

TOWN OF MIDDLETON, MA FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT POLICIES

Introduction

The following financial principles set forth the broad framework for overall fiscal planning and management of the Town of Middleton. In addition, these principles address both current activities and long-term planning. The principles are intended to be advisory in nature and serve as a point of reference for all policy-makers, administrators and advisors. It is fully understood that Town Meeting retains the full right to appropriate funds and incur debt at levels it deems appropriate, subject of course to statutory limits such as Proposition 2 ½. These policies supersede all previously adopted policies unless stated otherwise.

The principles outlined in this policy are designed to ensure the Town's sound financial condition now and in the future. Sound Financial Condition may be defined as:

- *Cash Solvency* : the ability to pay bills in a timely fashion
- *Budgetary Solvency*: the ability to annually balance the budget
- *Long Term Solvency*: the ability to pay future costs
- *Service Level Solvency*: the ability to provide needed and desired services

It is equally important that the Town maintain flexibility in its finances to ensure that the Town is in a position to react and respond to changes in the economy and new service challenges.

These Financial Management Policies will be periodically reviewed, revised, and readopted. At the very least, this shall occur every three years.

Policy Statements

1. **Budget Message:** The Town Administrator shall annually prepare a balanced budget and comprehensive Budget Message as required by state law and the Middleton Town Charter. The Budget Message shall include a detailed examination of trends in tax levy, new growth, local receipts, local aid, and available funds. The Town Charter further requires the preparation of a comprehensive five-year Capital Plan.
2. **Structurally Balanced Budget:** The Town will strive to fund recurring expenses with recurring revenues, thereby avoiding structural deficits. New operating costs associated with capital projects should be funded through the operating budget, but reflected in the capital improvement plan.
3. **Revenues:** municipal operations are funded from four primary revenue sources: 1) State Aid to Cities and Towns (a.k.a. Local Aid); 2) property taxes; 3) local receipts; and 4) other available funds. The Town Administrator, Chief Financial Officer, and other finance officials will develop an estimate prior to the commencement of the budget development process. Estimates from each source must be reasonable and based on sound information. Guidance

for each revenue source is discussed below:

- Property Tax Levy: Property taxes are the most stable revenue source. The estimate for the ensuing fiscal year shall be within the allowable levy limit under Proposition 2 ½.
- Local Receipts: Local receipts are locally generated revenues from sources such as license and permit fees and automobile excise taxes. Local receipts are tracked and the trends analyzed in order to identify potential changes. It shall be the policy to estimate local receipts based on the trend of the most recent five years.
- Local Aid: The State budget adopted by the Massachusetts Legislature and the Governor determines the aid each city and town will receive in the ensuing fiscal year. In most years, Middleton's budget is finalized before the State budget is adopted; at best, we have only an estimate based on the Governor's or House Ways & Means budget proposal. It shall be the policy that Local Aid for the ensuing year will be estimated at 100% of the current year, unless there is good reason to deviate, such as a known looming State deficit, Local Aid resolution, or other compelling evidence.
- Other Available Funds: These include transfers from other funds, such as from ambulance receipts to offset the operation of the Fire Department, from MELD to reimburse for expenses in areas such as insurance and pension assessments, and from other funds. Available funds can also include transfers from the Assessors overlay account, Free Cash, and various Stabilization Funds.

4. **Stabilization Funds**: A stabilization fund is designed to accumulate amounts for capital and other future spending purposes, although it may be appropriated for any lawful purpose. Communities may establish one or more stabilization funds for different purposes. A two-thirds vote of Town Meeting is required to establish or appropriate from a stabilization fund. The Town will maintain a series of Stabilization Funds as described below. Transfers to the various Stabilization Funds shall generally be from Free Cash or other reserves and shall be in conformance with G. L. c. 40, s. 5B.

- General Stabilization Fund: this is the Town's main financial reserve in the event of an emergency or extraordinary need. It shall be the goal of the Town to achieve and maintain a balance in the General Stabilization Fund of 4%-6% of current year budgeted general fund operating appropriation.
- Capital Stabilization Fund: The Capital Stabilization Fund will be available to set aside funds to use for one-time capital purchases or annual debt service payments. It shall be the goal to achieve and maintain a balance in the Capital Stabilization Fund of 3%-4% of current year budgeted general fund operating appropriation.
- Pension Stabilization Fund: The Pension Stabilization Fund will be available as a reserve to make future extraordinary "catch-up" contributions to the Essex Regional Retirement System (ERRS) if ERRS fails to achieve full funding due to unrealized investment returns or other factors. If ERRS's full funding schedule remains accurate, the Pension Stabilization Fund may be directed toward annual continuation payments, thereby limiting the impact on operating budget revenues. When full funding is complete or satisfactorily certain, the balance in the Pension Stabilization Fund may transferred or appropriated as allowed by G. L. c. 40, s. 5B.
- Special Education Stabilization Fund: The Annual Town Meeting on May 10, 2016 established the Special Education Stabilization Fund. It shall be the goal of the Town to use the Special Education Stabilization Fund to offset spikes in elementary school special education costs, including special education transportation costs. It shall be the further goal to have a balance equal to the average of the most recent five years actual special education spending. The initial target balance is \$350,000 with a maximum balance of \$500,000.

5. Free Cash reserves are the remaining, unrestricted funds from operations of the previous fiscal year. Free Cash is comprised of unexpended Free Cash from the previous year, actual receipts in excess of revenue estimates, and unspent amounts in budget line items. Once certified by the Director of Accounts, Free Cash is available for appropriation for any lawful purpose. The Town shall have a goal of maintaining Free Cash at a target range of at least 3% of the prior year general fund operating appropriation.

The Town hereby identifies the following as appropriate uses of Free Cash:

- Operating Budget: The Town has historically used Free Cash to subsidize the ensuing year's operating budget in order to reduce the tax rate. It is the Town's goal to eliminate or reduce the use of Free Cash used in the development of the operating budget. The Town will reduce its annual appropriation of Free Cash until it is \$0. When appropriate, the Town may, prior to setting the tax rate, elect to devote a portion of Free Cash for the purposes of reducing the tax rate.
 - Stabilization Funds: to replenish the Town's various Stabilization Funds.
 - OPEB Trust Fund: to fund the other post-employment benefits (OPEB) Trust fund.
 - Capital Improvement Program: to fund capital improvements in order to avoid or minimize borrowing.
 - Unexpected Deficits: to fund potential deficits in order to avoid carrying them into the next fiscal year. Snow and ice deficits an example of a deficit appropriately funded with Free Cash.
 - Emergency Appropriations: to allow for fiscal flexibility.
6. **Excess Levy Capacity**: The Town shall have a goal of maintaining Excess Levy Capacity of at least 1% of current year budgeted general fund operating appropriation in order to have tax capacity to pay for future fixed costs in excess of inflation, provide needed and desired services, and maintain flexibility to react and respond to changes in the economy with less measurable financial stress.
7. **Reserve Funds**: The Town shall maintain a general reserve fund and a special education reserve fund.
- General Reserve Fund: The Town, through its Finance Committee, shall maintain a Reserve Fund pursuant to G. L. c. 40, s. 6, to provide for extraordinary and unforeseen expenditures. The desirable annual appropriation shall be 1% of general fund expenditures excluding schools.
 - Special Education Reserve Fund: The Town, through its Board of Selectmen and Middleton School Committee, shall maintain a Special Education Reserve Fund pursuant to G. L. c. 40, s.13E to provide for unanticipated or unbudgeted costs of special education, out-of-district tuition, or special education transportation. The desirable annual appropriation or fund balance shall be equal to 2% of net school spending.
8. **Debt Management**: The Town recognizes that maintaining debt levels consistent with best practices allows the Town to maintain and improve its credit rating with rating agencies. It shall be the goal of the Town to manage debt within the following parameters:
- A. Annual debt service (principal and interest), exclusive of debt exempt from Proposition 2 ½, State reimbursements (e.g. Mass. School Building Authority), and State aid shall be no less than 2% nor more than 10% of current year budgeted general fund operating appropriation. This is known as Net General Fund Debt

Service.

- B. Annual debt service inclusive of debt exempt from Proposition 2 ½, State reimbursements (e.g. Mass. School Building Authority), and State aid shall be no more than 15% of current year budgeted general fund operating appropriation. This is known as Gross General Fund Debt Service.
- C. General Fund Debt does not include debt for water, sewer, and electric light.

9. **Capital Improvement Plan:** Capital items are assets that have a useful life of five (5) years and a cost of \$5,000. Regular capital investment is critical to maintaining the Town's infrastructure, including vehicle fleet, buildings, equipment, and acquisition of land. Annually, the Town Administrator will develop a capital improvement plan (CIP) for the next five (5) years. Year one (1) of the CIP is the ensuing year's proposed capital budget. In order to adequately invest in its capital assets, it is the Town's goal to annually spend at least two percent (2%) of general fund expenditures on its general fund capital plan. Non-general fund capital shall be evaluated and programmed based on need.

Funding of capital items may come from a number of sources, including, but not limited to:

- Available funds, such as Free Cash, Capital Stabilization, Overlay, Community Preservation Fund, and Ambulance Fund.
- Issuance of debt within the levy.
- Debt or Capital Outlay Expenditure Exclusion. In order to maintain budget capacity within the limits of Proposition 2 ½ and in recognition of the public facility needs facing the Town, the Town may wish to seek ballot approval for large general fund acquisitions, such as fire apparatus and public works equipment costing more than \$500,000, as well as for Town, school, and regional school building projects. Funding major acquisitions outside of Proposition 2 ½ will improve the Town's limited budget capacity, ensure broad community approval for such projects, and reinforce the Town's strong bond rating. Debt Exclusions and Capital Outlay Expenditure Exclusions allow a community to increase the tax levy above the limitations of Proposition 2 ½ and require a ballot vote.
 - A Debt Exclusion exempts the debt service for the term of the debt issuance.
 - A Capital Outlay Expenditure Exclusion is a one-time increase in the tax levy to fund a capital project or acquisition.

10. **Investments:** Investment practices are governed by the Massachusetts General Laws. The Town's general fund, special revenue funds, and trust funds are invested in accordance with all applicable Massachusetts General Laws using the list of legal investments and taking into consideration safety, liquidity, and yield.

Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 44, section 55B requires the Town Treasurer to invest all public funds except those required to be kept un-invested for purposes of immediate distribution. The state law further requires that invested funds are to be placed at the highest possible rate of interest reasonably available, taking into account *safety, liquidity, and yield*. Therefore, these guidelines are intended to further the objective of securing the highest return that is consistent with safety of principal while meeting the daily cash requirements for the operation of the Town's business.

- **Safety** of principal is the foremost objective of the investment program. Investments shall be undertaken in a manner that seeks to ensure the preservation of capital through the mitigation of credit risk (the risk of loss due to the failure of the security issuer or backer) and interest rate risk and interest rate

risk (which is the risk that the market value of securities in the portfolio will fall due to changes in the market interest rates). These risks shall be mitigated by the diversification and prudent selection of investment instruments, and choice of depository.

- **Liquidity** is the next most important objective. The overall investment portfolio shall remain sufficiently liquid to meet all operating requirements that may be reasonably anticipated. Since all possible cash demands cannot be anticipated, the Treasurer shall carry out investment activities in a manner that provides for meeting unusual cash demands without the liquidation of investments that could result in forfeiture of accrued interest earnings, and loss of principal in some cases.
- **Yield** is the third, and last, objective. Investments shall be undertaken so as to achieve a fair market average rate of return, taking into account safety and liquidity constraints as well as all legal requirements.

11. **Procurement:** Procurement shall be conducted in accordance with Massachusetts General Laws c. 30B (Supplies & Services); c. 149 (Building Construction); c. 30, s. 39M (Public Works Construction); c. 7C, ss. 44-57 (Public Building Projects Design); the Middleton Charter; and Chapter 14 of the Middleton Code. The Town Administrator is the Chief Procurement Officer and as such may delegate procurement responsibilities.
12. **Receivable Write-Offs:** The Town is unable to collect all receivables. It shall be the policy of the Town to write-off uncollected receivables after three years. This policy shall not apply to motor vehicle excise, real property, and personal property taxes.
13. **Audit of Financial Statements and Management Letter:** It is the Town's goal to retain the services of an outside auditing firm to complete an audit of the Town's financial statements and to prepare a management letter detailing its findings and recommendations. It is the further goal to be prepared for the auditor by September 30 so the auditor can return its completed product in a timely manner.
14. **Fraud:** The Town is committed to protecting its assets against the risk of loss or misuse. Accordingly, it is the policy of the Town to identify and promptly investigate any possibility of fraudulent or related dishonest activities against the Town and, when appropriate, to pursue legal remedies available under the law. Reference is hereby made to the Town's Municipal Fraud Policies and Procedures.

BOARD OF SELECTMEN

FINANCE COMMITTEE

TOWN ADMINISTRATOR

TOWN ACCOUNTANT/CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER

TREASURER/COLLECTOR

DATE:

