

Town of Grand Isle  
**02-28-2026 Selectboard - Special  
Informational Meeting**  
Meeting minutes

To transact any business proper to come before this meeting and to discuss any questions which shall arise concerning the issues to be voted upon by Australian ballot on Tuesday, March 3, 2026

The meeting was called to order at 10:23 AM by Town Moderator Ron Bushway on Saturday, February 28, 2026. Prior to the official start, representatives Mike Morgan and Senator Pat Brennan provided legislative updates to the community.

Representative Morgan began by congratulating the Grand Isle Fire Department on their 75th anniversary, reading House Concurrent Resolution 207 that he had sponsored along with Representative Leland Morgan and Senator Brennan. Chief White and several firefighters were present to receive copies of the resolution commemorating their decades of service to the community.

Senator Brennan discussed the current legislative session, noting they were approaching crossover on March 13th. He outlined the state budget of \$9.4 billion, representing a \$200 million increase, attributing the growth to healthcare and personnel costs. The education budget totaled \$2.56 billion, up 5.5 percent for the year but 39 percent over five years. Brennan emphasized his commitment to protecting island schools, stating "I'm not voting for a bill that closes any schools in the islands." He assured residents about school choice options, confirming support for maintaining choices including Milton, Colchester, South Burlington, and Essex.

When asked about protecting school choice for high school students, Brennan responded firmly that he would not support changes to school choice for high school students: "I wouldn't support that. No. I would not support that," referring to proposals that might limit options to just one school.

Representative Morgan echoed these sentiments, emphasizing the geographical uniqueness of the islands and the need for multiple school choice options due to parents' work locations and transportation needs. He warned that the governor had made it clear the legislature wouldn't adjourn until education reforms were addressed, potentially extending the session significantly.

Both legislators discussed property tax relief measures, including a \$115 million buydown of property taxes using state money, which they acknowledged was unsustainable but necessary for the current year.

Following the legislative presentations, Moderator Bushway officially opened the informational meeting, explaining the rules of order and introducing the Selectboard members: Ron Bushway (Moderator), Ellen Howrigan, Jeff Parizo, Aimee Cochran, and Jennifer Morway.

Denise Douglass offered a tribute to Merritt Vantine, whose photograph appeared in the town report, recognizing his years of volunteer service to the town, particularly his work at the transfer station. The moderator acknowledged Merritt's significant contributions to the community.

Bushway explained that this was an annual informational meeting to review the warning and questions going before voters on Tuesday, March 3, 2026. He established ground rules for the meeting, emphasizing the need to stay focused on the agenda items, speak through the moderator, and maintain respectful discourse.

## To elect all Town Officers as required by law

The moderator reviewed the list of town officers up for election. For Selectboard member (3-year term), Jeff Parizo was listed as a write-in candidate. When questioned about his decision to run despite earlier statements about not having time, Parizo explained: "Nothing's changed. It's just nobody's running, and the select board has a lot left to do."

Parizo outlined several major upcoming projects facing the town, including the July discussion about separating the town clerk and town treasurer positions due to increasing workload, the potential need for a third highway employee, and the ongoing library construction project. He detailed the library's progress, noting the foundation was complete and framing should begin within three weeks pending truss delivery.

Diane Cota introduced Jonathan DeBono as another write-in candidate for the Selectboard position, describing his background as a product manager at a global financial technology company specializing in commercial syndicated banking software, and encouraging voters to consider "new blood" on the board.

Selectboard member Ellen Howrigan expressed strong support for Jeff Parizo's continued service, highlighting the board's recent achievements including receiving the top tier audit rating for the first time in the town's history. She emphasized Parizo's extensive experience and knowledge, suggesting the workload could be distributed differently if needed.

For other positions, Andrew "Drew" Barber was running unopposed for Grand Isle School Director. Library Trustee positions had write-in candidates including Wendy Rosica for the 5-year term. Several Unified School District positions, including the moderator position, remained vacant and were seeking volunteers.

## Shall the legal voters of the Town vote to have the full details of the delinquent tax list printed in the Town Report?

This article generated no discussion from the floor.

Shall the legal voters of the Town vote to pay to the Treasurer, Real Property Taxes in three installments with due dates of October 31, 2026, January 31, 2027, and April 30, 2027, with an interest charge of 1% per month added if each installment is not paid by the due date; after April 30, 2027, any unpaid taxes will be charged an 8% collection

fee plus the interest, unless Article 19, below, is approved which will lower the commission due to 6%?

No comments or questions were raised regarding the tax payment schedule and interest structure.

Shall the legal voters of the Town approve the sum of \$1,335,986 as proposed by the Selectboard to meet the expenses of the Town General budget?

This article received no discussion from the attendees.

Shall the legal voters of the Town approve the sum of \$23,862 to meet the expenses of the Cemetery Commission budget?

The cemetery budget was presented without discussion.

Shall the legal voters of the Town approve the sum of \$73,000 for the Grand Isle Rescue, Inc., budget?

Grand Isle Rescue President Ray Mitchell came forward to address questions about the rescue budget. Denise Douglass offered heartfelt thanks to the rescue squad, sharing a personal story: "This last calendar year, you helped my family out get to the hospital. I want to thank rescue for all your hard work. You get up in the middle of the night. You take care of us, folks. It's greatly appreciated... In my husband's case, it meant the difference I believe in life and death."

Ray thanked the fire department for their collaboration on lift assists and other emergency calls. He emphasized that the squad was always looking for new volunteers, offering to pay for training and providing opportunities to meet community members while serving others.

Shall the legal voters of the Town approve the sum of \$14,000 to defray expenses of the Grand Isle Rescue, Inc. and Grand Isle Volunteer Fire Department, Inc. dispatching services?

This budget item for dispatching services was presented without questions from the floor.

Shall the legal voters of the Town approve the sum of \$105,000 for the Grand Isle Volunteer Fire Department, Inc. budget?

Fire Chief Adam White provided an extensive presentation about the fire department's current situation and future needs. He first addressed the dispatching fees, explaining that Shelburne dispatch had implemented unexpected increases, jumping from an anticipated 10-15% increase to 30% in November. The Grand Isle County Mutual Aid Association absorbed the extra costs to avoid requiring all departments to return to their selectboards mid-year.

Chief White warned of another anticipated 30% increase next year, potentially bringing the \$14,000 dispatching cost to \$17,000-18,000. He provided historical context, noting that when they switched from St. Albans dispatch to Shelburne in 2016, Grand Isle had been paying \$30,000 annually, so even with increases, they were still paying significantly less than a decade ago.

Regarding equipment costs, White painted a concerning picture of rapid price inflation. Their newest truck, currently being built in Florida for multiple purposes including towing their boat and ice rescue, cost \$250,000 for what he described as essentially "a pickup truck with a box on the back." He noted their 1993 pumper and 2000 heavy rescue truck needed replacement, with realistic costs of \$600,000-800,000 for a simple rescue pumper.

The chief provided a stark comparison of price increases, explaining that their most recent truck purchased in 2018 with FEMA grant assistance cost \$350,000, but the same truck would cost \$650,000 today. South Hero experienced a \$100,000 price increase for the same truck model in just one year.

White attributed these dramatic increases to industry consolidation, noting that congressional investigations were underway into fire truck manufacturing entities. Despite these challenges, the department had welcomed seven new firefighters in the past year, necessitating additional gear lockers costing \$2,500 each.

The chief acknowledged the financial pressures, stating: "I do think, you know, realistically, in the next year, at least the fire department will be looking at, you know, a 5 to 10 year plan, not just of apparatus, which we have been looking at, but also just needs of the fire department." He noted they currently operate on about \$125,000 annually, with the difference between their \$105,000 town allocation and actual expenses coming from donations.

## Shall the legal voters of the Town approve the sum of \$542,130 to meet the expenses of the Highway Department budget?

Road Foreman Steven More was unable to attend due to plowing duties and a family emergency, so Moderator Bushway presented the highway budget details. The total highway expenditure was \$717,800, representing an \$11,395 increase over the previous year's \$726,405. After subtracting \$70,000 for raw materials, \$77,670 in state aid, and \$28,000 in fish hatchery money, the amount going before voters was \$542,130, actually representing a decrease of \$1,400 or 0.26%.

Bushway explained several budget line items in detail. The town had decreased labor costs by eliminating a third person position, though Parizo had earlier indicated they might need to reconsider this decision and potentially hire a third highway employee due to increasing demands.

The budget included a \$75,000 bond payment for the new highway garage, now in its fourth year of operation. Several cost increases were highlighted, including a \$10,000 increase in repair and maintenance, largely due to expensive carbide cutting edges for snow plows costing \$5,000 per truck. Salt and sand costs increased by \$9,000 due to shortages, though the town maintained adequate supplies for the current year. Culvert costs continued rising annually, leading to a \$2,500 increase in that line item.

## Shall the legal voters of the Town approve the sum of \$70,000 to meet the expenses of the Highway Department Road Materials budget?

Bushway explained that road materials funding typically supported blacktop projects but could be used flexibly for emergency road repairs. He referenced the 2011 flood when high lake levels washed out roads, requiring extensive emergency repairs throughout town. In recent years, the funds had supported blacktop projects, but the flexibility allowed for emergency use when needed.

## Shall the legal voters of the Town approve a sum of \$86,542 to meet the expenses of the Library Commission budget?

Library Board Treasurer Karen Allen provided a comprehensive overview of the library budget, emphasizing the board's commitment to level funding over recent years, with exceptions only for health insurance premium increases and cost-of-living salary adjustments. She described this as a "bridging budget" designed to accommodate the transition to the new library facility.

Allen explained the budget timeline, noting the new library must open by year-end, with fiscal year 2027 including six months in the temporary space across from the town offices and six months in the new facility starting January 1, 2027.

For the second half of the fiscal year in the new space, the board increased collection materials (books, children's books, DVDs) by 25% of the annual amount, effectively a 50% increase for those six months. Programming funds received similar treatment to support expanded offerings in the larger space.

Utilities presented a particular challenge since they had no baseline data for the new building. Allen used information from the fire station and town garage to estimate combined heat and electricity costs, while phone and water estimates relied on historical library data.

The IT line item saw a significant increase to outfit the new library's computer systems and technology infrastructure. Allen emphasized that securing Vermont Department of Libraries grant funding required demonstrating the ability to provide quiet spaces for telehealth and education, necessitating a well-equipped huddle room with sufficient IT support.

Cleaning services would need to expand from the current 900 square foot space to 4,000 square feet in the new facility. The budget also included staffing for three additional hours per week to extend library operating hours in the new space.

Library Board Chair Howard DeMars expressed excitement about the long-awaited new facility, particularly acknowledging community members like Colleen Bushway who had nurtured love of literature and reading. He emphasized the new library would meet national standards for proper library services and invited community members to volunteer for programming, seeing it as an opportunity for talented residents to contribute while meeting other community members.

## Shall the legal voters of the Town approve the sum of \$21,191 to meet the expenses of the Recreation Committee budget?

Recreation Committee member Roth Perry spoke enthusiastically about the committee's activities and continued level funding for the third consecutive year, with only a minor technical fee adjustment that should have been included previously.

The committee had successfully implemented several popular programs. Adult softball was entering its fourth year, with the fire department fielding a team the previous year, though they humorously noted, "We lost every game." The sand volleyball court at the park had been reinvigorated with weekly Tuesday evening games throughout the summer organized by a committee member.

A significant safety improvement was the installation of an AED (Automated External Defibrillator) at the top of the hill above the pickleball courts, positioned for central access. The historical society had allowed them to repurpose their AED for this public safety enhancement.

Park usage had increased dramatically, with simultaneous activities including Yogi hosting the all-star district division for 9-11 year olds alongside bocce and pickleball activities. This created parking challenges, leading the committee to ask groups to double and triple park to keep vehicles off the street.

Tree management remained an ongoing challenge with the ash borer problem. The committee had removed at least half a dozen trees in the previous year through a triage approach, taking down the most dangerous specimens first, with several more scheduled for removal.

The committee balanced longer-term programs like softball, recreational basketball, and soccer with one-time events including trunk-or-treat, summer bash celebrations, and their first winter broomball bonfire event, which was "a ton of fun" with the fire department maintaining the bonfire.

Looking ahead, the committee planned to install horseshoe pits and coordinate horseshoe nights during the summer. Roth encouraged community participation, noting that even non-participants often attended to support friends or children, creating a strong community atmosphere at the park.

The committee acknowledged strong support from local businesses providing sponsorships for t-shirts and hats, as well as continued funding from the Masons, expressing gratitude for this community backing.

**Shall the legal voters of the Town approve the sum of \$25,000 to be raised by taxes for removing the invasive Emerald Ash Borer trees in the Town rights-of-ways as needed?**

The tree removal budget sparked discussion about the accelerating ash borer crisis. Bushway explained that trees were dying faster than anticipated, with approximately 120 trees already removed since mid-January through contracted tree services. The town had already exhausted the current fiscal year's budget allocation.

Bushway described the identification process: "You ride around, you see the blinding. That's the one with the light colored bark. Those trees are dying or dead." Many trees appeared to have been dead for extended periods and were rotting internally, creating dangerous conditions requiring professional removal starting from the top down to prevent breakage.

Parizo advocated for an even higher allocation, having supported \$50,000 instead of the proposed \$25,000 increase from the previous year's \$15,000. He described this as a three-to-four year project with a long-term maintenance strategy. Once the dangerous trees were removed, the road crew would maintain roadside mowing more frequently to prevent new tree growth in the rights-of-way, making this hopefully a one-time major expenditure rather than an ongoing crisis.

**Shall the legal voters of the Town approve the sum of \$1,500 to be raised by taxes for the Champlain Islands Food Shelf to provide food to Town residents in need?**

Food Shelf board member Josie Leavitt provided insight into the organization's expanding services. She expressed amazement at the increase in clients since joining the board, noting that 90% of recipients were employed, which prompted extending hours to 5:30 PM to accommodate working families.

Levitt emphasized the food shelf's unique position as the only facility in Grand Isle County providing fresh food, including produce, eggs, dairy, and substantial meat supplies from the food bank. The facility operated from the Catholic church next to Emmons on Wednesdays from 2:00 PM to 5:30 PM, serving residents throughout Grand Isle County, not just Grand Isle specifically.

She assured attendees that recipients weren't "scamming" the system and that the food shelf conducted significant independent fundraising beyond the town appropriation requests.

**Shall the legal voters of the Town approve the sum of \$1,950 to be raised by taxes for Island Arts for services to Town residents?**

Island Arts board member Natalie Churchill highlighted the organization's 40th anniversary celebration in the previous year, noting the transition from founding president Katia Wilcox, who had served for four decades. The organization had served over 2,400 adults in the past year, not counting children who attended various events.

Churchill emphasized Island Arts' diverse programming including concerts, events, and classes, many offered free of charge, with both indoor and outdoor options providing "something for everyone." She noted the organization's role in attracting tourists who support local businesses while maintaining the same modest appropriation requested for six consecutive years.

Former volunteer Kathy Proto added that Island Arts provided financial assistance for children needing instrument rentals or dance class fees, demonstrating their commitment to accessibility for all community members.

**Shall the legal voters of the Town approve the sum of \$8,000 to be raised by taxes for the UVM Health Network – Home Health and Hospice (formerly known as VNA of Chittenden and Grand Isle Counties) for services to Town residents?**

No representative from the organization was present, but Bushway spoke from personal family experience, praising their excellent service quality and describing them as "a good deal" for the community.

**Shall the legal voters of the Town reduce the commission charged by the collector of delinquent taxes for payments made after the April 30, 2027 due date for payment from eight percent (8%) to six percent (6%) of the tax collected pursuant to 32 V.S.A § 1674(3)(A)?**

Ellen Howrigan explained this reduction would not impact the 1% commission the town receives in the general fund. The change would only reduce the penalty paid by taxpayers experiencing difficulty paying their taxes from 8% to 6%. Given the financial hardship many people faced, the Selectboard thought this reduction made sense.

When asked about the impact on tax collectors (the town clerk serves as delinquent tax collector, with the assistant town clerk as assistant delinquent tax collector), Howrigan clarified that while their commission percentage would decrease, much of the delinquent tax collection work is handled by attorneys who manage the legal processes.

**Shall the legal voters of the Town approve the adoption of the Grand Isle Charter dated January 20, 2026, containing sections on general provisions, elected officers, appointed officers, local option tax, removal of elected town officers, application of general law, and severability?**

The town charter discussion generated the most extensive debate of the meeting, focusing primarily on two major components: the local option tax authority and the transition from elected to appointed positions.

#### Local Option Tax Discussion

The charter would grant authority to implement up to 1% local option taxes on sales, meals and alcohol, and rooms. Selectboard member Jennifer Morway clarified that if the charter passed, the new Selectboard would choose which taxes to implement, with no requirement to adopt all options.

Several Selectboard members stated their current positions. Morway said, "I personally will say that I am for the alcohol and the meals and rooms. That's where I stand." Ellen Howrigan agreed, supporting only alcohol, meals, and rooms taxes.

Aimee Cochran concurred: "I currently would only support the rooms and meals and alcohol tax, but I wouldn't be opposed to considering more tax later. I don't think that that's beneficial to our town right now, and I don't think that we know enough about how much revenue it would bring in and putting that tax on people who live here all year long isn't something that would be valuable right now."

Moderator Bushway, while having voted to advance the charter, expressed reservations based on community feedback: "What I've heard from at least 30 plus people... I would only be in favor of the alcohol rooms and meals. Anybody that goes to a garage and bring their vehicle there, I would not wanna see them pay more sales tax on parts because parts are expensive enough now."

However, Jeff Parizo provided a different perspective, supporting broader implementation including the general sales tax. He contextualized this within the broader property tax crisis: "We're in this predicament for, again, education. We all know what property taxes are like, and they're going up again this year." He described his personal financial situation where only a quarter of his monthly escrow payment went toward his actual mortgage, with the remainder covering taxes.

Parizo pointed to examples of other communities using local option taxes effectively, noting Colchester was funding a \$15 million recreation center with \$9 million upfront cash from their local option tax collections. He acknowledged that while Grand Isle lacked the major retailers of communities like Colchester and Williston, the tax could help offset municipal expenses.

The practical impact was explained by Morway, who owns a business: "I own a business personally, and I know that it doesn't cost me anything else to do it. I just go into QuickBooks, and I change it from the percentage... it is just kind of sent to the tax department, who then sends the money to the state." For Airbnb and VRBO properties, the platforms automatically collect and remit the taxes.

Revenue projections proved challenging because available data included ferry operations, which are federally tax-exempt. The state retains 25% of collected taxes for administrative costs, remitting 75% to municipalities.

Community members raised concerns about the actual revenue potential. Attendee Diane Cota calculated approximately 40 Airbnbs in town and questioned whether the revenue would justify potential negative impacts on residents and visitors. She worried about "opening the door for all these other entities to be taxed."

The sales tax, if implemented, would apply to anything currently subject to Vermont's 6% sales tax, with exemptions including farmer's markets and non-prepared food. Propane would be taxed, but heating pellets would be exempt from the tax.

#### Appointed Positions Discussion

The charter's provision to convert certain elected positions to appointed ones generated significant community concern. The Selectboard had already removed cemetery commissioners and library trustees from the appointed positions list following community feedback.

Positions that could become appointed included town treasurer, delinquent tax collector, lister, and assessor. Jeff Parizo provided the rationale for this change, particularly regarding the town treasurer position: "Right now, town is looking for around 2 plus million dollars to run our town every year... To be elected, does that mean you're qualified to manage that kind of budget?"

He emphasized this wasn't about replacing current treasurer Melissa Boutin, who had served since 2015 and whom the board wanted to retain. Instead, it was about future-proofing the position: "This is, again, about the big picture and looking to the future... her knowledge is institutional knowledge that's hard to pass from one person to the next... the learning curve to learn Nemrc and be a town treasurer is probably a long learning curve."

Ellen Howrigan supported the appointed positions concept as protection for the town, noting that ballot access requires only collecting signatures from voters with no qualifications required. She acknowledged past challenges: "We have a lot of procedures in place, and it's going very well. This has not always been the case, I'm going to be frank."

Aimee Cochran emphasized the forward-looking nature: "The main thing about the charter is planning for the future... we're really lucky to have Melissa... but that's not always gonna be the case... we need to have provisions in place to be able to fill positions that we need to fill and not be stuck with someone who maybe doesn't know what they're doing just because they were voted in."

Community members raised concerns about nepotism, asking whether safeguards existed to prevent favoritism in appointments. Morway responded that the employee handbook included anti-nepotism policies, and state statutes restrict certain hiring relationships. She explained that most positions would follow existing processes used for Planning Commission and Development Review Board appointments, with boards interviewing candidates and making recommendations to the Selectboard for approval.

Lister Sue Lawrence provided context about increasing qualification requirements, noting state mandates for certification and town-wide reappraisals every six years. The current reappraisal, running through 2027, would be followed by another in six years. She described failed attempts to share assessor costs with neighboring towns due to logistical complications around scheduling, benefits, and payroll administration.

The charter would require legislative approval, with implementation not expected until July 2027 if approved by voters in March 2026. This timeline would allow the community and Selectboard time to develop implementation procedures.

Moderator Bushway concluded the charter discussion by noting the negative feedback he'd received: "I've from at least 30 plus people some of the comments I've heard... A lot of it is about the appointed positions... There are a lot of questions and complaints that I did hear. And so I would have to say it's been negative."

Despite the extensive discussion, no formal motions were made regarding individual articles, as this was an informational meeting with actual voting scheduled for Tuesday, March 3, 2026.

The meeting concluded with Town Clerk Melissa Boutin announcing the availability of automatic property tax payment options through bank account deductions at no cost to taxpayers.

Motion to Adjourn: Jeff Parizo moved to adjourn the meeting. The motion was seconded and passed unanimously.

The informational meeting adjourned, with actual voting on all articles scheduled for Tuesday, March 3, 2026, from 7:00 AM to 7:00 PM at the Grand Isle Town Offices.