

FY 2017 Budget Address

Neil Wishinsky for the Board of Selectmen

Thank you to Mr. Lynn-Jones and the Advisory Committee for their hard work in crafting the budget motion before you tonight. I must also thank Town Administrator Mel Kleckner, Deputy Town Administrator Melissa Goff and Assistant Town Administrator Austin Faison for their role in creating our award winning Financial Plan. Having been involved in federal budgeting in another professional life, I must say that our national government could learn a lot about clarity in budgeting from the Brookline financial plan.

I must also congratulate Mr. Kleckner on his reappointment for another 3 years as our Town Administrator.

The Advisory Committee, Town Meeting and the numerous Boards and Commissions, ad hoc committees and other volunteers are what makes Brookline Town Government run. This sense of widespread volunteerism is what sets us apart from a city form of government. And for it to work, folks must continue to volunteer.

A year ago, I stood before you having come off a vigorously contested election for an override and for townwide offices like Selectman and School Committee. This year, I stand before you after an election with no opposition in any town wide office. And while I was one of the beneficiaries of this circumstance, I do believe that a respectfully contested election is healthy and makes us stronger as a town. There are many opportunities to participate in our town government and I hope more of you will consider stepping up. It's the only way we can continue to be a Town.

If you look around Brookline and the wider Boston region, you'll see many construction cranes. Multiple office and residential towers are being built downtown, in the Seaport District, the Fenway and the Longwood Medical area. In Brookline, the Homewood Suites is getting ready to open at the old Red Cab site, construction is set to begin at Brookline Place and the project at the Cleveland Circle Cinema site is proceeding full steam ahead. In addition to contributing to the vibrancy of their respective neighborhoods, these projects will add needed commercial tax revenues. Growing our commercial tax base is one of the few tools we have under Proposition 2 ½ to increase our tax revenue without increasing taxes on homeowners.

I recognize and applaud our Economic Development Advisory Board (EDAB) led by Paul Saner and Anne Meyers for their efforts in bringing these projects to fruition. I must also recognize Dr. Bob Sperber, one of the founders of EDAB, for his efforts over the years. EDAB and our Planning Dept is also leading us in a new phase of proactive economic development planning. As part of that, the Town engaged a group of MIT planning students to look at the Route 9 corridor and they conducted a series of well attended workshops. Some exciting ideas came out of those workshops. The first step in actually implementing some of those ideas is the formation of a River Road Study Committee led by Selectman Ben Franco. A hotel is being

proposed on the so called industrial island at the end of Brookline Avenue. That committee is looking at the possibility of rezoning the entire industrial Island with a goal of having a proposal before you in the Fall. Efforts such as these, need to continue. And in recognition of the importance of Long Term Planning, the name and mission of the Economic Development Division of the Planning and Community Development Department is being proposed to be expanded to include Long Term Planning in Article 9.

We're seeing the effects of the boom, all around us. People want to live in Brookline. Homes are on the market for mere days before they are snapped up at prices I never would have believed possible. We are seeing large homes subdivided; and a veritable avalanche of 40B proposals which are larger than our zoning allows. They are taking advantage of the hot housing market, especially for rentals, spurred on by the fact that we are fast approaching the 10% 40B safe harbor. Once we reach that safe harbor, we can take back control of our zoning. One consequence of the run up in prices is that Brookline is becoming even less affordable.

These are the problems of a successful community. And yet, they create challenges.

Arguably, the biggest immediate challenge is meeting the needs of our overcrowded school system. We are coming into the second year of the 3 year operating finance plan set forth in last years' override intended to meet the operating needs of the schools.

The exciting Devotion School expansion and renovation project is about to break ground and once done, we will have a new state of the art school and some additional capacity.

But, we still need a ninth elementary school. And on that front, I am happy to report that we are narrowing the search to the following 3 sites: next to the Baker School, the Baldwin School on Heath Street and the Stop and Shop site on Harvard. While none of the earlier identified sites are completely off the table, these are the sites we are focusing on.

We are currently on track to make a site decision by this fall. But, my fellow Town Meeting members and Brookline residents, the time has come to make a decision. We can't put it off any longer. This has been a long process which has not been as linear as I would have hoped. Each site has its pros, its cons, its difficulties and tradeoffs. If we had a perfect site, we would have already found it. None of the sites are going to make everyone happy.

But the kids are here. They need classrooms to learn. We need to move forward.

As most of you also know, the enrollment spike that has filled our elementary schools is on its way to the high school. The Advisory Committee, School Committee and the Board of Selectmen have all voted unanimously to forego a possible partnership with the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA). That certainly brings a financial challenge but it also allows us to work quicker and with more flexibility. The High School Expansion Working Group will be providing an update on June 13 at 7:00 pm at the high school.

One of the sites identified in prior studies as possibly playing a role in the high school expansion is a parcel located at 111 Cypress St. It abuts the Brookline Hills Station and is along Cypress between the train tracks and Brington Rd. The town doesn't own the parcel but the owner has proposed a new 99 unit, 7 story apartment building under Chapter 40B. Last week, the Board of Selectmen made appointments to a committee that will study the question of whether the Town should purchase or take the parcel with a goal of making a recommendation by October. If the recommendation is to buy or take the property, Town Meeting will need to approve it. We may also need to make adjustments to the CIP to make the acquisition possible. As much as we try to plan, sometimes we need to act on opportunities as they arise. This could be one of those. More on this to come.

Back to the Town side of the budget, spending on all aspects of personnel, accounts for about 80% of the budget.

Healthcare inflation has once again begun to rage. This year we are budgeting an increase for employee and retiree healthcare of 5.7%. Due to Proposition 2 ½ caps, we cannot grow revenue that fast. Continued growth of health costs at this level is unsustainable without other reductions in the total costs of compensation. One of the things we really need to look at, is the fact that the Town pays 83% of the cost of health insurance with the employee share at 17%. This is a higher cost to the Town than our peer communities.

Most of our workforce is unionized. Earlier, you approved 2 collective bargaining agreements for AFSCME Local 1358 and the Engineers. We have just begun bargaining with Police and three civilian unions: Library, School Traffic and Dispatchers. Until we can make adjustments to our health insurance costs, our ability to provide other enhancements at the collective bargaining table will be extremely limited.

The most significant outstanding contract on the town side is with the Firefighters union whose contract has not been settled for some time. That contract dispute is now headed towards binding arbitration before a state agency called the Joint Labor Management Committee or JLMC. The town has set aside reserves for when the contract ultimately settles but I must report to you that the union's demands pending before the arbitrator far exceed the reserves we have set aside. It will also likely impact bargaining with the other outstanding contracts. Depending on how these bargaining sessions progress and the JLMC award, Town Meeting may be faced with some extremely difficult decisions. This could happen prior to or at the Fall Special Town Meeting. Stay tuned.

The last item I would like to highlight is the topic of succession planning. Our Fire Chief and our able Finance Director have recently retired. A number of our department heads are also nearing retirement. It is essential to plan for turnover and the loss of such deep institutional knowledge, leadership and experience. The town has partnered with a team of graduate students from Northeastern University to explore the issue of succession planning with a goal of hiring a more diverse management team, by seeking best practices from other municipalities and the private sector.

So let me close by thanking my colleagues; Nancy Daly, Ben Franco, Nancy Heller and Bernard Greene for their guidance and support throughout my first year as your Chair. As I said earlier, we have the problems of a successful community. Brookline is a great place for children, young adults, for families with school age children, for empty nesters, for residents to age in place. We have been named an age and bicycle friendly community. Our parks are beautiful, our streets walkable and our community is safe. We must work to keep this balance. We must work to keep Brookline as affordable as we can.

In this coming year, the Board of Selectmen, the School Committee and, Town Meeting will be making some once in a lifetime decisions. We will be deciding where to build a school. We will be deciding on the high school expansion. We will be deciding whether to buy or take private property. We may also have some very challenging financial decisions ahead of us especially surrounding the JLMC process with the public safety unions. We must do all these in a way that maintains our excellent credit rating. I have heard some people doubt whether a Town our size, with our form of government can make these kinds of tough decisions in this day and age. I think we can. Let's together, prove the doubters wrong.

On behalf of a unanimous Board of Selectmen I urge you to vote FAVORABLE ACTION on the Advisory Committee's budget motion.