

Correspondence received by the
Concord Select Board
Week Ending – November 12, 2024

1. Pauline Stephens – 28 Concord Greene Unit 1
2. Paul Macone – 33 Grove Street
3. Miguel Echavarri – 255 Commonwealth Avenue
4. Paul Macone – 33 Grove Street
5. Sven Weber – 50 Belknap Street
6. League of Women Voters Concord-Carlisle

Please note: The letters posted here reflect the views and opinions of the author as recorded in the body of their email. Neither the Select Board nor Town staff have verified or reviewed the contents. The Select Board and the Town do not necessarily agree, condone, support or advocate the ideas expressed in these letters and have not verified any factual statements made in the letters.

28 Concord Greene Unit 1
Concord, MA 01742

November 8, 2024

Concord Select Board
22 Monument Square
Concord, MA 01742

Concord Select Board:

I am writing to inform you that my husband and I are very much in favor of the recent property tax exemption. We are hoping the vote on November 18 will extend this exemption.

My husband is 92 years old and I am 86. We have been residents of Concord for 60 years. We sold a modest house on Wright Road in West Concord seven years ago and first rented and then bought a condominium at Concord Greene. We do not have a million-dollar nest egg or a vacation home, as some people seem to think is true for senior homeowners in town. We budget our money carefully, and were very thankful to receive the property tax exemption this year.

I sincerely hope this measure will not be rescinded. Thank you for your consideration.

Yours truly,



Pauline Stephens

Hi Kerry,

I have two questions on issues that have been raised in the past and remain unanswered and I'm hoping you can shed some light on them:

1. On June 30, 2023 you sent me an email with responses to four questions I raised in a public meeting of the Select Board. One of my questions was the (missing? unaccounted for? accounting error?) of \$515,402 dollars in the Town budget. Your response to me included a memo you sent to the Fincom on April 4, 2023 that included your statement, **"But again, because we will need to make a more detailed analysis, for now I will propose to reduce Line 1, General Government by \$515,402, reducing the FY24 Line-item request from \$5,429,003 to \$4,913,601; and reducing the total ask under Article 9 from \$55,552,181 to \$55,036,779. We will have the opportunity to make the final adjustments to close the fiscal year at the 2024 Annual Town Meeting, under a FY24 Budget Adjustment Article."** This answer explains what actions were being taken to cover this half a million dollar deficit, but it didn't explain the loss of over a half a million dollars? Since your memo to the Fincom in April says you will need to make a more detailed analysis, **I'm asking for the results of the detailed analysis you implied was forthcoming.** I can't fathom any business or government entity that would move on without documenting exactly where the missing, loss or error happened? We are discussing a half of a million dollars, not a minor accounting glitch. I'm looking forward to receiving this analysis and definitive answer.

2. Many months ago I sent an message to you and the Select Board regarding Town vehicles that were used by employees as "take home cars" and the non-conformance to Town Policy APP#27 **Authorization for and use of Town Vehicles**. Your response to me included a statement that at some point you were going to review this policy. On June 4, 2024 you responded to another inquiry by another Concord taxpayer on the same subject in which you stated, *"I opened an audit of this information a few months back to compare against the applicable policy, APP #27 to consider updates/changes, particularly given that the last policy update was in 2012, and some practices have changed. Because of the need to focus on preparation for Annual Town Meeting, this work has yet to be completed."* In this response to another taxpayer you included an accounting of Town vehicles "assigned" to staff persons in effect allowing them to use these vehicles as a "take home vehicle." Since many months have passed since my (and another taxpayer's inquiry) I am requesting the results of the audit you stated was going be done.

In addition to the audit on the "take home vehicles" I recently inquired why many of the vehicles owned by the Town (mostly one's used by employees as take home vehicles) are not "marked" with a seal or lettering indicating they are owned by the Town, again part of APP#27? As I stated in my last inquiry, it appears only CMLP and the Police Department are in compliance. Why aren't all Town owned vehicles in compliance? What is the problem with following this simple procedure? Lastly, does the Sustainability employee really get a take home Town vehicle? This appears to be the case according to the list you sent us. If this is the case, how in the world is this justified? We have a full time "Risk and Compliance" employee in the Town management. Maybe he can work on compliance with existing policies?

Thanks,

Paul Macone

33 Grove Street

Dear Kerry,

On Friday night, you attributed problems with the FY25 Budget Book (in part) to **PowerPoint**. As I pointed out, this seems **improbable** because prior books were generated using PowerPoint and those books were always delivered on time; they even won awards(1). So respectfully, I'm skeptical over claims that PowerPoint was at fault. (link below)

<https://youtu.be/MnxdTWR1WOA?si=H9hpVST6HGvhCelu&t=628>

You also attributed problems to **transitions** within the Finance Department, which appears true. However, I wonder whether those transitions **could've been avoided** if the Town hadn't issued an NDA to a long-time employee who [a] helped deliver previous budget books using PowerPoint, [b] was well versed in Concord budgets and [c] was let go at a critical time during the Munis conversion. Shortly after this employee departed, the CFO stepped down and another employee (also involved with budgets) left the Town(2). So yes, the Finance Department was left in a precarious position **but** did we shoot ourselves in the proverbial foot and create this situation?

Further, did the **departure** of knowledgeable Finance employees **adversely impact** the conversion to Munis and did that undermine the integrity of our data? It's my understanding the Town had issues closing out FY24. My review of FY24 accounts showed holes in the data that have yet to be explained. The FY25 Budget Book was never delivered nor was FY25 account information(3). These are **red flags** that indicate a problem with the data and not with PowerPoint and how the book is formatted.

The new Finance team (with its current resources) is **unequipped** to handle this matter; it's **understaffed** and, due to previous departmental defections, **lacks** the institutional knowledge to fully understand what happened during the Munis conversion. This has the potential of evolving into a crisis that could **damage** our reputation and our standing with rating agencies.

I urge to you to **seriously consider** whether there's something wrong with the budget data, its integrity and the process by which it's inputted and managed. Specifically, I urge you to **fully fund** Finance in a manner that'll provide them the necessary resources to evaluate and correct this situation. This issue is potentially much more serious than dealing with PowerPoint and I hope the Town will act accordingly.

Please note that I've included the SMT because they were part of my email to the Select Board on this matter. I've blind copied a large number of concerned residents as well.

Sincerely,

Miguel Echavarri

Homeowner – 255 Commonwealth Ave

978-333-0385

Footnote

(1) Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) – Distinguished Budget Presentation Award for Excellence. Concord Bridge, January 12, 2024

(2) The employee in question didn't sign the NDA and took earlier retirement.

(3) Under a public records request I received budget spreadsheets for FY14, FY20 to FY24. I have since asked multiple times for FY25 and have not been provided that data.

Subject: FY25 Budget Book

Dear Finance Committee Members,

Since FY2006, the Town has produced a Budget Book and has submitted it to the Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) for review. In each of these 18 years, the Budget Book has received the Distinguished Budget Presentation Award for excellence.

According to the GFOA, “The budget document is very important, since it identifies the services to be provided (along with the funding), and the rationale behind key decisions.” Furthermore, as a given, a municipality, like Concord, which expects to earn and maintain its Aaa Credit Rating from Moody’s Investors Services produces high quality budget documents.

A Budget Book is not just a printout of the General Ledger, essentially the adopted budget approved by Town Meeting. It contains vital information for residents to know that their taxes are being well spent. For example, past Budget Books contained a 10-year history of the number of Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) employees by division and as a whole. Since personnel costs make up most of the budget, changes in the number of FTEs is important. These Budget Books also explained changes in proposed operating spending for each division and described planned capital projects. In the Books, each division outlined its accomplishments for the year and presented its goals for the coming year and beyond. All of this is essential for residents to continue to maintain confidence in the integrity of the Town.

The Town has not produced a FY25 Budget Book, although a purported FY25 Budget Book was posted online on the Town website two weeks ago, and this essentially was the FY24 Budget Book with the headings changed from “FY24” to “FY25”, but the underlying information and data was that for FY24. This posting has now been removed.

Budget Books are the responsibility of the Finance Administrative Division. The last document, the FY24 Budget Book was produced during FY23, when the Finance Administration Division’s appropriation was \$555,491. Since then, the appropriation for the Division has increased to \$647,927 in FY24 and \$756,342 in FY25. This increase of \$200,851, or 36.1%, over the last two years isn’t explained anywhere. A Budget Book would explain it, and having explanations for issues like this is the crucial reason for producing budget books. It doesn’t need to be said that putting large amounts of funds in the Finance Administration Division has not only not produced results but has produced negative results.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Paul Macone

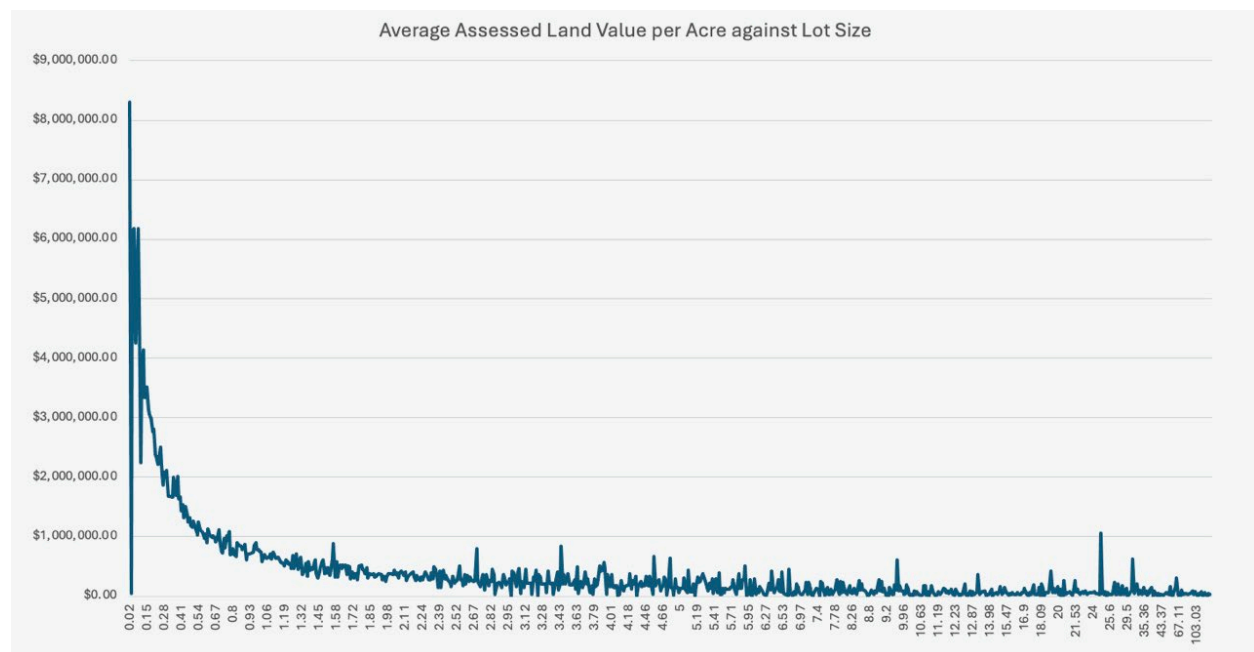
33 Grove Street

Dear Select Board,

for the upcoming hearing on tax policies on November 18th, I would be interested to hear from the Town's Assessor how the land value of a property is assessed. Based on the current Fiscal Year assessment data, large lots are getting assessed a much smaller value per acre than small lots. This as such is not necessarily a surprise as there is typically some "size elasticity" in the value. Nevertheless, Concord's lot value assessment seems a bit outside the norm.

Based on current FY data, I analyzed the "per acre" assessed value of all lots and plotted them against the respective lot size. As Chart 1 below shows, the assessed value ranges from over \$8 million per acre for very small lots down to about \$250,000 per acre for large lots. Even within the same neighborhood you can find an inverse correlation of lot value to lot size, e.g. a 0.3 acre lot on Middle St is valued at \$4.1 million per acre versus a 1.25 acre lot on Main Street just around the corner is valued at \$1.2 million.

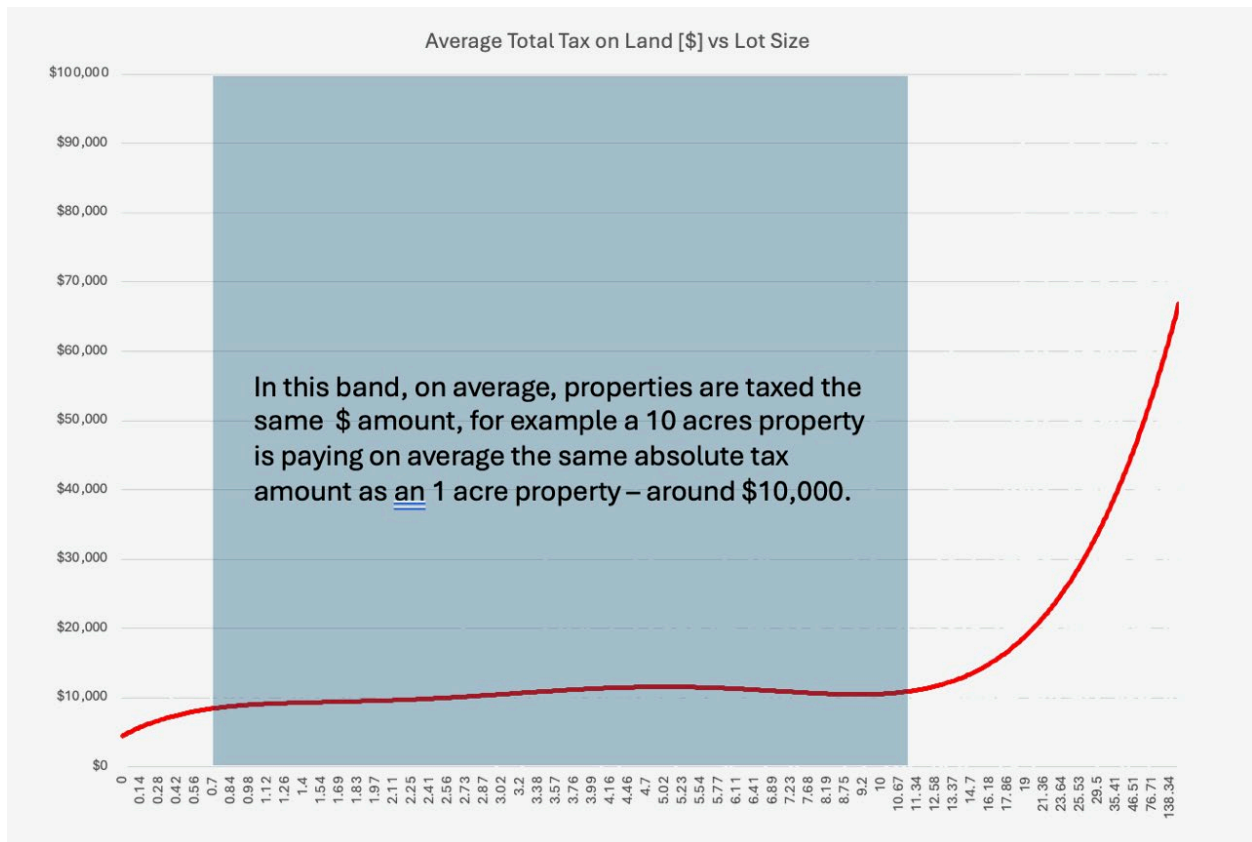
Chart 1



It is even more interesting to analyze the actual taxed dollar amount depending on lot size. Chart 2 below shows that the absolute tax amount on the land is on average not growing with lot size until a lot size of 11 acres - leading to a situation in which lots between 1 acre and 10 acres are paying on average the same absolute dollar amount of \$10,000 per year. In other words, the town is giving land tax free to property owners. In consequence, for lots

between 1 acre and 10 acres there is no incentive to make lots smaller, e.g. by subdivision, which prevents more housing.

Chart 2



In addition, it again shows that small properties carry an over-proportional burden of the tax, leading to significant equity and inclusion challenges. If Concord wants to be more inclusive and wants to generate more housing, larger lots should be taxed more than smaller lots. Right now, Concord protects the large multi-acre lots, and small lots pay the price.

I would encourage the Select Board to look deeper into this and evaluate its options to adjust the current system.

Best

Sven Weber
50 Belknap St.



November 6, 2024

To: Concord Select Board Chair, Mary Hartman; Select Board Clerk Mark Howell; Select Board Members Terri Ackerman, Cameron McKennitt, and Wendy Rovelli

Town Manager Kerry Lafleur

Subject: Peabody School Reuse Task Force

Dear Ms. Hartman, Ms. LaFleur, and Members of the Concord Select Board,

The Town of Concord has a unique opportunity to identify new uses for the Peabody Middle School and its athletic fields which encompass approximately 17 acres zoned for residential use. The school building and fields could be turned over to the Town as early as February 2025.

This opportunity comes at the same time as the Town is studying future uses for the approximately 50 acres of industrially zoned MCI-Concord parcel. Another 46 acres is potentially becoming available as the 2229 Main Street Advisory Task Force completes its work. Already in the pipeline is the recently approved NOVO Riverside Commons 201-multi-family residential rental apartment project.

Where does the Peabody parcel fit into long-term plans for commercial and residential development in Concord?

The LWVCC urges the Select Board to create a citizen committee to assess future uses for the Peabody School property. We suggest the committee begin by providing an opportunity for Concord citizens to tour the site and then weigh in on what they'd like to see happen with the property. The Peabody School property should be reviewed in conjunction with the other initiatives named above. It is not a standalone development.

Concord has a long history of using citizen committees as a tool for ensuring its residents have a say, particularly for decisions on available land parcels. We encourage the Select Board to form such a committee and allow for open discussions about the future use of the soon-to-be former middle school.

Thank you for your consideration.

League of Women Voters of Concord-Carlisle
Emily Wheeler, Clerk