

NEWSLETTER

VOL. 2

Special BOS Meeting Focuses on Auditing Delays

On September 27, 2023, a special Board of Selectmen (BOS) meeting was held in the Veterans Room at the Warren Memorial Town Hall to discuss the Town's annual financial auditing procedures and delays that have emerged during the past two to three years.

According to the state's [Municipal Auditing Act](#), all municipalities must have all their financial statements audited at least once annually. ([Learn more about the requirements here.](#)) Lynn Nenni, who has been the Town of Stafford's interim finance director since April 2022, reported to the BOS that the State of Connecticut Office of Policy and Management (OPM) sent a letter to the Town of Stafford indicating the audit report for Fiscal Year 2022 (FY22) was not submitted by the routine deadline of December 31, 2022. As a result, the OPM requested a written summary explaining why the report was late and the steps being taken to correct the current situation and prevent future delinquencies. Nenni gave the BOS a copy of the completed summary report, measures being taken to avoid future delays, and a preliminary version of the audit, as the OPM had requested before final submission to the OPM by September 29, 2023.

Discussion followed regarding the Board of Education (BOE) reports, which are assembled and presented to the Town's finance director by

September 30 of each calendar year. The submission of the BOE audit report for FY22 was late, as well. Nenni explained that key vacancies in the school system and Town finance departments have interrupted the normal audit process for both departments.

Also noteworthy, explained Nenni, is that the BOE and BOS use different software packages. Therefore, for the departments to share staff during periods of absenteeism is difficult because there is no cross-training on the two software systems.

The BOS discussed with Nenni the possibility of using a single financial software platform for both the BOE and the Town. Nenni and First Selectman Sal Titus agreed it would entail research to find a compatible system to handle the needs of both departments, possibly at a significant cost to the Town. This would be possible only if both departments agreed to use a single, shared accounting software.

Nenni said there are towns in CT that use a single accounting software, but that many towns use dual systems as Stafford does.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the BOS approved a motion to send a letter to the BOE requesting that the required financials be submitted to the Town as soon as possible to avoid further delinquencies in submitting the FY22 and FY23 audits to the OPM.

Stafford Seeks National Register of Historic Places Designation

Downtown Stafford is filled with history. Anyone walking down the street can see that, and it may become part of the National Register of Historic Places. At the October 12, 2023, Board of Selectmen meeting a very brief update was given on the project's progress, which is moving forward. The town plans to have a community meeting in January or February of 2024, when people will be able to ask questions and give comments, but, in the meantime, it's worth exploring what this designation would actually mean.

Back in February of 2023, representatives from the National Register Coordinator for [State Historic Preservation Office \(SHPO\)](#), and Roblee Historic Preservation, LLC provided an overview of the National Register program, the history of the downtown, and planned phases of completing the project, [according to the project's information site](#). The proposed historic district is boundaried by Main Street (Route 190) to the north, Tolland Avenue and Hyde Park Road to the west, Highland Terrace to the south, and River Road (Route 32) to the east. Hyde Park, Haymarket Square, Highland Terrace, Spring Street, Main Street (up to where it becomes West Main Street), and a small portion of River Road would be included in the district.

This project, which is funded by a [Survey & Planning Grant](#) administered by the SHPO of the [Connecticut Department of Economic and Community Development \(DECD\)](#), has several goals. If the Stafford district in question is ultimately designated as a historical place, it will preserve Stafford's history, possibly spur economic development, and encourage future preservation while benefitting residents and business owners.

Sounds good, but a little nebulous, right? In more concrete terms, let's explore what being on the National Register of Historic Places would mean for the people who live and work there, [according to the DECD](#).

The National Register DOES:

1. Identify significant buildings, structures, sites, objects, and districts.
2. Encourage the preservation of historic properties by documenting their significance and by lending support to local preservation activities.
3. Enable federal, state, and local agencies to consider historic properties in the early stages of planning projects.
4. Provide for review of federally funded, licensed, or sponsored projects which may affect historic properties.
5. **Make qualified owners of historic properties eligible for federal and state grants for preservation activities.**
6. **Encourage the rehabilitation of income-producing historic properties through tax incentives.**
7. **Provide eligibility for the CT Historic Homes Rehabilitation Tax Credit program for owner-occupied historic homes.**
8. Provide protection from unreasonable destruction under Connecticut General Statutes, Section 22a19a.
9. Allow consideration of fire and life safety code compliance alternatives when rehabilitating historic buildings.
- 10.

The National Register DOES NOT:

1. Restrict the rights of private property owners in the use, development, or sale of private historic property.
2. **Require that properties be maintained, repaired or restored.**
3. Automatically lead to historic district zoning or local landmark designation.
4. **Force federal, state, local or private projects to be stopped.**
5. Provide for review of local or privately funded projects which may affect historic properties.
6. Guarantee that grant funds will be available for all historic properties or projects.
7. **Provide federal tax credits to owners of residential historic properties, unless those properties are rental and treated as income-producing by the IRS.**
8. Provide a marker plaque for registered properties (owners may purchase a plaque from the SHPO).

BOE Hears 2023–2024 School Improvement Plans

On September 25, 2023, Superintendent of Schools [Steven A. Moccio](#) presented the 2023-2024 School Improvement Plans to the Board of Education (BOE). The plan is based largely on the Strategic Educational Framework (SEF) and leadership retreats held over the summer. The district's equity vision statement and mission statement play into the improvement plan, all of which build toward the "Portrait of the Graduate," which ensures students have the skills to succeed after graduation.

Moccio discussed the three strategic imperatives of:

- Organizational Health
- Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment
- Professional Learning for All

Each of these is then broken down into three-year long-term strategies, which are further broken down into short-term actions to be completed throughout the school year.

Organizational Health

Moccio pointed out that there have been significant gains in the district's evidence-based reading and writing (ERW) and math SAT scores. He also said that there are certain areas where Stafford is at the top of its [District Reference Group \(DRG\)](#) and that there is more to come on that at the October 23 meeting. He also teased the fact that Stafford is, at times, outperforming surrounding districts in other DRGs.

Among the issues being addressed by the Organizational health part of the plan is chronic absenteeism. To that end, BOE Chair Laura Lybarger asked about the pre-kindergarten contract that's been implemented at West Stafford School.

West Stafford School (WSW) Principal Anna Guerriero-Gagnon reported that roughly 90% of the contracts had been signed, and that part of the contract requires families to maintain good attendance.

Chronic absenteeism is one of the issues the district is trying to address, especially for the lower grades, under the theory that stopping chronic absenteeism early on will improve it in later grades. Pre-K students, who often haven't been to school before, often get hit hard with illnesses (though illness is an excused absence).

Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

High on every school's priority list is implementing data-driven decision-making across all departments and schools. Small-group instruction that takes students' individual needs into account is also a high priority. BOE secretary Sara Kelley asked how the success of those groups is measured.

Principal Guerriero-Gagnon said her teams use progress monitoring, learning walks, and in-person observations. Stafford Elementary School (SES) Principal Mary Claire St. James said that 2A and 2B (from the presentation) are closely linked, as the data from progress monitoring informs the in-class strategy. ES Assistant Principal Sara Varga added the teachers share strategies that are working with one another in group settings.

Lybarger asked about the sixth-grade social and emotional learning (SEL) class. Stafford Middle School (SMS) Principal Tim Kinel explained that sixth graders take the SEL class to learn about executive functioning skills, empathy and kindness, and generally combatting intolerance (a concern that was raised by student feedback data). The middle school is also looking at adding a second page to report cards that rate students on 11 of the 18 Portrait of the Graduate criteria as well as "Safety, Ownership, Responsibility and Respect" or SORR, as it's known at SMS.

BOE member Eric Bushior asked what the schools' target goals are. Stafford High School Principal Marco Pelliccia stated the high school's goals are to improve their numbers within the Connecticut Accountability System. Principal St. James added that there are student achievement scores and percentages that play a role in the school's goals. Principal Gagnon discussed the data

School Improvement Plans Cont...

that West Stafford School uses for its goals. Principal Kinel added that trend data plays a role as well.

Board member Aaron Hoffman stated he would like to see target data for academic achievement. Principal Pelliccia pointed out that the high school is not always able to report data from tests until later in the year and, therefore, isn't able to share it with the board early in the school year. The superintendent added that the district is now focused on "rigorous goal setting" and the importance of following the same cohort of kids in their growth over the years.

Continuous Learning for All

Kelley asked why there was a difference in the amount of learning walks for each school. Principal St. James said it largely comes down to logistics, but each educator is expected to participate at least once. Principal Pelliccia added that SHS has built the program over the years as teachers learned what to expect and that they are now looking for peer-to-peer feedback. Principal Kinel pointed out that middle school teachers participate in learning walks at the elementary and high schools to ensure they align.

Next, Bushior asked SES about the positive work environment result, which came in at around 55%, in the Stakeholder Feedback Survey. Principal St. James discussed communication and feedback as areas of growth for SES. She also discussed hosting an open-forum format meeting for staff to make it easier for staff to provide feedback on an ongoing basis.

Hoffman asked if the school does a mid-year analysis for the improvement plan. Principal St. James said that while there is no formal mid-year analysis, the schools circle back to the plan on a more ongoing basis throughout the year. Hoffman also asked for an end-of-year update on achievements as related to the improvement plans.

Toward the end of the meeting, Hoffman noted that the equity vision statement is about twice as long as the district mission statement. Saying he likes the first two sentences, he said the last sentence was a repetition of the first two sentences.

Hoffman also said that he gets calls about "polarising and divisive" terms that are used throughout the School Improvement Plan. He said he would like to "Staffordize" the language, specifically the words "equity" and "inclusivity." For instance, he suggested changing the language on the Organizational Health slide from "Establishing educational policies and practices that value equity and inclusivity in opportunity for all members of the community" to "Educational policies and practices that forge an environment that promotes a sense of belonging for all members of the community."

Lybarger said that by saying its "Staffordizing" the language suggests that the community is unable to understand the existing language. Hoffman again said the terms were polarizing. Moccio pointed out that the language deliberated on the language for over a year. When they look at the 2025-2028 SEF, they could reconsider if this is the template they want to move forward with, but cautioned against shying away from terms that people need a better understanding of.

Moccio pointed out that feedback given about specific curriculum that was presented to the board has been taken into account. He said, "I try to stay out of the middle of the politics because what I'm worried about getting the kids what they need, and that's a proper education and skills so that they can be successful in the future."

In the context of education, equity means giving each student what they need to succeed — not necessarily the same thing as all the other students. For instance, students who are financially disadvantaged may get a waiver of transportation costs for sporting events or field trips. Students with a learning disability might get extra instruction or time to take a test. The board approved the School Improvement unanimously. Each school's individual School Improvement Plan is posted on its website.

Stafford Schools Get \$70k in Funding for Tutoring

In an announcement made last week, Governor Lamont and the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) revealed \$11.5 million will be allocated for high-dosage tutoring across 46 districts in the state. Stafford Schools will receive \$70,000 worth of funding to service 35 students.

Governor Lamont and Education Commissioner Charlene Russell-Tucker announced the launch of the Connecticut high-dosage tutoring (CHDT) program in March 2023 to target students in grades 6 to 9 to enhance mathematics proficiency. CSDE initially allocated \$10 million from American Rescue Plan Elementary Secondary School Emergency Relief (ARP ESSER) funding for this program.

So what is CHDT? Here's what the CSDE has to say:

“Given the extensive impact of the pandemic on student performance in middle-school and secondary math, states and districts across the country are seeking to identify and implement viable methods to accelerate learning. High-Dosage Tutoring (HDT) is a well-researched strategy to address learning loss, ensuring students have intensive, curriculum-aligned support to close academic gaps. “

There was so much interest from school districts during the application process that CSDE increased its commitment from the original \$10 million allocation to \$11.5 million. The program is designed to provide grant funding for the 2023-2024 school year, lists of qualified tutors vetted by the CSDE, and "ongoing technical assistance, coaching, and participation in a Community of Practice provided by an external organization."

Additionally, CSDE announced a partnership with TNTP (formerly The New Teacher Project), a national education nonprofit organization.

TNTP will support CSDE by providing guidance for all participating school districts, technical assistance, coaching, and a suite of resources to aid schools as they establish new tutoring programs with the money provided by this grant.

The state also says the efficacy of the program will be evaluated by researchers through CSDE's research collaborative called the Center for Connecticut Education Research Collaboration. Scheduled to begin by January 2024, the CHDT program will allocate funding to schools for 2023-24 and the first half of the 2024-25 school year.

Chaos in the Skies Above the Stafford Fair

By Jamie Furness, Stafford Historical Society

On the opening day of the 18th Stafford Fair in 1888, the weather was not as promising as anticipated, but that did not stop the schools from closing or cause them to turn the attendees away. Nor had many tickets been returned at the gate. That morning, judges were glad to be inside, and hundreds opted for the attractions in the newly built hall, starting with the favorite and always popular showing of poultry.

Displayed in the grange hall were fruit, vegetables, a 150-pound squash, canned goods, quilted pieces, fancy needlework, and historical relics like dishes, tools, arrowheads, books of a bygone era that included a 1760 almanac, and a three-foot piece of the first ocean telegraphic cable. A display of bugs, beetles, butterflies, dairy exhibits, and a butter-making machine were most noteworthy. Local firms displayed their work and wares like cemetery stones, photos of homes built with Monson granite, hardware, sportsmen's goods, organ players, and stoves. Stafford's own G.H. Baker & Co. displayed an elegant line of carpets and parlor furniture. Those who braved the weather hoped to see livestock such as sheep, Governor Hyde's fine lot of award-winning Jerseys and Devons, and Julius Converse's Holstein's, both having been a leading attraction for the past several years. "Best showing of cattle I ever saw," said one veteran of cattle shows.

Early afternoon was one of promise. Breaks in the rain and specks of blue sky brought more hopeful crowds to the gates. But just before the horses started to trot, the winds picked up, and the rain fell, dispersing the fairgoers back into the exhibit halls and suspending the races. Soon after the attractions were stalled, the showers turned to a drizzle, and the dogs were able to perform their tricks, the rope walker was able to walk, and with the wind dying down, the main draw – the widely known Professor Hogan – was able to fill his balloon and be ready at the appointed time of 5:30 to perform his aeronautical feat.

A fine sight it was as he made his ascent above the crowd of 3,000 spectators. The balloon rose over a mile high until the grey clouds had almost blocked him from view. They waited patiently. The Professor took the fabric chute and its attached cords and connected it to the basket. He readied his contraption to fall to Earth once he started his descent. He took the last few moments to grab the large ring attached to the chute and cords, to sight a landing area, and to say a prayer.

With his hands tightly gripped around the ring, Professor Hogan jumped from the basket from that awful height, nothing below him but the spectators and the hard, unforgiving ground. The cord connecting to the basket suddenly snapped, the exhibitionist's only lifeline was a ring and some fabric. Then, although recently calm, the weather suddenly aggravated the situation when the wind picked up and tangled the cords, the rain stiffened the fabric, and the chute couldn't expand. The Professor fell through the sky at a terrible rate. His knuckles turned white, his head went dizzy. Mouths agape, the crowd saw his white chute plummeting like a log. Fearing the worst, some ran. Others covered their eyes. Women clutched their breasts. One almost fainted from holding her breath. Gasps and exclamations of "My God" were heard amid the silence.

Suddenly, half the descent made, Professor Hogan gathered his wits and shook the ropes with all his might. "Pop!" The chute did what it was intended to do and caught the air and transformed into a cone shape, reminiscent of an umbrella. Fully opened, it slowed, and he swung gracefully to and fro. The fearless aeronaut waved his hand to the crowd he had left on the ground a short time before. What a fantastically frightening sight over the skies of Stafford Springs at the Stafford Fair!

Balloon ascensions like Professor Hogan's were popular in the early years of the fair. He was one of many stage attractions and entertainers who helped to fill the schedule of the three to four-day agricultural fair held in October from 1870 to 1969. Even though attractions were popular, The Stafford Fair's purpose was to showcase farmers' produce and livestock and to share new methods of farming and husbandry.

Stafford Fair Cont...

Tens of thousands of fairgoers looked forward to seeing whose livestock, produce, and handiwork won ribbons and trophies, as well as the local businesses and industries that had booths or exhibits demonstrating their products or services. The most popular attraction at the fair was racing. Until WWII, harness racing (a horse pulling a driver in a two-wheeled cart called a sulky) brought racers and people from around the country to Stafford. On and off, starting in 1914, motorcycles raced and at the 1949 fair, stock cars made their debut.

The first Stafford Fair was set up under tents on Willington Avenue (where Stafford Fire Department No. 1 now stands) with the horses racing on Main Street. In 1871, the fair moved to what we know as Stafford Motor Speedway. There, it grew to what many residents may remember from their childhood – half-price children’s days, laser light shows, a midway with games, senior class fundraising, sitting in the grandstands, sending messages to Vietnam servicemen at a booth with amateur radio operators or Kelly the Kandy Man. Although the Stafford Fair may be gone, it will never be forgotten. The Stafford Historical Society continues to collect photos and memorabilia from the fair and to interpret the fair’s history for the Stafford residents and visitors. There is always something new to learn about the role the Stafford Fair played in the social and economic development of the town.

Candidate Kurt Vail Talks Seeking Second Office and Budget

With two weeks to go before election day, Republican Candidate and current [State Representative Kurt Vail](#) put out a video addressing questions and issues that have popped up over the course of the 2023 campaign for Stafford’s First Selectman race.

The video starts by addressing the elephant in the room, which is that if elected as Stafford’s First Selectman, Vail would simultaneously hold two paid elected positions. “I’ve always had a full-time job while serving as State Representative...” he said in the video. “If I have the great pleasure of becoming First Selectman, I’ll be able to use those relationships I’ve built and the experience I’ve gained in working with other town officials throughout this area to try to find efficiencies in local government.”

As we reported earlier this year, “The Stafford First Selectman position comes with a salary of roughly [\\$80,000 per year](#). State Representatives are given a base salary, which was raised from \$28,000 to \$44,000 in 2022. When lawmakers voted to increase this salary, [NBC Connecticut reported](#), ‘Rep. Doug Dubitsky, R-Chaplin, argued during the debate that the current low pay and long hours associated with working at the Capitol has made it impossible for most people to become a lawmaker.’”

Next, Vail moved on to allude to [a Facebook controversy](#) that popped up in response to [Bill Morrison’s Q&A with The Stafford Free Press](#). “We’ve heard some chatter about maybe trying to pass a town budget through town meeting,” said Vail. “Normally, town meetings are attended by a hundred people or less. I think we should continue with the process of doing it through a budget referendum because it gives more people the opportunity to vote. We can have meetings to discuss the budget, as we already do, but then we send that to a budget referendum so we can get as many people as possible to hear their voice.”

Vail Cont...

Morrison, the Democratic candidate for Stafford's First Selectman, said in his Q&A: "I will send out via Facebook and Everbridge (if possible) information about selectmen's meetings, the budget status, and important information about the budget in an effort to pass a budget by a town meeting that is well thought out and supported by the taxpayers on the first attempt, thus saving approximately \$4,000.00 per referendum. I believe the earlier we start working on the budget, the more informed the taxpayers will be. I will be entering the office during the second quarter of an already underfunded town budget, so information sharing and citizen input are imperative."

[A post in a local Facebook group interpreted this to mean Morrison wanted to vote on and pass the budget at a town meeting.](#) (People who are not in the "What's Going on in and around Stafford Springs" group may trouble with the link. So we've included screenshots below.) Morrison clarified in the post's comments that he meant he wanted to use town meetings to ensure that by the time the budget goes to referendum, it has enough support to pass on the first try. Despite the clarifications, the talking point has continued.

For those of you who did not closely follow the last budget process, it went to referendum three times before passing, at the cost of \$4,000 or more per referendum. [Stafford passed the \\$45.4 million budget on the third try by a vote of 639-542.](#) Stafford has over 7,500 registered voters — 1,181 voted in the last budget referendum. For reference, about 1,545 people voted in the first referendum, and 1,705 voted in the second referendum.

State statutes dictate how town budgets are passed

I checked in with [Town Clerk Karen Troiano](#) to learn more about the budget process regarding voting. Troiano told me that the [Connecticut General Assembly Statutes](#) (CGS) — which define the regulations, eligibility for voting, and conduct for town meetings and referendums — say that action on an

annual budget may be taken at a town meeting or at a referendum. A referendum under CGS can be called for by action of the Board of Selectman or upon petition of 200 or more qualified persons.

Furthermore, at a town meeting the voting body can vote to "reduce or reject" the budget — so most selectmen wouldn't choose to vote at a town meeting, where the voting body actually has more control. The last time Stafford approved a budget at a town meeting was for fiscal year 2003-2004 when there was no mil rate increase. Even more interesting was the fiscal year 2016-2017, when the BOS initially called for the budget vote at a town meeting but a referendum was scheduled upon receipt of a petition.

Ultimately, no BOS or First Selectman has the power to pass a budget at a town meeting unless the people of Stafford consent, so the candidates' opinions on the matter are inconsequential.

[Editor's note: We originally had a hard time finding the Facebook post in question, and thought it may have been deleted, though we could not be sure. So, when this article was originally published we made that clear and asked anyone who could find it to send it in, and also checked with admins from the groups. The post was eventually found and restored, so this article has been edited from the original to include the added context of the post (including a shameless plug from Stafford Free Press in the comments). We've also linked to the full post above so curious readers can have added context.]

Candidate Q&A: Jennifer Biedrzycki

Q: There are many boards and commissions in Stafford. Why have you chosen to run for the Board of Education specifically?

A: I chose to run for the Stafford Board of Education because I strongly believe our youth should have the best possible educational experience. My husband and I have called Stafford home for 19 years. I am a parent of two children who have attended Stafford Public Schools, starting at Learn & Play Group with the Stafford Family Resource Center and then entering Pre-kindergarten at Staffordville School; today they're in the middle and high schools. Over the past 12 years, my time as a volunteer and my engagement in the Stafford school system has given me powerful insight into our district, especially our special education program. Having a child with diagnosed special needs, I know firsthand the importance of the work the special education team does and how collaborating with them is essential to our children's success. As a member of the Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC), I also work to support other children and parents dealing with similar issues. In addition, through my roles as President of both the Staffordville and Stafford Elementary School PTOs, my involvement in the Stafford Music and Drama Boosters, and my work with SEAC, I've consistently aimed to enhance the educational experience for ALL students. Advocating for Stafford's youth and engaging in community service has always been dear to my heart. To be entrusted with a seat on the Board of Education would allow me to continue making a difference for students across the district.

Q: The education budget has been at the top of everyone's minds lately. How will you approach the challenge of ensuring students have what they need while keeping the budget challenges in mind?

A: Throughout my career and volunteer service, I've learned the value of teamwork and resource sharing. Over time, programs across our district have lost full or partial funding due to constant budget cuts and redistribution of funds. Every weekend, it seems there is a car wash or benefit dinner to help offset the costs of sports, music, transportation, or school events. As a member of the board, I'm excited to help identify areas of opportunity to share resources across the district and encourage more collaboration between programs. It is extremely important for the Board and the public to pay close attention to the detailed presentations provided by the Director of Finance and Operations at the BOE meetings regarding the audits and financial reports. This information helps the district to identify potential credits and cost-saving measures that can be applied to other areas of need. These reports ensure transparency, granting all community members the chance to understand the composition of the BOE budget in preparation for the budget referendum. Through my professional background as a registered nurse with a Master's degree in nursing administration, I have the skills to make decisions that strike a balance between addressing people's needs and responsible budgeting. As part of my day-to-day responsibilities, I perform utilization management; I pledge that my patients receive the best quality care, but I am also mindful of financial stewardship. This skill will help me advocate for our children and teachers, while always keeping our budget challenges in mind.

Q: If you could achieve one thing during your time on the Board of Education, what would it be?

A: If I could accomplish just one thing during my tenure on the Board of Education, it would be to make certain that every student, no matter their abilities or individual needs, receives the tailored support essential for their success and also feels a sense of safety and belonging in our community. As a parent of a child who is in the special education program, I want to help people understand what equity and inclusion truly mean. Equity is receiving resources and support so all our children can be successful. It can include accommodations such as movement breaks, using audiobooks, modifying assignments, or having more

Jennifer Biedrzycki Cont...

time to complete a test. Inclusion is more than feeling valued and respected. To me, it means ensuring our children feel welcome and proud to be part of something bigger than themselves - part of their community, classroom, grade, club, sports team, or whatever it may be. When watching the district stakeholder survey presentation at the July BOE meeting, I learned that 63.9 percent of our middle schoolers feel that their fellow students don't respect differences in other students. I recognize this as an area of improvement across our district. As parents and community members, I believe we all share the hope and dream that our children feel loved and welcomed, are prepared for life after Stafford High School (whether it be work, trade school, college, or the military), and who become successful, kind, and proud members of our society.

[Responses have been very lightly edited for clarity, typos, etc., but the answers are primarily as the candidates wrote them.]

Candidate Q&A: James Greene

Q: There are many boards and commissions in Stafford. Why have you chosen to run for the Board of Education specifically?

A: Since moving to Stafford in 2016, I've witnessed the exceptional education my daughters, Talyah and Kol, have received. I am driven by the motivation to ensure this excellence is maintained throughout the entire district while being cost-effective for the community. My choice to settle in Stafford was influenced by the potential I saw for my children to excel in a smaller town with outstanding schools. I have been involved in the Stafford Music and Drama Boosters and serve as a parent representative to the district's equity and inclusion committee. I believe that the success of our town will be built upon the success of our schools. I want to be part of that growth for my children and for this town that has become our home.

I chose to run for Board of Education after the last budget process. I saw first-hand the challenges our teachers were facing to provide an excellent education without the necessary resources. And at the same time, many residents in town aren't able to fully engage in the budget process until it comes up for a vote. I hope that we can work with community members, the Board of Finance, and the Board of Selectmen to ensure that the budgeting process is accessible and transparent and that we can provide more stability for the schools and our town in the years ahead. A seat on the Board of Education would allow me to make a meaningful difference to the town that we call home and the community that supports my family.

Greene Cont...

Q: The education budget has been at the top of everyone's minds lately. How will you approach the challenge of ensuring students have what they need while keeping the budget challenges in mind?

A: In my professional capacity as the CEO of Jewish Family Service of Western Massachusetts and my two decades of experience in the nonprofit sector, I've consistently emphasized fiscal responsibility. I am adept at managing large budgets, writing grants, cultivating donors, leading teams, and strategically guiding my staff. My aim is always to ensure that community resources are thoughtfully utilized and effectively allocated. Drawing upon these skills, I plan to approach the education budget by balancing our pursuit of excellence with prudent financial decision-making. This is particularly true with special funding from Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds running out and more of those dollars returning to the regular budget. Our budget challenges are going to get more complex in the years ahead, and we need strong leadership to help us navigate them successfully.

I believe that if we want to set a budget that makes sense, we must first get a stronger handle on how our current spending meets the strategic goals of our district and how it impacts our students and district staff. From there, like all families do, we need to prioritize where we invest and look for places where we can find positive impacts. But, the investment in our schools has a strong return for our town as a whole. Stafford schools are a draw to potential residents, who prioritize smaller classrooms and strong educational offerings offered in our town. A strong school system will draw in new residents, increase tax revenues, and support businesses that will want to service our residents.

Finally, I think our school district should be actively pursuing grant funding from federal, state, and private funders. It is an important pathway to bridge the gap between what our residents can afford in taxes and providing the services our students need to be successful. This is a particular area of interest and, given my nonprofit background, is a place where I believe I have something unique to contribute to the Board of Education.

Q: If you could achieve one thing during your time on the Board of Education, what would it be?

A: Schools certainly prepare students for further education and the workforce, but there is more to it than that. We also ask our schools to help develop our students' sense of self, build a positive identity, and help them discover their potential. Ensuring that extra-curricular activities, like drama and sports, are available for all students helps each person identify life-long passions. Having after-school clubs allows our young people to explore hobbies and interests while developing skills they wouldn't learn in conventional classes. In short, we want our schools to develop the whole person.

During my tenure on the Board of Education, my primary goal would be to create a nurturing environment where every student, regardless of their background or circumstances, has the chance to thrive and attain their utmost potential. I look forward to working with parents, teachers, and administrators to continue to build an inclusive culture that prioritizes a sense of belonging and an ability for all individuals to see themselves as integral to the success of our school district.

[Responses have been very lightly edited for clarity, typos, etc., but the answers are primarily as the candidates wrote them.]