

A Simple Clarification To Tiverton Financial Town Referendum Misconception

It's beginning to look like the case for a Financial Town Referendum (FTR) in Tiverton will be easier to make than I'd expected, because thus far, the majority of objections have involved a misconception that will be a simple matter to clarify. One gets the impression, reading various letters to the editor, that the budgets on which residents will vote at an FTR will be developed in secret and revealed only when poll workers hand over the ballots.

To appreciate just how inaccurate such impressions are, consider the system as it currently stands with a financial town meeting: The Budget Committee puts together the budget that will appear on the docket. It holds multiple public meetings and hearings until its members are satisfied that the numbers are legitimate and each department's request has been vetted.

If the School Committee or Town Council feels that the Budget Committee has not adequately answered its needs, either body can make its case to the public and offer amendments at the financial town meeting itself. Then, on that day, we get three surprise amendments from the floor, which the few hundred voters who actually show up must consider amidst shouts, sneers, procedural manipulation, obscure debates about Robert's Rules, and a constant reminder that there is a time limit for the meeting. Typically, the winning budget is the one whose advocates were able to drag a couple dozen more people to the uncomfortable seats in the high school gymnasium.

An FTR will differ from this description most significantly in that there will be no surprises on the day that votes are actually cast. Every version of the budget for which it will be possible to vote will be known at least two weeks beforehand, again through public meetings and hearings. Whoever is advocating for each one will have made their case to the entire voting population of the town (rather than just a hostile or friendly room). People whose opinions voters respect - most likely including print and online editors and writers - will be able to review the options in advance and offer endorsements of whichever ones make the most sense to them.

On the day of the referendum, we can all vote at our convenience for the budget that we've concluded to be the best. If none gets a majority, the two leading contenders will face off after a brief period during which the public can debate the merits of each in as much detail as desired. No surprises. More consideration. Less aggravation. And more input. That's not complicated; that's common sense.

A more intensive treatment of the proposed Financial Town Referendum, addressing arguments for and against, is available at tivertonftr.org.

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