



CUMBERLAND COUNTY FINANCE COMMITTEE

Meeting Minutes

Tuesday, January 6, 2026

5:00 PM

The Finance Committee held their meeting in person in the Sebago Room in the County Administration Building located at 27 Northport Drive, Portland, ME 04103.

Attending: Councilor Bob Vail, Cumberland
Councilor Karin Orenstein, Yarmouth
Councilor Sarah Michniewicz, Portland
Councilor Tim Thompson, Cape Elizabeth
Select Board Connie Justice, New Gloucester
Councilor Jon Anderson, Scarborough
Councilor Ben Grant, Portland (via speaker phone)

County: County Commissioner Patti Smith
Finance Director/Treasurer Theresa Grover
Finance & Budget Manager Alyssa Johnson
Assistant County Manager Breana Gersen
County Manager James Gailey

WELCOME

The Committee and staff went around the room and introduced themselves.

DEPARTMENT PRESENTATIONS

Registrar of Deeds Jessica Spaulding presented a 5.9% budget increase for Fiscal Year (FY) 2027. She projected a 28% increase in income from recording fees, attributing this to the implementation of a new, simplified flat-fee schedule that replaces the prior complex system (per-page/per-name/per-reference). An anticipated 27% increase in revenue is expected from the state's transfer tax for properties valued over \$1 million, despite the county's retained percentage of that tax decreasing from 10% to 9.2%. The department's revenues fully cover its operational costs.

Document volume has normalized to approximately 54,000 annually, down from a peak of 90,000-100,000 during the COVID years of 2020–2021. However, revenue has remained strong, and 72% of documents are now efficiently submitted via electronic recordings.

The department staff includes the Register, a Deputy Register, and four clerks.

Karin Orenstein: There is a different between your current staff level and what the budget shows.

Jessica Spaulding: A sixth position remains frozen in the budget due to current market conditions and efficiency changes,

County Manager Gailey: Provided further explanation on why the County handles this vacancy in the way we have and how the salary falls out to the unassigned fund balance at the end of the year if the position is not filled.

The Committee expressed thanks to Registrar of Deeds Jessica Spaulding for her presentation.

Michael Durkin, Director of Emergency Management, presented his department's budget, which is mostly unchanged and totals just over \$733,000. Of this total, 57% is funded by county general funds and 43% by non-matching federal grants. The majority of the budget (85%) funds seven staff positions.

Director Durkin noted a 7.2% staffing increase, consistent with other departments, and a 21% (\$13,000) decrease in the operations budget due to utility costs moving to the facility's budget after the agency relocated. Capital funding remains \$30,000 for direct support to the two regional hazmat teams in Portland and South Portland (\$15,000 each).

Director Durkin expressed concern that potential FEMA restructuring could make future federal grant revenues more volatile, possibly requiring the county to assume more responsibilities,

such as opening and staffing disaster recovery centers. The department is proactively preparing for this contingency by training volunteers.

The Finance Committee thanked Director Durkin for his budget presentation.

Regional Communications Director Melinda Fairbrother-Dyer presented the budget for the 911 Dispatch Center, which has an operating budget that increases slightly due to standard price changes.

The department employs 37 full-time staff: the Director, Deputy Director Erin Pelletier, seven shift supervisors (providing 24/7 coverage, vacation, and training overlap), and 28 full-time dispatchers.

The center reviews 100% of high-severity calls for quality assurance, which last year included 101 'not breathing' calls and 78 structure fire calls. The steady volume of mental health-related calls since the pandemic makes the center feel busier despite a slight decrease in overall call volume. The center also typically handles motor vehicle accidents and seasonal events.

The Cumberland County Regional Communications Center (CCRCC) serves as the primary Public Safety Answering Point (PSAP) and dispatcher for 19 communities within Cumberland County, as well as the Cumberland County Sheriff's Office. It also serves as a backup PSAP for the city of Westbrook.

The center is governed by the Cumberland County Regional Communications Board of Directors, which includes a voting representative from each contracting community. The center is designed for instant communication between dispatchers for different towns (e.g., Gorham, Windham, Cumberland) and the Sheriff's Office.

The total cost to operate the 911 Dispatch Center is \$4.6 million, primarily composed of salaries, benefits, and operating expenses (radio infrastructure, maintenance contracts, computers, software).

Revenues total \$1.9 million from the 19 communities served, covering approximately 40% of the operating budget. The center dispatches for the University of Southern Maine (USM) in exchange for free tuition for all Cumberland County employees and their family members. The remaining cost is covered by general fund allocations paid by all county municipalities (including those not directly serviced by the center) and an allocation for services provided to the Sheriff's Office.

Bob Vail: How much additional staff would be required for the center to take on dispatch services for the entire county?

Karin Orenstein: The revenues from the towns being served don't come close to expenditures.

County Manager Gailey: Explained how the budget has been set-up since the regional service was established back in 2006.

Director Fairbrother-Dyer: It is not a simple one-for-one swap. Portland's regional center, which covers Portland, South Portland, and Cape Elizabeth, has an identical staffing level (38 positions) despite handling a significantly higher 911 call volume (62,000 vs. the CCRCC's 34,677 in 2024).

The Gorham Police Department is covered by the CCRCC with 5 staff members, whereas Gorham's former independent center employed 8 people, demonstrating that shared resources and technology create cost savings.

The Finance Committee thanked Director Melinda Fairbrother-Dyer for her presentation.

The Cumberland County Extension Association was presented by Theresa Kelly, Sarah Davenport, Tim Schmidt, and Assistant Professor and Program Specialist Jason Lilley. The group provided an overview of its four major programs: 4-H Youth Development, Agriculture, Food and Nutrition, and Horticulture.

- **4-H Youth Development:** Traditionally known for animal husbandry exhibits at county fairs, the program now includes 17 active clubs focused on community service, leadership training, and a new STEAM club. It partners with new adolescent Mainers from Cambodia. A total of 80 adult volunteers contributed 7,860 hours to 4-H clubs.
- **Agriculture:** This program focuses on sustainable farming methods, such as adding to soil rather than depleting it, and has assisted over 1,600 clients through person-to-person consultations and conferences. A recent initiative in maple syrup production assisted over 200 backyard projects in 2025. The program also offers safe tractor operation certifications.
- **Food and Nutrition:** A central part of services, it provides classes, workshops, and webinars on safely preserving and handling food, and offers the "Serve Safe" course for food service certification. It includes the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) for low-income individuals and immigrant families.
- **Horticulture:** Covers home gardening and landscaping with plants. It includes the popular Master Gardener program, whose volunteers participate in the "Harvest for Hunger" project, with activities showcased at Tidewater Farm in Falmouth. Classes have served over 1,340 people.

The subsequent questions asked of the Cumberland County Extension Association representatives focused primarily on grant funding, budget concerns, and future financial planning:

Bob Vail: How long has the service been in place? (Answer: Started in 1895.)

Jon Anderson: Is the county required to provide funding, and how much funding is appropriate?

County Manager Gailey: Stated the requirement is unclear, as the money is drawn from the general fund.

Jon Anderson: Asked for the reasoning behind the flat funding level.

County Manager Gailey: Explained that the grant account process changed post-pandemic. Multiple small grant recipients totaling \$380,000, including set allocations to the Portland Public Library, CC Soil and Water, and the Extension Service, were previously managed differently. Now, smaller grants are awarded through United Way, who screens and awards funding on behalf of the county. The grant has remained flat at \$125,000 for the past three or four years.

Jon Anderson: Sought clarification on the actual amount of the full funding request, which was confirmed to be \$161,000 (from Appendix A), rather than the initially stated \$172,000. This \$161,000 request represents a 29% increase over the previous year.

Jon Anderson: Asked how the delta between the county's flat grant and their actual expenses is being covered.

Answer: The gap is covered by drawing on a surplus from a previous year (FY24) and using reserve funds. The surplus was created because they were unable to be fully staffed that year.

Jason Lilley (Extension Service): Explained the critical importance of county-funded support staff. While educational staff are fully funded by the university, support staff are funded by the county grant and are essential for administering grants and planning events, enabling program specialists to focus on their work.

The Extension Service indicated that they anticipate a time when they will be unable to support current staffing and program levels if flat funding continues. The presentation aimed to alert the committee to this potential problem for the following fiscal year (FY27).

Commissioner Smith: Suggested keeping the "big picture" of the budget in mind, noting it would be reasonable to at least cover staff salary costs to avoid a significant jump in future years.

Karin Orenstein: Asked whether the FY24 overage was used to cover subsequent staff salary increases.

Jon Anderson: Asked about the planned use of current reserve funds if they are not used to offset the operating budget.

Extension Service: The "want list" for these funds includes a 15-passenger van for 4-H youth programs and increased investment in facilities at Tidewater Farm. A five-year projection

indicates the entire surplus would be depleted if the organization remains fully staffed and flat-funded at \$125,000.

Bob Vail: Asked if the group receives any financial support from the Cumberland Farmers Club.

Extension Service: No, they do not. They collaborate with them and other community organizations, offering technical support, but have not sought financial support.

The Finance Committee thanked the Extension Service for their budget presentation.

COMMITTEE DISCUSSION

Jon Anderson: Asked about the impact on the budget from lost jail revenue and suggested exploring creative ways to make up the gap over two years. He also asked if the jail contract is annual and automatically renewed.

County Manager Gailey: Stated he has been considering the same issue and needs to meet with the Commissioners regarding changes to be incorporated. He confirmed the contract automatically renews and the last negotiated rate was in 2010.

Jon Anderson: Suggested the County Manager should prepare different scenarios outlining the impacts of new Commissioners or potential state support.

County Manager Gailey: Noted the jail has limited flexibility, having already reduced the jail budget by 40 corrections officers two years ago.

Bob Vail: Asked if there would be more information on regionalization from the new Fire EMS Coordinator. County Manager Gailey explained the coordinator started only three months ago and would not be presenting yet.

Bob Vail: Asked about the specific goals of that program.

County Manager Gailey: Explained that a regional survey of Fire Chiefs is guiding the process for the new Fire EMS Coordinator.

Karin Orenstein: As a new committee member, asked about the established process and whether recommended changes are typically written out.

Bob Vail: Stated that, in his past experience, the budget is typically voted up or down in its entirety, not "cherry-picked" line by line.

County Manager Gailey: Countered that there have been times the Finance Committee has made recommendations to forward the budget to the County Commissioners with specific, line-by-line recommendations attached.

Jon Anderson: Asked if the cut of 40 Full-Time Equivalents (FTE) to the jail staff was a specific recommendation.

County Manager Gailey: Clarified it was a recommendation that the county "right size" the jail with the appropriate level of staffing, not a mandate to cut a specific number of staff.

Karin Orenstein: Asked if the committee should maintain a running list of proposed changes to the budget during the process.

Bob Vail: Responded affirmatively, stating that there should absolutely be a discussion about potential budget cuts.

ADJOURNMENT

At 8:10 pm, a motion to adjourn the meeting was made by Jonathan Anderson, seconded by Karin Orenstein. The vote was unanimous, and the meeting was adjourned.