

**South Kingstown School Committee
and Town Council Joint Meeting
Public Hearing #1 - Municipal and School Budgets
South Kingstown High School Auditorium
215 Columbia Street
Wakefield, RI 02879
Tuesday, April 14, 2026**

Mr. McEntee opened the meeting and gave an overview of the meeting's proceedings.

1. Call to Order

- A. Pledge of Allegiance

Mr. McEntee led the Pledge of Allegiance.

- B. Land Acknowledgement Statement

Mr. McEntee read the Land Acknowledgement Statement.

2. Roll Call

Town Council members present: Rory McEntee, Council President; Michael Marran, Council Vice-President; Deborah Bergner, Patricia Alley, Jay Wegimont

Others present: James Manni, Town Manager; Brian Silvia, Finance Director, Michael Ursillo, Town Solicitor

School Committee members present: Carol Vetter, Chairperson, James Restivo, Vice-Chairperson, Michelle Brousseau, Paula Whitford, Kate Macinanti, Brad Shear, Stewart Lander

Others present: Michael Podraza, Superintendent; Daniel Seger, Assistant Superintendent; Patricia Proctor, Chief Financial Officer

3. Public Hearing

- A. Public Hearing, with School Committee participation, relative to the Town Council's Preliminary Budget for FY 2026-2027 as adopted on March 18, 2026. This Public Hearing will address all funds contained within the Town Council's Preliminary Budget.

Mr. Manni and Mr. Silvia gave the Town's presentation. The following items were reviewed and discussed:

- Public Hearings on the Budget
- Town of South Kingstown 2026-2027 Budget Calendar
- FY 2026-2027 Preliminary Adopted Budget Highlights
- FY 2026-2027 Personnel Costs - Summary or Proposed Changes
- Summary of Estimated Net Assessed Values, Less Exemptions
- Preliminary Adopted - Tax Levy (Updated to Reflect Projected Assessment Data)
- Impact of a Tax Levy Increase up to the State Cap of 4.00%
- Residential Real Estate - Median Assessed Single Family Property
- Checklists to Request Exceeding the State 4.00% Tax Levy Cap
- FY 2026-2027 Preliminary Adopted Operating Budget - Property Tax Need (School Operations)
- FY 2026-2027 Preliminary Adopted Operating Budget - Proposed Property Tax Need
- FY 2026-2027 Proposed Tax Levy Breakdown
- Property Tax-Rate/Levy Allocation Summary (Excluding Motor Vehicles)
- FY 2026-2027 Preliminary Budget Adoption - Summary of Enacted Changes - General Fund - Revenue
- FY 2026-2027 Preliminary Budget Adoption - Summary of Enacted Changes - General Fund - Expenditures (page 1)
- FY 2026-2027 Preliminary Budget Adoption - Summary of Enacted Changes - General Fund - Expenditures (page 2)
- FY 2026-2027 Preliminary Budget Adoption - Summary of Enacted Changes - School Operating Fund - Revenue
- FY 2025-2026 General Fund Operating Budget - Year-End Projections
- Debt Obligations of the Town (FY 2025-26 through FY 2031-32)
- Preliminary Adopted Budget - All Funds Summary (Expenditures)
- FY 2026-2027 Preliminary Adopted Budget - General Fund Revenues - By Revenue Source
- Town General Fund - Summary of Fund Balance
- FY 2026-2027 Preliminary Adopted Budget - General Fund Expenditures - By Department (page 1)
- FY 2026-2027 Preliminary Adopted Budget - General Fund Expenditures - By Department (page 2)
- FY 2026-2027 Preliminary Adopted Budget - General Fund Expenditures - By Department (page 3)
- FY 2026-2027 Preliminary Adopted Budget - General Fund Expenditures - By Department (page 4)
- FY 2026-2027 Preliminary Adopted Budget - General Fund Expenditures - By Department (page 5)
- FY 2026-2027 Preliminary Adopted Budget - General Fund Expenditures - By Department (page 6)
- FY 2026-2027 Preliminary Adopted Budget - General Fund Expenditures - By Department (page 7)
- FY 2026-2027 Preliminary Adopted Budget - School Operating Fund
- Summary of Historical Tax Transfer - Education
- FY 2026-2027 Preliminary Adopted Special Revenue Funds - By Fund
- FY 2026-2027 Preliminary Adopted Enterprise Funds - By Fund

- Proposed Budget Amendment (General Fund) - Updated Health & Dental Rates
- FY 2026-2027 Proposed Budget Amendment - Senior Center Operating Fund (304)
- FY 2026-2027 Proposed Budget Amendment - Senior Center Operating Fund (304) - Corresponding General Fund Portion
- Proposed Budget Amendment (Other Funds) - Updated Health & Dental Rates

Discussion ensued regarding the year-end projection for the School Department. Ms. Proctor advises that she does foresee a surplus for fiscal year 2026, within the range of \$200,000 and \$900,000. Ms. Proctor believes she should have a more solidified number in May. Further discussion regarding the Projected Future School Debt and the Estimated Bond Anticipation Notes (BANS).

Mr. Podraza thanked the Town Council for the additional \$1m in local appropriation and explained that, despite this, new pressures have arisen since the original FY26–27 submission (Higher-than-expected health (12.06%) and dental (8.47%) insurance increases, a nearly \$400K reduction in state aid, and the loss of a one-time ~\$608K local appropriation) have created more than \$3.2M in required cost increases. This is before factoring in unsettled contracts, transportation, tuition, and federal funding. He noted that closing this gap with only \$1M in new local funds would require about \$2.2M more, potentially rising to approximately \$3M if the sole transportation bid is accepted without changes. The district plans to commit \$1M of fund balance to operations, while warning that using reserves for recurring costs is not sustainable and reduces the safety net for emergencies and capital needs. He described a “budget decision matrix” listing possible reductions where programming exceeds BEP minimums (including music, world language, athletics, student supports, and technology), stressing that no one wants to cut these, and that reaching even \$1M in reductions would impact every school. Mr. Podraza shared the efforts to manage costs responsibly by prioritizing reimbursable capital work—submitting roughly \$1.2M in projects to RIDE with over \$423K in anticipated housing-aid reimbursement to the town, plus a ~\$500K Broad Rock roof project. He clarified that while about \$1.44M in current-year capital is funded from dedicated reserves, no new capital spending is presently budgeted for FY26–27. He confirmed the district’s fund balance target of 1–2% of budget (approximately \$630K–\$1.26M) and that the projected unassigned fund balance of about \$1.9M sits above this range, not yet including any final FY25–26 surplus. Mr. Podraza also noted approximately \$645K in savings from retirements and reductions and reiterated that the district is not seeking extras, but only the funding required to maintain core programs and protect long-term financial stability and the community’s investment in the new high school and fields. Mr. McEntee shares that the Town Council will give to the school department the amounts reimbursed by the State related to projects that are not the high school. These funds should be used towards projects that are reimbursable. Mr. Silvia clarifies that currently reimbursements from RIDE are received by the Town, and they are deposited into the debt service fund of the Town. The Town previously established a School Capital Improvement Fund, which is a capital account for the school department controlled by the Town. Further discussion regarding submission of bundled reimbursement requests to RIDE.

Discussion then ensued regarding the Town’s OPEB status. Per the most recent actuarial valuation, the OPEB trust is funded at approximately 153%. The actuary has recommended a \$0 contribution for the upcoming year. They discussed that temporarily setting both the Town and School FY26–27 OPEB contributions to zero (freeing roughly \$500K+ on the Town side and \$700K+ on the School side) could provide over \$1.3M in budget capacity to increase the school tax transfer and reduce school operating expenses, significantly helping to close the school budget gap in combination with the previously approved \$1M increase. It was emphasized that this would be a one-year, actuarially supported strategy, and OPEB contributions would need to be reevaluated in future years.

4. Public Comments

Bob Trager, Resident - Mr. Trager shared his pride in the school department and his family’s connection to it. He questioned the usefulness of focusing on large budget numbers and emphasized the importance of maintaining strong school programs—especially music and mental health support—stating that these are more important than cuts. He states that education funding should grow, not shrink.

Nicole Gardner, Parent - Ms. Gardner urged the Town Council to fully fund the schools, emphasizing that teachers, staff, and coaches already stretch every dollar and that there is a big difference between efficiency and underfunding. She called the schools the “heartbeat” of the town and warned that cuts—especially to middle school and JV sports—would remove critical experiences where students build character, resilience, and mentoring relationships that keep them engaged and “on the right path.” She said that even with full funding, educators will still be working on a shoestring and contributing their own time and money. She asked the Town Council to provide a budget that lets the school department focus on helping students thrive rather than constantly having to “make do.”

Evelyn Gray, Student - Miss Gray shared how important music is in her life and in the lives of other students. She described how her teacher had taught her multiple instruments (violin, ukulele, clarinet) and how Thursdays, when instrument groups meet, are special because students get to do something they love with their friends. She said music class makes school a safe and enjoyable place. She asked the Town Council not to cut these programs, stressing that “we are students, we are important.”

Nicole Mulanaphy, Parent - Ms. Mulanaphy thanked officials for working to increase school funding and warned that without it, cuts would fall on programs not required for graduation but essential to a well-rounded education—especially sports, music, and mental-health support. She stressed that eliminating these at younger levels would weaken high school programs and argued that sports and music are not “extras” but critical to academics and student well-being. She cited research from the CDC, National Federation of State High School Associations, NAFME, and the U.S. Department of Education which shows that participation in such activities improves grades, attendance, and graduation rates and reduces behavioral issues. She said these programs give students a reason to come to school and make SK an attractive place to live. She supports the Council’s exploration of additional funding to protect sports, music, mental-health supports, and the middle school experience.

William Nikitas, Student - Mr. Nikitas spoke in strong support of the music program. He said that many students, including those present, have developed a deep passion for music through the district's offerings—choir, jazz band, symphony, and orchestra—and that these programs foster creativity and personal growth. He warned that if funding is reduced and the music program is cut back, “hundreds of young minds may never get to express their creativity and skill,” and he urged the Council to “please save our music”.

Julie Geary, Parent - Ms. Geary shared that everyone already understands how important music and related programs are at all grade levels, and that these opportunities support brain development, mental health, coordination, creativity, and communication. She emphasized there is a clear difference between a middle school model and a junior high model, noting that middle school emphasizes teaming, collaboration, and social-emotional development, which she believes is especially critical for the current cohort whose early schooling was disrupted by COVID. She warned that shifting to a junior high model and reducing teaming would remove needed emotional supports for a uniquely vulnerable class of students, reminded officials that parents voted them in with their children in mind, and urged them to prioritize and protect these programs when making budget decisions.

Jonathan Sigman, Social Worker - Mr. Sigman spoke in strong support of fully funding the school budget and highlighted the critical role of teaching assistants (TAs). He said the current budget is already a “bare minimum,” noting that TAs are “the glue” of the schools yet are paid very little, and argued that the district must improve TA pay if it wants to recruit and retain them. He also described a voluntary professional development series organized by the union and administration—focused on topics like building relationships and instructional access—that has attracted about 53 unpaid participants, which he offered as evidence of the dedication and professionalism of SK faculty and staff even amid budget uncertainty.

Samuel Crump, Student - Mr. Crump spoke about how deeply music and creative outlets have shaped his life, particularly through composing music over the past four years. He explained that the lessons he has learned from music—such as managing his own ego, slowing down, and being less impulsive—have directly improved his behavior and decision-making in everyday life. He argued that any creative outlet (music, art, creative writing, etc.) is essential because it gives students unique ways to express themselves and learn important life lessons that cannot be replicated elsewhere, and he urged officials not to cut these programs.

Lucy _____ (?), Student - Lucy shared that the district's music program has sparked creativity, dedication, and joy for her and many peers. She recalled first seeing the SK marching band in the Veterans Day parade and deciding she wanted to join, then learning flute and later mellophone, and continuing to grow as a musician. She said performances such as concerts, parades, musicals, and festivals are among her fondest memories and would not be possible without skilled music teachers and community funding, and she urged officials not to cut music, warning it would be “a tremendous loss” to students and the community.

Laura Thakrell, Parent - Ms. Thakrell thanked officials for their work and for moving the hearing to a larger venue, then focused on the long-term pattern she sees in the budget. She pointed to the “big zero” on page 32 for capital over the past six years and said that while she appreciates efforts to find solutions this year, she is concerned that the town keeps “doing this” annually and that schools and key programs are not being treated as an ongoing priority. She urged the Council to recognize the strong public support for the schools, reflected in turnout and testimony, and to keep that support in mind not just for this budget cycle but in future years so they are not repeatedly back in the same crisis.

Christian Blaney, Parent - Mr. Blaney urged the Council to look at the community's voting record as clear evidence of strong town-wide support for the schools. He cited three recent examples: the 2023 budget-reduction referendum to cut the school budget by \$1.5M, which was “resoundingly” defeated with record turnout; the high school bond referendum, which passed by nearly 10 percentage points, a political “landslide”; and the most recent Town Council and School Committee elections, in which candidates opposed to the school budget and new high school were not elected, with unsuccessful candidates trailing by roughly 1,000–1,600 votes. He argued these results show that South Kingstown voters consistently back school funding and the new high school, and he urged the Council to keep that mandate in mind and be willing to contribute the money needed to support the schools.

Dorald Beasley, Resident - Mr. Beasley stated that, although the total property tax transfer to schools has been flat, declining enrollment means per-pupil local funding has risen about 30% over six years, from roughly \$20,700 to \$27,000 per student. He said that in a \$68M budget, the district should be able to find about \$320,000 to protect arts and music without putting them on a cut list, and he criticized repeatedly listing those programs as cuts as “using students as pawns.” He also pointed to higher benefit costs in South Kingstown compared with Barrington, despite SK having fewer employees, and argued that if reductions are needed, they should focus more on staffing and benefits rather than core student programs.

Janelle Geaber Morelli, Parent - Ms. Morelli described SK as having “small town magic” and said the quality of its schools and sense of community were central reasons she and her husband chose to move back and raise their children here. She gave examples of that community spirit—neighbors helping each other after storms, town support when a local child was diagnosed with leukemia, and a school-run Halloween costume drive that far exceeded expectations—and said today's students are the “future magic makers” of the town. She urged officials to recognize that investing in schools is investing in that shared community identity and to ensure the budget protects the programs and supports that make South Kingstown such a special place to live and learn.

Cadence Hallock, Student - Ms. Hallock said she chose to attend SK specifically for its strong music program and described music as central to her identity (“my name means rhythm”). She emphasized that the district is not just teaching students to play instruments, but is fostering creativity and deep thinking, which she believes is especially important as AI becomes more prevalent and influences learning. She argued that music classes create safe, present, human-centered spaces where students build community and express themselves in ways technology cannot replace, and she urged officials to invest in and protect these programs rather than let them erode, especially as key staff members depart.

Sadie Lang, Student - Ms. Lang said that although academics are important to her—she noted she is currently ranked first in her junior class—the most influential parts of her life have been the arts and athletics. She explained that theater and choir have given her leadership and creative opportunities, while middle school and JV sports are essential “building stages” where students can learn, make mistakes, and grow in supportive environments; without them, students would lose critical chances to develop skills before varsity. She argued that cutting these co-curricular programs would undermine both student development and the overall quality of education, and urged the Council to prioritize what truly matters and fight for the funding needed to preserve them.

Sam Cadman, Student - Mr. Cadman said that budget decisions reflect what a community truly values, and that repeatedly putting arts and co-curricular programs on the chopping block signals they are not being valued despite their importance. He argued that the arts represent passion, self-expression, and intellectualism “at its highest,” providing an idealistic space where students can say and do what matters to them outside the constraints of the “real world.” Sam urged officials to move beyond a year-to-year, crisis-driven approach—likening the current process to bailing water from a sinking boat—and to develop a more proactive, long-term budget plan, adding that he found it hard to believe the town could not find roughly \$2–3 million within the overall budget to properly fund the schools.

Orin Shear, Student - Mr. Shear said that learning his instrument has become very important to him and that both band and sports give students reasons to be excited about school. He explained that without band and sports, school would feel like “just sitting at a desk all day,” whereas these programs make school enjoyable and meaningful for many kids. He expressed excitement about joining the middle school band and trying out for the Broad Rock baseball team, and urged officials not to cut these programs because “many kids will be upset.”

Nava Shear, Student - Ms. Shear explained that school programs are central to her experience: she plays violin in the orchestra (including a before-school ensemble), sings in chorus, and participates in several after-school activities such as the SMILE engineering program (with trips and competitions at URI), the Green Team (focused on composting and recycling in light of the state landfill's 2046 deadline), and the BRMS drama club, which has helped build her confidence. She said these programs give students opportunities to discover their passions, learn important skills, and care about issues like the environment, and she warned that cutting music and after-school activities would take away chances for many students to find what they love and shape their futures.

Mya Hubbard, Student - Ms. Hubbard said she did not get to start strings in 4th grade due to COVID, but discovered a deep love of music when she began violin in 5th grade, using it to express feelings she didn't want to share out loud during an isolating time. She now plays in both the regular high school orchestra and the symphony orchestra that combines strings and band instruments, and described the powerful, indescribable feeling of performing together on stage as central to who she is. She noted that a planned string concert was canceled to make space for this budget hearing and said that, while she understands the need to address funding, protecting these music experiences is vital because they are one of the most important parts of her and many other students' lives.

Katie Garvin, Parent - Ms. Garvin thanked officials for their work and for moving the hearing to a larger venue, and said she appreciated the creative ideas being discussed to close the gap this year. She emphasized, however, that many families and educators are worried about the recurring, year-to-year budget crisis, especially for teachers who are already overwhelmed with testing, recommendations, and student support, yet feel compelled to attend meetings, wondering if their programs or jobs are at risk. She urged the Town Council and School Committee to pair any short-term solution with more proactive, long-term planning so they are not back in the same place next year, and suggested that if specific advocacy (e.g., letters on the state funding formula) would help, the community is ready to mobilize. She also warned that ongoing instability may push some families with younger children or rising middle/high schoolers to look outside the district, making it harder to bring them back once they leave.

Lucia Hubbard, Student - Ms. Hubbard said she has been playing violin since 4th grade, now participates in orchestra and chorus, and that these music opportunities have become a central and joyful part of life for her and many classmates. She noted that her older sister missed starting strings in 4th grade due to COVID, but later found the same passion, underscoring how important it is to keep these entry points available for younger students. Ms. Hubbard said it is painful for parents to return year after year, wondering if their children's favorite activities will disappear, and she urged officials to find the money needed to keep music and related programs, calling them “one of the most important parts” of students' lives.

Karen Discuillo, Teacher - Ms. Discuillo stressed that the middle school teaming model is essential for student safety and support. She explained that teams meet and communicate throughout the day about students who may be struggling, allowing teachers to flag concerns (“Johnny's having a bad day, look out for him”) and coordinate care as students move from class to class. She warned that if teaming is eliminated and teachers work in isolation, those regular conversations and shared awareness will be lost, making it harder to identify and support students in need. She concluded that teaming “saves lives” and is a core part of how the school cares for and connects with students, not an optional extra.

As there were no further speakers, Mr. McEntee thanked everyone for attending. He also invited the community to return tomorrow (April 15) for Public Hearing #2. Final budget adoption is scheduled for Monday, April 27, 2026.

5. Adjournment

The meeting is adjourned.