



Town of Wendell

# Financial Management Review

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Division of Local Services / Technical Assistance Section

January 2012



January 17, 2012

Town of Wendell  
Board of Selectmen  
P.O. Box 41  
Wendell, MA 01379

Dear Board Members:

It is with pleasure that I transmit to you the enclosed Financial Management Review completed by the Division of Local Services for the Town of Wendell. It is our hope that the information presented in this report will assist the town in improving its financial management practices, addressing areas of concern and meeting its long-term planning needs.

As a routine practice, we will post the completed report on the DLS website, [www.mass.gov/dls](http://www.mass.gov/dls), and forward a copy of the report to the town's state senator and representative.

If you have any questions or comments regarding our findings and recommendations, please feel free to contact Rick Kingsley, Bureau Chief of the DLS Municipal Data Management and Technical Assistance Bureau at 617-626-2376 or at [kingsleyf@dor.state.ma.us](mailto:kingsleyf@dor.state.ma.us).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert G. Nunes". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Robert G. Nunes  
Deputy Commissioner &  
Director of Municipal Affairs

cc: Senator Stanley C. Rosenberg  
Representative Stephen Kulik

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## Introduction

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At the request of the board of selectmen, the Department of Revenue's Division of Local Services (DLS) completed this financial management review for the Town of Wendell. The observations, conclusions and recommendations presented in this report are based on site visits and interviews with local officials and town hall staff. In addition, records and documents provided by the town and information maintained by DLS were reviewed by members of the DLS Technical Assistance Section. Included were the town's Tax Recap, Schedule A, Balance Sheet, warrants and annual budgets, as well as the outside audit reports and management letters completed by Scanlon & Associates. The town's DLS Bureau of Accounts field representative and its Bureau of Local Assessment community advisor were also consulted. Persons interviewed are listed in the Acknowledgements section of this report.

The request for our assistance was among a series of recommendations offered by the town's money managers study committee. Formed by the board of selectmen in February 2010, this eight-member ad hoc committee was asked to explore the financial management operations of the town accountant, treasurer, assessors, town clerk and collector. In doing so, the committee reviewed the performance of each office and how they work together; it researched how neighboring communities oversee and manage these functions; and, it investigated what changes might be made to provide for a more efficient and effective operation. The results of the committee's four-month investigation identified 28 recommendations designed to enhance accountability and improve overall financial management operations in town government. Their report is available on the town's website ([www.wendellmass.us](http://www.wendellmass.us)).

The money manager's findings identify various issues that are not uncommon, and often characteristic of governments in small towns such as Wendell's. Their report contends, among other observations specific to the individual finance offices, that the part-time nature of government needs renewed focus from town leadership. This is primarily attributed to feelings among department managers that they receive "very little feedback, guidance, monitoring, understanding, and support." By extension, the money managers envision benefits from a system that promotes additional supervision and help. The report concludes that, along with greater focus and involvement from the board of selectmen, the town needs to establish a new finance director position, expand the role of the town coordinator and hold regular "money manager" financial team meetings to solve problems, coordinate communications and hold staff accountable. A complete list of the recommendations and a progress report to date is available in the Appendix.

This financial management review largely dovetails with the scope of the money managers study committee. Our report centers on an evaluation of the town's government structure in the context of the duties and responsibilities of finance officers, the degree of coordination and communication that exists

between and among local officials involved in financial management, and the budget, capital planning and other fiscal activities. It begins with a brief introduction to Wendell's general government and follows with a series of recommendations to enhance overall financial management practices in town. It then provides an overview and additional recommendations specific to the town accountant, treasurer, tax collector and assessors. We encourage the board of selectmen, the finance committee, and other local government officials to consider the observations, analyses and recommendations we make when formulating overall strategies for improving Wendell's financial management.

## General Government Overview

The Town of Wendell is a rural hilltop community located in eastern Franklin County. Almost two-thirds of the town is comprised of state-owned conservation and other public and private protected watershed, forest and wildlife land areas. With a population of 848 (US Census 2010) and a land area of 32 square miles, Wendell is among the least densely populated communities in the state (19<sup>th</sup>).

Wendell operates under a mix of state statutes and local bylaws that define the financial management responsibilities of office holders and set out the requirements relative to the procedures of government. The town is governed by open town meeting and a three-member elected board of selectmen who oversee municipal operations. Selectmen appoint a part-time town coordinator, shared with the neighboring town of New Salem, to manage the day-to-day affairs of the municipality. This shared arrangement is rare among communities in Massachusetts, but one that has been in place for almost 20 years. The town coordinator, whose duties and responsibilities are outlined in a joint job description, is also paid a small stipend by Wendell to serve as the town's finance director. This new role, recommended by the money managers study committee, facilitates communication and orchestrates financial management team meetings that have typically taken place every other month.

Outside the town coordinator, the management of municipal finances centers on the four core departments of the town accountant, treasurer, tax collector, and assessors. The treasurer, tax collector and board of assessors are separately elected, while the town accountant has a contractual relationship through the Franklin Regional Council of Governments' fee-for-service town accounting program. Wendell has experienced recent turnover in the board of assessors and town clerk. By all accounts, the new office holders represent a positive change that has contributed to improved financial management operations. In the body of the report, we provide a more detailed description of the various financial management offices, along with recommendations specific to each department. An organizational chart of local government finance offices is included in the Appendix.

Wendell's total operating budget in FY2011 was \$2,943,732, of which approximately 55 percent was funded through the tax levy, 10 percent through state aid, 4 percent from local receipts and 31 percent from all other sources. The cost of education amounted to 48 percent of the general fund budget, while remaining dollars financed public safety (3 percent), general government (12 percent), public works (20 percent), recreation & human services (3 percent) and other fixed costs (14 percent). In the Appendix, we provide a historic view of Wendell's revenue and expenditure trends.

Wendell carries a moderate debt burden. According to the most recent statement of indebtedness, the town has \$1,339,843 in total outstanding debt, but most falls outside the limits of Proposition 2½. Last year the town appropriated \$131,317, or a little over 4.5 percent of the budget, to cover principal and interest charges. The bulk of Wendell's debt (\$1,242,474) is attributed to the construction of the new town hall and library that were financed through the USDA Rural Development Program. While the terms of the loan (4.25 percent interest rate over 39 years) are favorable for a community with limited access to the market, the total interest charges will amount to over \$1.3 million over the life of the obligation according to the most recent debt schedule.

Wendell's reserve levels however are extremely high, if not excessive, for such a small town. Combined reserves including stabilization and free cash are sizable at \$1,261,159 or 42.8 percent of the total operating budget. As of July 2010, free cash totaled \$249,544 or 8.48 percent of the budget, while the general stabilization fund balance was \$1,011,615 or 34.37 percent of the budget. The town also has access to \$150,476 in excess levy capacity, which it can use to raise revenues if need be. In the Appendix we provide a comparison of Wendell's debt and reserve levels to Franklin County peer communities, as well as the town's historic trends.

Conclusion – Based on our review, we found Wendell to be a reasonably well-run community despite the informal nature of its largely volunteer part-time government. Local officials have made tremendous progress since the summer to improve Wendell's overall financial management operations, which we credit to the recent self-assessment completed by the money managers study committee. Their holistic approach to evaluating the municipal government and the implementation of over two-thirds of their recommendations to date has moved the town forward. We credit the hard work and dedication of each member of the financial management team who have made this happen. In no small way, the appointment of the town coordinator as finance director, holding regular financial management team meetings and efforts of new managers in key departments contributed to this success.

Among every day government functions, town receipts are collected, posted and accounted for on a more or less regular basis. Vendor and payroll warrants are processed and approved, and town obligations are met. Records are up to date, accurate and reconciled. Also, checks and balances appear to be in place. While the town has had issues in the past with setting the tax rate, this appears to be

resolved moving forward. Complementing these factors, Wendell benefits from a relatively low cost to operate, a moderate debt burden and significant stabilization and free cash reserve levels. Still, improvements are warranted.

We contend that in order to continue the momentum and energy started by the money managers study committee, Wendell needs to build a culture driven by accountability and sustained leadership. To this end, our primary recommendation introduces a strategy to develop annual goals and objectives. Equally important, however local officials must continue to hold regular financial team meetings and adopt a formal budget process. Wendell could also benefit further from broadening their succession planning efforts and exploring potential regionalization opportunities. Additional recommendations suggest an aggressive pay down of the town's long-term debt to save money and the need to identify target reserve and debt levels. Lastly, in the body of the report, we comment on and provide additional recommendations specific to the offices of the accountant, assessor, treasurer, and tax collector.

## Overall Financial Management

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The recommendations below center on the fiscal procedures carried out in finance related departments. Accordingly, we examined the budget, financial forecasting, capital planning and the accounts payable and receivable processes. We looked at fiscal policies and financial monitoring practices, as well as the effect the town's organizational structure has on government. We further reviewed the town's current operations in the context of best practices observed in other communities and recommended by the Division of Local Services. We also considered the roles, responsibilities and working relationships among individuals together with the level of communication and cooperation that exists among decision-makers, managers and staff. Finally, we reviewed local compliance with state laws and regulations relating to finance matters, adherence to acceptable form and to timetables for the submission of periodic reports to the DOR.

### Establish Annual Goals & Objectives

Wendell continues to make meaningful progress in improving its local government operations. Over two-thirds of the recommendations made by the money managers study committee are now implemented. Communication is also strong and local officials are collaborating regularly to complete financial management tasks. In order to prevent this forward momentum from waning, we recommend that selectmen, as the chief policy-making body for the town, develop annual goals and objectives.

Establishing a comprehensive list of clearly defined annual goals and objectives gives departments direction and focuses their efforts on issues that are of primary importance to the town. In its simplest form goals are broad statements of purpose, while objectives offer specific strategies that help attain preferred results. With guidance from the financial management team and assistance from the town coordinator, a series of specific and reasonable benchmarks can be developed for each department to accomplish which is consistent with the long-term plan outlined for the town.

During the year, it is important to measure progress and to anticipate strategies to implement goals more successfully. Opportunities will arise to discuss improvement and, if necessary, bring additional focus to bear on areas where shortcomings are identified. By year-end, departmental performance can be assessed and feedback provided, with appropriate adjustments being made for the ensuing year. Results can be published in the annual town report which will better inform residents of the continued progress being made in town. This system not only fosters an environment of expectations for departments and provides clarity of purpose, but it can become the basis for allocating scarce resources when formulating the annual budget.



As local officials and residents begin to deliberate on goals and objectives for the town, we feel there are three core areas they might explore as part of a long-term strategy. First, we believe the town would benefit by codifying its financial policies and procedures. Wendell functions in a relatively informal way because of the small town atmosphere and the open communication that exists in town hall. However, this may not always be the case. In this instance, it is important to have formal practices in place for the budget or how departments transact business, as we recommend later in the report.

Second, Wendell should embrace technology and the efficiencies it offers. Although broadband is not yet available in town, local officials should initiate a review of how technology is utilized and the many manual practices that persist. They should also identify any risk factors associated with backup or computer use policies. A technology committee composed of residents and staff with technical knowledge and experience could provide a good perspective on how technology can and might be better used in advance of broadband coming to town. As we recommend in the report, a decision to embrace the tax collections software package is a good first step.

Lastly, policymakers should look to improve citizens' access to government services. As a small town, Wendell functions on a very part-time schedule, which sometimes makes it difficult for residents to conduct business in a timely or efficient manner. By initiating a process of identifying all ways in which residents interact with the town, local officials can improve access to services. Examples include developing a more full service website that offers bylaws, web-based payment options, applications, as well as frequently asked questions and the ability to make services requests or report a problem. Other areas of investigation would include expanding town hall hours, or determining what offices should coordinate hours of operation to ease public access.

### Continue to Hold Regular “Money Manager” Financial Team Meetings

One of the bigger hurdles in Wendell is coordinating financial management activities on the part-time schedule of town hall personnel. The current situation can not only make communication difficult between and among local officials, but it can delay getting things done. For this reason, at the recommendation of the money managers study committee, the town coordinator began holding regular financial management team, or “money managers”, meetings to coordinate financial management activities and improve communication between and among the various financial offices in town hall. A number of local officials have expressed that these team meetings were one of the driving forces behind successfully implementing so many of the recommendations made by the study committee, as well as improved communication and financial planning. However, it is also our understanding that the typical schedule of holding these meetings every other month appears to be waning.

Moving forward, we would like to see these meetings codified in bylaw and held every month. Regular financial team meetings, which would comprise the town accountant, treasurer, tax collector, assistant assessor and a representative from the board of selectmen and finance committee, will allow the town coordinator to direct financial planning efforts and strategic decision-making. Meetings provide for a point of contact where information can be discussed and vetted. We anticipate the town coordinator using meetings to review upcoming deadlines and responsibilities related to town meetings, the Schedule A, Tax Recap Sheet, and Free Cash Certification.

### Initiate Broad Succession Planning Effort & Consider Regionalizing Services

Policymakers in Wendell are in the early stages of framing a succession plan for the fire and police chief positions. While no retirements are imminent, local officials feel it is important to have a plan in place that provides for a smooth and thoughtful transition if a vacancy occurs. While we think this makes sense, we recommend officials expand the effort to rethink how all individual roles and office functions are handled in town hall with an eye toward creating greater efficiency and possible cost savings.

Moving forward, we suggest that when town officials become aware of any impending vacancy, they should establish a target date for when the position needs be filled. They should allow time to gather information about core functions and legal responsibilities of the office and/or the position. Included should be any job description, position classification and grade, hours assigned and benefits package. Any applicable provisions of the personnel policies or bylaws should also be identified.

Before advertising the position, a salary survey of neighboring towns should be completed to determine whether the town is sufficiently competitive to attract qualified job candidates. Through interviews with the departing employee and remaining staff it can be determined whether changes in the job duties or office function should take place. The skill sets, experience and qualifications necessary to fulfill the resulting job should also be defined and incorporated into an updated job description.

A vacancy also presents an opportunity to explore whether options exist to appoint or merge positions. To this end, Wendell might consider special legislation to consolidate the separately elected treasurer and tax collector to a single treasurer/collector appointed by the board of selectmen as a long-term strategy. Not only could this establish a more full-time presence in town hall, but provide greater assurance that any new office holder would have the same skills, technical knowledge and experience necessary to carry out their responsibilities as do current office holders. The possibility of converting the board of assessors to appointed under the provisions of M.G.L. c. 41, §25 also exists.

Contracting out or regionalizing a particular service with a neighboring community might also be an efficient alternative. Regionalizing public safety services, for example, might be more cost effective and

less complicated than in other communities because there are no unions in Wendell. The town might also be eligible to compete for a Community Innovation Challenge Grant to help finance the planning, implementation and startup costs of the project. While submitting an application in time for the January 17<sup>th</sup> deadline seems unlikely, we are hopeful additional funds will be available in the future. For information on the grant program, including the guidelines and application, visit the Executive Office for Administration and Finance website: <http://www.mass.gov/anf/budget-taxes-and-procurement/working-for-you/community-innovation-challenge-grant/>.

## Limit Appropriation Requests & Adopt Formal Budget Process

The budget process in Wendell is fairly informal and operates absent any guiding local policy. As one result, in addition to the annual town meeting, special town meetings were held in June, October, December, March and May of last year. Although the finance committee completes revenue projections, distributes guidelines and holds hearings with departments ahead of a presentation and vote on the budget at annual town meeting, warrants from special town meetings point out that a number of supplemental appropriations and/or additional capital request or transfers are routinely made throughout the year for various purposes. These include salaries, equipment costs, and expenditures for consultant type services as an example. While this is within the purview of town meeting, it points to a lack of long-term planning and coordinated communication between and among the department managers and the finance committee who orchestrate the budget process. In short, the town is in perpetual budget mode unnecessarily.

Moving forward, we recommend that the town codify an annual budget process in bylaw. The budget process is the key component of municipal finance, which should have clearly defined roles and responsibilities. It should also follow a formal calendar, outlining when various milestones would occur, such as the presentation of revenue projections, distribution of budget guidelines and department hearings. For more information on the budget process, go to [www.mass.gov/dls](http://www.mass.gov/dls) > Financial Management Assistance > Sound Financial Management Practices.

At the same time, we suggest a policy stating that all finance related town meeting warrant articles be addressed at Annual Town Meeting, while a fall town meeting would be reserved for non-finance-related warrant articles. This approach will condense and provide closure to the annual budget process, which now appears to continue year-long. It removes decisions whether to withhold funding for certain departmental requests until free cash is certified in the fall. The approach also places major funding decisions before town meeting when its attendance is highest and conversely removes sometimes significant funding articles from the special town meetings when attendance is typically low. It further takes the guesswork out of budgeting, by eliminating town leaders' reliance on free cash or transfers from the stabilization fund to supplement budgets or pay for capital equipment purchases that could

otherwise be planned for. Lastly, this will allow the finance committee to shift their focus away from budget related items toward contributing to a discussion of town-wide goals and objectives with the board of selectmen.

Communities significantly larger than Wendell, in terms of population and budget, function successfully with only two town meetings per year. Wendell can do the same if it chooses to.

### Identify Target Reserve & Debt Levels

We recommend that selectmen and finance committee establish guidelines for funding and appropriating from free cash, stabilization, and other reserves. A free cash policy should limit the amount that can be used, or establish an amount that must remain as a starting point for next year's free cash calculation. For instance, if the town chooses to direct a portion of free cash to a recurring spending purpose, then an equal amount should be retained as unexpended so that it might carry forward into the subsequent year's free cash calculation. As a matter of practice, the town should resist using free cash to supplement current year operations. Free cash would be appropriated to fund a capital expenditure, or to serve as a funding source for the ensuing year's budget.

With respect to a general stabilization fund, a policy should identify target levels in a total dollar amount or as a percentage of the total budget. Three-to-five percent of the budget is the recommended range by credit rating agencies. The policy might also specify that excess free cash or certain, recurring income streams become a stabilization funding source. The use of stabilization might be restricted to non-recurring expenditures and only in an amount above a certain dollar threshold. As an option, the town might explore the use of special purpose stabilization funds. State law allows communities to authorize debt exclusions to funds these reserves.

Additionally, local officials should define a debt policy that directly relates to the town's capital improvement program. A policy would control the amount of debt issued by tying debt service levels to a percentage of total general fund revenues (exclusive of free cash, stabilization, or debt exclusion revenue). A policy would specify what spending purposes would qualify for bonding. Further, a policy would direct an annual review of previously authorized or issued debt, with the purpose of redirecting any remaining balances where projects are completed, abandoned, or have yet to begin after a certain period has passed since authorization (often, this is set every two years).

### Consider Aggressive Loan Pay Down

We recommend that local officials consider a strategy to rapidly pay down the town's debt. In September 2007 the town borrowed funds through USDA Rural Development Loan Program to

construct a new town hall and library. Over the 39 year life of the loan the town is expected to pay back \$1,242,474 in principal and \$1,322,524 in interest charges. To significantly reduce this long-term burden the town should consider allocating additional funds to pay down the debt. Through a combination of stabilization fund and/or general fund appropriation, our analysis demonstrates that the town could realize close to \$800,000 in total saving over 12 years if residents are willing to double the current annual debt service payment on the loan from \$65,789 to \$131,578. To our knowledge, the USDA loan program offers the flexibility to make advanced payments without penalty and will provide revised debt schedule based on the new amortization conditions.

We provide a debt service calculator on our website for local officials to compute the total savings based on our recommended payment schedule: <http://www.mass.gov/dor/local-officials/municipal-data-and-financial-management/financial-mgt-assistance/calchandforms.html>

### Conduct Bylaw Review

We recommend that the town complete a substantive review and recodification of the town's bylaws. A strong set of bylaws establishes a formal framework under which the town government operates, sets out certain financial procedures to be followed and describes the role of departments and the responsibilities of appointed and elected managers. Bylaws also help guide residents in their dealings with town government. In Wendell, we requested, but never received a copy of the general bylaws, nor is a copy available on the town's website. As a result, we could not confirm their current condition or that a copy exists. Once a review is complete, a list of adopted general bylaws and locally accepted statutes should be made available on the town's website and at town hall.

### Implement Auto Attendant Phone Feature

We recommend that local officials implement the auto attendant feature in the phone system. Currently telephone calls made to town hall are automatically routed to the town coordinator who transfers the caller to the appropriate office. While this may be perceived as good customer service, the town coordinator is answering telephones and responding to simple requests, all of which is disruptive and a poor use of her time. Rather than having the town coordinator answer the phone, the town should implement the auto attendant feature already present in the system. Residents can then be more effectively directed to specific offices where they can leave a voicemail.

### Re-Advertise for Auditing Services Periodically

We recommend that the town re-advertise for auditing services every five to eight years. As a routine practice, we comment on the number of years that a municipality might contract with or rely on the same auditor. The Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) recommends that communities

enter into multi-year agreements with auditors, or a series of one-year contracts, for a term of at least five years. A multi-year agreement allows for greater continuity and enables a new auditor to spread initial start-up costs over multiple years, potentially reducing costs in the initial years. However, after this term, GFOA recommends a full competitive selection process and a rotation of auditors after each multi-year agreement. Contracting with a new audit firm can not only bring a fresh perspective, but reflects good practice. GFOA also acknowledges circumstances or locations where there is a lack of competition among fully qualified auditors. In such cases, the continued participation of the then current auditor is acceptable, assuming their past performance has been satisfactory and has conformed to industry standards. Wendell has been with the same audit firm for at least the last ten years, which is not uncommon among smaller, western Massachusetts communities.

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## Town Accountant

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Wendell's part-time town accountant has a contractual relationship through the Franklin Regional Council of Governments fee-for-service town accounting program, a service that has been in place since 2007. The department also receives support from a part-time (7 hrs/wk) retiree who is generally responsible for data entry. The town accountant has the legal obligation to oversee all financial activity of the municipality. Through the maintenance of independent records and by following well-defined procedure, the office is responsible for documenting the flow of money into and out of municipal accounts, and plays a vital role in the system of checks and balances established by statute to monitor and protect local assets.

To fulfill this obligation, the office prepares warrants to be signed by the board of selectmen and maintains a general ledger where receipts, expenditures and all other town financial activity is recorded. The town accountant also reconciles cash and debt with the treasurer and receivables with tax collector. In addition, the town accountant monitors revenues and expenditures and is involved in the annual budget process. The office uses FundWare financial software to complete these activities.

More recently the town accountant has also put together a package of "General Accounting & Financial Policies and Procedures", as directed in the money managers study committee report. Yet to be formally adopted by the board of selectmen and finance committee, the draft outlines procedures for processing general receipts, accounts payable, and payroll as well as procedures to complete reconciliations and to handle year end encumbrances.

### Submit All Department Turnover Sheets to Accountant

When departments turn money over to the treasurer they are required by statute to provide a copy of the accompanying turnover sheet to both the treasurer and the accountant. In Wendell, all departments appear to submit a turnover sheet to the treasurer, but do not necessarily deliver a copy to the accountant. Instead, the accountant only receives notification that a department turnover was made when delivered by the treasurer, which represents a weakness in internal controls. To comply with state law and ensure that checks and balances are in place, departments should be required to hand-deliver an original copy of a turnover sheet to the accountant immediately after delivering the turnover to the treasurer. This practice is also consistent with turnover procedures outlined in the draft General Accounting & Financial Policies and Procedures manual introduced by FRCOG.

## Provide Accountant with All Contracts & Grants

After speaking with the town accountant, it seems he does not have custody of all contracts and grants that as a matter of practice he is legally obligated to maintain. Therefore, we recommend that all departments, boards and commissions submit copies of all grants and contracts to the accountant's office in compliance with M.G.L. c. 41 §57. The accountant must be able to verify that the terms of the contract are met when reviewing payment requests. If a bill is submitted for payment and the contract that contains information to payment terms is not on file, the accountant should not process the payment until said contract is presented.

## Distribute Quarterly Revenue Report

We recommend that the town accountant begin issuing quarterly revenue reports to the board of selectmen and finance committee. In accordance with M.G.L. c. 41, §58, the town accountant currently posts a copy of the monthly expenditure report on departments' approved budgets, expenditures to date, transfers and any remaining funds on the bulletin board in town hall. Equally important however, is for policy makers to monitor current revenue trends. To this end, the town accountant should deliver revenue reports identifying total estimated revenues, receipts to date and the balance brought in by departments over the preceding quarter.

## Complete Exit Conference with Outside Auditor

It is our understanding that Wendell does not request a regular exit conference as part of their annual outside audit procedure. To be of greatest value, a successful audit requires good communication and involvement between the town and auditor. Once the audit report is complete, local officials should request a sit down with the auditor to discuss the results of the audit and what procedures or actions need to be taken to strengthen internal controls in the future. Any deficiencies are a risk to the community and so communicating those risks or compliance issues is critical to the financial well-being of the town. As such, the financial team, comprised of representatives from the board of selectmen and finance committee as well as department heads, should meet with the auditor to complete an exit conference.

## Continue to Develop Departmental Procedures Manual

As mentioned in the overview to this section, the town's contract accountant has introduced a thorough guide on General Accounting & Financial Policies and Procedures in response to the outside audit recommendation that manuals be developed for each department. We support this recommendation and encourage the development of procedures manuals within the treasurer, collector and assessors offices. Effective manuals include step-by-step instructions for various financial procedures and often include computer screen images. This is particularly important for the tax collector who is scheduled to roll out a new collections software package.



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## Town Treasurer

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The treasurer is the community's cash manager and should have custody of all municipal money. This responsibility includes posting and depositing receipts into appropriate bank accounts and monitoring balances to ensure the sufficient funds are available to cover town obligations. The treasurer invests town funds and manages debt to maximize investment income and to meet cash flow needs. The treasurer maintains a cashbook, debt schedule, and check registers. As a financial control, the treasurer is obligated to reconcile cash balances and debt, both internally, and with the accountant on a regular basis. Lastly, the treasurer maintains tax title accounts and prepares documents to petition for foreclosure.

The treasurer in Wendell is elected and in her 14<sup>th</sup> year of service. Certified by the Massachusetts Collectors and Treasurers Association, she works 15-20 hours per week and receives additional support from a part-time assistant. The treasurer and her assistant share office space with the part-time accountant and cemetery commission. As treasurer, she accepts departmental turnovers which are recorded in Excel. She deposits town receipts twice a month and prepares a schedule of receipts for the accountant. The treasurer's cash book is maintained in Excel. The treasurer also reconciles the cash book to the bank statements and with the accountant on a monthly basis. Payroll is completed using QuickBooks.

### Create Town Hall Security

Because of concerns about the lack of town hall security, the treasurer retains some blank check stock, then prints and holds vendor checks at a private business location where she is also employed. She does this because that building is fully alarmed and town hall is not. Consequently, she views the remote location as more capable of safeguarding town payments that are legally due to individuals, companies and the Federal government, among others. While we credit the treasurer for her diligence, the storage of town property (signed checks) at a private establishment is not good public policy. Town officials should be prompted to take corrective action. Options would include the installation of an alarm system in town hall, or the installation of a floor safe in the office of and to the satisfaction of the treasurer. We do not regard contortions to make the town clerk's safe available to the treasurer as a viable option. The expense would be money well spent and a minor draw on the town's available resources.

### Establish Office Hours for Turnovers

We recommend that the treasurer establish predetermined hours to accept receipt turnovers from departments. By fixing the office hours for when turnovers are made by individual departments, the

town avoids the risk that money will be left in an unsecured location for days at a time. While this might not be the most convenient approach because of the limited working hours and the varying schedules of town officials, it is an internal control we feel is necessary given the part-time nature of town hall.

## Address Tailings

We recommend that the treasurer research returned or unclaimed checks issued to pay employees and vendors, refund municipal taxes or charges, or pay other municipal obligations. These are commonly referred to as tailings. Any check that is not cashed within three years of issuance is deemed abandoned under MGL Chapter 200A §5. A municipal treasurer holding abandoned checks may turn them over to the state treasurer (Chapter 200A §7). An alternative procedure allows treasurers to retain uncashed and abandoned checks (tailings) for the municipal treasury. With local acceptance of Chapter 200A, §9A, as amended in 2010, a town is also allowed to print a one year expiration date on checks it issues. If, after notice and publication requirements are met, a check remains unclaimed, the amount can be returned to the general fund with the expectation that it will close to free cash at year-end.

## Seek Investment Training

The treasurer is the community's cash manager who is solely responsible for the investment of public funds. As Massachusetts General Laws restrict the choices available to cities and towns regarding these investments, the treasurer must clearly understand her duties and legal obligations to invest prudently and effectively. Accordingly, we recommend that the treasurer seek additional training opportunities to enhance her own level of understanding of legal municipal investments. As an initial reference, the Massachusetts Collector and Treasurers Association, or MCTA, publishes a manual that clearly explains how to safely and effectively invest public funds. Additionally, the MCTA hosts seminars and discussion groups on investing every year. Not only are these events good occasions to learn and discuss prudent investment options, but they also provide opportunities to network with peers. For additional information on these classes and the treasurer's manual, we direct you to the MCTA website at: <http://mcta.virtualltownhall.net/Pages/index>.

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## Tax Collector

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The elected tax collector is certified by the Massachusetts Collectors and Treasurers Association and has been with the town for about 13 years. She is responsible for issuing tax and excise bills, for receiving and posting payments to taxpayers' accounts and for turning over collections to the treasurer. To complete these tasks, she receives a hardcopy commitment from the assessors which is used to post payments or make other adjustments. She also has a separate receivable control (or collector's cash book) in Excel where all monies received, abatements allowed and interest is posted for real estate, personal property and motor vehicle excise, which is reconciled annually with the accountant. Tax payments can be made over-the-counter, by mail, or by drop box. If tax payments are delinquent, procedures are in place for sending tax demands and tax takings are completed annually for delinquents that are more than two years old. The tax collector also processes bounced checks and issues refunds when appropriate. Municipal Lien Certificates, which list all taxes owned on a parcel at the time of refinancing or sale of a property, are completed by the office. Also, while no date has been set, the department is gearing up to install a new tax collections software package through the Community Software Consortium (CSC). In addition, the board of selectmen recently appointed New Salem's tax collector as the assistant tax collector for Wendell. It is our understanding that she will bring a wealth of knowledge and computers skills to the job.

### Embrace Tax Collector's Software Package

As recommended by the money managers study committee, we encourage the tax collector to begin using the tax administration software package offered through the Community Software Consortium (CSC). The program will not only eliminate a number of the manual processes currently employed by the office, including hand adjusting second half tax bills, but streamline procedures involved in reconciling commitments, generating bills and posting receipts. The CSC Tax Administration software offers the ability to implement the full gamut of collection processes including real estate, personal property, farm animal and motor vehicle excise, as well as any special assessments. It also provides a suite of options including: tax bill preparation and printing, demand preparation and printing, municipal lien preparation and printing, payment processing, and report generation. The CSC Tax Administration software is integrated with the CSC's Real Property Information System (CAMA) utilized by the assessors, so commitments are transmitted seamlessly. Tax information is also stored in a secure, password protected database where it remains isolated in order to preserve the integrity of the fiscal year's tax information.

## Complete Monthly Reconciliation of Receivables

The reconciliation of receivables between the tax collector and the accountant takes place only once a year. It is best that this activity be given priority and completed immediately after the close of each month. Frequent reconciliations make it easier to identify problems as they occur and to take corrective action. Conducting these reconciliations at year end is labor intensive and could impact the completion of the outside audit and/or certification of free cash. The failure to reconcile receivables also makes it impossible for the accountant to generate accurate revenue reports, which is an important financial management tool that we recommend earlier in the report. Toward this end, the accountant should speak with the collector, as soon as practical, to agree on a specific day each month when they will meet to complete reconciliations.

## Initiate Tax Takings & Complete Subsequents

We recommend that the collector complete tax takings for the current fiscal year by November or December. While we found that demands are issued timely after second half bills, it is over a year before the notice of tax taking is issued and the taking is executed for receivables to be moved into tax title. At the same time, the treasurer should record the collector's subsequent taxes into previously established tax title accounts before the end of the fiscal year. This is an essential step towards securing the town's liens on these properties, but one that has yet to take place for FY2011.

## Direct Tax Collector & Clerk Fees to the General Fund

We recommend that the town meeting adopt a bylaw to direct the tax collector and town clerk's statutory fees to the general fund. Most Massachusetts communities have adopted a bylaw, which would make the collector's and town clerk's fees general revenues and they would no longer be retained as supplemental income. Simultaneously, and as a matter of fairness, town meeting should increase the annual compensation of these two individuals to account for the loss in fee income.

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## Board of Assessors

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The assessors are responsible for valuing all real and personal property in town and generating the commitment that authorizes the tax collector to collect property taxes and excise payments. Work is performed by a three member elected board of assessors and an appointed part-time (27 hr/wk) assistant assessor who handles day-to-day administrative activities. The town also consults with Duane Adams of Mayflower Valuation, Ltd to complete revaluation work.

The board of assessors in Wendell is relatively new because of the successive departure of the former board members. While we will not expand on those reasons here, all three members were originally appointed by the selectmen in 2010, and have since been elected. To date, each member has completed the Division of Local Services' Course 101 on assessment administration law, procedures and valuation, and is pursuing their certification through the Massachusetts Association of Assessing Officers.

The assessing office uses the CSC Computer Assisted Mass Appraisal (CAMA) system for maintaining property record data, developing property values and hosting the town's property record information online. Assessors' maps are annually updated through Cartographic Associates, and are being converted to a digital format for the town's new geographic information system (GIS).

The volume of work in the assessing office involves approximately 375 residential, 15 commercial and industrial, 15 personal property, 240 vacant land and 90 chapter land parcels. Wendell issues tax bills on a preliminary semi-annual basis. The town does not issue boat or farm animal excise bills, but committed 1,140 motor vehicle bills in FY2011. The town also had an allowance for abatements and exemptions, or overlay reserve, of \$60,303 that represents just over 3.7 percent of the total levy. Of applications filed, the board of assessors issued 23 abatements and 7 exemptions. The board conducts inspections on all sales, abatement and building permit properties.

### Develop Cyclical Reinspection Schedule

The maintenance of current and accurate property data is a critical element in the development of uniform, fair market values. While Wendell completes abatement, sales and building permit related inspections, it does not appear to have a systematic approach to ensure that all properties are inspected at least once in every nine-year cycle. Therefore, we encourage the board of assessors to develop a cyclical reinspection program of all improved property scheduled for completion by FY2015.

## Regularly Submit Building Permits

According to the board of assessors, it is an ongoing challenge to get building permits from the building inspector who also holds similar positions in two other towns. While the building inspector is apparently very responsive to homeowners, he only submits building permits to the board of assessors twice a year. The infrequent turnover of building permits delays the board of assessors in completing necessary inspections and adjustments to field cards. Moving forward, we recommend that the assessors request that the building inspector simply mail the completed permits to the board once a month. The assessors might even provide pre-addressed, stamped manila envelopes for the building inspector to ease the process. Alternatively, the town might consider investing in a tablet computer, such as an iPad, for the building inspector who would complete permits electronically and simply email them to the board of assessors. Not only would this increase productivity, it would eliminate the manual paper driven process.

## End Practice of Printing Field Cards

We recommend that the assistant assessor stop printing field cards at year end to put in a file. As mentioned above, the assessing office uses the CSC CAMA system for maintaining property record data, including field cards. Because field cards are stored electronically in the system and available for use, any printing for filing, or any other storage related purpose, is considered redundant and unnecessary.

## Appendix

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### I. Progress Report on Money Managers Study Committee Recommendations

Recommendation/Goal	Action Taken
1 Create clear and concise job description for each member; put into manual; update as necessary	Job descriptions created for most positions; no updates made to date
2 Create job description for Assistant Assessor	Done
3 Clarify roles of board and staff in Assessors' office, delegating day-to-day operations to staff	Done
4 Create and maintain a calendar or list of deadlines	
5 Create and maintain policy manual in order to provide education for each employee	Currently in draft stage; hope to finalize in January
6 Provide a schedule for the setting of the tax rate	Done
7 Consider requesting a management review by the Department of Revenue	In Progress
8 Adopt a town Code of Conduct and Ethics for elected and appointed officials	Done
9 Establish and adopt a bylaw for a recall election	Idea was considered but rejected; too divisive in small town; requires special legislation
10 Consider the conversion of elected positions to appointed ones	Under consideration; no consensus among money managers
11 Consider ideas for enabling households to display numbers to assist Assessors	Signs have been purchased with emergency management funds; to be installed in spring

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Recommendation/Goal	Action Taken
12 Consider an IT Committee to inventory the town's computers and provide guidance on future IT expenditures	Being done informally through the Selectboard; one Selectboard member is well versed in computer technology and is addressing issues as they arise
13 Ensure that Town Meeting votes are certified and distributed on a timely basis	New Town Clerk certifies and distributes votes within days of meeting; a huge improvement over previous Clerk's practices
14 Develop a procedure to resolve questions between the Collector and Assessors	This has been a topic of conversation at a couple of Money Managers meetings; hopefully they will improve their communication as a result
15 Ensure that abatements are processed and distributed on a timely basis	Being done according to Assessors Assistant
16 Ensure that the Tax Commitment signed by the Assessors agrees with the total amount of tax bills printed	Being done
17 Develop standard forms for bill schedules, time sheets, and receipt turnovers	Done
18 Research resources to provide feedback, guidance, monitoring and support to new money management employees	No formal action taken; all current members of the money management team have been very supportive of new Town Clerk
19 Consider upgrading to another commercial Assessors software program	The Assessors did consider this, but decided they were OK with current CAMA program
20 Consider Tax Collection software for the Collector	We have joined the consortium to use CAMA Collector's software; will be installed and training conducted in the near future
21 Educate the public on the roles of each employee in order to foster goodwill and positive behavior	One of our Selectboard members has written a series of articles in our town newsletter--"Know Your Tax Collector/Town Clerk/etc."; he plans to continue in future newsletters
22 Research the cost and benefits of high speed internet	The benefits are clear; we are working with Mass Broadband to bring high speed internet to the town buildings, hopefully within the year

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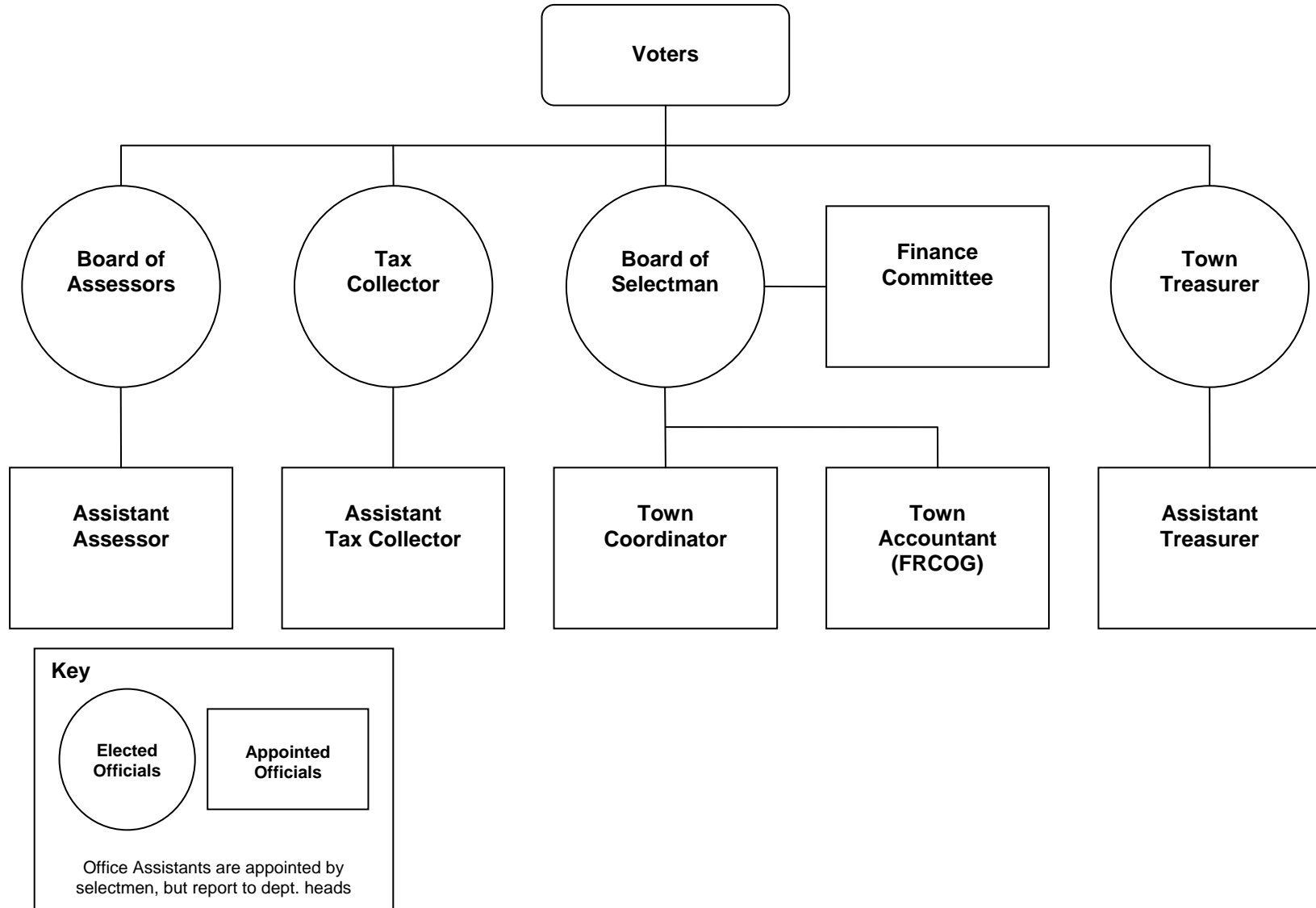
Recommendation/Goal	Action Taken
23 Set up email for the Collector and consider town-wide email addresses	We are still working on the Tax Collector, who seems pretty resistant to email; a member of the Selectboard is working on town-wide address issues, but this probably won't be completely resolved until we get high speed connection
24 Establish a procedure for making changes and additions to job descriptions when regulations and/or mandates increase duties	
25 Research the idea of using July 1 as a start date for newly elected officials	Looked into idea; would require special state legislation, as it is contrary to state law; we abandoned the idea
26 Establish a schedule for regular Money Manager meetings to review calendar and foster communication	Being done, usually every other month
27 Conduct surveys to compare salaries, ideas and task times	We participate in Franklin Regional Council of Governments salary survey; nothing done with other recommendations
28 Create a regular system of accountability, oversight, and feedback, and provide resources and training from outside sources when necessary	No formal action taken on this goal; difficult to establish accountability for elected officials, as they are accountable to the public that elected them, not other officials

## II. Community Benchmarking Data (Franklin County Towns)

Comparative Community Data is sorted by Population, Total budget, and EQV per Capita. Data are gathered and obtained through the Tax Recap and Schedule A that is submitted to the Division of Local Services by Local Government Officials. Combined reserves equal free cash and stabilization funds.

Municipality	2010 Actual US Census	FY2010 Operating Budget	2010 EQV/2010 US Census	FY2011 Avg. Single Family Home Value	FY2011 Avg. Single Family Tax Bill	FY2011 Combined Reserves	Combined Reserves as % of Budget
<b>WENDELL</b>	<b>848</b>	<b>\$2,943,732</b>	<b>\$113,318</b>	<b>\$169,412</b>	<b>\$3,048</b>	<b>\$1,261,159</b>	<b>42.84</b>
MONROE	121	701,368	187,728	86,856	1,112	453,184	64.61
HAWLEY	337	907,500	151,913	213,433	3,127	348,139	38.36
ROWE	393	3,833,174	733,045	207,832	1,108	2,287,268	59.67
HEATH	706	2,046,831	138,493	187,470	3,530	284,771	13.91
LEYDEN	711	1,596,174	129,005	222,677	3,659	111,120	6.96
WARWICK	780	1,908,234	114,479	180,871	3,021	241,764	12.67
NEW SALEM	990	2,388,989	126,600	231,364	3,054	465,957	19.50
CHARLEMONT	1,266	3,114,037	112,521	196,183	3,139	555,165	17.83
WHATELY	1,496	4,817,445	161,322	263,225	4,072	495,563	10.29
GILL	1,500	2,900,658	106,688	210,627	2,928	283,712	9.78
COLRAIN	1,671	3,320,433	106,176	187,253	2,790	327,892	9.87
ASHFIELD	1,737	4,097,553	138,857	240,308	3,350	288,049	7.03
SHUTESBURY	1,771	5,841,468	119,344	244,755	4,741	1,071,470	18.34
ERVING	1,800	11,405,944	350,242	186,154	1,348	5,824,244	51.06
LEVERETT	1,851	6,120,542	153,406	321,418	5,207	863,163	14.10
SHELBURNE	1,893	3,749,299	126,383	240,762	3,048	529,506	14.12
CONWAY	1,897	5,650,729	141,700	300,525	3,901	1,413,649	25.02
BUCKLAND	1,902	4,285,788	117,656	218,061	3,077	631,772	14.74
BERNARDSTON	2,129	4,233,785	105,467	215,998	3,419	320,433	7.57
NORTHFIELD	3,032	7,232,817	134,751	218,239	2,994	358,495	4.96
SUNDERLAND	3,684	7,513,116	99,344	274,967	3,520	741,478	9.87
DEERFIELD	5,125	13,357,149	139,886	278,588	3,432	3,111,217	23.29
ORANGE	7,839	19,614,987	73,204	158,307	2,625	-294,285	-1.50
MONTAGUE	8,437	17,975,567	91,932	191,244	2,922	1,576,921	8.77
<b>Average</b>	<b>2,157</b>	<b>\$5,662,293</b>	<b>\$158,938</b>	<b>\$217,861</b>	<b>\$3,127</b>	<b>\$942,072</b>	<b>16.64</b>

### III. Financial Management Organization Chart



#### IV. Revenue & Expenditure Components

Data are gathered and obtained through the Tax Recap and Schedule A that is submitted to the Division of Local Services by Local Government Officials. Expenditures are from the general fund and do not reflect spending from special revenue, enterprise, capital projects or trust funds.

##### Revenues by Source (FY2005-2010)

FY	Tax Levy	State Aid	Local Receipts	All Other	Total Operating Budget	As Percent of Total Operating Budget			
						Tax Levy	State Aid	Local Receipts	All Other
2005	1,058,275	367,289	229,793	256,658	1,912,015	55.35	19.21	12.02	13.42
2006	1,250,356	460,741	205,000	1,456,782	3,372,879	37.07	13.66	6.08	43.19
2007	1,361,932	371,706	135,700	591,020	2,460,358	55.36	15.11	5.52	24.02
2008	1,401,774	406,197	134,961	541,380	2,484,312	56.43	16.35	5.43	21.79
2009	1,431,877	395,016	137,250	349,295	2,313,438	61.89	17.07	5.93	15.10
2010	1,518,938	276,337	154,891	279,164	2,229,330	68.13	12.40	6.95	12.52
2011	1,619,935	288,547	119,276	915,974	2,943,732	55.03	9.80	4.05	31.12

##### General Fund Expenditures (FY2005-2010)

##### As Percent of Total Expenditures

Fiscal Year	General Gov	Public Safety	Education	Public Works	Human Service, Culture & Recreation	Debt Service, Fixed Costs & Other	Total Expenditures	As Percent of Total Expenditures					
								General Gov	Public Safety	Education	Public Works	Human Service, Culture & Recreation	Debt Service, Fixed Costs & Other
2005	215,721	39,404	827,601	267,309	49,946	198,495	1,598,476	13.50	2.47	51.77	16.72	3.12	12.42
2006	164,051	50,072	957,367	290,553	51,518	234,651	1,748,212	9.38	2.86	54.76	16.62	2.95	13.42
2007	189,726	48,254	934,842	320,511	55,256	245,038	1,793,627	10.58	2.69	52.12	17.87	3.08	13.66
2008	228,173	55,248	916,363	354,452	37,670	227,814	1,819,720	12.54	3.04	50.36	19.48	2.07	12.52
2009	256,749	67,307	895,639	353,381	49,577	253,080	1,875,733	13.69	3.59	47.75	18.84	2.64	13.49
2010	205,301	63,455	840,082	345,876	51,876	242,713	1,749,303	11.74	3.63	48.02	19.77	2.97	13.87

## V. Debt Levels (Debt Service & Total Outstanding Debt)

### **Total Debt Service & Total Outstanding Debt (FY2006-2011)**

Debt Service is the repayment cost, usually stated in annual terms and based on an amortization schedule, of the principal and interest on any particular bond issue. Total Outstanding Debt refers to the remaining principal payments that have not been paid off as of July 1 of the current fiscal year.

	FY2006	FY2007	FY2008	FY2009	FY2010	FY2011
<b>Total Debt Service</b>	<b>\$143,767</b>	<b>\$153,327</b>	<b>\$109,835</b>	<b>\$136,617</b>	<b>\$133,967</b>	<b>\$131,317</b>
<b>As % of Total Budget</b>	<b>4.26</b>	<b>6.23</b>	<b>4.42</b>	<b>5.91</b>	<b>5.79</b>	<b>4.50</b>
<b>Total Outstanding Debt</b>	<b>\$446,861</b>	<b>\$346,738</b>	<b>\$388,460</b>	<b>\$1,551,474</b>	<b>\$1,481,490</b>	<b>\$1,339,843</b>

VI. Reserve Levels (Free Cash & Stabilization)

**Certified Free Cash (FY2005-2011)**

Unrestricted funds from operations of the previous fiscal year that are certified by the Director of Accounts as available for appropriation. Remaining funds include unexpended free cash from the previous year, receipts in excess of estimates shown on the tax recapitulation sheet, and unspent amounts in budget line-items. Unpaid property taxes and certain deficits reduce the amount that can be certified as free cash. The calculation of free cash is based on the balance sheet as of June 30, which is submitted by the town accountant.

	FY2005	FY2006	FY2007	FY2008	FY2009	FY2010	FY2011
<b>Certified Free Cash</b>	<b>\$218,696</b>	<b>\$259,305</b>	<b>\$257,016</b>	<b>\$268,248</b>	<b>\$234,537</b>	<b>\$260,760</b>	<b>\$249,544</b>
<b>As a % of Budget</b>	<b>11.44</b>	<b>7.69</b>	<b>10.45</b>	<b>10.80</b>	<b>10.14</b>	<b>11.70</b>	<b>8.48</b>

**Stabilization Fund Balance (FY2005-2010)**

Fund within a municipal accounting system used to accumulate amounts for capital or other future spending purposes, although it may be appropriated for any lawful purpose per MGL Ch. 40 - Powers and Duties of Cities and Towns § 513. Communities may appropriate into this fund an annual amount not to exceed ten percent of the prior year's tax levy. The aggregate of the stabilization fund shall not exceed 10 percent of the community's equalized value, and any interest shall be added to and become a part of the fund. A two-thirds vote of town meeting is required to appropriate money from the stabilization fund. DLS does not collect fund balances for separate stabilization funds authorized by Chapter 46, sections 14 and 50 and Chapter 140, sections 19 and 137 of the Acts of 2003.

	FY2005	FY2006	FY2007	FY2008	FY2009	FY2010
<b>Stabilization Fund Balance</b>	<b>1,390,239</b>	<b>\$456,163</b>	<b>\$712,137</b>	<b>\$980,794</b>	<b>\$1,109,588</b>	<b>\$1,011,615</b>
<b>As % of Total Budget</b>	<b>41.22</b>	<b>18.54</b>	<b>28.67</b>	<b>42.40</b>	<b>49.77</b>	<b>34.37</b>

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## Acknowledgements

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