

## Brookline603 Episode 2

# Brookliners Talk Taxes

[00:00:00] In the past, I just voted as recommended. By the people with greater knowledge, and that's all well and good, but look where it's gotten us. We're in a place where we've never been before. Our taxes are higher than they've ever been.

We asked Gary Young to join Brookline 603 to provide music for our podcast. But it turns out he's contributing much more. This is Brookline 603, a podcast created by Brookliners to shine a bright light on the civic life of a small New Hampshire town. I'm Gail Russell Chaddick, eighth generation Brookliner.

Gary, what's it like to be a voter in Brookline, facing a big, for some huge, increase in taxes? The tax hike. And my wife sitting at the kitchen counter staring at this letter in horror and trying to [00:01:00] figure out how much our taxes just went up. And it was astronomical. It was a couple thousand dollars. It was a 15 percent tax hike.

And then came the questions, why? Where did this come from? Who voted on this? My method of voting has always been to fall back on voting day to what is recommended by the various committees, like the library, the police, the road agents, everybody that's gotten involved with the process from the beginning that I never did.

And that's what I followed. But look where it's gotten us. We're in a place where we've never been before. Our taxes are higher than they've ever been. So, now it behooves us, I think. That's a good word. Good word. Thank you. I think we need to learn more. I think, I won't say we, I think I need to learn more about the [00:02:00] process that's taking place in Brookline and get more educated from the get go, like attend a meeting, attend several meetings, meet some people, talk to some people, and get a balanced understanding of where we're going and where we come from and where we want to be.

We can't sit back and just let it happen. If we're not okay with a gigantic tax increase, it has to be controlled somehow. And it has to come through knowledgeable sources. We all know neighbors who've moved out of Brookline because the tax rate is unaffordable, so that's I've seen that happening for 25, 30 years.

Remember a person that lived down by the lake, a good friend, and just announced, that's it, I'm leaving. And I'd never heard of that before. No one's ever left Brookline like that. And it's becoming much more common, and [00:03:00] maybe more common than we even realize. The people that I credit are the people that attend the meetings every week, late into the night.

and gather information, hammer out what needs to be done, and we're facing that now. I mean, right now is when the committees are meeting to determine what the tax rates will be and where the money goes, like the budgeting committee. Then that would get acted on during town meetings. Those two points are the places where people need to attend.

They need to know what's happening. To me, kind of a frightening thing because it means I have to get involved and I have I have my little purple circle up and on Russell Hill that I have invisible gates and everything force fields and Nobody can get near the things that we need to do is attend the meetings and vote I mean, we've got what 6, 000 people [00:04:00] in town and the meetings have 200 people There's a town out there of people that have things to say.

Gary, if you watch people walk into town meeting, they're often holding the town report, which comes out just before the meeting, and a warrant with a list of things to be voted on. How helpful did you find the warrant, for example, in understanding what was going on? Um, honestly, it doesn't help me because I'm not knowledgeable enough to know what they're talking about.

Okay, they can put it all in writing and last minute, because I haven't touched anything until voting day, last minute, I always fall back on, you know, this is recommended by the finance committee, this is recommended by the police department, this is recommended by the fire department. I go by those people because they're the ones that have done their homework.

And they've attended all [00:05:00] those meetings and they know what they want and they, they know what they need. But maybe there's times we can't always get what we need. We're in a place where we've never been. And how do we deal with it? I have limited funds. Everyone does. We have to figure out the best way to use it.

Gary, as you know, we have with us today two people in a good position to help on this. This is Peter Webb here at the Russell Homestead. This is Michelle Decoto, Town Planner. Michelle, Peter is well known to Brookline and a feature on this podcast. But in introducing you, I'd like to pass along to our listeners a

comment I heard yesterday from a neighbor who has plowed Brookline roads for 35 years.

He said, Michelle is the first planner I've seen who actually comes down with the road inspector to look at the road. She leaves her desk and sees what's happening on site. That is high [00:06:00] praise. Welcome. You and Peter are working together on a new voter's guide for Brookliners headed into this year's town meeting.

Why is this needed and what do you hope to accomplish? Well, Michelle, with that intro, I will defer to you. Okay, the voters guide is really going to be focused on the eight zoning ordinance changes that are being proposed by the planning board this year. This is actually the second year of our voters guide.

We had one last year as well, and the feedback that we got from residents was that it was really helpful to explain some of these changes that are being proposed because they're not always obvious. To people who aren't doing this every day. Some of the zoning ordinance changes that are being proposed are what we consider to be truly just housekeeping things that need to be updated based on changes at the state or the federal level or things that just need to be updated.

[00:07:00] For example, The first proposed zoning ordinance is a change to our zoning map. Our current map hasn't been updated in over 20 years. Some of the other ones that we have are a little more complicated, which is why we have a voters guide to help people who haven't been at planning board meetings every month for the last six months, to understand not only what the changes are, but why the changes are being proposed.

Michelle, I'm very grateful that you've done this work on the voting guide for the voters. Uh, from my vantage point as the moderator on election day, it is uncomfortable for me to have people come up and say, relative to the proposed zoning. What does this mean? I don't understand. Tell me what it means.

And I, as a moderator, have to say, I can't give you any interpretation because it may be inaccurate or it may be biased. You really have to make a judgment call on what you see on the ballot. Now, if I [00:08:00] could digress on that for a sec. For whatever Reason the legislature has decreed that when the planning board wants to tweak or update or fix our zoning ordinances, their proposal has to go on the ballot.

It's not something we get to discuss at town meeting. So you're all alone inside the voting booth, trying to figure out what the planning board is talking about. You have to understand that zoning ordinances are hundreds of words and the ballot contains a distillation of the essence of. The proposed change, so it's vague, it's unclear, and so frequently the voters are frustrated and just don't understand and have to, by default, do what Gary Young does, which is to defer to those people who are doing the work, which is a wonderful statement of trust, but it's not the ideal process.

So. Uh, I am [00:09:00] thrilled pieces that, uh, Michelle's doing what she can to get info out there to voters who live busy lives and have too much to do and really don't want to spend time watching the planning board with all due respect to the planning board. She's trying to enable the voter to have the benefit of input so they can make an informed decision on these zoning ordinances.

And I appreciate that. Thank you. The voters guide this year, like last year, is going to be available at town hall on paper for those people who like paper, but we also are going to offer it electronically again and we'll have a video component for those people who prefer to have it. Someone read the words of the voter's guide, as well as maybe read along with them to make it as accessible as possible.

And as always, I am available to answer questions. Um, feel free to stop by my office, give me a call, drop me an email. I'm happy to review with you what [00:10:00] led the planning board to make the decisions that they made. Many of these changes are complicated and it's important that people do understand what they're voting on.

Careful reading of the changes is important. I'm glad people do trust the planning board. They are a great group of people. And by the way, they're also looking for alternates. So if you really do want to learn more about the work of the planning board, please consider becoming an alternate. It's a great opportunity to learn a lot more about your community and have a voice in writing ordinance next year, perhaps, or in helping.

shape the master plan, which is our guiding document for our town. It's a really great opportunity to shape the future of Brookline. Well done. I'm often the master of the obvious, so let me speak the obvious. The planning board makes recommendations. They do not create ordinances. Their recommendations, based on a lot of work, are put [00:11:00] to the voters, and the voters are the ones who enact the recommendation of the planning board.

Absolutely. I would say that the planning board, along with a group of really dedicated volunteers, this summer worked to develop a new ordinance. So there's always the possibility of working with the planning board on a shorter term basis and I think that once the voters of Brookline take a look at that proposed ordinance, I think they're going to be really amazed at what a group of dedicated volunteers can do here in town.

It was really impressive. I'm working on a piece for the Rotary Club's internet local newsletter, Hollis Brookline news online. com and it will be an attempt to explain what I, uh, believe the planning board is proposing in these various proposals, which will appear on the town ballot. So that'll be another source that [00:12:00] voters could turn to, to try to familiarize themselves with the substance of these proposed ordinance changes.

Thank you so much for having me today. I really appreciate the opportunity to speak to the residents of Brookline. I'm happy to provide information in any and every way that people need. I am here to help. Actually, town council always teases me that my job is to drink coffee and know things. Peter, I'd love to ask you one more question.

Uh, can you help Especially newcomers understand what a budget debate is like a town meeting. What usually happens? Town meeting is tough because there's an enormous amount of [00:13:00] information that, uh, the, the selectmen, uh, have been working on for months and months and months. And the departments have been working on for months and months and months.

So it's a data dump. And the voters, if they have stayed out of the line of fire and not watched the planning board and select board meetings, walk into it with a clean slate and it's tough work, the town, among many other. Items on the agenda called the warrant. The town that is the board of select men have an operating budget and they pose to the assembled people.

Here's what we think we need to spend of your tax dollars in order to operate for the next 12 months. And there is a lot of detail. People approach a microphone and ask questions. So select person, why is the police department budget what it is? And what about this particular item? And there's a conversation back and [00:14:00] forth and it's always got to be respectful whereby the poor voters try to educate themselves about the basis for the selectman's operating budget.

So it tends to be random. It tends to be amusing at times because sometimes we spend a lot of passion on. Dumb little things because someone thinks it's not a dumb little thing. So it's not a highly efficient system, but it is a democratic

system where people are faced with a lot of information and they get to ask questions and.

Require answers so they can get comfortable with a proposal on the floor and vote at town meeting, whether to approve it or not. But that I think would be my description of the. Budget debate process at town meeting. It is preceded, of course, by a number of other occasions when the budgets are discussed and refined and changed.

That's done at select board meetings. Peter, there's an event coming up [00:15:00] on January 20th of great interest to this podcast and to anyone interested in this place. Gil, thanks for asking. Yeah, Saturday, January 20, the Brookline Historical Society is going to have an open house from 9 to 2. We are eager to have the public come.

There's no admission fee. There will be refreshments, and we're hopeful that we can get the public in to See our facility, to see our collections, to talk with the people involved in historical society. We do what we can to promote and preserve the heritage of our small town. It's not a place with famous people.

One might think that for that reason, there's nothing of interest, but I would beg to differ, because I think it's clear that everyday life for regular people is more a part of history than the fluff that we tend to get. And the historical society is [00:16:00] dedicated to preserving the Pieces and paraphernalia and the stories of everyday life in our town for the past 250, 60 years.

So we want people to come. Those people are part of the heritage of this town, part of life in this town, and we'd like them to see the wonderful historical parade that they're a part of. This Historical Society is also delighted to report that Mark Austin Fountain will be available with us at the open house.

Mark is a remarkable artist and about an 11th generation Brookliner, and he was commissioned by the Historical Society to do a mural for us in our lower gallery behind the town cannon. Peter, thank you. We know that you're gearing up not only for the open house on Saturday, but for the big event for the town motivator lasting through an entire primary voting session on January [00:17:00] 23rd.

And now we have a second guest, Mark Fountain, who is the artist who created the mural that's about to hang permanently over the town cannon in the historical society. Mark, what images did you choose to illustrate Brookline's history, and why those? Well, it's a funny story behind that. I was meeting with

the Brookline New Hampshire Historical Society, and we were discussing what they wanted to have in the mural.

And, uh, talk went on for a while, and, uh, President Peter Webb says, You know, Mark, you see all these people around here? He says, Each one of them has a different idea of what they'd like to have in the mural. I said, Okay. So, talk went on for a few more minutes. And then Mark Fezzanin, God bless him, he comes forward and says, Look, Mark knows what he's doing.

Why don't we let him decide how to put it together? And so that's [00:18:00] how it started. There's nine vignettes. They all have a big historical impact in the history of Brookline, New Hampshire. There's a lot of good reasons to come and see this in person, especially if you're there to explain it. Well, I plan to be there, unless I get run over by a rogue elephant.

I'll be there to chat and explain things. Listen, we are so grateful you could join us to get started thinking about this mural. I think a lot of people will get to see it over the years, and I so appreciate your love of the town and the way it's expressed in your art. Thank you. Thank you very much. It was a labor of love.

It shows. Winding up this podcast, we turn to Laurie Peach Tupin, who is organizing our next podcast on education in Brookline. Laurie, can you give us a preview of the issues you'll be discussing? [00:19:00] Well, it's no secret that people came to Brookline for the schools, but leave when their kids are grown to escape the taxes.

Just recently, I've had several friends move out of town. And the amount spent on schools is pretty daunting. Is it worth it? What are you getting for your investment? Next episode. I will be talking with several people who have worked in the school system for many years to help shed some light on how the money is spent and why it is important for not only our future, but everyone's.

Laurie, before taking up one of the largest issues in Brookline's public life, can you help us reflect on a question of great matter to private life here? Where's the snow? Yes, we've had some snow, but it didn't last. At the time of recording, the ice, uh, is not yet on the lake. What is happening to winter in Brookline?

That is a good question, Gail. [00:20:00] My whole family loves snow. My daughter Maria is from Guatemala and her favorite season is winter. Go figure. So we're all just a little bit sad this year. Winter in the past in Brookline is absolutely the best. Ice skating, sledding, and of course snowmobiling. I

remember when we first moved to Brookline, we were so excited because we could hit snowmobile trails right from our front yard.

One can snowmobile from Brookline all the way to Canada if we want. We never went quite that far, but it is possible under the right conditions and with some time. But that is a more recent type. Gary, what do you remember when you were young? Thank you, Lori. The town meets in the wintertime on Lake Potanapo.

When I was a kid, There was no such thing as snowmobiles. My best memory of that time was just haunting the shoreline where people had fires and food. The old men [00:21:00] would hang out and drink, and they'd tend their ice traps and catch panfish, like kibbies and perch and bass, an occasional trout. Um, but they'd be cooking venison over a fire or, you know, whatever, whatever I'd say, had sausages and things.

And if you were polite and approach them quietly, usually you got fed. We had ice skates, we'd play, uh, Fox and geese and hide and seek or whatever, um, just skate around. And the ice makes such a cool sound in the wintertime when it's cracking and expanding and contracting. It could be really scary, but it doesn't mean that you're about to go through the ice.

It's just the ice changing. It was fun. There were no screens back then. There were no internets back then. We spent a lot of time outside, um, sliding. The most important lesson I ever learned was never lick a [00:22:00] clothesline pole or a sled runner. It was winter in Brookline was always a blast. This year, not so much.

The seasons are different. It's an easier time to live in New England because there's a lot less shoveling. I was looking through a box of old diaries and came to 1929. And I start reading entries like, Shoveled snow, six hours a day. Shoveled snow, eight hours. I asked my father, how old was uncle when he's shoving snow eight hours a day?

And he said he was 69. And then there was a reference where he said, shoveled snow to Ball Farm. And I said, where was Ball Farm? And he said, it's about half mile down the road. And as we talked about it, you know, the, it was very important for farmers to be able to connect with each other, especially in those deep, long winters and snows.

If you weren't able to milk your [00:23:00] cows, somebody had to, and the neighbors were aware of each other. And it's one of the things that I think, I



hope we can develop more in these podcasts, which is what people did for each other. And that network of social connection, kind of responsibility and affection that seem to be such a big part of the town's history.

And if I can add one more note on her way out the door, Michelle gave me a copy of the town ordinance about dumping your snow in the roadways, which I was not aware of, and let me just inform fellow Brookliners, it's 100 for the first offense and 500 for each subsequent offense. So, it's probably good that there isn't a lot of snow these days because those penalties can pile up very high if you're inclined to toss your snow into the road.

We hope you enjoyed this week's podcast. You can find more, including an archive of this and future podcasts, at our website, [brookline603.org](http://brookline603.org). [00:24:00] And, by the way, if you know anyone else in Brookline who's concerned about this issue, We'd appreciate it if you shared this podcast with them. We're grateful for comments received to date of issues you want to see covered, such as the town's food bank school spending.

Please keep those comments coming on our website or directly to the editor at editor at [brookline603.org](http://brookline603.org) or by commenting on our podcast wherever you see it on social media. We especially want to hear from the 5, 000 plus who have not attended town meeting in the past. This town is your place. We want to make it easier for you to have a part in this conversation.

This episode was edited and hosted by me, Gail Russell Chaddick. With Peter Webb, Gary Young, Lori Peachtubin, and guests Michelle DeCoto and Mark Fountain. Our producer and audio director is Michael Moss, who also recorded and arranged original music by Gary Young. Copyright [00:25:00] 2024.