

Hingham Advisory Committee Meeting
Thursday, March 12th, 2026, at 7:00 PM
Town Hall, 210 Central Street, Third Floor, South Meeting Room

In Attendance: Carol Tully, Chair, Kevin Freytag, Vice Chair, Ted Ciolkosz, Secretary, Brenda Black, Ben Burnham, Tina Sherwood, Jerry Seelen, Steve Pohl, Brian Stack, David Leiphart, Elaine Cusker, Michael Herde, Mary Power, Alan Macdonald, John Germain

1. The Chair called the meeting to order and read the following statement. This meeting is being held remotely/or in person as an alternate means of public access pursuant to Chapter 2 of the Acts of 2025 and all other applicable laws temporarily amending certain provisions of the Open Meeting Law. You are hereby advised that this meeting and all communications during this meeting may be recorded by the Town of Hingham in accordance with the Open Meeting Law. If any participant wishes to record this meeting, please notify the chair at the start of the meeting in accordance with M.G.L.c. 30A, § 20(f) so that the chair may inform all other participants of said recording.
2. Town Financial Discussion Part 3 – Debt, Debt Service, Statutory Limit, Financial Policy. See attached presentation. Massachusetts law allows municipalities to have debt exceeding 5% of taxable property value. Recent town policy includes borrowing exclusions for enterprise funds. 2025 equalized valuation: \$10.6 billion; FY26: \$11.4 billion. Remaining borrowing capacity as of April 2025: approximately \$416 million. Debt limit growth: 5-10% every two years over the past decade. Projected debt capacity after planned borrowings: about \$113 million. Authorized but unissued debt totals approximately \$34.5 million; total potential liabilities around \$170 million. Debt service as a percentage of expenditures: between 5% and 10% per financial policy. Current debt service projections stay within policy limits although adding future projects may temporarily exceed limits, however, historical debt levels show fluctuations aligned with major projects and rating agencies take such things into account, even if policy limits are exceeded temporarily.
3. Warrant Articles - EE, Hingham Municipal Light with liaison Elaine Cusker. The “cost of this project” paragraph added clarity to the prior three years of rate increases (total cumulative increase was 6.91% over three years, not 6% per year over three years). Motion made to recommend the borrowing of up to \$70 million for HMLP project. Unanimously approved.

Article P, Construction for the Center of Active Living. Considering impact of alternatives to the current project (alternative site or alternative size on planned site) the current project cost is approximately \$32 million, including design costs already expended. A scenario with a reduced-size building on the current site estimates costs around \$32.3 million if completed in two town meetings, which is more expensive than the current plan. Building on an alternative town-owned site could require three town meetings, extending the timeline by 2.5 years, with costs increasing due to delays. The town has already spent \$2,025,000 on feasibility and design for the current project.

Current construction costs are estimated at approximately \$19 million for the full-sized HCAL building (not including site improvements costs at Bare Cove Park Drive location) and a reduced 20,000 sq ft building is estimated at about \$17.3 million. Site costs for the current building are around \$6.6 million; a smaller building would reduce site costs to approximately \$6.29 million. Cost savings from reducing size are not linear; fixed infrastructure costs (HVAC, electrical, plumbing) remain largely constant. Contractors have already invested significant hours in preparing bid packages due in late March and early April. Not approving this project could also have adverse repercussions on any future HCAL bidding as contractors have invested time and money into current bids, which have been competitive.

The project could be financed through borrowing, with a proposed article asking for authorization to issue bonds and notes. The current tax impact on the average assessed home would increase by approximately 2.5% annually, reaching about 4% by 2029. To pass at Town Meeting, a two-thirds majority would be required followed by a majority vote at the ballot to authorize borrowing (excluded from Prop. 2 ½). Supporters emphasize the project's importance for community sustainability and senior wellbeing. Opponents focus on high costs, traffic concerns, and existing infrastructure needs.

Article K, Transfer to the Reserve Fund. Comment describes impact of MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) and OOD (Out of District) expenses including contracted costs of transportation and other. Tina Sherwood recommended "contracted costs" be labelled as "specialized services" and use wording of "contracted transportation" to clarify and be consistent with School Committee language. Discussion of MOU language ensued, as MOU specifies applicable reserve funds should be used prior to Town paying any remaining OOD related expenses which would be done via Article K (which is the Article 6 reserve fund process for unanticipated costs like snow and ice, legal fees, etc. or in this case unexpected OOD related expenses). Note, if unassigned fund balance is insufficient to cover Article 6 expenses, reserve fund balance would be the fallback position to cover any remaining balance owed.

5. Hingham Public Schools (HPS) Budget – Presented by Superintendent of Schools, Kathryn Roberts. Refer to Budget Presentation from March 3rd, 2026. Challenges in Special Education cost management were discussed in depth, and it was noted the number of students receiving special education services has grown statewide, with the district trending similarly. Cost increases are partly due to more intensive services, including behavioral techs, speech therapy, occupational therapy, and psychological evaluations. Contracted services are used for episodic or temporary needs, often based on IEP team decisions, not permanent staffing. The HPS district has proactively built new programs, like language-based dyslexia programs, to service more students in-Town but cannot create all specialized programs in-house due to scale limitations. The Town does however collaborate with neighboring districts and regional collaboratives to provide more cost-effective specialized services.

The number of students with IEPs has increased in line with statewide trends, and currently there are 61 students in out-of-district placements. Again, HPS emphasizes in-district support to reduce out-of-district placements, focusing on strengthening Tier 2 supports and in-district specialized programs although building in-district programs is limited by cohort size and scale; programs like language-based dyslexia support are recent additions and collaboration, e.g., with Marshfield, to develop specialized programs like therapeutic services are pursued when not practical for the Town to do so in-house. Additionally, space constraints can influence program placement and expansion within existing Hingham Public School buildings. Case in point, HPS plans to move students to new classrooms at Foster next year and is exploring the development of a therapeutic program which would serve students with trauma, mental health needs, and behavioral challenges. Special Education Executive Director Chris Panarisi has experience in building such programs, and the newly hired principal at Foster Elementary School has relevant experience as a special education team chair and assistant principal.

It was also noted HPS had added 32 FTE (Full-Time Employee) positions post-COVID, mainly in general education support, not directly in special education. However, since then the district has cut 26.2 secondary and 9 elementary positions, related to decreased enrollment. Cuts have targeted central office, technology, supplies, and professional development to avoid impacting student services as much as possible.

6. Motion to Adjourn – Unanimously approved.

Respectfully submitted by Theodore D. Ciolkosz, Jr., Secretary