

As Scarborough yet again is in the middle of a protracted budget process, I thought it may be helpful to share my perspective as your Town Manager. Over the last three years, we have instituted a series of improvements to the budget process intended to add transparency, inclusiveness and clarity. These changes have included a new budget format, a public budget forum, and a budget portal. The current budget process and final product was the best I have experienced during my nine-year tenure in Scarborough. Though some are wary of the “One Town, One Budget” approach and have characterized it as a gimmick, I believe a collaborative and inclusive approach is essential as we are all in this together.

Despite significant process improvements and what I believed was a good budget product, the first vote on the school budget was a resounding rebuke by the voters. The voters have spoken very clearly and as Town leaders we need to listen or we are likely to repeat the same mistake again. Your elected leaders return a budget for voter consideration that provides meaningful and more than a good faith effort to respond to the voters, which allows additional school spending of 2.88% over last year. This may still seem like a lot to some, but given the fact that nearly 75% of school spending relates to human capital (teachers, support staff, administration) I am pleased, and somewhat impressed, that they are able to control spending to this level. Although it is tempting, it is simply not realistic or prudent to believe that significant additional reductions in school spending can be made in the near term without having a direct impact in the classroom.

I continue to be amazed and impressed by citizen involvement in Scarborough. This input comes through all sorts of voices and perspectives. As regards the school budget, from those that are concerned with school spending, I hear legitimate concerns around three central topics: 1) the need for multi-year forecasting, 2) structural changes to the fundamentals of the School and Town organizations and 3) management of long-term debt. I generally agree that these are laudable goals and ones I am committed to advancing, but the reality is that material change in these areas requires a long-term strategy and effort which is simply not possible in the near term, certainly not as we work toward getting a school budget passed this summer. It is worth noting that Julie Kukenberger, our new Superintendent of Schools, has brought a different and refreshing perspective to the conversation. I believe Julie will do great things for Scarborough schools and our community, but she and the Board of Education need time and space to work, and most of all they need our collective support.

The voters have spoken, I believe we have listened and received the message, so now it is time to come together and move forward as a community. Let’s do what is right for Scarborough by supporting our schools and preserving our relationships so we can continue the conversation in the future.

Thomas Hall, Scarborough Town Manager