

At a Special meeting of the Town Council in and for the Town of Gloucester on July 9, 2025

I. Call to Order

Councilor W. Worthy called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.

II. Roll Call

Members present: Jonathan E. Burlingame; Stephanie L. Calise; Cheryl A. Greathouse; Walter M. O. Steere, III, Vice- President; William A. Worthy, Jr., President

Also Present: Jean Fecteau, Town Clerk; Christine Mathieu, Deputy Town Clerk; Elizabeth Beltram, Finance Director; David Iglozzi, Town Solicitor

III. Pledge of Allegiance

Councilor W. Worthy asked all to stand for the Pledge of Allegiance.

Councilor W. Worthy stated that per the Solicitor, a motion is needed to move ITEM V. to this point on agenda.

MOTION was made by Councilor W. Steere to MOVE ITEM V. Closed Executive Session to this point on agenda; seconded by Councilor J. Burlingame

Discussion: None

VOTE: AYES- Burlingame, Calise, Greathouse, Steere, Worthy
NAYS-0

MOTION PASSED

V. Seek to Convene to Closed Executive Session Pursuant to:

- A. RIGL 42-46-5(a)(2) Sessions pertaining to collective bargaining, litigation or work sessions pertaining to collective bargaining or litigation:
 - 1. Discussion by Council, Vote, or Other Action re: Litigation – Opioid Settlement
 - 2. Discussion by Council, Vote, or Other Action re: Potential Litigation

MOTION was made by Councilor J. Burlingame to Seek to Convene to Closed Executive Session Pursuant to:

- A. RIGL 42-46-5(a)(2) Sessions pertaining to collective bargaining, litigation or work sessions pertaining to collective bargaining or litigation:
 - 1. Discussion by Council, Vote, or Other Action re: Litigation – Opioid Settlement
 - 2. Discussion by Council, Vote, or Other Action re: Potential Litigation

Seconded by Councilor S. Calise

Discussion: None

Councilor W. Worthy asked the Clerk to call the roll:

Councilor Burlingame- Aye

Councilor Calise- Aye

Councilor Greathouse- Aye

Councilor Steere- Aye

Councilor Worthy- Aye

Discussion: None
MOTION PASSED

Executive Session

After Executive Session all were invited back into the meeting room.

VI. Reconvene Open Session, Disclosure of votes taken in Executive Session & Consideration of the Sealing of Minutes- Discussion and/or Action

MOTION was made by Councilor J. Burlingame to Reconvene Open Session, Disclose 3 votes were taken in Executive Session & to Seal the Minutes of Closed Executive Session; seconded by Councilor W. Steere

Discussion: None

VOTE:AYES- Burlingame, Calise, Greathouse, Steere, Worthy
NAYS-0

MOTION PASSED

IV. Special Town Referendum

A. Status of proposed Town Referendum – Discussion and/or Action

Discussion:

1. Phil Eaton, resident South Kingstown, stated that he works for NEARI, the union that represents the teachers and support staff. P. Eaton stated that NEARI asked the school committee to provide the Council with specifics that they would bring back the teachers and support staff if provided the money from the taxpayers through this referendum. P. Eaton stated that it sounds like they did not do that and NEARI is disappointed. P. Eaton stated that NEARI union is not comfortable going out to ask voters to provide more of their hard earned taxpayer money if they don't have a commitment for where that money is going. P. Eaton stated that the union is not saying they would oppose the referendum. P. Eaton stated they are saying they won't put their reputation on the line and ask their members to talk to neighbors to encourage them to vote for something without a commitment of what the money would be used for.

P. Eaton stated that NEARI is really disappointed that the union is in this situation. P. Eaton stated his opinion that students will be denied services next year because of this decision. P. Eaton stated that there are 15 people who have dedicated their lives to educating Glocester students who are out of a job. P Eaton stated that these folks were providing vital services that students need. P. Eaton stated that while he wishes the school committee would have provided the information that the Council required, at the end of the day, they believe the Council is also part of this.

P. Eaton stated his opinion that school funding comes from the Town Council and that Council is responsible for the financial reporting to the school and approving the budget. P. Eaton stated that, these kids are your responsibility as well and stated that the school committee and Council really need to work together to solve this problem.

P. Eaton stated that his opinion as to what might happen if the problem is not solved in that the kids are going to suffer, that there will be larger class sizes, there won't be any math interventionists, the taxpayers will be exposed to a lot of liability for violating IEP's, violating state required and allowed requirements, and outsourcing which is a violation of the collective

bargaining agreement. P. Eaton stated that this will end up costing taxpayer's money. P. Eaton stated he is not sure where the parties can go from here. P. Eaton stated that NEARI has two options to suggest.

P. Eaton stated the first option is for the town to dip into the reserve fund. P. Eaton stated that Council could send a letter to the school saying that the town will dip into its reserve fund if the school agrees to bring back the staff and provide the cut services to the students. P. Eaton stated that he does not know if taxpayer permission is needed. P. Eaton stated that using fund balance for one year of operational costs can be a reasonable and strategic decision if it is done transparently so that voters know it is a temporary bridge and there is a long term plan. P. Eaton stated that this band-aid would give a year to form a long term plan. P. Eaton stated that NEARI feels this could be an especially prudent move right now because if these layoffs go ahead, the town is potentially on the hook for the resulting failures to provide legally obligated services.

P. Eaton stated that the second option is the town puts specifics on the ballot for the voters. P. Eaton stated that the ballot could propose asking for a 1.5% supplemental increase to go to reinstate the staff that was laid off. P. Eaton stated that the ballot needs to be worded so that voters know what the money is going for. P. Eaton stated that if the ballot was specific they would be comfortable asking people to support it.

P. Eaton stated that they understand that taxes are too high in Gloucester and that people are already struggling. P. Eaton stated that NEARI would rather see a referendum going forward for 1.5% that voters can get behind than to ask for 3% and have it go nowhere.

Councilor J. Burlingame asked if the school committee members present had a budget that reflected the referendum vote. R. Palazzo, Supt. Gloucester Schools, stated that she did not know how to answer that question. Councilor J. Burlingame stated that the statute says that once the referendum passes that the school budget needs to match what the voters approved. Councilor J. Burlingame stated he is asking for a copy of that budget. E. Keeling school committee member, stated that E. Beltram should have a copy. E. Beltram, Finance Director, stated that the adjustments for the recent changes in staff have not been made yet.

R. Palazzo stated that E. Beltram and she have worked together to adjust the budget and that cuts were made strategically due to timing factors. R. Palazzo stated that additional reductions were made to insure the school could meet what the voters approved.

Councilor J. Burlingame asked when the Council would get a copy of the revised budget .R. Palazzo stated that the school committee approved the proposed changes and they now need to be finalized. E. Beltram stated that the payroll piece needs to be done and it is very time consuming. E. Beltram stated that each individual salary and benefits are considered and adjusted separately. E. Beltram stated that the information needs to be sent to the payroll clerk and would take longer than a week.

Councilor J. Burlingame asked if Council could get a model of what a 1.5% budget would look like. E. Keeling stated that E. Beltram would have to crunch the numbers. Councilor J. Burlingame stated that he would like to see a model of the 1.5% budget before he can make any commitments.

J. Whitford, resident asked the amount of money a 1.5% budget would bring in. Councilor J. Burlingame stated an estimate of approximately \$300,000. Councilor J. Burlingame stated that Council can't tell the school what to do with their funds but asked the school committee or

superintendent to let the Town Council know what they would do with the funds if the referendum is approved.

R. Palazzo stated that the biggest challenge is to tie the school department down to say that this money will be spent on this item and lead the taxpayers to believe that this is the only thing that the money can be spent on. R. Palazzo stated that she wanted to be clear that any time there is a budget proposed and approved that funds may and are reallocated during the year. R. Palazzo stated that if a commitment is made to spend the money on this item and by the time school is opened, because school is being opened without that money, and it isn't spent for that purpose because there were other needs that came up, student needs, then she stated she is not sure what that would look like.

R. Palazzo stated that the school will create and work with and propose whatever is needed to insure that student needs are met with appropriate staff. R. Palazzo stated that last time I was here I said the majority would absolutely go towards faculty and staff because that was where the majority of cuts in the budget were made. R. Palazzo stated that she is not looking to put money any where else but student needs.

R. Palazzo stated that she is opening a building in September and if this does not go until October then she will absolutely give Council a tentative plan. R. Palazzo stated that if Council is going to require exactly what the money will be spent on then she does not think legally she can do that because if she needs to reallocate money for something else based on student needs then that is what she is tied to do.

Councilor W. Steere stated that this is a supplemental tax for a specific reason. Councilor W. Steere stated he wanted to clear up the rumors that some of the supplemental tax money will be used for town purposes. Councilor W. Steere stated that money, if the referendum is approved, will absolutely not be used for town purposes. Councilor W. Steere stated that he does not know where the rumors came from but that it is absolutely false. Councilor W. Steere stated that if there is a ballot question that is approved then it goes to the school.

Councilor J. Burlingame stated that the statute was written that way but that Council will not use any of that money for anything else if it is approved.

Councilor W. Steere asked J. Fecteau, Town Clerk, if any minutes have been received from the school committee as to any decisions on this. J. Fecteau stated that we receive minutes that are posted on line but we haven't received any recently.

Councilor W. Steere stated a suggestion that the Region, which has a 3.4 million dollar fund balance, as of the audit, could grant funds to the Gloucester schools.

M. Rizzo, school committee member, stated his opinion that full regionalization would be better. Councilor W. Steere asked M. Rizzo which school he would close and stated that there are a lot of questions that would need to be answered if that were to happen. Councilor W. Steere stated his opinion that the Region will be facing the same boat as the elementary schools within the next 5-7 years.

M. Rizzo stated that what confuses him is that every time we meet we say that taking money out of fund balance creates a structural deficit so why would it be make sense to take it out of the Region's fund balance. M. Rizzo asked where that money would come from the next year. Councilor W. Steere stated that the last two years the Region has taken money out of fund balance and put it in their budget just in case it is needed. Councilor J. Burlingame stated that if the town

takes money out of fund balance then it is part of maintenance of effort and that is not a solution. Councilor W. Steere stated he only brought it up because using fund balance was brought up earlier and there is another fund balance. M. Rizzo stated his opinion that taking from fund balance is not an option.

R. Palazzo stated that she will not address any comments about the Region as that is a separate conversation. R. Palazzo stated that the Region has its own charter separate from the elementary schools.

R. Palazzo stated that her purpose for being here tonight is to support a collaborative effort to insure that the elementary schools get what they need. R. Palazzo stated that she feels like when she comes here, open to conversation, it is always about what the school didn't do or what the Council needs from the school. R. Palazzo stated that she will not be able to give a very detailed account to commit to. R. Palazzo stated that the school department needs the money that was proposed in the original budget which was \$840,000 more than what is currently allocated. R. Palazzo stated that right now she is working to open the schools without that money. R. Palazzo stated that her opinion that the school and town should sit down and work collaboratively on a solution.

R. Palazzo stated that she is concerned about the legal ramifications of saying they are hiring teacher assistants back and then a student need or a transportation need requires the funds which then could create a deficit. R. Palazzo stated that she can't operate with a deficit.

Councilor S. Calise stated her opinion that there can be legal wiggle room or fluctuation in some plan. Councilor S. Calise questioned how she can stand before the taxpayers with a proposal to raise taxes without being able to say what the money will be spent on.

R. Palazzo stated that she stepped into this problem and from what she can see there has been a deficit for last 10 years or so. R. Palazzo stated that she is in this position to help and support because she wants to do this work and she cares about the students and taxpayers. R. Palazzo stated that she can't speak to anything before this year. R. Palazzo stated she is trying to understand what Council needs and taxpayers need.

Councilor C. Greathouse stated that if this gets funded and teacher assistants are brought back then how will the school pay next year. R. Palazzo stated that is the question. R. Palazzo stated that there are not 13 teacher assistants to bring back because one retired and one was already brought back. R. Palazzo stated that her priority is the opening of schools in September.

R. Palazzo stated that up until two weeks ago she did not know a plan was needed. R. Palazzo stated that her priority since the budget got passed and approved was to open the schools in September. R. Palazzo stated that she is working very closely to insure she doesn't violate IEP's; and she is working closely to ensure that student needs are met. R. Palazzo stated that she will probably call back some people but she needs to find where that money comes from now because the referendum may not pass and it may be pushed to October.

R. Palazzo stated that she is responsible for making sure that in September those buildings are open with student needs met. R. Palazzo stated that is where her mind is. R. Palazzo stated that if council wants her to develop an elaborate plan then she can't right now until she works with what September looks like.

D. Igliazzi, Town Solicitor, stated if the referendum did pass then that becomes both maintenance of effort and also part of the base for the purpose of the state's calculation upon which you could build another 4 %. D. Igliazzi stated that if the referendum were to pass it is built in both the town and school budget as a base number. D. Igliazzi stated that is why the mechanism does not create a structural deficit.

Councilor W. Steere stated his opinion that he wants to work together with the school but feels it is difficult when the school takes actions such as serving the Finance Director with a subpoena. R. Palazzo stated that at times she feels Council is not listening. R. Palazzo stated that she is not an attorney and whatever the attorney does is on him. R Palazzo stated she is working to open schools.

Councilor W. Steere stated that there are time constraints from the state regarding the referendum and that is why they are asking for information. Councilor J. Burlingame stated that Council is trying to make an educated decision because there is a date certain in September for the referendum. Councilor J. Burlingame stated that he wants to make sure Council gets things right. R. Palazzo stated that she couldn't form a plan and have it to Council by July 7th as asked. R. Palazzo stated that she received the letter from Council on July 2nd and due to the holiday on the 4th, there was not time to post a meeting in compliance with the 48-hour rule. R Palazzo stated the school committee had a meeting scheduled for July 8th. Councilor J. Burlingame stated that Council was told the answer was "that Council does not tell the school what to do".

Councilor W. Steere stated that the Board of Canvassers meets tomorrow so if Council decides to do something tonight it needs to go to the Board of Canvassers tomorrow for the vote to be in September otherwise it could be pushed to October.

Councilor J. Burlingame stated that he would like to see the correct budget with all cuts made for opening in September before he votes.

D. Igliazzi stated that the Council could decide a question tonight for the Board of Canvassers to take their step tomorrow and then there would also still be a date by which the town could withdraw.

J. Fecteau stated her opinion that she does not want to spend all this money to hold this referendum which includes 20 days of early voting and mail ballots having to be sent out if Council would then consider withdrawing. J. Fecteau stated that she is really against all the time and effort and money she has already put into this for Council to then entertain with-drawing it at a later date.

J. Fecteau stated that if a referendum were to be held in October then it would be on the 7th in answer to Councilor J. Burlingame's question. J. Fecteau stated that it requires 50 to 60 days for preparations and that she has not received a calendar of dates from the state. J. Fecteau stated that she estimates early August would be the time by which a decision would have to be made.

Councilor W. Steere stated that if the referendum were held in October if it would be feasible to staff the positions at that point if the referendum passed. R. Palazzo stated that she would find the people. Councilor J. Burlingame asked how quickly the funds could be available. E. Beltram stated that it would depend upon the cash flow of the town at that time.

Councilor W. Steere asked if the 2 percent set aside would be affected by the supplemental tax. E. Beltram stated that the set aside is part of town capital and appears separately on the budget. Councilor W. Steere stated that a small amount of the supplemental tax may be included in determining the set aside.

Councilor S. Calise stated her opinion that it may be a better to understand the situation if the referendum were held in October because Council would have an actual budget showing expenses. Councilor J. Burlingame asked if E. Beltram could have the budget information ready in early August or late July.

E. Beltram stated that she needs to receive payroll data from the payroll clerk and then incorporate that information into a new budget. E. Beltram stated that the payroll piece is more complicated as it involves pay and benefits and would take a couple of weeks.

M. Rizzo stated that the school committee can put together an idea of what the money would be spent on but that the school committee is wary of putting a specific required use on the ballot. M. Rizzo stated that all of the money, if received, will go towards student needs. M. Rizzo stated that the school committee can give the Council an idea of how many of the staff may be hired back unless there is a student need to be met. M. Rizzo stated that the school committee can't submit and agree that the ballot has to read that a set number of staff are to be hired back.

Councilor J. Burlingame stated that the ballot question would read something like: "Shall the Town of Glocester propose a supplemental property tax increase in the amount of _____ to fund school department operations and avoid a loss of critical town services for FY2026". Councilor J. Burlingame stated that this wording is the same as the statute. Councilor J. Burlingame stated that the Council would give the voters an explanation to include on the ballot.

Councilor W. Worthy and J. Burlingame stated a suggestion that a meeting should be held between the school committee and the council.

Councilor W. Worthy stated his opinion that anytime a decision is made it is worse to do so under any kind of duress or speed. Councilor W. Worthy stated that he has been talking with the school trying to understand the situation. Councilor W. Worthy stated that the only reason to look back is to try and understand why it happened so it doesn't happen again. Councilor W. Worthy stated his opinion that the relationship between the school committee and the town should be one of trust because the school has a lot of money and the town gets left with a few cents to the dollar.

Councilor W. Worthy stated his opinion that the Council approved the 6% increase to the school knowing the school was in a predicament and did so in good faith. Councilor W. Worthy stated that there is no skin on the bone in Glocester in the budget. Councilor W. Worthy stated his opinion that this vote is a good one to give to the voters to make because it is a lot of money.

Councilor W. Worthy stated his opinion that if Council is going to agree on this referendum that the voters need to be informed because as in past elections, a small percentage can influence the vote. Councilor W. Worthy stated that Council needs to consider the burden on the taxpayers that they have already felt over the last six years.

Councilor J. Burlingame stated his opinion that he feels it is important that Council and the school committee meet to plan for the future and to figure this out.

Councilor C. Greathouse stated that if this referendum goes forward that word needs to get out to the entire community so that everyone has an opportunity to vote and not just a small interested minority as has happened in the past.

R. Palazzo stated her opinion that the school department is a town department and as such that the more that is shared between the school and the town the better it will be. R. Palazzo stated that the school is the largest department of the town and has the largest budget. R. Palazzo stated her opinion that the school is going to be fiscally responsible and is going to meet the needs of the students.

Councilor W. Worthy stated that the Council will wait to hear of a date for a joint meeting from the school committee.

J. Fecteau asked if Council would be making a motion to move the referendum to October. Councilor J. Burlingame stated that Council would wait till after the meeting with the school. J. Fecteau stated that if council is considering she needs to reserve a date in October with the state. Councilor J. Burlingame stated to reserve a date in October. J. Fecteau stated she would speak with the state tomorrow. D. Iglizzi stated that the clerk would still need to do all the same work for an October date that she does for a September date.

Councilors J. Burlingame and S. Calise stated that they need information about the budget before they can talk about the ballot.

Councilor W. Steere asked the goal of the meeting between the Council and the school committee. Councilor J. Burlingame stated his opinion that it was to get an understanding of the budget going forward; and discuss a plan of action. Councilor J. Burlingame stated that the school can send him information as to a possible agenda as he is the liaison. D. Iglizzi stated that a joint meeting would require posting in both places.

MOTION was made by Councilor W. Worthy to TABLE Item A to the next council meeting; seconded by Councilor J. Burlingame

Discussion: None

VOTE:AYES- Burlingame, Calise, Greathouse, Steere, Worthy
NAYS-0

MOTION PASSED

B. Approval of Ballot question– Discussion and/or Action

Discussion: Councilor J. Burlingame stated that the proposed question for the referendum should be as follows: Shall the Town Council approve a supplemental property tax increase of ___ percent to fund school department operations and to avoid loss of critical town services for FY2026. Councilor J. Burlingame stated that this is exactly as written in the statute so he feels it needs to reflect this same language.

Councilor J. Burlingame stated that a meeting between the school and the Council depends upon getting an actual budget. P. Eaton, NEARI union representative, asked which budget. Councilor J. Burlingame stated the revised one that reflects the cuts that have been made. Councilor S. Calise asked if the union would help with advertising. P. Eaton stated that the union would help with advertising as long as people know what the money will be used for.

J. Whitford, resident, asked for the proposed question to be read again. Councilor J. Burlingame read the question. J. Whitford asked the meaning of the term “ loss of critical town services”. Councilor J. Burlingame stated that the language would be on the ballot question because that is

how the statute was written. J. Whitford stated that people may question the language. Councilor W. Steere stated that is how the legislation was written. E. Keeling asked if the ballot question could have “to meet the needs of the students” added to it. Councilor S. Calise stated that part would be something to add in the explanation but not the question. Councilor J. Burlingame stated that the question would read as the statute.

D. Iglioizzi stated that Council wants to stay as close to the language of the statute as possible. D. Iglioizzi stated that the Council can be in favor of moving away from the statute so long as the intent of the statute is not defeated. D. Iglioizzi stated that the further away from the statute that the wording gets then the more susceptible it is to being challenged as not legally sound and then a waste of time. D. Iglioizzi stated that the explanation which is not seen here today is going to be very in- depth. D. Iglioizzi stated that the explanation will be on the ballot.

No Action Taken

V. Seek to Convene to Closed Executive Session Pursuant to:

- A. RIGL 42-46-5(a)(2) Sessions pertaining to collective bargaining, litigation or work sessions pertaining to collective bargaining or litigation:
 - 1. Discussion by Council, Vote, or Other Action re: Litigation – Opioid Settlement
 - 2. Discussion by Council, Vote, or Other Action re: Potential Litigation

Moved to be heard after Item III. Pledge of Allegiance

VI. Reconvene Open Session - Disclosure of votes taken in Executive Session & Consideration of the Sealing of Minutes - Discussion and/or Action

Moved to be heard after Item III. Pledge of Allegiance

VII. Adjourn

MOTION was made by Councilor J. Burlingame to ADJOURN at 8:42 P.M.; seconded by Councilor S. Calise

Discussion: None

VOTE: AYES- Burlingame, Calise, Greathouse, Steere, Worthy
NAYS-0

MOTION PASSED