

Livable Community Advocacy Committee
June 12, 2023

Attending: Susan Granoff (Chair and Presenter), Amanda Hirst (Guest Presenter), Rachid Belhocine and Lincoln Heineman (Guest Presenters), Carol Seibert (Notetaker), Janet Gelbart, John Seay, Yolanda Rodriguez, David Trevvett, Melissa Trevvett, Marion Freedman-Gurspan, Leslie Friedman, Ruth Seidman, Katie Hope, Jill Schiff, Susan Cohen, Carol Macbain, Maureen Mayotte,

1. **Presentation: Exploring an Array of Offerings at the Public Library of Brookline**

Guest Presenter: Amanda Hirst, (Director of Libraries - Town of Brookline)

Brookline's three library locations are the third busiest in the Commonwealth behind only Cambridge and Newton with over one million circulations in print and electronic materials and 42,000 registered borrowers. Director Hirst gave an overview of the many and varied library services including the Library of Things, the Tool Library, museum and park passes available for checkout, the English language learning program, storytimes, book clubs, and Girls who Code. Over 13,000 Brookline residents attend hundreds of programs, both in-person and online. LCAC members, many of whom make regular use of the library, were surprised to hear the impressive list of offerings.

Accomplishments of FY 23 include:

- Both Putterham and Coolidge Corner locations are now exceeding pre-Covid circulation levels.
- Guided by a diversity audit of the print collection, the library is able to ensure that the collection and future purchases align with Brookline's changing demographics.
- Increased engagement with Brookline's older adult population in programming and partnering with COA.

Goals for FY24 include:

- Support for K-12 and lifelong learning with an emphasis on literacy and STEAM (science, technology, engineering, the arts, and math.)
- Partner with community organizations to broaden outreach
- Implement library-wide strategies for racial equity and inclusion
- Increase opportunities for residents to engage with library staff, collections, programs, and services without having to visit the library.

New initiatives: Outreach and mobile services including a bookmobile made possible by an ARPA funding request, Friends of the Brookline Library, and the Brookline Library Foundation.

Ms. Hirst recommended a close look at the Library website <https://www.brooklinelibrary.org> to view the calendar of events, content of the Library of Things, museum and park passes, and the extensive e-library with Kanopy, e-books, e-audio books, and their press reader that makes available newspapers from around the world in several languages.

Q&A Responses/Discussion

- If you have an old Minuteman Library card, this can be updated at the library.
- Interlibrary links for requests give access to materials in the Minuteman system, throughout the Commonwealth, and beyond
- LCAC members commented that they enjoy the Taste of Poetry, chair yoga (on pause for the summer), assistance with audiobooks and e-books, and the availability of Zoom programs
- The library archivist works with the Brookline Historical Society
- The library recently hired a Library IT support specialist and plans to invite tech savvy volunteers to assist with computer help
- The library respects individual patron privacy but does collect data on what circulates
- Suggestions for new material are welcome.
- Donations are welcome. On the website, go to “About” and look for Friends of the Brookline Library. All the branches have book sale fundraisers.

This presentation was informative and much appreciated. The slides Ms. Hirst provided are attached below.

2. **Brookline’s New Means-Tested Senior Property Tax Exemption**

Guest Presenters: Rachid Belhocine (Brookline Chief Assessor and member of the Board of Assessors), and Lincoln Heineman (Brookline Finance Director)

Mr. Belhocine introduced the new Means-Tested Senior Property Tax Exemption (MTE) which will be implemented for the first time in Fiscal Year 2024, effective July 1, 2023. This exemption was brought to the 2020 Fall Town Meeting by the Moderator’s Committee on Elderly Tax Relief, where it was passed and then sent to the State Legislature as a home rule petition. The State Legislature passed it (with one amendment) in December 2022, and it was signed into law by the Governor in January 2023.

The MTE is modeled after a highly successful program in Sudbury which has been in operation since 2014 and which has been adopted by many other Massachusetts communities. Under this exemption, no qualifying senior homeowner is required to pay property taxes greater than 10 percent of their total gross household income as long as they pay at least half of their annual property tax bill.

In order to qualify for this exemption in FY24, the applicant must:

Be age 65 or older (with a joint owner, if any, at least 60 years old) as of December 31, 2022.

Have resided in Brookline for 10 consecutive years as a renter or owner and in their Brookline domicile on December 31, 2022.

Have a gross total household income no greater than \$64,000 if single, \$80,000 if head of household, and \$96,000 if a married couple. (These income caps are the same as those needed to qualify for the State Circuit Breaker Income Tax Credit.)

Have household assets (excluding the value of their primary residence) no greater than \$750,000. (This asset cap is set by the Select Board each year.)

Own and occupy a Brookline home with an assessed value of no more than \$1,076,600. (This is FY23's median assessed value of all Brookline single-family homes and condominiums, plus 10%.)

Not also qualify for Brookline's Senior Tax Deferral program (41A). (In most cases, seniors with conventional mortgages on their primary Brookline residence are not able to qualify for the town's Tax Deferral Program.)

Chief Assessor Belhocine showed us slides with examples of worksheets reflecting how the MTE might apply to applicants with varying circumstances. His slides and an application form will be included in separate emails due to the size of the attachment. *Please note that Mr. Belhocine has sent a correction slide reading December 31, 2022, not July 1, as pertains to the ages of the applicant(s).*

How to apply for the new Means-Tested Senior Property Tax Exemption:

Here is the link to the application form on the Assessor's Office website page for this new exemption. This must be submitted by August 31, 2023.

<https://www.brooklinema.gov/DocumentCenter/View/42635/FY24-MEANS-TESTED-SENIOR-EX-APPLICATION>

Q&A Responses/Discussion

- Thank you to the Finance Director and Mr. Belhocine who attended a listening session with the Council on Aging. The limit on assets has been increased substantially in response to feedback from seniors.
- The cap on the total amount to be granted for the exemptions will be voted on by the Select Board every year.
- The amount of a mortgage on the property is not a factor in determining the assessed value.
- Note that other exemptions are available: the tax deferral program (41A) allows one to defer taxes up to 50% of the home value with a current interest rate at 2.96%; this is an advantage over a home equity line of credit where the interest rate can vary from year to year.
- Few seniors are participating in the available programs. There have been only 12 filings for the tax deferral program this year.
- Guidelines and application forms are now available on the town website (see link above), and will also be available at the Senior Center, and at Town Hall. There is a plan to include these with the annual Town Census.
- Other suggestions for spreading the word were: Brookline Town Clergy Association, BrooklineCAN newsletter, the Brookline Neighborhood Alliance, the Town Meeting Member Association, and Brookline.News.
- Several attendees noted that the program seems to be aimed at condominium owners. Homeowners with higher assessed values will not qualify. Susan Granoff noted that the problem was caused by an amendment by the State Legislature, which substituted "median" for "average" when calculating the maximum assessed value of the applicant's home. Had the qualification been based on the average assessed value of all Brookline single-family homes and condominiums, as in the original home rule petition sent to the State Legislature, the cap would have been over \$400,000 higher: \$1,493,200 rather than \$1,076,000. We probably will have to ask Town Meeting to go back to the State Legislature with a new home rule petition to fix this.
- Asset limits are too low. In the absence of pensions, many are living on their accumulated assets into old age.
- With current and expected overrides and debt exclusions, there will be a real need for property tax exemptions.
- Mr. Belhocine and Mr. Heineman thanked LCAC for the opportunity to explain this new exemption and will be available to answer questions.
- LCAC thanked the presenters for their helpful explanations.

3. **Report on Annual Town Meeting 2023**

Presenter: Susan Granoff (Town Meeting Member Precinct 7, Advisory Committee Member)

The content of this report is included in an attachment below. Following the report, there was an opportunity to review this first in-person Town Meeting since Covid. Most felt it had been successful, but that a few technical issues need to be addressed before the Fall Town Meeting. Susan Granoff noted that there is a new feature on the Town's "Town Meeting/Town Meeting Files" website page: a separate item for each warrant article that includes all reports, amended versions, and proposed amendments and motions relating to that article.

The Livable Community Advocacy Committee is one of several BrooklineCAN committees. Everyone is welcome to attend, but if you do so regularly, we invite you to support BrooklineCAN with your membership. You can join using PayPal, credit card, or by check. Instructions are on the right-hand sidebar on the front page of brooklinecan.org. Thank you!

4. **Other Business:** None

5. **Next Meeting: September 11, 2023, 3:00 pm on Zoom**

Susan Granoff requests suggestions for topics for our Fall meetings.