

FINANCE COMMITTEE
Minutes
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MILLBURY, MASS.

Date: March 13, 2023

Time: 6:30 p.m.

Present: O'Connell, Cooper, Wells, Kuphal, O'Connor, Pratt

Absent: Cooney

Meeting called to order at 6:33 p.m.

Motioned by Pratt, seconded by Kuphal to accept the minutes of March 6, 2023 as written.
Unanimous.

Sean Hendricks, Town Manager, was present at the meeting.

Richard Bedard, Gregory Myers, Jennifer Nietupski and Chris Wilbur were in to discuss the School Department Budget at 6:33 p.m.

Jen O'Connell: BVT came in last week and they came with a decrease over last year. Their debt is about to retire. They have less students and they received more State Aid.

Gregory Myers: We are coming here with a budget of \$25,443,212 or a 4.26% increase. The largest share of this increase is in staffing. The teachers, SEIU and the non-union employees are all at a 2% increase. The SEIU is in negotiations at this time. We plugged in 2% to be consistent with the other union. Some of the increase is due to shifting the salaries from the ESSER Grants to our budget. We have been phasing this out to the budget, knowing that the grant would be expiring next year. We are also part of the Assabet Valley Collaborative and the Southern Worcester County Collaborative for our Special Education program. Instead of spreading the increased cost over a couple of years, the State approved a 14% increase for next year. This will cost us an additional \$200,000. If we were not part of these collaboratives, the cost of Special Education Outside Placement would be very costly.

Russell Wells: Does the State help out with these costs at all?

Gregory Myers: We do receive Circuit Breaker funds, but that is a trailing reimbursement. The State promises to help fund transportation and Special Ed costs. We are anticipating \$800,000 in additional funding to the Town.

William Pratt: I understand that your cost is going up, but the people who are footing the bill are having their costs go up too, with a new fire station, new school, roofs etc. It looks like the taxpayer is looking at having a bottomless wallet.

Kevin Kuphal: At what point does the Governor's budget, in your calculations, reach a point where you're comfortable with it?

Richard Bedard: We are confident that the Governor's Budget will go through. The last few years it has gone up. We will not know what the actual figures are until June. We do hear you on the cost going up. We have worked with other Towns and the Town Manager to control our

supply contracts. We also receive solar credit. We asked for permission to extend the contracts on the transportation from 3 years to 5 years, which was approved. We saved because we were able to get a longer contract.

Russell Wells: What percentage of the student population is Special Ed?

Richard Bedard: It is about 23%.

Russell Wells: Does this increase each year?

Richard Bedard: It does. This also includes their transportation.

Gregory Myers: We like to keep our students in Town. There are some students that we do not have the programs that would keep them in Town. We have some in residential programs and some that are going to other schools. We have one student that the Town is responsible for \$150,000 for their yearly education. Student tuitions, out of district, are very expensive.

Christopher Wilbur: BVT cannot be compared to what we have here. They can pick and choose who goes there. We do not have that option.

Gregory Myers: We also partner with the Carpenters' School. We are doing our best to help those students that do not get to attend Blackstone Valley Tech.

Christopher Wilbur: There are a lot of in-house costs for SPED.

Jennifer Nietupski: We also have someone in the position of making sure that these students are getting what they need. She oversees all of their files and makes sure that the programs that each individual is in, is what they need. She does everything to keep these students here.

Gregory Myers: Enrollment has been relatively flat over the past 10 or so years. We have some staff that are on a 75/25 split on the health insurance and some that are on a 70/30 split. Those that are on the old rate were grandfathered.

Sean Hendricks: We are looking at a 5.5% increase in health insurance.

Russell Wells: How many students do we send to other vocational schools?

Gregory Myers: We have 2 at Norfolk Agriculture and 1 at Pathfinder. The student at Pathfinder moved to Millbury in his junior year. That shop at Valley Tech was full and we were able to get the okay from Pathfinder to have him continue his education there. We pay his tuition to go there.

Jen O'Connell: Do you have an agreement with any higher education schools?

Gregory Myers: We have no arrangement with them. Some of our students take college courses while still attending high school. This does not give them any advantage to get into that particular college when they graduate.

Jen O'Connell: How do you feel about the bus contract?

Richard Bedard: I feel good about it. It is hard to go out to bid. We only get one or two bids. We do our best to get more. We receive a reduced rate from them. Neighboring towns use them too.

Christopher Wilbur: Bus companies have an unwritten rule that they do not go into one another's territory.

Jen O'Connell: Do you think we are utilizing the buses the way they should be for what we are paying?

Richard Bedard: The pandemic caused a lot of parent drop offs. We were able to combine some of the bus routes and reduce the number of buses. There are 10 big buses, 3 mini buses and we have one of our own.

Jen O'Connell: Valley Tech charges for athletics and we don't. He has a way of having them work off some of the fees. This would help with our lower income families. What percentage of our student population is considered low income?

Gregory Myers: We are hovering at around 40%.

William Pratt: Why such a large increase in Athletics when you don't use all of it. You have only used \$158,000 so far this year.

Richard Bedard: You have to understand that our expenditures are only through December. We feel we will be closer to \$215,000 by the end of the year.

William Pratt: I understand the concussion protocol, but why do the taxpayers have to be responsible for this when it is a high risk sport? Why isn't this the responsibility of the family?

Jen O'Connell: About ½ of the student population plays more than one sport.

Christopher Wilbur: A student that is engaged in a sport is more apt to be more engaged in their studies.

Jen O'Connell: Is transportation included in athletics?

Richard Bedard: Yes, it is.

Jen O'Connell: What percentage of students are not playing without paying something?

Christopher Wilbur: About 10% have some sort of problem paying.

Jen O'Connell: If 90% are paying part of it, it seems like there should be some sort of fee for sports.

Gregory Myers: The Town of Uxbridge just dropped their fees.

Jen O'Connell: If someone isn't athletic, but they are into theater, for example, it seems like more money is spent on athletics than other activities.

Jennifer Nietupski: We actually spend more on other activities.

Jen O'Connell: 70% of the Town has no immediate connection to the School. Families in Town are getting frustrated over this.

Christopher Wilbur: There is always an open spot on the School Committee. I will never vote for fees in the schools, if it causes a barrier for even one student.

Kevin Kuphal: You do make a case for your budget. We don't come here saying that the School is wasting money. The trend line is going in a direction and if we do not cut, it will end up getting cut at Town Meeting. What if your budget was cut? Where would you cut? I don't think you are wasting money. None of us does.

Christopher Wilbur: The last three years we have been asked to cut, even when there is so much Free Cash available. Whatever we cut, we cut services.

Russell Wells: Do we need all of the additional staff that was created during COVID?

Gregory Myers: We don't necessarily need all of them, but we have a lot of mental health issues that are still here. The State and the families are shifting a lot of the responsibilities to the Schools. They are starting to see that they need to continue funding some of these mandates because the Town cannot continue to handle all of it.

Judy O'Connor: How many volunteer aides do you have helping out in the classrooms in the lower grades?

Gregory Myers: I would have to find out for you. During the pandemic, we had to cut back on having volunteers come into the schools, but we are getting back to having them come in.

Judy O'Connor: I think there are still some women out there that would love to do it. I think it would be a plus.

Russell Wells: What is an Instructional Coach?

Gregory Myers: They are personnel that have an expertise in a specific area. We eliminated the tutors when we put these people in that position. They help with certain programs like iReady, which helps get the students ready for MCAS.

Christopher Wilbur: They take the individual data and get back to the teachers to let them know which areas the students are lacking certain skills. There are so many testing mechanisms and we need the help to get through these mechanisms.

Richard Bedard: We need these people. We need to do these assessments to help get these kids through MCAS.

Jennifer Barrett, Finance Director, joined the meeting.

Jen O'Connell: How much office staff do you have? Is there any technology that would help reduce that staff?

Gregory Myers: In my office there is a secretary, payroll clerk and a person for grant writing. The clerical staff at the schools has been constant. We have 5 School Adjustment Counselors at the High School, including the Jr. High.

William Pratt: What percentage of the budget goes into the classroom versus administration?

Richard Bedard: I will have to look into that for you.

Jen O'Connell: There is a lot in the budget for conferences and dues.

Richard Bedard: Our memberships to the collaboratives is part of the dues.

Jen O'Connell: When is your payroll system going to be able to be updated so that the Town Hall doesn't have to input all of your payroll?

Sean Hendricks: We are working on this.

Jennifer Barrett: It takes one person, at least 8-10 hours, to input the paper document from the school. Then another person re-checks everything.

Sean Hendricks: We are discussing with the School about eventually changing the format to be more compatible. We are a lot further down the road than we were last year.

Jen O'Connell: How quickly do teachers get up to the maximum step?

Richard Bedard: There are 8-9 steps. They only go up 1 step per year. Once they get to the top step, they only receive the CODA.

Jen O'Connell: It seems strange to me to max out after 8-9 years.

Charles Cooper: Are there any incentives to increasing their degrees?

Gregory Myers: They change lanes. There are lane steps that depend on what degree they have.

Jen O'Connell: We will be meeting again next Monday. We will have our Public Hearing at 6:30 p.m. then we will vote on the budgets.

Motioned by Kuphal, seconded by Pratt to adjourn at 8:35 p.m. Unanimous.

Jen O'Connell
Russell Wells
Charles Cooper

Jennifer Barrett
William Pratt
Sean Hendricks