

Present: Mayor Campbell
Councillor Ward-Russell
Councillor Elderkin
Councillor Land

Absent: Councillor Jonah
Councillor Coates

Staff Present: Sean Wallace – CAO
Kim Beers – Director, Legislative Services
Jillian Hutchinson - Treasurer

Call to Order

Mayor Campbell called the meeting to order at 6:00 pm.

Adoption of Agenda

IT WAS MOVED by **Councillor Elderkin** and **SECONDED** by **Councillor Land** **THAT** the agenda be adopted as presented.

MOTION CARRIED (unanimously)

Conflict of Interest Declarations

NONE

2026 Budget Presentation

Mr. Sean Wallace presented the [2026 Fundy Albert Draft Budget Workbook](#) and the Ms. Hutchinson presented the [2026 Fundy Albert Draft Utility Budget Workbook](#)

Councillor Elderkin sought clarification regarding the year-to-year principal installment amounts shown in the budget. Noting that several principal installments appeared to decrease compared to the previous year, whereas installment amounts typically increase annually.

Ms. Hutchinson explained that last year's budgeted amounts were higher because the municipality had anticipated securing a debenture at year-end. Due to project delays, the debenture was not taken. Updated cost estimates for the upcoming debenture were obtained from Community Finance and have now been incorporated into the budget figures.

Councillor Elderkin asked regarding the Alma utility rates, noting that the draft budget shows a decrease in the wastewater rate and an increase in the water rate. **Councillor Elderkin** recalled prior discussions suggesting there would be no rate changes for Alma. **Councillor Elderkin** asked what factors led to the wastewater rate decreasing and the water rate increasing.

Ms. Hutchinson explained that the Alma utilities are operating with a surplus this year, which is shared equally between water and wastewater. This surplus provides additional revenue to offset expenses, resulting in revised rate calculations and the corresponding adjustments.

Councillor Elderkin referenced previous discussions about potentially applying the same surplus-sharing approach to Riverside-Albert. However, it had been noted that the wastewater system there is vulnerable, one significant issue could eliminate the surplus. **Councillor Elderkin** also recalled that Council had discussed the possibility of lowering residential rates in Riverside-Albert pending further consultation with the water operator.

Ms. Hutchinson advised that the contingency for transmission and distribution could be reduced from \$30,000 to \$20,000. Minor decreases were also made after updating the budget with the correct debenture costs for next year. Beyond those adjustments, no further changes were recommended to the water budget.

Councillor Elderkin asked whether the recent adjustments had been incorporated into the updated rates, noting that Riverside-Albert had previously shown an increase of about \$40 per quarter. Ms. Hutchinson confirmed the changes were included and that the increase had been reduced, estimating a decrease of approximately \$10-\$13 per quarter per residential unit from earlier projections. It was acknowledged that the initial proposed increase had been higher.

Councillor Elderkin inquired whether the knotweed removal project remained in the Alma budget. Ms. Hutchinson confirmed it is still included but noted that Council may remove it if they choose. **Councillor Elderkin** recalled previous discussions questioning its necessity and expressed concern about making a decision without direct representation from the Alma area. **Councillor Elderkin** suggested it would be beneficial to gather resident feedback before determining whether to keep the project in the budget.

Councillor Elderkin noted that the presentation differed slightly from what was shown the previous night. Ms. Hutchinson confirmed that the updated presentation includes a detailed budget to help provide clearer information.

Councillor Ward-Russell noted that the budget presentation format differed from the previous evening and expressed appreciation for the improved clarity. **Councillor Ward-Russell** acknowledged the significant work involved in preparing the budget and commended both Council and administration.

Councillor Ward-Russell reiterated several requests, including identifying which budget items are shared services and providing year-to-date actuals before the 2026 budget is approved.

Councillor Ward-Russell also raised questions regarding the projected 2024 surplus of \$182,000 and the unallocated surplus from 2023, noting that Council has yet to establish goals or direction

for how these funds should be used.

Additional comments included:

- Suggesting a reduction to the Councillors' budget line to reflect the vacant seat until May 2026.
- Requesting discussion on whether to continue funding the Alma knotweed removal project.
- Questioning the increased budget for the visitor information center line and noting the need to confirm whether the Alma location should operate in 2026 given proximity to Parks Canada
- Suggesting that potential savings or reallocated funds could increase support in areas such as recreation and culture (e.g., Canada Day funding).
- Requesting clearer documentation on the purpose of the \$156,000 transfer to capital reserve, including defined goals and deliverables.
- Noting that the presentation did not list the total operating budget, and requesting that both the 2026 budget total and the 2025 comparison be included for transparency (noting an estimated increase from approximately \$6.6M to \$7.2M).

Councillor Land sought clarification on the projected \$182,000 surplus for 2024, questioning whether the figure was final given the budget year is not yet complete. Ms. Hutchinson confirmed the estimate was prepared in collaboration with E6, who reviewed and compiled the lead sheets. While a few minor adjustments remain, Ms. Hutchinson noted that any changes to the surplus amount are expected to be minimal.

Councillor Ward-Russell noted that E6's contract expires in March and expressed concern about the increased workload that the Treasurer and Assistant Treasurer will assume once E6 is no longer providing support. **Councillor Ward-Russell** suggested that, if funds allow, Council consider allocating resources toward hiring a CPA or similar accounting professional to assist with financial oversight of the municipality's \$7.2 million budget. **Councillor Ward-Russell** noted that bringing in a CPA quarterly could be a cost-effective option.

Public Statement and Inquiries

Mr. Sean Blewett asked for the meaning of "PILT." Ms. Hutchinson explained that PILT stands for "Payment in Lieu of Taxes," typically received from federal or provincial properties that do not pay regular municipal taxes.

Mr. Blewett asked whether the RCMP rate charged to Fundy Albert applies uniformly across all communities, Lower Coverdale through to Alma, or if the costs are broken out separately. It was clarified that RCMP billing is calculated per ward based on each area's tax base. Larger tax-base communities, such as Lower Coverdale, pay a higher share, while smaller communities contribute less.

Mr. Blewett noted that, when presenting the Riverside-Albert utility rates, only the percentage

increase for institutional users was mentioned and not the actual dollar value. Ms. Hutchinson explained that institutional properties in Riverside-Albert are billed individually rather than through a unit system like Alma and Hillsborough, and specific values were omitted to maintain privacy regarding what each institution pays. Mr. Blewett suggested that a combined, overall institutional rate could have been presented without identifying individual users. Mr. Sean Wallace agreed and confirmed that the global institutional rate will be added to the updated budget document.

Ms. Kathy Weir asked why Riverside-Albert has multiple utility rates compared to Alma and Hillsborough. Ms. Hutchinson explained that each community operates under its own legacy water and wastewater by-laws, resulting in different rate structures, with Alma and Hillsborough using a unit-based system. Mr. Wallace added that a new unified water and wastewater by-law is currently being developed to simplify and standardize the approach across the municipality.

Ms. Joanne Butland asked what would trigger a water rate (plus) of \$152.00, rather than \$147.00, being billed on a Riverside-Albert property and whether the difference was based on acreage. Ms. Hutchinson explained that properties with farm animals require a backflow preventer, which involves additional maintenance and inspections. When a barn is connected, the extra usage triggers an additional charge. Ms. Hutchinson further clarified that Hillsborough and Alma do not have separate commercial rates; instead, both communities use a unit-based system.

Ms. Butland expressed concern about the significant increase to the water rate in Riverside-Albert, noting that it rose 28% in 2025 and is proposed to rise another 27% in 2026, resulting in a 55% increase over two years. She emphasized that such increases are difficult for seniors to manage and asked whether the rate is expected to stabilize in future years or if similar increases should be anticipated again next year.

Mayor Campbell explained that while future rate increases cannot be guaranteed, the current increases are driven by the urgent need to secure an additional water source. This past summer the reservoir levels were critically low, and although the system managed to hold, significant work is required. The budget includes funds for water system upgrades, exploration, and improvements to the reservoir and ponds to ensure long-term supply reliability.

Councillor Elderkin advised that one of the primary cost pressures within all three utility systems is wages for water operators. The municipality currently employs an operator-in-charge and two additional operators who are still working toward achieving their Level II certification; once fully certified, wage-related costs are expected to decrease somewhat. It was emphasized that operator wages and administrative costs represent a significant portion of the utility budgets.

Councillor Elderkin further explained that these costs are shared equally among Alma, Hillsborough, and Riverside-Albert, rather than being allocated based on user numbers. While this may result in higher relative costs for smaller systems, the approach is intended to balance

out over time, as each community may face major infrastructure or operational issues in different years.

Councillor Land added that recent provincial changes have made it significantly more difficult to obtain Level II water operator certification, requiring additional hours and training. As a result, certified operators are in high demand and increasingly difficult to recruit. This has placed added pressure on the municipality's existing Level II operators and contributes to the overall staffing challenges within the utility systems. **Councillor Land** advised due to the difficulty of recruiting certified Level II operators, municipalities now essentially need to train and develop operators in-house. **Councillor Land** emphasized the importance of supporting and retaining these employees once certified, given how competitive the market has become.

Mr. Sean Wallace cautioned that if the municipality were ever unable to staff its own certified water operators, it would need to contract an external firm such as Veolia, which could cost approximately \$25,000 per month. Mr. Wallace noted that such contracts often do not include repairs or additional services, which would further increase expenses.

Ms. Kathy Weir noted that the wastewater disposal expense shown in the budget appears to have doubled and asked whether this increase is due to higher charges being billed to the municipality. Ms. Hutchinson explained that wastewater disposal costs are higher because the mechanical systems in Alma and Hillsborough require extensive maintenance. These systems are aerated and have numerous moving parts, blowers, lines, and aerators, that frequently need repairs or replacement, leading to increased contingency budgeting. In contrast, Riverside-Albert operates a natural lagoon system with lower maintenance needs. Ms. Hutchinson noted that additional repairs are anticipated, some of which were deferred, and the increased budget ensures the municipality is better prepared for ongoing and unexpected system issues.

Ms. Kathy Weir questioned why projected water revenues remain relatively flat if the municipality expects community growth. Ms. Hutchinson explained that the surplus from the year prior becomes part of the following year's revenue, and this year's surplus was higher than anticipated. As a result, the surplus is being used to help offset rising expenses and maintain stable rates, rather than increasing projected revenue from water sales. **Councillor Elderkin** advised that based on the explanation provided, the current rates would be significantly higher without the use of surplus funds.

Ms. Hutchinson clarified how surplus funds flow into future budgets. Surpluses must sit for two years before they can be used as revenue, meaning the 2026 budget is supported by the 2024 surplus. Because the 2025 financials are not yet finalized, staff are using projected figures that have already been reviewed with E6. Staff explained that, with E6's assistance, draft financial statements have been prepared and the surplus estimates have been verified internally before going to the auditors.

Ms. Weir observed that projected grant revenue appears lower than in previous years and questioned why, noting earlier discussions about the need for increased grant-writing efforts. Mr. Sean Wallace advised that this is why the Steeves House Museum is seeking independence, as more grants are available to standalone organizations than to the municipality.

Ms. Hutchinson explained that the grant revenue line reflects only predictable funding sources, such as Canada Summer Jobs and SEED, and is based on what has been received over the past three years. Other grants are not budgeted in advance because they are uncertain and are only recorded when awarded. Mr. Wallace confirmed that the municipality is actively applying for grants, currently working on three, but the process is time-consuming, and available grants often require a municipal contribution (typically 20%), which must also be financially feasible.

Ms. Kathy Weir noted that the budget shows a decrease in the regional collaboration line and questioned the rationale. She referenced previous community discussions highlighting significant opportunities for joint initiatives, such as the new Recreation Council, which brings together all three communities to support youth programming. Ms. Weir indicated she may have missed the explanation during the presentation due to the pace of the information. Ms. Hutchinson clarified that the regional collaboration budget line decreases when the Regional Service Commission secures grant funding. Because the Commission sets the rates charged to municipalities, any grants they receive reduce the amount they need to recover from Fundy Albert. Staff noted that this includes projects such as the Trans Canada Trail work where grant funding offsets municipal contributions, resulting in a lower charge in the regional collaboration expense.

Ms. Robin Stuart raised several concerns and suggestions regarding the budget process and available information. She noted that the detailed budget breakdown was only posted shortly before the meeting, making it difficult for residents to review in advance or follow the presentation in real time. She suggested including explanations for significant increases, clearly identifying shared services, outlining which salaries are municipal or provincial, and indicating where specific projects will take place and who they benefit.

She also recommended providing clarity on which costs are controlled by the municipality versus externally set (e.g., RCMP, NB Power), and ensuring residents know where to find up-to-date financial information such as actuals to date. Staff noted that monthly Committee of the Whole reports already include budget-versus-actual information.

Ms. Stuart expressed concerns about the quality and accessibility of meeting videos and praised the clarity of the written minutes, suggesting the municipality share highlights publicly to improve community understanding. She also asked whether the province had granted an extension for the budget deadline, which staff confirmed.

She raised questions about the upcoming unified water and wastewater by-law and recommended more standardized approaches, including commercial water rates and the installation of water meters, particularly for high-usage businesses and Airbnbs. Staff agreed meters and standardization are worth exploring, though costly.

Ms. Stuart also requested information on the mosquito control spraying conducted in Lower

Coverdale, including what chemicals are used and potential health impacts. Staff committed to connecting her with the Regional Service Commission, though she emphasized the ward Councillor should also seek this information directly.

She concluded by expressing interest in seeing detailed breakdowns of community-focused spending and appreciation for the opportunity to ask questions, indicating she hopes to attend more meetings.

Mr. Jason Horsman thanked Council for the presentation and raised several concerns and recommendations. He noted that earlier discussions had suggested further review of a shared-costing model, but it was unclear whether that work was still progressing. He emphasized the need for accurate cost tracking before shared services can be reassessed.

Mr. Horsman focused heavily on vehicle-related budget lines, observing that some repair budgets increased by up to \$100,000, amounts he felt were unrealistic given actual repair costs or the price of replacement vehicles. He questioned why projections were being used instead of actual expenditures and expressed concern about “projections over projections” in the budget. He also raised concerns about municipal equipment being sent as far as Saint John and Moncton for repairs, despite multiple repair businesses within Albert County capable of performing the work at lower cost. He used the Zamboni repair pricing as an example, highlighting the large difference between local parts pricing and what was quoted by an external contractor. Mr. Horsman strongly encouraged the municipality to support local mechanics and repair shops whenever possible. Mr. Sean Wallace acknowledged this and noted they are already reviewing contractor lists and expanding local procurement where feasible.

In response to his questions about shared services, staff confirmed no changes from last year's allocations and advised that a detailed shared-services list will soon be posted. Mr. Wallace also explained that a new GPS and task-tracking system will be implemented to better capture where staff and vehicles spend time, which will support future cost-sharing adjustments.

Mr. Horsman also questioned institutional water and sewer rates in Riverside-Albert, expressing concern that government facilities may not be paying an appropriate share. He advised that privacy is not an issue for provincial or federal institutions and recommended publishing actual institutional rates. Staff agreed this was a valid point and will review the practice.

He further recommended re-evaluating how public works staff are deployed, noting inefficiencies when staff travel long distances to begin work. Staff confirmed that operational changes are already being implemented and additional efficiencies are planned.

Mr. Horsman concluded by encouraging Council to continue pursuing cost efficiencies and data-driven decision-making.

Mr. Lee Warnock thanked staff for the clear charts and presentation and asked for better integration between the budget document and the monthly Council meeting “packet.” He suggested adding an extra column showing 2025 year-to-date annualized figures (e.g., to end of September, divided by 9 and multiplied by 12) between the 2025 and 2026 budget columns, and then republishing the document so residents can more realistically compare actual costs to

projections. He also recommended numbering each budget line so it can be easily matched “one-for-one” with the corresponding lines in the Council package.

Mr. Warnock further requested that the post-meeting budget survey be re-issued now that the public has seen the presentation and videos, so residents can provide “second-round” feedback based on what they’ve learned. Staff advised they are also analyzing 2024 vs. 2025 survey results for posting. Mr. Warnock asked about next steps and was advised Council will deliberate on the budget within the next two weeks, with those meetings open to the public. Mr. Warnock also voiced support for knotweed eradication (with added public education to avoid spreading it) and strongly endorsed installing water meters, especially for high-use properties such as Airbnbs, and considering commercial or additional charges for heavy users, drawing on examples from other jurisdictions.

Mr. Sean Blewett expressed support for expanding the use of in-house staff for municipal work and asked for clarification on the equipment the municipality is planning to purchase. Mr. Wallace explained that the municipality plans to purchase a small \$6,000 man-lift attachment for the front of the tractor. This equipment will allow in-house staff to perform tasks such as installing banners and completing elevated maintenance work, reducing the need to hire contractors and saving an estimated \$6,000 annually. Mr. Wallace added that they also plan to purchase a push camera, which will enable crews to inspect utility lines and hard-to-reach areas of buildings internally. This will reduce costly contractor callouts and support proactive, preventive maintenance by identifying issues before major repairs are needed.

Ms. Kathy Weir asked whether Riverview’s mutual aid service is billed per fire call. Staff clarified that Riverview’s fire coverage for parts of Lower Coverdale and Hillsborough LSD is provided under a single contract rate, not a per-call fee. Although the contract sets the cost for that designated service area, mutual aid between departments still occurs when needed.

Ms. Robin Stuart asked why the municipality has two separate budgets, one for general operations and one for utilities, and whether this is standard practice. Staff explained that the utility budget is separate because water and wastewater services are fully user-funded. Although the budgets are distinct, they do interact: a portion of staff wages and administrative costs charged to the utility are transferred to the general operating budget as revenue. Staff noted that upcoming analytics and GPS/task-tracking tools will allow for much more accurate allocation of staff time between utility and general operations.

Ms. Stuart also offered input on the Alma Visitor Information Centre, noting that provincial and municipal visitor centres provide different services than a National Park information centre. She cautioned Council to consider these differences before deciding whether to close the Alma VIC. She suggested exploring alternative models, such as shared spaces, citing St. Martins, where the library and visitor centre operate from the same building and benefit from shared traffic. She encouraged Council to consider similar options to enhance visibility and usage before making final decisions.

Adjournment

Moved by Councillor Elderkin that the meeting be adjourned at 7:56 pm.

Mayor

Clerk