecasts

With a continued effort to educate our community as a whole, and in the effort of full transparency, we have created two forecasts – actual and budget. While there are some differences in methodology, both demonstrate that expenses exceed revenues in the coming few years.

- The “Actual Forecast” is exclusively based upon actual historical spend along with projections of CBAs and personnel costs. The actual forecast also takes into account a vacancy rate of around 4% that is discounted from estimates of personnel appropriations.
- The “Budget Forecast” outlines potential appropriation increases based on projected CBAs, personnel costs, and operating expense inflationary increases, with the view to the past but rolling forward the FY 20 budget.

Revenues

At this time, our revenue projections are preliminary and there will be modifications (increases and decreases) as we move forward with the budget process. That said we must use informed assumptions to help plan and guide discussions. The following assumptions provide context for the initial revenue forecast.

- Tax Levy – Prior year tax levy, plus 2.5%, plus debt exclusions (offset with part of debt service expense), with New Growth estimated between \$1.2M - \$950k.
- State Aid – Projected growth of 2%-3% annually with a 1% increase to charges.
- Local Receipts & Other Local Receipts – An initial decrease from the FY20 budget based on anticipated reduced investment income and other revenues, such as ambulance revenue and motor vehicle excise that are not materializing to the same degree.

Expenses

Given the difference between the actual and budgeted forecasts, the expense assumptions for each are different.

Actual Forecast Expenses

Personnel Costs

- Collective Bargaining Agreements COLA projected at 2%, 3%, 1% through FY21, and 2% COLA increase for FY22 – FY24
- Step increases have been forecasted by bargaining unit
- Personnel Board employees 2% merit
- Vacancy rates calculated based on average of FY17-FY19 approximately 4% which has been reduced from projected personnel expense

Operating Expenses

- These expenses assumptions are derived from a combination of sources: expenses from FY 19, historical averages, regressive modeling, and inflationary index of 1.7%.

Budget Forecast Expenses

Personnel Costs

- Collective Bargaining Agreements COLA projected at 2%, 3%, 1% through FY21, and 2% COLA increase for FY22 – FY24
- Step increases have been forecasted by bargaining unit
- Personnel Board employees 2% merit

Operating Expenses

- Using current expense appropriations with inflationary indexes to project out the next few years.

Outstanding issues and items of note

While the forecasts provide informed estimates there remain some budgetary line items that are difficult to predict at this time.

- There are remaining outstanding collective bargaining agreements.
- While the FY 19 local receipts came in over budget, they were erratic with a significant downturn in ambulance revenue, motor vehicle excise, and parking. Mitigating those decreases were increases in investment income, and supplemental taxes but are those unreliable for future years.
- Neither forecast includes new programming or initiatives going forward.
- Free Cash use as well as Stabilization/OPEB funding remains level in the forecasts.
- We need to better understand the Natick Public School Department's historical and future enrollment trends, and refine the personnel cost projections.
- Benefit costs are highly variable in the regression model utilized and had the costs at about 0.8% annually. Of the benefit appropriation, health insurance has had turn backs of 805k in FY17, 466k in FY18, and 759k in FY19. The uncertainty of this large expense year over year, and reduction of options available to reduce premiums makes this budget driver difficult to extrapolate into the future.

Conclusion

I recognize that the forecasts may cause alarm and worry for some, while some others may claim they saw this all coming and times changes and everything has to increase. The forecasts should help inform discussions, so that we can analyze the past and chart a predictable path forward for our community.

It is my recommendation that the Board of Selectmen, as the chief policy making agency within our Town utilize these indicators and forecasts to help make critical financial planning determinations for our community in the months and year ahead. Town Administration remains committed to working with the entire community to understand their concerns and provide viable solutions.