

WHITMAN-HANSON REGIONAL SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEETING
Minutes of November 5, 2019
Held at the Whitman-Hanson Regional High School
600 Franklin Street, Whitman MA

Meeting convened: 5:30 p.m.

Meeting adjourned: 7:35 p.m.

Members present: Robert Hayes, Christopher Scriven, Frederick Small, Daniel Cullity, Christopher Howard, Michael Jones, Robert O'Brien, Jr., Dawn Byers, Steve Bois arrived at 5:40 p.m. and Alexandria Taylor arrived at 5:55 p.m.

Members absent: None

Administrators present: Jeffrey Szymaniak, Superintendent of Schools
George M. Ferro, Jr., Assistant Superintendent of Schools

Chair Hayes brought the meeting to order at 5:30 p.m. and announced the meeting was being recorded and broadcast live.

Moment of Silence

Pledge of Allegiance

Approval of School Committee Meeting Minutes

VOTE: Mr. Small motioned; Mr. Cullity seconded; voted to approve the School Committee meeting minutes of September 18, 2019 as presented. The motion carried unanimously.

Unfinished Business

- A. Regional Agreement / Assessment Method Discussion
 - a) Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education representatives C. Lynch and M. Griffin from the Office of Regional Governance
 - b) School District Legal Counsel, Attorney Andy Waugh from Murphy, Hesse, Toomey and Lehane LLP

Christine Lynch and Michelle Griffin from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) Office of Regional Governance were introduced. Superintendent Szymaniak reported the School Committee requested representatives from DESE be available to field questions in an effort to clarify remaining questions regarding local assessment methods as they relate to the school district budget. Superintendent Szymaniak added that Attorney Andy Waugh, legal counsel for the school district, was also present to field question and offer counsel. It was noted that town officials from both Whitman and Hanson were also present, including both Town Administrators and Board of Selectmen and Finance Committee representatives.

Superintendent Szymaniak reported the school district has been following the agreement methodology for the local assessment computations. As previously stated by DESE, the agreement method or statutory methods are both legal processes for the calculations. Whitman-Hanson bases the assessment on per pupil enrollment whereas the statutory method uses the minimum local contribution as the calculation starting point.

The School Committee had requested that DESE representatives attend a School Committee meeting to discuss the assessment methodology. In addition, Mr. Szymaniak found it necessary to also have DESE representatives discuss the processes, steps and consequences should a region fail to agree on a school budget by June 30 of the each year. Mr. Szymaniak noted that Christine Lynch is retired but continues to work on a part-time basis for the state and was available for the School Committee meeting this evening.

Ms. Lynch thanked the Committee and Superintendent for inviting her and gave some introductory remarks. She reported she has steadily been in communication with School Committee and town officials. Ms. Lynch added that at the MASC/MASS Joint Conference in Hyannis on Thursday, November 6, she will be presenting on the topic of assessment methodology in a workshop. Handouts for that presentation were shared with the Committee. Ms. Lynch provided a brief background on the assessment methodology dating back to the Education Reform Act of 1993. In addition to providing stringent benchmark requirements and state aid, what was established was the Foundation Budget. If towns increase their level of spending, the state will increase its spending and each city will reach its foundation budget. However, at the time, there was little consideration for regional districts. Ms. Lynch discussed how regional agreements may have been impacted by Ed Reform and the creation of a two-step process when using the agreement methodology. Ms. Lynch also spoke to regional districts complaining that they wanted to use their agreement method and an amendment was eventually filed and passed. Ms. Lynch confirmed that approval of a budget constitutes approval of the method, and the method, or budget, must be approved unanimously in a two-town region.

Ms. Lynch discussed how School Committees should be working with town officials to discuss the different methodologies, which method to use and how the calculation is done. Both methodologies are in the statute and there is also some guidance on the DESE website in more detail to illustrate the how the calculations are made to meet the two different methodologies.

Ms. Lynch reported there are 30 two-member town districts in Massachusetts and a number of these regional districts have experienced what Whitman and Hanson are going through now, and how the calculations may impact each town differently and sometimes favor one town over the other. Accordingly, towns have had discussions to come to a consensus on which methodology to use going forward to avoid a contentious budget cycle. Ms. Lynch emphasized either methodology is perfectly legal and outlined in the statute.

Consequently, if a school committee finds itself without a locally approved budget by June 30, DESE has the authorization to establish the school district budget so the district can function after July 1. The Commissioner will set a 1/12th budget based on the statutory methodology.

Likewise, if December 1 arrives with no local budget, the statute requires the Commissioner to take over the fiscal responsibility of the budget and will calculate the assessment under the statutory method.

Ms. Lynch recommended looking at the two methodologies and trying to come to an agreement to use the best method moving forward. She reported there are some districts that have changed from an agreement method and put in place a time frame in which to meet the statutory method and when that would be implemented. There can also be a discussion to include language in the regional agreement, to be approved the by two towns, for a compromise method to reach a certain level over a period of time as to avoid a major financial impact on any given town.

Ms. Lynch fielded several questions at this time. There was a discussion of a budget failing to pass in one town and then going to a town-wide or 'super town' meeting, whereas the statutory method would be the only method that may be used at that level. It was noted that there needs to be language in the regional agreement as an amendment to spell out what the new agreement is, how the calculation will be designed to meet the end goal of meeting the local minimum contribution. The Agreement method is designed to put

into effect a process by which the towns agree to and still have the methodology for the apportionment of costs. Ms. Lynch has other agreement examples that she can share with the Committee and towns, if needed. Whitman-Hanson cannot create a hybrid without first amending the current agreement. Chair Hayes confirmed any amendment would need to not only be approved by the two towns but also the DESE Commissioner. The timeline for completing a new agreement was discussed. Superintendent Szymaniak reported that at the last School Committee meeting, the Committee voted to impanel a new regional agreement amendment committee. Ms. Lynch commented the Commissioner could potentially approve an amended regional agreement promptly and prior to the May 2020 town meetings as long as the towns agree and approve the assessment method language and final amended agreement. The Commissioner has already reviewed some of the Whitman-Hanson regional agreement changes as approved. Chair Hayes reported that the Town of Whitman did not vote the amended regional agreement due to withdrawal language at the time, not because of the assessment methodology language. The Committee discussed focusing only on the apportionment of costs to amend the agreement. Ms. Lynch re-iterated the consequences of having no approved budget by December 1 and the DESE Commissioner taking fiscal control of the district and setting the final budget. When the Commissioner takes over fiscal control, he approves all line item transfers, collective bargaining, contracts over \$25,000, and any financial decisions being made. There is no potential benefit being under state control.

Several town officials from both towns spoke to the matter recognized the history of the towns that have been working together since the 1950's and professed to come to some kind of an agreement. Hanson Board of Selectmen Chair, Laura Kemmett stated the Town of Hanson Board of Selectmen stand ready to work with the School Committee and Town of Whitman on a solution.

Chair Hayes added that the School Committee will continue discussing methodology with the town officials at their next meeting on November 13.

The Committee also heard resolute comments from town officials in Whitman who were not in support of working out an agreement/alternative method and favored the statutory method due to the assessment calculation being in favor of the Town of Whitman. Whitman Board of Selectmen, Dan Salvucci, reported the Board of Selectmen voted to only approve a local assessment using the statutory method.

The Committee discussed projections for FY2021 and the impact a 1/12th budget would have on the school district. Mr. Szymaniak reported contractual obligations alone would increase the current budget by \$1 million. In addition, state revenue figures will not be available from the DOR until mid-January so developing a realistic projection is challenging. Mr. Szymaniak provided a brief history of how he discovered there were two different assessment methodologies. He added that there was conversation about the calculation in the previous amended agreement meetings but no designation of the method during the previous amended agreement meetings. He believed there was no conversation by MARS consultants, and a lack of question from previous central office administration, that there could be a financial impact to one town or the other, of what he could personally determine in conversations with School Committee. It was noted the Regional Agreement currently in place is dated 1991. The Superintendent urged the Committee to keep things in perspective, continue working for the children in the towns and work collaboratively with the towns as one community to establish a budget. He would like to see the towns come together and agree on an assessment method without the state taking fiscal control of the school district budget and avoid a massive layoff next year should the school district budget go to a 1/12th on July 1.

The Committee will continue discussion on the budget and assessment methodologies at their next meeting on November 13, 2019.

Warrants signed at the meeting

Accounts Payable #110519AP in the amount of \$2,664,260.47

Payroll Warrant #P11079 in the amount of \$1,258,852.94
Payroll Warrant #P10249 in the amount of \$1,233,082.62
Payroll Warrant #P92619 for -945.62 (void)

Meeting Adjournment

VOTE: Mr. Small motioned; Mrs. Taylor seconded; voted to adjourn the meeting at 7:35 p.m. The motion carried unanimously.

Minutes respectfully submitted by Michelle Lindberg

Signature of School Committee Secretary

Meeting Handouts:

- Meeting agenda for November 5, 2019
- Meeting Minutes of September 18, 2019
- Copy of Hanson Warrant Article passed at October 7, 2019 Special Town Meeting rescinding vote to approve Amended Regional Agreement
- Request from Town of Whitman Board of Selectmen regarding assessment method for FY2021 operating budget
- 1991 Regional Agreement
- Examples of Statutory versus Agreement Assessment methods