

WHITMAN-HANSON REGIONAL SCHOOL COMMITTEE
SPECIAL JOINT BUDGET MEETING WITH TOWN OFFICIALS

Minutes of October 5, 2017

Held at the Whitman-Hanson Regional High School

Meeting convened: 7:00 p.m.

Meeting adjourned: 8:34 p.m.

Members present: Robert Hayes, Frederick Small, Robert Trotta, Christopher Howard, Michael Jones, Dan Cullity

Members absent: Robert O'Brien, Jr., Kevin Lynam, Steve Bois, and Alexandria Taylor

Administrators present: Dr. Ruth Gilbert-Whitner, Superintendent of Schools
Christine Suckow, Executive Director of Business Services
Kyle Riley, Assistant Superintendent of Student Services

School Committee Chair, Robert Hayes, convened the Special Joint Meeting of the School Committee and Town Officials at 7:00 pm, and stated to meeting was being recorded and broadcast live.

Introductions

Attendees introduced themselves. The following appointed and elected town and state officials were also present:

Town of Whitman:

Town Administrator Frank Lynam
Finance Committee, Rick Anderson

Town of Hanson:

Town Administrator: Mike McCue
Board of Selectmen Chair, James McGahan
Finance Committee Chair, Michael Dugan
State Representative, Josh Cutler
Staffer for State Representative Geoff Diehl, Jackie Del Bonis

The group reviewed the meeting minutes of June 12, 2017, which were voted approved at the September 13, 2017 regular School Committee meeting.

Chair Robert Hayes announced the Regional Agreement Amendment Committee (RAAC) was established and held an initial meeting on September 25, 2017. Two representatives from the Massachusetts Association of Regional Schools (MARS) are consulting and assisting with the amendments. The next meeting is scheduled for October 30, 2017 and will be held in the high school library at 6:00 p.m. Chair Hayes encouraged community members and parents to attend.

Financial planning

Budget projections FY2019 and beyond

School District

Dr. Ruth Gilbert-Whitner began the discussion with a recap of the FY2018 budget process and projected budget at level service for FY2019.

She reported the current FY2018 budget is for level services and represents a 3.2% increase over last year. Dr. Whitner cited the positive collaboration with the towns, the creative use of grants, and a decrease in enrollment were factors which helped maintain services when the local assessment increase for schools was reduced from 11% to 8% to avoid an override situation.

Dr. Whitner explained budgetary decisions are aligned with the Strategic Plan, the Resource Allocation and District Action Reports (RADAR) pilot program, resources representing the needs of the District, and address the three pillars of success: Every Child Every Day; A Cohesive PreK-12 System of Teaching and Learning; and Safe and Secure Schools.

Dr. Whitner referenced several important initiatives built into the 2016-2019 Strategic Plan relevant to student success. Currently, these are not included in the budget, are above a level services budget, which is of concern.

At the high school, the two foreign language programs offered are French and Spanish. At the middle schools, only Spanish is offered with one teacher assigned to each middle school. This is significantly less than other districts. Also, Whitman-Hanson is one of 15% of school districts in Massachusetts not offering tuition-free full day kindergarten. Of major concern is the inequity in student learning with 25-35% of students attending half day programs rather than full day. Related arts programs at the high school are limited. Dr. Whitner discussed the uncertainty in state and federal grants for student support services, Title IIA, and the 21st Century Learning Centers grants. Dr. Whitner reported on the advantages of belonging to collaboratives and participating in their program offerings. Through the North River Collaborative, social work interns are available to support our schools in addressing social and emotional needs. There is also a need to align elementary school start and end times in order to allow teacher professional development and collaboration throughout the District to occur at consistent time periods. Several years ago, elementary school starting and ending times were adjusted in an effort to reduce transportation costs and save teaching positions. If these times are realigned to the same starting times, then early release professional development programs will benefit our teachers and be more effective. Safety and security systems are being updated. Entrances to the middle schools have been re-worked but are still improvements are needed at all elementary schools. Also, an App to contact first responders faster in case of emergencies is being researched. In addition to items in the Strategic Plan initiatives, there will be costs associated to the closing of Maquan School. Up front moving expenses and retrofitting classrooms and lavatories will be necessary. Cost savings in insurance, utilities and custodial services will be realized over time but not immediately. In addition, positions may not be lost, but retirements may not be filled, depending on the effect of enrollment to staffing needs.

Dr. Whitner reported that in order to continue to fund level services, the FY2019 proposed budget increase could increase by 5-6%. This does not include any of the items of concern as discussed. Furthermore, negotiations will commence as all bargaining agreements are set to expire on June 30, 2018. The 5-6% accounts for the unknown increases at this time. Another major concern is the rising cost of health insurance. Recently, NFP made a presentation to the School Committee to discuss options in health care plans as an alternative to belonging to Mayflower Municipal Health Group (MMHG). Other factors affecting the FY2019 beyond health care costs and negotiations include an increase of 4% in transportation costs, increase in custodial cost contract with SJ Services 3.5% and workers' compensation costs. There was a lengthy discussion on underfunded and unfunded mandates. Some of the mandates include regional transportation, which is not fully funded, growing enrollment of English Language Learners (ELL), homeless transportation (McKinney-Vento) and programs that require specific teachers and mandated teaching times.

Decreases in grant funding were also discussed to an extent. They could include Title I, Title IIA for professional development and class size reduction, Title IV, 21st Century Community Learning Centers

grant for at risk students, and IDEA grant used to supplement special education. Losing funding in these grants or portions of these grants would have significant impact on District programs and services for students. Dr. Whitner has been to Capitol Hill to advocate for public education for the last three years. Assistant Superintendent, Kyle Riley, discussed special education funding issues and difficulty projecting budget due to annual costs ranging from \$40,000 to \$350,000 per student. Costs are determined by the needs of the student and if the District can accommodate the student with an in-house program or if the student requires a specialized program out of district. The cost of early intervention programs (for children beginning at age 3) and laws requiring special education students to be enrolled until age 22 were discussed.

Lastly, capital expenses play a major role in the school district budget. In addition to the closing of the Maquan School and transitions with Hanson Schools, the Whitman Middle School will require some future planning needs. In collaboration with the Town of Whitman, the District anticipates submitting a Statement of Interest with the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA). The process for a building project with MSBA includes a feasibility study. The funding of the feasibility study must be approved by voters and would likely cost a minimum of \$750,000. For approved SOIs, a percentage of the feasibility study is reimbursed.

Dr. Whitner stated at level services and very tight budget, the FY 2019 projected budget increase of 5-6% represents about \$2.7 million.

Town of Hanson

Hanson Town Administrator, Michael McCue, stated it is premature to offer a projected budget for the Town of Hanson. Mr. McCue reported he has reached out to departmental staff to assemble projected costs to establish the FY2019 budget. He spoke of open communications with the District and confirmed attendance at future budget meetings. There was a brief discussion of reclassification within some town unions and sustainability of funding contracts, and also looking at long term solutions rather than short term answers to budget constraints.

There was a brief discussion about solving budget issues at the local level and not relying on state aid, which has not increased significantly. Stagnant funding from state aid, under Chapter 70, was noted. Charter school costs, antiquated formulas for special education and health insurance and per pupil costs were also discussed.

Representative Josh Cutler offered comments relative to the state aid discussion. The state budget increased 1.75% last year. Rep Cutler provided figures for line item increase under Chapter 70, Regional Transportation and Circuit Breaker. Representative Cutler noted that state is in a similar situation as towns and school districts, losing revenue sources and supporting higher expenditures. He is supporting a bill to increase the per pupil cost to \$50 in Chapter 70 funding. He recently testified with Senator Brady before the education Committee to support through foundation budget and utilize unrestricted government aid or lottery ticket aid. A portion of every Massachusetts lottery ticket sold goes to the state's Unrestricted General Government Aid fund, a program that provides local aid to cities and towns. The state budget will be released in January. Representative Cutler also reported on upcoming ballot questions for the Fair Share amendment and sales tax cut from 6.35% to 5% and the impact that will have on revenue. Representative Cutler did share that the state revenue report for the month of September exceeded benchmark by \$124 million dollars. Representative Cutler encouraged the community and School Committee to contact the State House, send emails and other modes of communication to support a foundation budget amendment. Websites like MASC and MMA post the foundation budget hearings and all are welcome to attend.

Town of Whitman

Board of Selectmen Chairperson, Frank Lynam, spoke on behalf of the Town of Whitman. He spoke to the demands on the state budget from all stakeholders which will remain high. He spoke to issues with diminishing federal funding. Mr. Lynam stated that funding for local schools and towns is a local issue and needs to be addressed locally. The constraints on the amount of the levy under Proposition 2 ½% was discussed. Mr. Lynam talked about the increase in community support that is needed to fund the town and school budgets. Mr. Lynam suggested a 2.5% levy limit is too low to address the financial needs of the local budgets. Furthermore, there is little or no commercial tax base in either town so the responsibility will fall on homeowners and taxpayers. Although Mr. Lynam was hopeful to have actual figures to bring forth and indicate the amount the town could support in terms of an assessment increase, he did not have those numbers. Neither growth figures nor final tax evaluations were available. Mr. Lynam will determine the monthly or annual household tax increase based on the projected school budget increase and communicate those with the District.

Mr. Trotta recommended the budget meetings are formatted differently going forward, proposing more may be accomplished in a smaller, working meeting setting. He suggested a subcommittee be established consisting of two school committee members, two town officials, two community members, the business manager and superintendent in an effort to concentrate on a long term action plan.

VOTE: Mr. Small motioned; Mr. Cullity; seconded; to adjourn the meeting at 8:34 p.m. The motion carried unanimously.

Minutes respectfully submitted Michelle Lindberg

Handouts:

- 1) Agenda for October 5, 2017
- 2) Meeting Minutes of June 12, 2017