



News Coverage

Mohawk Trail and Hawlemont Regional School Districts
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[All 30 articles, including solar grant match and \\$2.8M school assessment, OK'd in Ashfield](#)

By Diane Broncaccio, Staff Writer

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ASHFIELD — The 126 voters who attended the five-hour Annual Town Meeting on Saturday approved all 30 warrant articles and applauded several longtime volunteers who have given decades of service to the town.

The largest hike in the \$7.69 million town budget was a \$208,809 increase in the town assessment and capital costs for the Mohawk Trail Regional School District. That represents a \$2.8 million school assessment for Ashfield, a 6.3% increase. According to the school district, Ashfield has 39 students enrolled at the high school, 72 at Sanderson Academy and 11 in other Mohawk Trail schools.

“I do not support this budget,” commented resident Phil Pless. “We need a revolution in our school budget.”

Pless argued the district spends Ashfield’s assessment on funding partially empty school buses and spends “too much on administration” compared to other districts.

“We have to come up with some dramatic solutions,” Pless added.

Superintendent Sheryl Stanton said state Rep. Natalie Blais is leading the efforts for more equity for rural schools, which may include changing the rules outlining that rural districts should have school bus seats available for every eligible student, regardless of whether they take the bus. Stanton said the budget increase reflects a \$112,000 transportation increase, \$719,746 in increased salaries and the state’s “minimum required spending” formula, in which per-capita income levels are factored in.

On Friday, Ashfield became one of the state’s 19 Climate Leader Communities, making the town eligible for up to \$1 million in grants to help transition town buildings away from fossil fuels and toward cleaner, renewable energy. Energy Committee Chair Alexandra Osterman said the group’s goal is to eliminate all greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. Annual Town Meeting voters agreed to transfer \$100,000 to match a state grant to install solar arrays at the Highway Garage and Wastewater Treatment Plant.

To save time, residents agreed to amend the bylaw that requires Town Meeting voters to vote to give non-resident officials permission to speak. From now on, the police chief, school superintendent and other officials who do not reside in town will be able to address Town Meeting attendees after they have been recognized by the moderator.

Voters also gave the green light to a \$500,000 Proposition 2½ debt exclusion to repair the crumbling retaining wall on Bronson Avenue, so that the money will be quickly available as a match for state or federal funding.

Among changes to town government positions, Town Meeting attendees gave their blessing to making the tree warden an appointed role instead of an elected one. In recent months, the Selectboard has discussed the possibility of rolling the tree warden's responsibilities into the highway superintendent's job description. Additionally, to encourage more participation on the Planning Board, voters changed the board's five-year terms to three-year seats.

Other approved articles include:

■\$721,470 for general government expenses, \$521,830 for public safety, \$974,933 for public works, \$80,888 for health and human services, \$139,632 for culture and recreation, \$73,552 for debt services, \$41,802 for Franklin Regional Council of Governments services and \$359,990 for employee benefits.

■Capital projects totaling \$351,941 that include bridge work (\$100,000), a pickup truck replacement (\$40,000), a chairlift at Town Hall (\$70,000), computers (\$12,500), Town Hall building and design improvements (\$50,000), and parking lot paving behind the Belding Memorial Library (\$20,000).

Election results

Incumbents were reelected in the two contests on this year's election ballot, which drew 211 voters to the polls.

Tom Poissant was re-elected to tree warden by a 108-89 vote against Lucas LaFleur. Elizabeth Lesure was re-elected as constable for a three-year term over Lucas LaFleur by a vote of 132-53.

The following candidates ran unopposed and won seats for these terms:

- Moderator, one-year term — Stewart "Buz" Eisenberg, 197 votes.
- Selectboard, three-year term — Thomas Carter, 190 votes.
- Board of Assessors, three-year term — Faye Whitney-Lussier, 194 votes.
- Board of Health — Evelyn Resh, three-year term, 182 votes; and Jennifer Williams, one-year term, 185 votes.
- Finance Committee — Bennett Markens, 181 votes, and Laura Stravino, 184 votes, with both seats for three-year terms; and Ayala Carter, 182 votes, two-year term.
- Park Commission, two seats with three-year terms — Gail Wiedmann, 186 votes, and Jaime Rogers, 188 votes.
- School Committee, three-year term — Patricia Bayer, 181 votes.
- Sewer Commission, three-year term — Richard Taylor, 186 votes.
- Belding Memorial Library trustee, five-year term — Robert Barba, 184 votes.
- Planning Board — Adam Bright, five-year term, 175 votes; and Carter Carter, two-year term, 187 votes.

Ballot questions

All [five ballot questions](#) were approved. The 211 voters represent 14% of Ashfield's 1,465 registered voters.

Voters agreed to exempt any borrowing for repairing the Bronson Avenue retaining wall from Proposition 2½, so that any tax hike caused by the borrowing would not be a permanent tax increase. The vote was 171-25.

They also agreed to change the tree warden position from elected to appointed by a 139-60 vote.

Additionally, voters agreed to combat invasive species growth in Ashfield Lake by a 179-27 vote. On the question of whether Ashfield should consider using herbicides to control the invasive species, 106 residents voted in favor and 98 residents were opposed.

The final non-binding question asked if the town should pursue fiscal sustainability of the Mohawk Trail Regional School District, even if it might mean closing Sanderson Academy. The vote was 132 in favor and 72 opposed.

Source: <https://www.recorder.com/All-30-articles-including-solar-grant-match-and-2-8M-school-assessment-OK-d-in-Ashfield-61017887>