Woolwich is about to embark on a Town Meeting like no other. On August 22, we will convene outdoors to do the Town’s business at 9 am. This year it means attendees will be under 2 tents, each holding 50 socially distanced people, and another group of 50 partially shaded under tents. The remaining folks are invited to stay in their cars, because the Town Meeting will be broadcast on the radio and will be heard for a short distance from the Town Office. We’ve arranged for a system to provide good quality sound.

This will obviously pose challenges – we’ll be competing with US Route 1, for instance – but the Selectboard and the Town Office staff have done their best to plan for a good outcome, and to communicate our plans to the public with a mailer sent out last month. But we’ll need your help to keep everyone safe and to do the work of the Town. First and foremost, please do not attend if you don’t feel well. We’ll be sorry to miss you. Please bring a face covering and wear it when you are within six feet of other people. Finally, please bring your own chairs, although we’ll have some available. Patience and good humor will help us all.

Because we’re outside, overcoming traffic noise and increased distance will require everyone to approach one of the microphones if they want to speak to an issue. Please be patient as the moderator seeks to recognize each person who wishes to speak.

So, what is the business of the Town this year? Proposed marijuana ordinances that, if approved by voters, will allow up to three retail stores in the downtown area, and cultivation in the general purpose and rural areas of Town. We held a public hearing last month, which is posted on our website, and where you can also find the ordinances. You can also pick up a copy of this year’s Annual Report at the Town Office with its dedication to our former Boston Post Cane holder, Margaret Gardiner, who died in February.

Most of the selectboard’s municipal budget discussions were finished prior to the pandemic this year. As we do every year, we look closely at last year’s expenses, anticipate the coming year, and make changes accordingly. It is always a collaborative discussion, and we meet with the FD, EMS, and other Town committees, such as Woolwich Recreation and the Fish Commissioners, as well as the Patten Free Library.

This year, we‘re recommending an increased budget for snow plowing and for staff. After contacting several surrounding towns about their snow plowing budget, it became clear that Woolwich has been getting a great deal for our hard-working plowing contractors.

Currently, we pay about $5,800 per mile for snow plowing, while surrounding Towns have been paying anywhere from $5,878 to $10,111 per mile. In addition, all of those Towns provide their own sand and salt; in Woolwich, our contractors provide their own. All of our contractors also provide legally approved sand and salt storage. After several discussions with our three long-time local contractors, we settled on a proposed price of about $8,500 per mile.

Proposed increases for staff come after a similar survey of other Towns. As you know, until recently, we had staff who had served for several years, providing a stability that some other Towns haven’t enjoyed. After a couple of years, our hope is that we’re again providing some steadiness, and part of hiring the right people has been salary and benefits. If we want to hire and retain good people, what we pay them matters. Covid-19 created other challenges that our staff met, and continued to work even while the Town Office remained closed.

The Town Warrant also includes a proposed ordinance allowing our Emergency Medical Services team to charge for some calls that don’t require transportation to a medical facility, for instance, when a patient requires medication on site but doesn’t need to be transported elsewhere.

We look forward to seeing your faces, even at a distance, and hear your voices ready to participate in our small town democracy.

-Allison Hepler, on behalf of the Selectboard