

MUNICIPAL FINANCE TERMS

Abatement: A reduction or elimination of a real or personal property tax, motor vehicle excise, a fee, charge or special assessment imposed by a governmental unit.

Appropriation: An authorization by the Town Meeting to make obligations and payments from the treasury for a specific purpose.

Assessed Valuation: A value assigned to real estate or other property by a government as the basis for levying taxes. In Massachusetts, assessed valuation is based on a property's full and fair cash value as set by the Assessors. (See Full and Fair Cash Value)

Available Funds: Balances in the various fund types that represent non-recurring revenue sources. As a matter of sound practice, they are frequently appropriated to meet unforeseen expenses, for capital expenditures or other onetime costs. Examples of available funds include free cash, stabilization funds, overlay surplus, water surplus, and enterprise net assets unrestricted (formerly retained earnings).

Balance Sheet: A statement that discloses the assets, liabilities, reserves and equities of a fund or governmental unit at a specified date.

Bond: A means to raise money through the issuance of debt. A bond issuer/borrower promises in writing to repay a specified sum of money, alternately referred to as face value, par value or bond principal, to the buyer of the bond on a specified future date (maturity date), together with periodic interest at a specified rate. The term of a bond is always greater than one year. (See Note)

Bond Anticipation Note (BAN): Short-term debt instrument used to generate cash for initial project costs and with the expectation that the debt will be replaced later by permanent bonding. Typically issued for a term of less than one year, BANs may be re-issued for up to five years, provided principal repayment begins after two years (MGL Ch. 44 §17). Principal payments on school related BANs may be deferred up to seven years (increased in 2002 from five years) if the community has an approved project on the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) priority list. BANs are full faith and credit obligations.

Bond Authorization: The action of town meeting authorizing the executive branch to raise money through the sale of bonds in a specific amount and for a specific purpose. Once authorized, issuance is by the treasurer upon the signature of the mayor, or selectmen. (See Bond issue)

Bond Rating (Municipal): A credit rating assigned to a municipality to help investors assess the future ability, legal obligation, and willingness of the municipality (bond issuer) to make timely debt service payments. Stated otherwise, a rating helps prospective investors determine the level of risk associated with a given fixed-income investment.

Budget Message: A statement that, among other things, offers context by summarizing the main points of a budget, explains priorities, describes underlying policies that drive funding decisions, and otherwise justifies the expenditure plan and provides a vision for the future.

Capital Assets: All tangible property used in the operation of government, which is not easily converted into cash, and has an initial useful life extending beyond a single financial reporting period. Capital assets include land and land improvements; infrastructure such as roads, bridges, water and sewer lines; easements; buildings and building improvements; vehicles, machinery and equipment. Communities typically define capital assets in terms of a minimum useful life and a minimum initial cost. (See Fixed Assets)

Capital Budget: An appropriation or spending plan that uses borrowing or direct outlay for capital or fixed asset improvements. Among other information, a capital budget should identify the method of financing each recommended expenditure, i.e., tax levy or rates, and identify those items that were not recommended. (See Capital Assets, Fixed Assets)

Capital Improvements Program: A blueprint for planning a community's capital expenditures that comprises an annual capital budget and a five-year capital program. It coordinates community planning, fiscal capacity and physical development. While all of the community's needs should be identified in the program, there is a set of criteria that prioritizes the expenditures.

Capital Outlay Expenditure Exclusion: A temporary increase in the tax levy to fund a capital project or make a capital acquisition. Exclusions require two-thirds vote of the selectmen and a majority vote in a community-wide referendum. The exclusion is added to the tax levy only during the year in which the project is being funded and may increase the tax levy above the levy ceiling.

Cherry Sheet: Named for the cherry colored paper on which they were originally printed, the Cherry Sheet is the official notification to towns and regional school districts of the next fiscal year's state aid and assessments. The aid is in the form of distributions, which provide funds based on formulas and reimbursements that provide funds for costs incurred during a prior period for certain programs or services. Links to the Cherry Sheets are located on the DLS website at www.mass.gov/dls. (See Cherry Sheet Assessments, Estimated Receipts)

Cherry Sheet Assessments: Estimates of annual charges to cover the cost of certain state and county programs.

Classification of the Tax Rate: Each year, the selectmen vote whether to exercise certain tax rate options. Those options include choosing a residential factor (MGL Ch. 40 §56), and determining whether to offer an open space discount, a residential-exemption (Ch. 59, §5C), and/or a small commercial exemption (Ch. 59, §5I) to property owners.

Debt Exclusion: An action taken by a community through a referendum vote to raise the funds necessary to pay debt service costs for a particular project from the property tax levy, but outside the limits under Proposition 2 1/2. By approving a debt exclusion, a community calculates its annual levy limit under Proposition 2 1/2, and then adds the excluded debt service cost. The amount is added to the levy limit for the life of the debt only and may increase the levy above the levy ceiling.

Debt Service: The repayment cost, usually stated in annual terms and based on an amortization schedule, of the principal and interest on any particular bond issue.

Encumbrance: A reservation of funds to cover obligations arising from purchase orders, contracts, or salary commitments that is chargeable to, but not yet paid from, a specific appropriation account.

Enterprise Funds: An enterprise fund, authorized by MGL Ch. 44 §53E½, is a separate accounting and financial reporting mechanism for municipal services for which a fee is charged in exchange for goods or services. It allows a community to demonstrate to the public the portion of total costs of a service that is recovered through user charges and the portion that is subsidized by the tax levy, if any. With an enterprise fund, all costs of service delivery-- direct, indirect, and capital costs—are identified. This allows the community to recover total service costs through user fees if it chooses. Enterprise accounting also enables communities to reserve the "surplus" or net assets unrestricted generated by the operation of the enterprise rather than closing it out to the general fund at year-end. Services that may be treated as enterprises include, but are not limited to, water, sewer, hospital, and airport services. (See DOR IGR 08-101)

Equalized Valuations (EQVs): The determination of the full and fair cash value of all property in the commonwealth that is subject to local taxation. EQVs have historically been used as variables in distributing certain state aid accounts and for determining county assessments and certain other costs. The Commissioner of Revenue, in accordance with M.G.L. Ch. 58 §10C, is charged with the responsibility of bi-annually determining an equalized valuation for each town and city in the Commonwealth.

Estimated Receipts: A term that typically refers to anticipated local revenues listed on page three of the Tax Recapitulation Sheet. Projections of local revenues are often based on the previous year's receipts and represent funding sources necessary to support a community's annual budget. (See Local Receipts)

Excess and Deficiency (E&D): Also called the "surplus revenue" account, this is the amount by which cash, accounts receivable, and other assets exceed a regional school district's liabilities and reserves as certified by the Director of Accounts.

Excess Levy Capacity: The difference between the levy limit and the amount of real and personal property taxes actually levied in a given year. Annually, the board of selectmen or council must be informed of excess levying capacity and evidence of such acknowledgment must be submitted to DOR when setting the tax rate.

Fiscal Year (FY): Since 1974, the Commonwealth and municipalities have operated on a budget cycle that begins July 1 and ends June 30. The designation of the fiscal year is that of the calendar year in which the fiscal year ends.

Free Cash: (Also Budgetary Fund Balance) remaining, unrestricted funds from operations of the previous fiscal year including unexpended free cash from the previous year, actual receipts in excess of revenue estimates shown on the tax recapitulation sheet, and unspent amounts in budget line-items. Unpaid property taxes and certain deficits reduce the amount that can be certified as free cash. The calculation of free cash is based on the balance sheet as of June 30, which is submitted by the community's auditor, accountant, or comptroller. Important: free cash is not available for appropriation until certified by the Director of Accounts. (See Available Funds)

Full and Fair Cash Value (FFCV): Fair cash value has been defined by the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court as "fair market value", which is the price an owner willing but not under compulsion to sell ought to receive from one willing but not under compulsion to buy. It means the highest price that a normal purchaser not under peculiar compulsion will pay at the time, and cannot exceed the sum that the owner after reasonable effort could obtain for his property. A valuation limited to what the property is worth to the purchaser is not market value. The fair cash value is the value the property would have on January first of any taxable year in the hands of any owner, including the present owner." (Boston Gas Co. v. Assessors of Boston, 334 Mass. 549, 566 (1956))

Fund: An accounting entity with a self-balancing set of accounts that is segregated for the purpose of carrying on identified activities or attaining certain objectives in accordance with specific regulations, restrictions, or limitations.

GASB 34: A major pronouncement of the Governmental Accounting Standards Board that establishes new criteria on the form and content of governmental financial statements. GASB 34 requires a report on overall financial health, not just on individual funds. It requires more complete information on the cost of delivering value estimates on public infrastructure assets, such as bridges, road, sewers, etc. It also requires the presentation of a narrative statement the government's financial performance, trends and prospects for the future.

GASB 45: This is another Governmental Accounting Standards Board major pronouncement that each public entity account for and report other postemployment benefits in its accounting statements. Through actuarial analysis, municipalities must identify the true costs of the OPEB earned by employees over their estimated years of actual service.

General Fund: The fund used to account for most financial resources and activities governed by the normal town meeting appropriation process.

General Obligation Bonds: Bonds issued by a municipality for purposes allowed by statute that are backed by the full faith and credit of its taxing authority.

Governmental Accounting Standards Board (GASB): The ultimate authoritative accounting and financial reporting standard-setting body for state and local governments.

Grant: A contribution of assets by one governmental unit or other organization to another. Typically, these contributions are made to local governments from the state and federal government. Grants are usually made for specific purposes.

Indirect Cost: Costs of a service not reflected in the operating budget of the entity providing the service. An example of an indirect cost of providing water service would be the value of time spent by non-water department employees processing water bills. A determination of these costs is necessary to analyze the total cost of service delivery. The matter of indirect costs arises most often in the context of enterprise funds.

Interest: Compensation paid or to be paid for the use of money, including amounts payable at periodic intervals or discounted at the time a loan is made. In the case of municipal bonds, interest payments accrue on a day-to-day basis, but are paid every six months.

Levy Limit: A levy limit is one of two types of levy (tax) restrictions imposed by MGL Ch. 59 §21C (Proposition 2 1/2). It states that the real and personal property taxes imposed by a city or town may only grow each year by 2 1/2 percent of the prior year's levy limit, plus new growth and any overrides or exclusions. The levy limit can exceed the levy ceiling only if the community passes a capital expenditure exclusion, debt exclusion, or special exclusion. (See Levy Ceiling)

Line Item Budget: A budget that separates spending into categories, or greater detail, such as supplies, equipment, maintenance, or salaries, as opposed to a program budget.

Local Aid: Revenue allocated by the Commonwealth to cities, towns, and regional school districts. Estimates of local aid are transmitted to cities, towns, and districts annually by the "Cherry Sheets." Most Cherry Sheet aid programs are considered general fund revenues and may be spent for any purpose, subject to appropriation.

Local Appropriation Authority: In a town, the town meeting has the power to appropriate funds, including the authorization of debt.

Local Receipts: Locally generated revenues, other than real and personal property taxes. (See Estimated Receipts)

M.G.L.: Massachusetts General Laws.

New Growth: The additional tax revenue generated by new construction, renovations and other increases in the property tax base during a calendar year. It does not include value increases caused by normal market forces or by revaluations. New growth is calculated by multiplying the assessed value associated with new construction, renovations and other increases by the prior year tax rate. The additional tax revenue is then incorporated into the calculation of the next year's levy limit. For example, new growth for FY07 is based on new construction, etc. that occurred between January and December 2005 (or July 2005 and June 2006 for accelerated new growth communities). In the fall of 2006, when new growth is being determined to set the FY07 levy limit, the FY06 tax rate is used in the calculation.

Note: A short-term loan, typically with a maturity date of a year or less.

Other Amounts to be Raised: (Tax Recapitulation Sheet) Amounts not appropriated but raised through taxation. Generally, these are locally generated expenditures (e.g., overlay, teacher pay deferral, deficits) as well as state, county and other special district charges. Because they must be funded in the annual budget, special consideration should be given to them when finalizing the budget recommendations to the city council or town meeting.

Overlapping Debt: A community's proportionate share of the debt incurred by an overlapping government entity, such as a regional school district, regional transit authority, etc.

Overlay: (Overlay Reserve or Allowance for Abatements and Exemptions) An account established annually to fund anticipated property tax abatements, exemptions and uncollected taxes in that year. The overlay reserve need not be funded by the normal appropriation process, but rather is raised on the tax rate recapitulation sheet.

Overlay Deficit: A deficit that occurs when the amount of overlay raised in a given year is insufficient to cover abatements, statutory exemptions, and uncollected taxes for that year. Overlay deficits must be provided for in the next fiscal year.

Overlay Surplus: Any balance in the overlay account of a given year in excess of the amount remaining to be collected or abated can be transferred into this account. Within 10 days of a written request by the chief executive officer of a city or town, the assessors must provide a certification of the excess amount of overlay available to transfer. Overlay surplus may be appropriated for any lawful purpose. At the end of each fiscal year, unused overlay surplus is "closed" to surplus revenue, i.e., it becomes a part of free cash.

Override: A vote by a community at an election to permanently increase the levy limit. An override vote may increase the levy limit no higher than the levy ceiling. The override question on the election ballot must state a purpose for the override and the dollar amount. (See Underride.)

Proposition 2 1/2: A state law enacted in 1980, Proposition 2 1/2 regulates local property tax administration and limits the amount of revenue a city or town may raise from local property taxes each year to fund municipal operations.

Reserve for Abatements and Exemptions: (See Overlay)

Reserve Fund: Money set aside by Town Meeting to be allocated by the Advisory Board for extraordinary and unforeseen expenditures.

Revaluation: The assessors of each community are responsible for developing a reasonable and realistic program to achieve the fair cash valuation of property in accordance with constitutional and statutory requirements. The nature and extent of that program will depend on the assessors' analysis and consideration of many factors, including, but not limited to, the status of the existing valuation system, the results of an in-depth sales ratio study, and the accuracy of existing property record information. Every three years, assessors must submit property values to the DOR for certification. Assessors must also maintain fair cash values in the years between certifications so that each taxpayer in the community pays his or her share of the cost of local government in proportion to the value of his property. (See Triennial Certification)

Revolving Fund: Allows a community to raise revenues from a specific service and use those revenues without appropriation to support the service. For departmental revolving funds, MGL Ch. 44 §53E1/2 stipulates that each fund must be reauthorized each year at annual town meeting, and that a limit on the total amount that may be spent from each fund must be established at that time.

Stabilization Fund: A fund designed to accumulate amounts for capital and other future spending purposes, although it may be appropriated for any lawful purpose (MGL Ch. 40 §5B). Communities may establish one or more stabilization funds for different purposes and may appropriate into them in any year an amount not to exceed ten percent of the prior year's tax levy. The total of all stabilization fund balances shall not exceed ten percent of the community's equalized value, and any interest shall be added to and become a part of the funds. A two-thirds vote of town meeting is required to establish, amend the purpose of, or appropriate money into or from the stabilization fund. (See DOR IGR 04-201)

Tax Rate: The amount of property tax stated in terms of a unit of the municipal tax base; for example, \$14.80 per \$1,000 of assessed valuation of taxable real and personal property.

Tax Rate Recapitulation Sheet (Recap Sheet): A document submitted by a city or town to the DOR in order to set a property tax rate. The recap sheet shows all estimated revenues and actual appropriations that affect the property tax rate. The recap sheet should be submitted to the DOR by September 1 (in order to issue the first-half semiannual property tax bills before October 1) or by December 1 (in order to issue the third quarterly property tax bills before January 1).

Triennial Certification: The Commissioner of Revenue, through the Bureau of Local Assessment, is required to review local assessed values every three years and to certify that they represent full and fair cash value (FFCV). Refer to MGL Ch. 40 §56 and Ch. 59 §2A(c).

Trust Fund: In general, a fund for money donated or transferred to a municipality with specific instructions on its use. As custodian of trust funds, the treasurer invests and expends such funds as stipulated by trust agreements, as directed by the commissioners of trust funds or by town meeting. Both principal and interest may be used if the trust is established as an expendable trust. For nonexpendable trust funds, only interest (not principal) may be expended as directed.

Undesignated Fund Balance: Monies in the various government funds as of June 30 that are neither encumbered nor reserved, and are therefore available for expenditure once certified as part of free cash.

