



TOWN OF BUCKFIELD

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January 29, 2024

To: The Buckfield Budget Committee – Peter Werwath, Judy Berg, Priscilla Bennett, and Adrián Rivas

RE: 2024-2025 Proposed Budget

Included please find my proposed municipal budget for fiscal year 2024-2025. Last year, despite rising costs across all industries and a growing wage gap between Town employees and their counterparts in other municipalities we were able to decrease taxes for our residents. This is something that most towns across Maine were unable to do and we should all be proud of what we were able to achieve as a team.

Unfortunately, I believe that this year we need to be more realistic with our expectations. I have put together a proposed budget that addresses what I feel are the most critical areas of our municipal operations. For example, wages. The Town of Buckfield has been pacing further and further behind surrounding municipalities in almost every position that we employ. Our wages in many cases are below the 50th percentile in the State based on figures provided by the 2023 MMA Salary Survey.

As an employer we invest a significant amount of time and resources in each one of our employees. When we lose employees because of open positions that are more in line with their profession, the taxpayers feel it in the form of added costs and reduced production. Retention of qualified employees is my number one goal.

Since I took over as the Town Manager in August of 2022, the Municipal Center has experienced three separate burst pipe incidents. The resulting damage has cost thousands of dollars in repairs. Fortunately, insurance was able to cover the damage, but with so many claims in a short period of time, I anticipate a larger than usual insurance premium going into the new fiscal year.

The Municipal Center is the hub of our local government. It houses our Town Office and our historical records, hosts our Select Board and Committee meetings as well as our elections. It also serves as a home to the Buckfield Historical Society. Unfortunately, this structure is closing in on turning 100 years old and it is showing signs of its age. Every window in the building is inefficient. Many are broken, and they all are dangerous. Just recently the roof started to leak because of the more frequent and intense rainstorms. If we are going to continue to rely on the

Municipal Center, we must begin budgeting for critical repairs that have been neglected throughout the years.

In 2022, the Town of Buckfield voted at a Special Town Meeting to remove the Board of Assessors and replace with an Assessing Agent and/or single Certified Maine Assessor. Since then, with the help of Clint Swett and Colleen Halse, much of the assessing work has continued. Unfortunately following two years of turnover there was a significant backlog in the work needed.

A lot has been achieved in eliminating the backlog, but there is still much to do. Clint has since finished his time with Buckfield. Colleen is now serving as a full-time assessor in Oxford and has been providing her services one day a week in Buckfield. This cannot be maintained, and I have started looking for other options, but with no success. I will continue to seek out an assessor to serve Buckfield. My budget proposes making that position a part-time employee of the Town if a firm cannot be contracted with.

Discussions took place this year about combining the Fire and Rescue Departments. Operationally this is a process that must be looked at responsibly and if executed, done so properly. I don't yet believe we are ready to consolidate all operations into one umbrella, publish updated SOPs, ensure compliance with all safety and licensing standards, and whatever else may be required.

Both the Fire and Rescue Departments already work hand in hand with one another and complement each other's operations effectively. Aside from much needed wage adjustments for both departments, much of the proposed budgets for these departments remain operationally the same.

A newly added Emergency Management budget is being proposed for fiscal year 2024-2025. The Town's emergency planning was outdated and is currently being worked on by several individuals on a voluntary basis. However, in order to ensure that the Town remains up to date and prepared to respond and manage natural disasters or other emergencies, I feel strongly that the Town needs to invest a minimal amount of resources to do so.

Over the last two years the Recreation budget has been broken into two groups, the Recreation Committee and Youth Programs. I have consolidated everything to fall under the Recreation Committee to simplify bookkeeping. Overall, the proposed increases for Recreation are centered around replacement of one of the Baseball Field dugouts which was lost during one of the recent storms but was already in need of replacement. I also included \$2,500 for maintenance on the Railroad Bed Trail.

After consulting with the Library Director, the proposed Library budget includes the addition of 8 hours per week to assist with programming and events at the library as well as a wage adjustment for the Library Assistant/Deputy Director based on the data from the MMA Salary Survey.

I am making no recommended additions to Debt Services this year. The final reevaluation payment was taxed and assessed in 2023-2024 reducing the Debt Services line by \$45,000. This will be the final year for two of the Public Works truck payments totaling \$31,395. With this in mind, we do have one truck that will need replacement in 2025-2026.

The Public Works Complex budget remains the same as last year apart from a small adjustment to electricity and water.

The Public Works operations account is seeking adjustment to wages to better position us in line with neighboring municipalities. Public Works will also be taking back the grounds maintenance of the Town Cemeteries and other town owned facilities and parks. The most significant increase however is in the Maintenance and Repair line for PW Trucks. One of our trucks currently has a body that is failing. Failure to replace the body will deadline the truck completely as it will be deemed unsafe and unusable. The Foreman received three quotes for this project with the best price coming in at \$45,990.

The Summer Roads account is the most significant increase in the budget I have proposed. The guardrail at the corner of Jim Warren Road is damaged and in need of repair. Additionally, the Drew Brook box culvert needs guardrails installed now that the structure is complete. The quoted price to complete both projects is \$16,000. The remaining \$3,500 is what we typically budget for minor repairs.

The price of culverts has increased significantly over the last couple of years. More consistent and heavy rainstorms have forced the Town to replace many aging and failing culverts. The good news is that as a result, our roads are holding up much better than in years past. However, I have proposed increasing this line by \$5,000.

The largest increase to the proposed budget is for paving. Based on anticipated repairs and paving costs, the Road Commissioner believes that returning to the 2022-2023 budget will be necessary.

The proposed Winter Roads budget has been decreased in part due to reduced salt costs. In prior years the Town paid to rent a sidewalk machine for snow removal. In 2023, the vendor decided they could no longer rent the machine to the Town. We attempted to source another rental with no luck. We were able to purchase an older machine for the same price that we paid annually to rent. We are currently in the process of replacing the engine in the machine. I have proposed reducing this line from \$6,000 to \$2,500 to cover ongoing maintenance.

The proposed Cemeteries budget is down as a result of Public Works taking the grounds maintenance back over. The budget includes a shared portion of the purchase of a new Zero-Turn mower and maintenance funds for gravel and to replace failing water spickets.

The Solid Waste budget sees a proposed increase as well. Disposal costs have increased since the COVID-19 pandemic and have been estimated accordingly. The proposed budget also includes a slight increase to wages as well as an annual stipend for the Transfer Station Supervisor/Manager.

I do not know what the R.S.U. or the County will be proposing for increases to their budgets. For the sake of budgeting, I have estimated a 5% increase for both.

I am proposing the same Emergency Contingency as last year at \$10,000.

Proposed Revenues will help to offset many of our municipal increases. Interest earned on our cash accounts is proposed at \$48,000 more than last year due to Northeast Bank adjusting the

interest we earn on our Checking and Money Market accounts. This increased interest revenue also helped to increase the proposed Trust Fund appropriations to various accounts.

Contracts with Hartford and Sumner for Rescue and Fire services also increased slightly this year. Overall, the proposed Rescue Revenue is down this year due to a reduction in medical transports and the revenue they generate.

The largest increases in the proposed State Revenues were to municipal revenue sharing, LRAP, and Tree Growth reimbursement lines.

As all of you are aware, the Town of Buckfield is still in the midst of a townwide reevaluation. The data has not yet been finalized and provided to the Town. My hope is this will be completed prior to commitment. However, without this data, all I can do is estimate based off of the figures from last year. The budget as proposed to you, with a fund balance appropriation of \$300,000 would result in an **estimated** mil-rate of \$27.30 per \$1,000 of valuation. I want to reiterate that this is an **estimate** only based off of valuations and data from 2023 as if nothing changed.

I look forward to working with you during the budget process. I am available to answer questions that you may have.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Cameron Hinkley', written in a cursive style.

Cameron Hinkley
Town Manager
Treasurer