

No. 5: ConVal School District Budget Process

Our last article discussed the recent tax bills. This one will address the process and timeline followed to develop the next budget (FY 2021-22) which will impact final tax bills issued a year from now.

School Board -The ConVal School Board consists of thirteen members, each elected by voters in their respective towns for a three-year term. The Board has statutory authority and responsibility in two key areas: Policy and Budget.

The Board starts the budget process each summer (usually just after each school year ends on June 30th) by providing “guidance” to the District Superintendent regarding development of the budget for the following school year. The Superintendent then develops and recommends a proposed operating budget to the Board. Over the course of several months, the Board reviews, discusses, amends, and then finally has a formal vote to approve the budget that is presented to the public and must be approved by District voters as a separate “warrant article” each year in March.

This past year was not a normal year. The impact of COVID on District resources (both financial and personnel) has been significant. The budget development schedule described below started at the same time as usual, but the Superintendent requested (and the Board approved) a one month delay for the submittal of the budget to the Board for review. That just happened - on Saturday December 5th - at the Board’s annual budget planning meeting.

Budget Guidance – One significant change in the process this year was the budget “guidance” the Board provided to the Superintendent. It has changed as the pandemic has changed. We started with “Plan A” which was a *return to normal* for the 2021-22 school year with “Plan B” being a *continuation of the current hybrid model* of instruction. That was later reversed as the inevitability of the second wave became probable – and was changed again as the likelihood of effective immunizations increased and as state requirements for long term remote instruction options are emerging.

Remote learning is likely to be an “option” that will outlast the pandemic. State regulations requiring just that are being discussed. The key factor now is flexibility.

Discussion of the merits of the Board’s guidance and our instructional delivery model(s) going forward deserve an open discussion with public involvement. We’re going to do that - but not in this article.

Budget Schedule - The school year runs from July 1 through June 30. There are several key steps in the annual school budget process. There are many opportunities for public participation. Each step will be briefly described below.

The process to develop the budget for the next school year begins well before the March vote. Here’s a typical budget schedule (with this year’s adjustments for COVID highlighted in yellow):

- July – School Board provides preliminary budget guidance to the School Superintendent.
- Aug to Oct (Nov) – Superintendent and school administrators develop budget options based on School Board guidance.

- November (December 5) – Superintendent submits budget to School Board for review.
- Nov to Dec (Jan) – Board reviews, modifies, and approves the proposed budget to be included on March ballot. A “Default” budget is prepared.
- January – formal submittal of warrant articles for the proposed budget and the default budget. The Board’s recommendation regarding the budget is included on the warrant article voters see in March. Warrant articles submitted by public are also due. The last day for the initial public hearing on the budget: January 19, 2021.
- February - **District Meeting Part 1** is held - usually mid-month at the high school. This meeting is open to the public. The proposed budget and other *warrant articles* that will be on the March ballot are presented and the public is provided an opportunity to comment, ask questions, and can propose amendments to any warrant article whether it was initiated by the Board or by registered voters in the District.
- March - **District Meeting Part 2** is the actual voting held in the individual towns. The proposed (as amended) budget is always one of the warrant articles on the ballot. Other typical warrant articles may include: proposed contracts (e.g. teachers), allocations to the district trust funds, school board stipends, etc. There may be one or more voter-initiated warrant articles as well.
- Fall – budget allocation to the towns for use in final property tax bills (refer to the Article 4).
- December - each town finalizes and publishes final tax rates for the year

The dates for the two District Meetings have been established:

- Part 1 – February 2, 2021
- Part 2 – March 9, 2021