

Bedford tax rate could increase due to expected loss in revenues

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An expected loss in revenue could contribute to a substantial tax increase for Bedford homeowners.

A proposed \$36.6 million town operating budget, which includes capital budget appropriations, will be considered by voters at a town meeting on March 10.

If approved, the new budget could increase the town portion of the tax rate by 12.5%.

The newly proposed 2021 budget, if adopted without changes, would increase the town portion of the tax rate from \$4.24 per \$1,000 of assessed valuation to \$4.77 — an increase of 53 cents, said Rick Sawyer, town manager.

“That is still a substantial increase,” he told the town council at a Jan. 13 meeting.

For the average home assessed at \$400,000, this would result in a \$212 increase on the property tax bill.

“We worked hard to reduce the impacts as much as possible with all other items, other than what was really out of our control, which was revenues,” explained Sawyer.

Those decreased revenues include a 25% reduction from rooms and meals taxes, a nearly 12% reduction in a highway block grant, the loss of \$177,000 from a state grant and a 44% reduction in investment interest; the decreased revenues total about \$712,000.

“It is essential that our state and federal delegations work to help the local taxpayer by finding ways to mitigate these losses,” Sawyer wrote in a memo to the town council.

A significant portion of the budget increase, or about 22 cents of the 53-cent rise, is related to the town’s road program — specifically the sale of the third installment of the \$30 million road bond approved in 2014, according to Sawyer.

Town officials also acknowledge there are unknowns in light of the pandemic, including the opening of the town pool; the pool did not open last year.

“We absolutely intend to be open,” Sawyer said, adding he has asked the recreation director to do everything she can to find lifeguards and get them trained in time for a summer opening.

A reservation program so families can be allotted certain hours at the pool, and with a limited capacity, might need to be developed, according to Sawyer.

“But our full intent is to open the pool, if at all possible,” he stressed.

“I know we all hope that is going to be the case, but I don’t hold up a lot of hope that is going to be the case,” said Phil Greazzo, town councilor.

While he doesn't want to take the pool away, Greazzo questioned whether opening the pool would be worth the money if its use has to be restricted.

Sawyer said the town council would need to make that decision.

During an initial public hearing on the town budget last week, no residents spoke in favor or in opposition to the proposed spending plan. A second public hearing on the budget is planned for Jan. 27.

The town portion of the tax rate has fluctuated since 2016, when it was \$4.97 per \$1,000 of assessed valuation, followed by a significant dip in 2017 to \$4.13, followed by \$4.54 in 2018, \$4.14 in 2019, \$4.23 in 2020 and now an estimated \$4.77 in 2021.