

Town Council Special Meeting

Meeting Minutes

August 12, 2026, 6:00 PM

Town Hall Auditorium, Newmarket, NH

1. Pledge of Allegiance

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited to open the meeting.

2. Roll Call

The Vice Chair invited all attendees to introduce themselves as part of the roll call.

Present:

- Brian Ward, Town Council Chair
- Scott Blackstone, Town Council
- Gary Swanson, School Board Member
- Joe LaMattina, Vice Chair, Town Council
- Sönke Dornblut, Town Council
- Lonnie Stebbins, Chair, School Board
- Gwen Boyd, School Board Member
- Elizabeth Szeliga, School Board
- Kathy Malsbenden, School Board
- Stella McShera, Town Council
- Todd Allen, Superintendent of Schools
- Steve Fournier, Town Manager

3. Public Forum

The Vice Chair opened Public Forum at 6:08 PM. No members of the public came forward to speak. Public Forum was closed at 6:08 PM.

4. New Business/Correspondence

a. Joint Meeting with the Newmarket School Board

The Chair convened the joint meeting with the Newmarket School Board and introduced the first substantive agenda item.

b. Share Recent Successes and Challenges

School District - Superintendent Allen

Superintendent Allen opened on a positive note, highlighting a 100% graduation rate for the 2026 school year. He also reported strong academic performance relative to national trends, noting that the average Newmarket student is performing approximately three-quarters of a grade level above their expected level, a result that has been consistent for three consecutive years.

Financially, despite an unexpected \$400,000 healthcare assessment and shortfalls in anticipated state and federal aid, the district is returning \$688,000 to taxpayers to offset taxes the largest such return in recent memory while preserving all programs and maintaining its retained fund balance. Superintendent Allen noted the fund balance had been threatened by legislation that ultimately did not pass.

Additional successes highlighted included the launch of a district-wide AI task force following the School Board's adoption of a new AI policy, proactive cybersecurity planning (with IT Director Jason Carey receiving a Primex award and being invited to present at a statewide technology conference), the collaborative development of the Educator Success Platform (ESP) for teacher evaluation, and the district's ongoing 20-year capital maintenance plan protecting the \$39 million investment made in the schools seven years ago.

On challenges, Superintendent Allen cited the hostile tone toward public education and school administration coming from Concord, including a general narrative that administrative costs are responsible for school budget pressures. He expressed concern about the mixed messages from both state and federal levels regarding their commitment to public education.

Town - Town Manager Fournier

Town Manager Fournier reported that the Planning Board adopted the Town's Master Plan the prior evening, concluding a multi-year process and establishing a vision for the next decade. He highlighted significant infrastructure investment, including road paving, sidewalk improvements, and a major sewer relocation project removing a line from the Lamprey River while simultaneously improving the pedestrian bridge. Many of these projects were completed with grant funding or principal forgiveness, limiting the burden on taxpayers.

Fournier cited public safety as a success, pointing to low staff turnover in both the police and fire departments. He noted that a recent study by Municipal Resources, Inc. found the fire department delivering services at exceptional value, with the current model saving approximately \$1 million annually compared to a fully staffed department. He identified the declining volunteer pool as a growing challenge and noted the department has begun using a per diem system to supplement staffing, which has strained the salary budget. Municipal Resources also recommended separating the combined Fire Chief/DPW Director position into two distinct roles, which Fournier indicated would be pursued.

On challenges, Fournier echoed concerns about unfunded mandates from Concord and emphasized the town's housing affordability crisis. He noted that following a revaluation to 100% market value two years ago, values have already declined to 87.5%, and that housing stock including manufactured housing, once a reliable affordable option has become increasingly unpriced for many residents, including seniors and first-time homebuyers.

Board and Council Discussion

Several board and council members offered follow-up remarks. School Board Member Szeliga noted that the longevity of the School Resource Officers had been praised by Police Chief Jordan at the Back to School Bash, and that the continuity of those relationships' benefits students significantly. Superintendent Allen added that prospective employees are now actively seeking

out Newmarket as a desirable place to work, a shift from prior years. Town Manager Fournier confirmed that staff retention is a town-wide phenomenon, with many employees having served longer than his own fourteen years.

Representative Cahill, who was in attendance, briefly acknowledged the concerns raised about the legislature, characterizing the current session as among the most difficult in his seven terms and expressing hope for future change.

c. FY28 Budget Discussion

Town Timeline

Town Manager Fournier presented a draft budget and election timeline for the town. Election Day is anticipated to be March 9, 2027, with a deliberative session on Saturday, January 30, 2027 (or February 6 as a snow day alternative). Key charter-required deadlines include presenting the Capital Improvement Plan to the Council by September 15 and a full budget by October 15, with the Council's budget due to the Municipal Budget Committee by November 15. Guidance from the Department of Revenue Administration (DRA) was still pending, and Fournier noted several cost pressures: projected 7–10% healthcare increases, approximately 5% increases in property liability, workers' compensation, and software subscriptions, continued energy cost volatility, and the anticipated costs associated with separating the Fire Chief and DPW Director positions.

School District Timeline

Superintendent Allen confirmed the school district would follow the same general election timeline and had no objection to the proposed deliberative session dates. He noted the district typically presents its full budget to the Budget Committee in the week following Thanksgiving. However, he flagged that the timeline this year would be significantly complicated by HB 1300 (discussed further under item 4e), which requires a community vote in November and will necessitate earlier public outreach likely beginning in September and October so residents can understand the potential financial implications before voting.

d. FY28 Capital Projects Discussion

Carpenter Property Possibilities

Superintendent Allen provided background on the Carpenter property, approximately 18 acres owned by the school district (with an adjacent approximately 12–13 acres owned by the town), located across the street from the high school. The property was originally purchased in 2011 as a potential high school site, a project that was ultimately replaced by the \$39 million school renovation bond. Since his arrival, Superintendent Allen noted he has consistently heard community interest in developing the property for athletic field use.

Recently, conversations with Councilor LaMattina and Energy Committee member Scott McGrath prompted exploration of whether the site could host a solar array, after rooftop installation on the school buildings was ruled out as cost-prohibitive due to structural engineering requirements. This led the district to commission a formal engineering feasibility study through a firm called Galeus, contracted in March, with results expected by end of August. Preliminary indications confirm the property is feasible for athletic development, though final

cost details are pending. A SolSmart study previously identified the Carpenter property as one of the more viable sites for solar energy in the community.

Superintendent Allen emphasized that no decisions have been made. He plans to present the full feasibility study at the September 17 School Board meeting and intends to present to the Long-Range Planning Subcommittee. He framed the property's future as a community-wide conversation rather than a school or town initiative in isolation, noting other interests have been expressed including trail development, potential library expansion, a future SAU office, and recreational space.

Town Manager Fournier added that the Recreation Department is also in need of additional field space because of the department's programming growth, and that the town has been involved in discussions with the school district regarding shared use of the property.

Council Member Blackstone suggested the opportunity to think broadly about the Carpenter property potentially as a site for a community or recreation center and stressed the importance of inclusive, large-scale planning. Councilor Dornblut proposed that the scope and central location of the property, with potential pedestrian and bicycle connections linking disparate parts of town, warranted a planning charrette to gather broad community input and build a shared vision. Superintendent Allen agreed this was a strong idea and expressed interest in organizing a public session to present the feasibility study, the SolSmart findings, and conceptual ideas for community feedback.

Town Hall and Police Station Renovations

Town Manager Fournier presented the results of a recent facilities study identifying the police station and Town Hall as the two most critical buildings in need of renovation. The police station, designed in the early 1990s, no longer meets the needs of modern policing in terms of security, evidence storage, training space, or layout. The Town Hall, which was not originally designed as a municipal hall, lacks sufficient meeting space, accessible public entry, conference rooms, and archival storage.

The proposed concepts include rebuilding the police station on its current site and constructing an addition to Town Hall that would reorient the ground floor as a public-facing entrance with clerk services, convert the current main floor to a primary meeting hall, expand the upper floor for administrative offices, and repurpose the top floor for archival storage. The estimated combined cost is approximately \$20 million, to be financed through bonding. Fournier indicated a building committee would be formed to develop a formal recommendation, with a public vote anticipated not in the coming March election but the following year, to allow adequate time for public education.

Fournier also noted that major water and sewer infrastructure upgrades are planned, particularly along the older utility lines on the hill from Spring Street down. He noted that pipe breaks have revealed infrastructure dating to before 1800, and that the town intends to coordinate streetscape, sidewalk, and traffic improvements whenever pavement is opened for utility work.

e. HB 1300 - School District Tax Cap and SAU Administrative Spending Cap: Impact on Newmarket

Superintendent Allen outlined the significant uncertainty surrounding HB 1300, which mandates a community vote on a school district tax cap in November 2026. The cap would be tied to the Northeast Consumer Price Index (CPI), with March used as the reference month, but guidance from the DRA on key definitional questions particularly what constitutes "administrative costs" had not yet been received. He noted a potentially confusing discrepancy: the definition of administrative costs under the tax cap law may differ from the definition used in a separate warrant article requirement for administrative spending, which could produce different numbers for the same concept and confuse public messaging.

Superintendent Allen stressed the importance of community education prior to the November vote, recognizing that the November electorate is substantially larger and less familiar with school district finance than the typical March voters. He cautioned that the district must share information without crossing into advocacy, referencing the recent case in which the Amherst School District was cited by the Attorney General for advocacy on a warrant article.

Town Manager Fournier offered to assist with public communication, drawing on his experience from a prior New Hampshire Supreme Court case (Town of Epping) that established the right of municipal officials to share factual impact information including both outcomes if a measure passes and if it does not without crossing into improper advocacy. He and Superintendent Allen indicated they would collaborate on materials.

Board member Malsbenden spoke personally about having grown up in Franklin, which has operated under an extreme tax cap for 37 years, and noted that taxes did not decrease but services and school quality suffered significantly. She underscored that communities which have voluntarily put similar measures to their voters have largely rejected them.

Representative Cahill noted the tax cap was put on the November ballot intentionally to benefit from higher voter turnout and confirmed that the ballot question language is prescribed by law. He also noted that passing requires 60% (3/5) of voters, and that should it pass, it remains in effect until 2030.

Several members discussed outreach strategies. Suggestions included community information forums, informational videos (including animated-style videos like prior district communications), distribution of printed voter guides at polling places, tabling at events such as the Farmers Market, and outreach to homeowner associations. Town Manager Fournier confirmed he had successfully used HOA meetings to share information with residents for many years. School Board Chair Stebbins raised the additional challenge of reaching renters estimated at approximately 60–70% of Newmarket residents who may be less engaged in local elections.

Superintendent Allen noted that the New Hampshire School Administrators Association is also developing statewide informational resources and that he had been in contact with them about a Newmarket-specific video component.

f. Shared Goals and Collaborative Opportunities for Council and Board Moving Forward

The Chair opened this item by noting that much of the evening's discussion had already touched on collaborative themes and invited further dialogue.

Councilor Dornblut proposed that the two bodies consider meeting at least twice per year, rather than the current charter-mandated once annually, to maintain continuity on shared topics. He suggested that a jointly developed agenda soliciting input from both bodies in advance would make the meetings more productive. He also raised two additional topics he felt warranted joint attention: the feasibility of the municipality creating a community power and light company (building on the existing Newmarket Community Power aggregation program) to address energy market volatility and potentially align the town, school district, and community accounts; and the issue of food insecurity, noting increased demand at local food pantries and the Community Fridge, and the related question of food system resilience.

Councilor LaMattina suggested the creation of a joint subcommittee to identify and develop common priorities between the town and school district before bringing recommendations to the full bodies, though he acknowledged the challenge of finding volunteers. School Board Chair Stebbins suggested that meeting twice per year in a spring and fall cadence, alternating hosts might accomplish the same goal without requiring a standing subcommittee. Town Manager Fournier cautioned that quarterly meetings could conflict with the budget development cycle and might not be practical.

Superintendent Allen agreed that twice-yearly meetings represented a meaningful improvement over the current frequency. He suggested that a pre-meeting agenda-setting process, in which each body solicits topics internally before the joint session, would ensure more substantive and action-oriented discussions. Town Manager Fournier noted that for operational matters, he and Superintendent Allen already meet every other week and are well-coordinated, and that much of the groundwork for joint communication efforts could be handled at the staff level without requiring formal board action.

The group reached informal consensus around meeting twice per year, with an April meeting as a second regular joint session, and with administrators continuing to coordinate operationally in between. It was understood that the separate question of a community information forum regarding HB 1300 would be organized prior to the November vote, with planning led at the administrator level.

Community member Al Zink was recognized by the Chair to briefly address the group. He expressed that the joint meeting represented a milestone that he and others had advocated for over two decades, including through his work on the Charter Commission, and encouraged the boards to sustain the practice regardless of future leadership changes.

5. Adjournment

There being no further business, the Chair declared the meeting adjourned.