TOWN OF BOLTON
3 BOARD MEETING:
BOARD OF SELECTMEN JOINT MEETING WITH MEMBERS OF
THE FINANCE COMMITTEE & BOARD OF EDUCATION
Tuesday, October 20, 2026, at 6:30 p.m.
Town Hall & Zoom Meeting
MEETING MINUTES

	ROSTER	IN-PERSON	ZOOM	ABSENT
FIRST SELECTMAN:	Rodney Fournier	X		
SELECTMEN:	Bryce Aaronson	X		
	Mather Clarke	X		
	David Cowles		X	
	Robert DePietro		X	
	Gwen Marrion	X		
	Tim Sadler	X		

STAFF:	Stephanie Smigala, Interim Finance Director
	Andrea Vassallo, Recording Secretary

1.0 Call to Order:
First Selectman Rodney Fournier called the meeting to order at 6:31 p.m.

2.0 Public Comment: None.

3.0 Discussion on Columbia Student Count and Projections:

Additional parties present for discussion:

- David Caruso, **Superintendent, Bolton Public Schools**

- **Bolton Public Schools Board of Education:**
  Andrew Broneill,
  James Perkins,
  Ashley Phelan,
  Ashley Paggioli,
  Denay Johnston,
  Benjamin Davies,
  Jennifer Stahl

- **Finance Committee:**
  Ross Lally,*
  Melissa Wielandt,*
  Tyler Egner,
  Rodney Fournier,
  David Cowles,
  Benjamin Davies,
  Denay Johnston

*Absent from meeting.

- The superintendent described attracting Columbia students to Bolton High School and retaining current district students as ongoing priorities. A prior comparison found Bolton's rate of students continuing from Bolton Center School to Bolton High School was higher than in many neighboring districts, although all districts face competition for students.
- **Columbia presents particular recruitment challenges:** its students can choose among several high schools, its student population is declining, and the district has not always been able to communicate directly with Columbia families. The superintendent said some families may not know Bolton is an option.
- Recent outreach included:
    - Hosting about 48 Columbia students at Bolton High School for a student-led tour, small-group discussions, and activities such as culinary and band experiences. Families were invited to provide contact information for follow-up tours or student shadowing.
    - Planning an evening event for prospective students and families and attending an informational night at Horace Porter School with representatives from other high schools.
    - Meeting with Columbia's superintendent, sending families personal letters, and arranging informal opportunities for Columbia and Bolton students to meet, including after a soccer game.
    - Posting school spotlight videos on the district website to publicize programs and activities.
- The superintendent said Bolton's strengths include small classes, teachers who know students personally, a strong sense of community, and students' ability to shape clubs and activities. Many students also participate in sports and extracurriculars; Bolton allows students to play multiple sports without needing to make a highly competitive team.
- Board members were encouraged to support the schools publicly and advocate for the resources students need. The superintendent described the schools as one of Bolton's most valuable community assets.

Enrollment & Tuition Possibilities

- The Board of Education is considering whether to accept tuition-paying students from other towns to increase enrollment and revenue. The board has received several inquiries from families living elsewhere and plans to review legal and operational pros and cons with its attorney in November.
- Columbia's arrangement with Bolton is distinct from general tuition enrollment and dates back to the high school renovation; Columbia students now have additional high-school options.
- Potential policy safeguards could include limiting enrollment when additional staffing is required, using a lottery, and considering the costs of special education. Members also discussed the possibility of siblings seeking placement across multiple grade levels.
- The superintendent said taking about **40 additional students** might be possible without immediately hiring staff, but the financially workable number for Bolton may not match what would benefit a larger district. Tuition levels would also matter; Bolton's per-pupil expenditure was cited as about **$23,000**. No enrollment policy or target was decided.

4.0 Discussion on Bonding and Referendum:

- The town reviewed outstanding obligations:
    - A **2017 general obligation bond** for improvements at Bolton Center School and Heritage Farm was paid off in August. Savings of approximately **$175,000 per year** are expected in fiscal year 2028.
    - A **2017 advance-refunding bond**, associated with the remaining portion of the 2010 high school bond, is due to be paid off in August 2030.
    - A **2021 advance-refunding bond**, associated with the original 2012 high school/fire-truck bond, is due to be paid off in May 2032.
    - A short-term bond anticipation note has been renewed annually.
- The bond proportions attributable to the high school and fire truck were not available during the meeting and were to be confirmed.
- The fire truck purchased for approximately **$810,000** was initially financed with a **$630,000** bond anticipation note. The remaining principal is about **$595,000**, plus outstanding interest. The note has been carried forward since 2023; the town has paid nearly **$77,000 in interest**, about **$49,000 in issuance/refinancing costs**, and **$35,000** in fiscal year 2027. Maintenance costs were not included in those figures.

- The original plan was reportedly to incorporate the truck into a school-roof bond, but that did not occur. The town is now considering ways to pay it off without adding it to the roof bond, including reallocating capital funds or using rainy-day or unassigned fund balances.
- Members raised selling a truck as an option, while noting that a fire-department study and truck-by-truck maintenance records are needed to assess the fleet's costs and value. The study's level of detail and timing were questioned; additional supporting data had been requested. The fire chief is compiling annual maintenance costs by truck. The debt and truck issue will remain on the agenda as the town evaluates its options.

5.0 Discussion on budget related items for the current fiscal year, next year and subsequent years including:

FY2026 figures are preliminary and unaudited; the audit is targeted for completion by **December 31, 2026**. The initial actual-versus-budget comparison showed:

a. Revenues
- Revenue above budget by approximately **$296,010**.

b. Expenditures
- Town expenditure is below budget by approximately **$411,514**.
- Board of Education expenditures below budget by approximately **$734,455**.
- Together, those variances produce a possible **$1,441,979 surplus versus budget**. The finance officer cautioned that this is not a complete measure of available fund balance.

c. Debt Service
- A broader fund-balance calculation presents a more constrained picture: audited unassigned fund balance of about **$3.2 million** is projected to fall to roughly **$1.3 million** after accounting for an anticipated **$730,000 FY2026 deficit** and **$1.1 million budgeted use of fund balance for FY2027**.
- The finance officer said the town has effectively used unassigned fund balance to balance budgets for more than a decade. Positive revenue and tax performance had masked the practice, but the town recorded a **$135,000 loss in FY2025** and expects a larger FY2026 loss.

- The town's fund-balance policy, adopted in 2009 and updated in 2017, calls for undesignated fund balance of **8.5%–10%**. The town is currently below that range, and the finance officer is developing a multiyear plan to restore it.
- For FY2027, an error involving the mill-rate collection factor is expected to create a revenue shortfall of about **$624,000** if collections reach the historical **99%** rate; at **98%**, the shortfall could be closer to **$800,000**.
- Interim Finance Director, Stephanie Smigala, stated the town may need to find about **$1 million in reductions from the FY2027 budget**. Current planning suggests a roughly **5% mill-rate increase for FY2028**, followed by an increase closer to **2% in FY2029**; the 2030 revaluation is expected to affect the rate. The board discussed smoothing the adjustment over two years and possibly using some fund balance to ease the first year. Further modeling is needed before firm figures are presented.
- Projections include inflation and bonding costs, including the school-related borrowing. Members noted that falling fund balances also reduce interest income, which could further weaken the outlook.

d. Capital Improvements Discussion (Both Town and School):

i. Updates on Current Capital Projects

- **School roof:** Engineering services were out to bid; proposals were expected to be reviewed the following week.
- **Town Green:** The project was authorized, but the contractor's signed contract was still pending. The contract provides a 60-day performance period.
- **Herrick Park soccer field:** Plans were nearing completion after site investigations for rock and ledge. A **$500,000 grant** was discussed, with a reported 20% local match.
- **Recreation and park facilities:** The remaining roughly **$200,000** from a $500,000 grant was discussed for pavilion work, including at Heritage Farm/Herrick Park. Members noted the funds might not cover all desired work. A pavilion would also provide shelter for recreation programs during bad weather.

- **Steele's Crossing:** A new parking area and crosswalk were nearing completion. Solar-powered warning signs had been delivered to the highway department for wiring. Tree trimming and ownership/easement boundaries on the bank remained issues; clearing was not expected to happen that year.
- **Community septic system:** Work was moving forward to connect the library, police station, and town hall, potentially enabling future uses of sites currently constrained by septic systems.

ii. Upcoming Capital Projects for Next Year

- **Other projects:** The trail continuation was on hold, and playground work was reported complete.
- Capital requests for the next fiscal year were still being collected. Items mentioned included an approximately **$11,000 town-hall door-entry system upgrade**. The BOS noted that vehicle replacements had often been deferred.

6.0 Adjourn:

T. Sadler **MOVED to ADJOURN** the meeting **at 7:36 PM.** Selectman B. Aaronson **SECONDED. MOTION CARRIED 7:0:0.**

Respectfully submitted by Andrea Vassallo, Recording Clerk
Andrea Vassallo
Please see minutes of subsequent meetings for corrections to these minutes and any corrections hereto.

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