

WALDO COUNTY 2026-2027 BUDGET COMMITTEE MEETING

OCTOBER 25, 2025

9:00 A.M. TO 4:00 P.M.

Waldo County Commissioners Courtroom and Remote Teleconference (Zoom)

PRESENT Budget Committee Members Bob Kurek (Chairperson), Laura Greeley, Mary Mortier, Breanna Bebb, Elizabeth Lenharr, Brandy Bridges, and Tammy Higgins, and Robyn Tarantino was present by Zoom. (Douglas Thomas was absent.) Also present were County Commissioners Betty I. Johnson and Kevin J. Kelley, and Timothy A. Parker was present by Zoom. Staff present were Finance Director Kari Hunt, IT Director J-sun Bailey, and County Clerk Barbara Arseneau to take minutes.

Call to Order/Review Minutes – Chairperson Bob Kurek called the meeting to order at 9:00 a.m.

Bob asked for TAN Interest-related information from K. Hunt. She said she would send it to them later today. B. Kurek and R. Tarantino will meet with K. Hunt this coming Monday at 9:00 a.m. to review the information.

WALDO COMMUNITY ACTION PARTNERS – presented by Monica Pettingill.

Some on the Budget Committee expressed that they felt a funding request to the County was redundant because WCAP also request funds from the towns. When asked why the Commissioners' proposal for this budget request was different, K. Kelley explained that some of the funding streams are continually getting smaller – such as cancer patients need rides for treatment. He is familiar with the healthcare side and has worked with this type of organization for decades, and stated that non-profits are always stretching the dollars, and he felt the mission is great. Some on the Committee took issue with the fact that head CEO makes \$156,000.00 per year and stated that the average local income is at \$32,000.00 to \$43,000.00.

M. Pettengill explained that the County requested funds are to supplement what WCAP does not receive. Some is used toward transportation, Head Start, and other programs, as well as for grant matching and/or flexibility to supplement underfunded programs, which is occurring more and more. Reductions in grant funding is already happening. The federal shutdown is severely effecting SNAP food assistance, and people are already asking for heating assistance. WCAP is not receiving funding as timely as they were, and this funding is used to fill the gaps. They are required to demonstrate that they have matching funds. The committee mentioned that some towns pay their full requested amount, some do far less. M. Pettengill explained the \$5,000.00 from the County is more to supplement what they don't receive. In 2023 WCAP received 71% of total municipality request, in 2024, it was 60%. So far this year, they've received 69% and it isn't double dipping, it's trying to receive and raise the money to match the grants. There was discussion and differing opinions expressed regarding the amount the Commissioners proposed to allocate, that not all Commissioners agreed with that amount, some felt WCAP could improve on explaining in more detail what the funds are used on, and some still felt it was double-dipping. There was discussion on which District had the most need, grants that have been made available through WCAP, that running a \$20 million organization required a highly qualified person and the pay was appropriate, and B. Bridges shared a negative experience with WCAP and expressed frustration that it appeared WCAP was spending more time and energy assisting addicts than those with disabilities and health problem. M. Pettengill said she couldn't speak to what happened before she began working with WCAP, but she cared about the situation, asked that WCAP be allowed another

chance to help, and she wants to speak with anyone who has had a negative experience and try to help. K. Kelley said the County has funds that have come in for OPIOID addiction and suggested that WCAP reach out to the OPIOID Standing Committee.

When asked if there is any extra funding that hasn't been allocated yet, M. Pettengill replied no. Those unrestricted funds must be kept at a certain amount because they are required to have enough to keep programs going for a certain amount of time. There are not enough funds to replace SNAP benefits and 15% of Waldo County relies on SNAP. WCAP is rallying the community at Mill Lane and are hosting an emergency summit to meet about food insecurity. Political leaders, food kitchens and others are invited. WCAP is meant to call to action and mobilize others to assist and while they don't direct client benefit food organizations, they can call these groups and put together a coordinated approach. When asked how WCAP had the funds to purchase the Hutchinson Center, M. Pettengill explained that they had responsibly planned to construct a building for over a decade and that owning a building is far less expensive than renting.

No changes were made in the Waldo Community Action Partners budget request.

WALDO COUNTY FIREFIGHTER ASSOCIATION – presented by Kenneth Clement.

K. Clement reported that the training building will need work or replacing. A new facility had been approved but the State doesn't have the funds. Roofs has been put on the "burn building" and storage building. The Association hosts "Pumps class" and charges \$50.00 per person. Other trainings are hosted related to emergency vehicles and Basic Fire School.

There was brief discussion about the Association apparently missing the budget process last year and that they had been reached out to and encouraged to request funds this year. Some spoke to the continued need for volunteer firefighters who need proper equipment and safety protection. Possible regionalization, call sharing, etc. was briefly discussed. It was noted that most towns don't want to give up their fire department.

DISTRICT ATTORNEY – presented by District Attorney Natasha Irving and Prosecutorial Assistant/Supervisor Eric Harvey.

N. Irving mentioned the four counties she serves, and commended Waldo County Victim/Witness Advocate Megan Duval for recently receiving an award for serving as a victim/witness advocate for 5 years as one of the foremost in the State. When asked if the vacant VWA position could be done without, N. Irving said no, they are already overloaded now. She explained the position, the training involved, and both she and E. Harvey stated that these positions are required by statute. Every other County has two F/T VWAs. The County must allocate funds to the DA's for the District Attorney to operate efficiently. N. Irving stated that they are aware of costs and try to be mindful of that. She emphasized that the office must be funded appropriately and if the budget were cut too much, she would file a lawsuit and while she doesn't want to do that, she would because of the law, and probably would have a good shot at winning.

When asked about the court system's backlog, she explained that during COVID, for the lower end of the cases, the decision was made to decline cases that were minimal, and lower fines were offered to incentivize pleas while toeing the line on public safety issues. 80-90% of these are cases that there is

not an incentive to plea because there is chance of prison time. Misconceptions about dismissals and the seeming lack of consequences was briefly explained. Difficult cases can be hard to prove. Deferred disposition can also be used. When it goes to a jury it has to be proven beyond a reasonable doubt. 80% of the time victims will not show up or will deny it happened, even when many other people testify. Some counts are being dismissed or pled down because they will have trouble proving the case. While she doesn't believe prison changes behavior, the community needs to be kept safe. E. Harvey explained that dispositional conferences started several years ago. When a case is being discussed, sometimes they realize it will be difficult to make a case. Attorneys try to keep the cases going and they have pushback from the committee.

No changes were made in the District Attorney's budget.

UNIVERSITY OF MAINE COOPERATIVE EXTENSION – presented by Matt Clifford and Brett Johnson. Matt Clifford, a citizen of Waldo County and a member of the Waldo County Community, was there to make a few comments and then would turn it over to Brett Johnson. The budget request pays for an administrative officer to be in the office and support the professionals there, and it also funds some of the utilities for the office. It is covered in Title 7 of the Maine Statute. It doesn't have to be a specific breakdown, but across the State, counties provide about 3% of the total budget.

Brett Johnson spoke about his position and function and maintains a presence in the Waldo County building. He works with agricultural producers and others. There are 469 commercial farms in operation with over 50,000 acres, the bring in over \$22 million in revenue, and cash production is over \$5.5 million. Educational programs are developed based on community needs and needs assessments. Several different methods and tools are used to figure out what adversities and issues are out there and try to help reduce that. One way is through establishing a Midcoast Sustainable Agriculture Committee, which meets about twice a year, and also meets to talk at grange halls and libraries to have an exchange of ideas and learn directly from people what is happening in the agricultural economy. Enterprise, profits, land management issues, cover-cropping to help soil over time, environmental and other issues are discussed with the view to making agriculture more socially supported. The work is often done alone with a small group of people and to help them to connect. M. Mortier commended him for his excellent work.

When asked if the budget request could be reduced, it was explained that the bulk of the funds go to staffing, which is part of a university union contract and the pay is basically out of their control. They had reduced it already by working together with the staff. When staff is not available, it hampers people if they can't get in the door and receive help. Office hours are Monday through Thursday, 8:00 to 4:00 pm. All the staff that were present were there to represent their functions. One was an employee who was going to be out sick, decided to host meeting upstairs instead of a in a HIPPA free environment, and assists with newborns nursing. Phones need to be answered. Just having one assistant makes it very prohibitive for meetings and work and support groups. The parenting support group is done at the Y instead of the office.

The University of Maine Cooperative Extension budget request was not changed.

WALDO COUNTY SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICT – presented by Andy Reed Chair and Gene Randell, Treasurer.

The financial statement shows a loss. They are working hard to get some grants to supplement the shortfall and trying to obtain a P/T National Resource Conservation Agency person. They lost two people and replaced them with people from the Forest Service but that does nothing. These people are hassled and so they got some people in to help with filing, etc. There was mention of Hidden Valley Camp, Maine Audubon, and expertise in how to size culverts. The Town of Unity spent 250,000 on the storm of 2023 because the culverts were blocked or not large enough. There's a big push on replacing and enlarging culverts all over the state.

The Waldo County Soil and Water Conservation District budget request was not changed.

COUNTY COMMISSIONERS – presented by the County Commissioners and County Clerk Barbara Arseneau. The Commissioners explained that they have been meeting much more often than in the past to hold executive sessions for workshops to deal with non-public information regarding payroll, cyber security, reviewing and updating policies, reviewing and updating job descriptions, discussions on efficiencies, meetings with staff, etc. The Commissioner Liaison Program was briefly explained. There was brief discussion about the new Opioid Funds Policy and separate warrant, and the recently formed Opioid Committee.

The Commissioners budget was reviewed. The budget has been bare-boned and some budget lines are already over-expended and will continue to be. The Commissioners and staff are increasingly attending more meetings outside the office now that COVID has subsided. The short-staffing situation was discussed, how the first payroll after the H.R. position became vacant was assisted by another County, and how Finance Director Kari Hunt has done it for many months until the new H. R. Director was hired and trained.

Some of the budget lines are expenses shared by the Commissioners, Finance, and Human Resources offices.

Waldo County will reach its bicentennial year 2027, as it was incorporated February 7, 1827. A small amount of funds was put in the Convention Hosting budget line for that purpose, and to contribute to the annual Maine County Commissioners Association Convention.

Because there are other lines over-expended, B. Arseneau has been scrimping on office supplies to compensate. This line has been kept low for the last couple of years. The Committee asked that this continue and asked if they could reduce that line. K. Kelley offered to do without his cost of living increase, but B. Arseneau said they will make it work with the reduction in that line.

The Commissioners Office Supply line was reduced from \$3,000.00 to \$2,000.00.

The Committee recessed for lunch break.

HUMAN RESOURCES – presented by Human Resources Director Tracy Benton.

The full-time line has been less expended than it normally would be due to the vacancy in position,

which then became P/T working remotely, and now is full-time. There is no need for a part-time line as the current shared position has been moved into another department.

The remaining budget lines were reviewed. T. Benton stated that she reduced the Professional Services line from the original request.

The Human Resources Budget Professional Services line was reduced to \$31,500.00 for 12 months and \$15,750.00 for 6 months.

EMPLOYEE BENEFITS – presented by the Commissioners and Human Resources Director Tracy Benton. Never before have all the payments that the County has actually been paying been seen. Only the premiums have been presented in the budget process. The County budgeted \$1.4 million, puts the funds in an account, and when the check register comes out, it is paid. There is also Stop Loss Insurance required. Up until recently when the TAN was used, there had been a Health investment Account, and the Finance Director at that time used that account to fund the health insurance plan. The budget committee never saw the combined premiums and actual amount being spent on claims because costs were manageable for many years and the budget hadn't needed to be increased until recent years. The Commissioners talked about the need to substantially increase the health insurance budget for the past five (5) years.

K. Kelley explained that he wants to see the breakdown by categories. The County is trying to find a health insurance company to take on the County and stop being self-funded. He negotiated with Cross Insurance for the broker fee. Currently it was at \$67.00 and they immediately dropped it to \$45.00. He asked if it could be reduced to \$40.00, the company agreed, and said they could eventually go down to \$26.28. Then hopefully will get it dropped a little further. The 100% tariff on pharmaceuticals was mentioned and they are looking hard at the pharmaceuticals regarding where they are purchased and what they are to try and manage those costs.

These are the actual numbers of what it costs to run the health insurance program, and the Commissioners are trying to be transparent.

L. Greeley said she wished the budget had been more realistic with health insurance and Information Technology prior to this year.

The committee inquired about the auditors findings on the audits. K. Hunt said the auditor has some questions on 2022 audit so it may not be finished by the end of the month. Budget committee members expressed that the health insurance costs should be budgeted in the actual budget. The Commissioners are having long conversations with the administrator, they have the resources and analytics to get quick answers for decisions, and T. Benton said that the County is looking at programs and everything possible to manage the health insurance plan and reduce costs while still offering a good plan.

E. Lenharr thanked the Commissioners for a realistic budget. Now that they know what the actual costs are, she felt that the Commissioners should not do an 18-month budget, and that the Commissioners should educate the towns about a future 18-month budget. R. Tarantino said what she

is seeing does not justify the \$4.9 million. It was explained that the employer pays 85%, and the employees simultaneously pay the 15%. This comes out every month at the beginning. B. Kurek said he would like to see the premiums broken out by what the employees pay, the employer pays, and the reinsurance being paid. K. Kelley said now that they have switched brokers, there will already be savings.

M. Mortier said that she now understood that there were big things coming up. This budget will require being pushed to toward the end of December. It will hopefully show the pennies, nickels and dimes. She recommended that they wait on the health insurance budget until as close to the end of the year as possible. When she joined the budget committee, she realized the TAN that had jumped, that it is crazy to have the income coming in $\frac{3}{4}$'s of the year later, and she had asked about changing the County to a fiscal year. She was a proponent of this then, and when she came in this year. She listened and read. It was great that there was an introductory meeting and it was fabulous but the committee wasn't as ready as the Commissioners. At this point she doesn't see how the County can go to an 18-month budget. E. Lenharr agreed small palatable bites are needed. The Committee decided to call for a vote.

****MOTION: E. Lenharr/B. Bebb to ask the commissioners to reconsider going to a fiscal year during this budget cycle.** Bob Kurek called for a roll call vote.

Roll call:

E. Lenharr – yes

B. Bridges - yes

T. Higgins - yes

L. Greeley - yes

M. Mortier – yes

B. Bebb - yes

R. Tarantino - yes

B. Kurek - yes

Vote passed unanimously.

The Commissioners stated that they would need another special meeting and expressed their appreciation to the budget committee for asking the hard questions because it helps put all the puzzle pieces together. It will take at least about two (2) weeks to obtain the health insurance information.

Budget Meeting Schedule:

Nov. 8, 2025 is the same (Sheriff, Jail, Information Technology)

Nov. 21, 6:00 to 9:00 – Revisit Health Insurance Budget Line; Vote on all budgets for Proposed Budget for Final Hearing.

Dec. 12, 2025 Final Budget Meeting and Public Hearing.

****MOTION: B. Bebb/T. Higgins to adjourn at 4:23 p.m.**

Respectfully submitted by Barbara L. Arseneau Waldo County Clerk
Barbara L. Arseneau