

# League of Women Voters of Weston

## GUIDE TO THE ANNUAL TOWN BUDGET PROCESS WESTON, CONNECTICUT



*The Onion Barn, c. 1830 by Mary E. O'Reilly*

**Who Ultimately Approves the Annual Town Budget?** The voters do.

**How Is the Proposed Annual Town Budget Developed and Passed?** The budget is determined by a series of recommendations for budget appropriations developed by Town departments, agencies, and Town boards, potentially decreased by the voters at the **Annual Town Budget Meeting (ATBM)**, and finally approved by a **Town-wide referendum**.

**How Does the Process Work?** The Annual Town Budget consists of three major elements that are developed on parallel tracks:

- The **Board of Education operating budget** is first developed by school administrators and is reviewed and can be modified by the Board of Education. After Board of Education approval, it goes to the Board of Selectmen for comment, and then on to the Board of Finance;
- The **Town operating budget** is developed by the First Selectman and is reviewed and can be modified by the Board of Selectmen before being approved for submission to the Board of Finance;
- The **capital improvement budget** is jointly developed by the Board of Education and the First Selectmen, and is also reviewed and can be modified by the Board of Selectmen before being approved and sent on to the Board of Finance.

The **Board of Finance** considers the appropriations that comprise the recommended budgets. After holding one or more **public hearings** on the matter, the Board of Finance can revise—by raising or lowering—the appropriations as it sees fit. It then submits them to the ATBM. If a quorum of at least 130 Qualified Voters is in attendance when the ATBM is called to order, those present may vote to either: 1) approve the Board of Finance's proposed appropriations or 2) reduce—but not increase—these appropriations. (If a quorum is not present, no such votes may be taken.) **Qualified Voters** include all registered Weston voters as well as those not registered to vote who are U.S. citizens 18 years or older and who own property in Weston assessed at \$1000 or more.

The **Annual Town Budget**, consisting of the Board of Finance's proposed appropriations (amended, if applicable, at the ATBM) is then submitted to all Qualified Voters in a secret ballot Town-wide referendum. The voters consider each of the three budgets separately, and may vote to approve or reject each of them. (There is a subsequent Board of Finance review and referendum if any of the proposed budgets are rejected.)

# THE ANNUAL TOWN BUDGET PROCESS TIMELINE

*The timeline below outlines the Annual Town Budget development and approval process, which culminates in the ATBM and Town-wide referendum. All meetings of Town boards, commissions and committees are open to the public (except when in executive session). Comments are generally welcome but are subject to the discretion of the meeting chairperson. Opportunities for public input mandated by the Town Charter include the Board of Finance public hearing(s) and, if a quorum is present, the ATBM.*

*You can help determine the character of our Town by becoming involved, attending meetings, learning about the issues and speaking with Town officials throughout the process. Check the Town Clerk's office at Town Hall and/or the Town website at [www.westonct.gov](http://www.westonct.gov) for meeting schedules and other information. Some meetings can be viewed on Weston's government cable channel 79 and may also be available online. Your views count. Speak up; participate; vote.*

## **Late November/into the New Year**

The Board of Education reviews budget assumptions of school administrators and enrollment projections. Early in the year, the Board completes its proposed operating budget and finalizes its list of needed capital improvements.

Town department heads receive budget preparation materials to assist in planning their budgets for the next fiscal year.

## **On or before January 14th**

Each Town department and agency submits preliminary budget requests to the First Selectman, including any proposed capital improvement budget items. Department heads usually meet with the First Selectman, the Town Administrator and the Finance Director to discuss their requests during preparation of the First Selectman's proposed Town operating and capital improvement budgets.

## **On or before February 3rd**

The Board of Education presents its proposed operating budget request to the First Selectman.

## **Not later than February 10th**

The First Selectman presents the proposed total Annual Town Budget, including the proposed budget of the Board of Education, to the full Board of Selectmen. (The Town debt service is part of the Annual Town Budget but is a legal obligation not subject to a vote.)

The full Board of Selectmen may raise or lower any budget item(s) of the proposed Town operating and capital improvement budgets. The Selectmen do not have the power to make changes to the Board of Education's proposed operating budget but may recommend changes before that budget is submitted to the Board of Finance.

## **Not later than March 1st**

The Board of Selectmen transmits all three proposed budgets: the Town operating budget, the capital improvement budget, and the Board of Education budget to the Board of Finance.

## **March and April**

The Board of Finance reviews all budgets. At least two weeks before the date of the ATBM, and with at least 10 days prior notice, the Board of Finance must hold one or more public hearings at which any Qualified Voter may be heard regarding any of the recommended appropriations for the next fiscal year. (Sufficient copies of the proposed appropriations must be available for general distribution in the Town Clerk's office, online, and at the public hearing(s).)

**Following the public hearing(s)**, the Board of Finance may decide to raise or lower any line item in the proposed Annual Town Budget. It then sends the proposed appropriations on to the voters at the ATBM.

### **At least five days prior to the ATBM**

A public **Notice and Call** of the ATBM, accompanied by the proposed appropriations in condensed form, are published in a local newspaper. Copies of the proposed appropriations and proposed rate of taxation are made available in the Town Clerk's office and online at the Town website.

### **Not later than the end of the first full week in May**

**The Annual Town Budget Meeting (ATBM) is called to order at 8 p.m.** and must end by 11:30 p.m. (If business is not completed, the meeting reconvenes at 8 p.m. on the following night(s), excepting Saturdays, Sundays and holidays, until completed.)

A quorum of 130 Qualified Voters is required in order to vote and/or to take any action at the ATBM.

**If a quorum is present, voters have the power to reduce but may not raise any line item** of the proposed:

- **Town operating budget** (voted on as single line items for each department, agency, and service);
- **Capital improvement budget** (voted on as individual line items from all departments, agencies, and the Board of Education);
- **Board of Education operating budget** (voted on as a single line item).

In other words, **if and only if a quorum is present when the meeting is called to order**, the Town Charter gives voters at the ATBM the final say on whether to reduce any of the proposed appropriations in the Annual Town Budget before it is submitted for approval to the Town-wide referendum.

**NOTE:** If there is no quorum, the Meeting is adjourned to the referendum without discussion.

### **The Annual Town Budget Referendum begins immediately after adjournment of the ATBM**

Voting on the proposed Annual Town Budget (as amended, if applicable, at the ATBM) is by machine ballot. Separate votes are cast on each of the three elements of the proposed Annual Town Budget.

For those not present at the ATBM or not able to stay and vote on the budgets as finally proposed that evening, **the referendum resumes between 7 and 14 days following the ATBM**. Voting continues on the designated day between the hours of noon and 8 p.m. (As provided in the Connecticut General Statutes, the starting hour may be earlier if approved by the Board of Selectmen). Each separate component of the Annual Town Budget will be adopted if approved by a majority of Qualified Voters.

### **What if all or part of the proposed Annual Town Budget is defeated?**

If one or more parts of the Annual Town Budget are not approved, the rejected part(s) of the proposed budget will be reconsidered by the Board of Finance and resubmitted to the voters between 10 and 21 days after the date the referendum was completed. Voting for the resubmitted budget is by machine ballot and must be publically noticed at least five days prior to the date of the vote. Should any part(s) of the budget be rejected again, the process repeats itself with respect to the rejected part(s) until the entire Annual Town Budget is approved. In the event that it has not been adopted by July 1 of any year, the budget appropriations of the previous fiscal year serve as an interim budget until a new one is approved.

Within 10 days after the Annual Town Budget has been approved, the Board of Finance will fix the tax rate in mills for the applicable fiscal year. *(To calculate approximate tax, consider a property's assessed value in thousands and multiply by the mill rate.)*

## More About the Annual Town Budget Meeting (ATBM)

### What is the Call of the ATBM?

The community is notified in local media of the date and time of the ATBM through the Notice and Call. The Call specifies those items that may be discussed and decided on at the Meeting: the Town operating budget (presented as separate line items for each department, agency, and service); the capital improvement budget (presented as individual line items from all departments, agencies, and the Board of Education); and the Board of Education operating budget (presented as a single line item). The Call also includes information on the Town debt service, the proposed rate of taxation, and other related matters.

### What are the Rules and Procedures at the ATBM?

A Moderator is selected who then conducts the proceedings to assure order and fairness. When the Meeting is called to order, the Moderator must determine whether or not a quorum of 130 or more Qualified Voters is present. If not, the Meeting is adjourned and the Annual Town Budget as proposed by the Board of Finance is submitted directly to Qualified Voters for a machine vote (referendum).

If a quorum is present, the meeting proceeds. Once a motion has been made and seconded on any item, but before any vote—or action—is taken, the matter is opened to the floor for consideration and debate. Questions concerning details of the proposal are in order as are statements to influence the vote of other participants.

Action is generally taken by voice vote. However, the Moderator may call for a counted or “standing” vote on any item where he or she cannot clearly discern the outcome. If seven or more voters present at a meeting challenge the moderator’s determination of the outcome of the voice vote, a standing vote on the same issue is taken immediately. The ATBM may elect to take the vote on any question before it by paper (secret) ballot if requested by not less than one-third of Qualified Voters present at the ATBM. Once the ATBM has completed its business it is immediately adjourned to the referendum.

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For further information about Town meetings (including the ATBM), special appropriations (which can be made throughout the year), voter petition procedures, and other matters, see the Town Charter, which is available in the Town Clerk’s office and online at [www.westonct.gov](http://www.westonct.gov).

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*The League of Women Voters is a nonpartisan political organization that encourages active and informed participation of citizens in government, seeks to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy.*

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