

I thought it might be helpful to update people on a number of Waldo County-related items just to make sure that elected officials and other interested community members from all 26 towns are up to date on activities and are aware of scheduled meetings. I am distributing this to about 80 email addresses via "blind copy" (Bcc) so that people on the list don't have to receive every single reply that may result. Nothing that I communicate needs to be considered privileged information, so feel free to share this with others as you wish.

Media coverage: There have been a number of recent articles focused on problems facing several County governments in Maine (notably in Washington, Penobscot, Waldo and Knox Counties) that have appeared in Maine newspapers — The Maine Monitor, Bangor Daily News, Midcoast Villager, Portland Press Herald, and Pen Bay Pilot. As you likely are aware, newspapers share articles these days, so it's not unusual for a story that originates in one paper to appear in another a day or two later. There's no question that more people are reading about and becoming aware of County government functions (and problems) than ever before. *[By the way, if you are not familiar with David August, he's a Belfast resident who has a Substack site and writes regularly about local government issues — most often about Belfast City government (especially about housing and development issues), but also about the Waldo County Commissioners and the RSU71 School Board. I highly recommend that you explore his columns. While access is free, people who value David's perspectives have the option of subscribing to support the time and energy he puts into his "citizen journalism."]*

Waldo County Commission Sessions Following the December 12 Budget Committee Hearing: The Commissioners held a Special Court Session (Executive Session) at 2:00 pm, Monday, December 14, followed by a Special Court Session at 10:00 am on Tuesday, December 16 (notice for which was distributed the afternoon before). Several town select board members and a handful of interested community members attended the Tuesday meeting. The Commission Chair, Betty Johnson, began the meeting by saying that the Commissioners would provide additional information about the proposed FY26 Budget, adding that there would be no opportunity for audience questions or comments (*that turned out not to be the case*). Commissioner Kevin Kelley handled most of the presentation, spending the better part of 45 minutes explaining the issues surrounding the County's self-funded health insurance program that has been in place since 2007, and outlining his work with Cross Insurance Agency to explore the steps necessary to conduct a competitive bidding process in order to shift the plan to an outside carrier (7 companies were contacted this fall and none wanted to bid under the present circumstances, especially given the County's high utilization experience). The County will need to stay with the existing arrangement for 2026 while taking the necessary steps to prepare to go out to bid for 2027. Kevin also discussed the delay in the completion of audits over the past several years, noting that the 2021 audit was completed in August and that the 2022 audit is due from the auditor by December 31, 2025. He said he is pressuring the audit firm to complete 2023 and 2024 audits by January 31, 2026. He indicated that he expects that there will be management findings for 2022 and 2023, given the extended period during those two years when the County had 4 or 5 different finance directors. Commissioner Parker made a few brief remarks. Thereafter, there was a 30–40-minute period where the Commissioners took questions from the audience. As happened at the previous week's Budget Committee hearing, the remarks/questions that came from half a dozen people were sometimes pointed but always presented in a respectful manner I believe the meeting was accessible via Zoom to people who could not attend in person. I don't know whether Minutes were kept.

Waldo Commissioners Regular Court Session held December 18, 2025: As I recall, there was not much in the way of further budget discussion at this regular meeting. I was interested to receive an update on the formation of a permanent Opioid Settlement Committee for Waldo County comprised of a strong mix of 8 community members with backgrounds in both prevention and treatment, as well as people

with lived experience. The Committee will hold its initial meeting in mid-January and will receive guidance from staff of the Maine Opioid Settlement Support (MOSS) Center in designing a grant process for allocating funds to meet identified priority needs. Since 2022, Waldo County has received approximately \$500,000 in federal opioid settlement money resulting from negotiations with major pharmaceutical companies. Payments from those companies, channeled through State Attorney Generals, will extend at least through 2037 and Waldo County is slated to receive at least an additional \$1.2 million by that time....I did not stay for the whole meeting. There was a contentious exchange at a later point when Commissioner Kelley made a motion recommending that in light of the County budget challenges, the Commissioners should not take any increase in their salary for 2026 and also should forego participation in any employee benefits, including health care coverage. Commissioner Parker objected to the motion, saying that it could cause a hardship for families. The motion passed 2-1, with Commissioners Johnson and Kelley in support, and Commissioner Parker opposed. Commissioner Parker indicated that he would consult a lawyer to see if it is permissible for the County to deny access to benefits for certain employees.

Review of Proposed 2026 Budget by Chris Lewis: I believe it was at the Waldo County Budget Committee public hearing that Chris Lewis, Chair of the Thorndike Selectboard, made the offer to review the proposed 2026 Waldo County Budget from the perspective of someone who has had significant corporate management and budgeting experience. Commissioner Kelley said that he would provide Chris with a detailed copy of the proposed 2026 budget, adding that the Commissioners would welcome his questions and observations. On December 22, Chris provided his response, either with questions or comments pertaining to 30 specific line items within the proposed budget. I assume that Chris will receive a response from the Commissioners in early January. We all can appreciate the time and effort that Chris devoted to the task during the busy holiday period and we look forward to hearing about the Commissioners' response to the items he raised.

Commissioner Meeting on December 23 to Discuss Moving January 2 Payroll Back into December: I was told by a town selectman that the Commissioners held an Executive Session on December 23 to discuss the possibility of moving the January 2 County payroll distribution back to December 30 or 31, 2025. I understand that the Commissioners voted in favor of the change. This shift would lower wages and benefits paid in 2026 by \$235,000. I don't know enough about how this would affect County finances from an accounting and auditing perspective. Does it inflate salaries and benefits for 2025? Would that create (or add to) a deficit in 2025? Does some portion of that payroll and benefit expense end up getting charged to 2026 anyway because at least a couple of days in 2026 are being pre-paid? Stay tuned.

Upcoming Waldo County Commission Meetings: As far as I am aware, these are the dates, times and locations of upcoming Commission meetings. The first one, mentioned to me by a town selectman, was posted on the Waldo County website this morning, then cancelled in the past couple of hours.

**10:00 am, Wednesday, December 31, 2025 — Commission "Budget Workshop", presumably at the Commission offices at 39B Spring Street, Belfast. This meeting now has been canceled.** It was not clear whether this meeting was intended as an Executive Session (public excluded). Over the course of the past year Commission Chair, Betty Johnson, has held a series of "Workshops" (that are labeled as Executive Sessions) ostensibly to help orient the two new Commissioners, Kevin Kelley and Tim Parker, to their roles. In the opinion of several people, including me, those kinds of meetings do not meet the conditions necessary to qualify as Executive Session that permits Commissioners to exclude the public from attending/observing as outlined in Maine's Open Meeting Law, part of the broader Freedom of Access Act. The Act requires that most state and local government meetings be open to the

public, with advance notice, accessible locations, and public records of proceedings (votes, attendance). Executive Sessions are allowed only for very specific reasons (e.g. sensitive personnel matters, legal advice, contract negotiations) and require an open vote to enter, with the specific reason stated in the Minutes.

**10:00 am - 12:00 Noon, Thursday, January 8, 2026 — Commissioners Regular Court Session, 39B Spring Street, Belfast.**

**6:00 - 8:00 pm, Friday, January 9, 2026 — Waldo County Budget Committee (Location TBD).**

**10:00 am - 12:00 Noon, Thursday, January 22, 2026 --- Commissioners Regular Court Session, 39B Spring Street, Belfast.**