

Barrington Committee on Appropriations

Meeting Minutes

April 2, 2014

Opening

The regular meeting of the Barrington Committee on Appropriations was called to order at 7:00 pm on April 2, 2014 in the Barrington Senior Center by Tim Sweetser.

Present

COA: Tim Sweester, Geoff Grove, Peter Clifford, Chad Mollica, Joel Hellman

TC: Ann Strong

School Committee/Department: Ron Tarro, Mike Messore, Paula Dominguez, Kate Brody, Bob Shea, Patrick "Buzz" Guida

Public: Ed McKinley

Approval of Agenda

The agenda was unanimously approved as distributed.

Approval of Minutes

The minutes of the previous meeting were unanimously approved as distributed.

Open Issues

Mike Messore provided introductory info to the proposed budget:

Curriculum: Decisions guided by student achievement. Embedded in budget is curriculum. District is rolling out two major language arts and math (part of common core). Science and Social Studies curriculum changes because RI adopted new standards. RI 1st to adopt with a partial rollout with Social Studies for grades 6 – 12. All meet same basic standards as Common Core.

Tech: Already equipped all teachers with laptops which helped improve teaching/learning in classroom K-5 and 9-12. Lots of professional development is ongoing. Continue funding tech through capital reserve. Goal is to get technology in hands of students grades 2 – 12. Must equip schools to meet tech needs of PARCC Assessment. Five schools chosen as test sites for tech while two were chosen for pencil and paper. The idea is to see what works best. Device proposed are Chromebooks which are under \$350 per unit. This is a very simple device with no hard drive.

Kate stated that Full Day K is heavily aligned to common core curriculum which includes subjects plus social/emotional part.

Buzz said we (schools) suffered some justifiable criticism for delivery of kindergarten curriculum because we must provide full day of subject matter in half day.

Mike stated that 21 out of 35 districts have full day K. Statistically the state is looking to support districts towards a full day.

Kate said that the School Committee unanimously approved budget as presented.

Paula: There is no sunlight between us on this budget.

The COA then presented questions...

Peter Clifford presented a municipal comparison. Barrington has more students per population than other RI communities. Average is 13% while Barrington is 20%. He reviewed 10 audit numbers and demographics steady but cost per student and taxes have increased substantially. He suggested that Barrington begin doing what Town Charter mandates: Looking at all expenses as not all end up showing in budget. Suggests this begins next budget year.

Peter reviewed a number of proposed and historical budget items to quantify the \$800K budget increase in this year's proposed budget. Graphs illustrated possibilities for potential savings. Peter believes that we can cut \$800k+ out of budget resulting in a ZERO tax increase. COA applauded Mr. Clifford's efforts.

Tim lamented the "We have to do it that way, it's state law" attitude that he hears at many school meetings. As an example, he said he drives by BMS every day and sees the cars with one child and the buses with four kids and when he questioned it at a meeting he was told "it's state law." He suggests that the time has come to address this issue.

Ron indicated that the budget was a "zero based budget" and the budget document is built from the ground up. They did not simply add a percentage. They looked at number of children in classrooms and what items would be needed, they looked at savings because of contract negotiations.

Peter asked Ron about the Reserves (money left over). Ron said that he is anticipating about 1% (about \$400K) and that there are some stories behind the savings in previous budgets including state funds and federal stimulus funds. Ron requested more time to review Mr. Clifford's document.

Chad commented that the numbers (Clifford document) show both sides. What's driving the budget? The contract. In large part, it's people plus health care. He contended that the schools have been slow in reacting. The pensions will only get worse.

Tim said the only thing we have any control over is salary and benefits and the light he'd like to see the School Department work toward are the things that can be fixed.

Chad questioned curriculum changes. Particularly, if textbook costs are going down what are the drivers for the cost for the curriculum changes? Buzz explained that through *Race to the Top* we got a lot of money for "CCSS" changes. Mike said that there were material costs involved and said an inventory of all books in storage had been completed. Many of them aligned to the new curriculum. But we still have to buy materials. For example, for science, we will need textbooks, technology and science kits.

Paula indicated that a great deal of the budget is driven by the teachers that make this all happen. There's been a great deal of professional development. That's reflected in the budget as well. Chad asked where it is that cost was shown in the budget? Ron indicated that it's a contractual obligation and directed the COA to the budget summary page and reviewed specific salary numbers and other expenses.

Kate pointed out that "other post employment benefits" (OPEB) have decreased substantially. Ron explained further including an explanation of health care coverage. Teachers now must take at time of retirement rather than deferring, and are only eligible for individual plan rather than family. Additionally, they are only eligible until Medicare kicks in. Cost went from \$21million to \$7million in unfunded liabilities.

Geoff questioned assumptions for five year plan. Office administration and principal costs are "flatlined" where he thinks most of those items will be going up. He would like to talk about those costs – particularly since 87% of the next two years are already decided via the contract. Ron indicated that these costs were developed by the budget forecast committee. Geoff and Ron disagreed about the level of detail that the committee came up with.

Geoff asked for more detail regarding school revenues from the Clifford report (pg. 6) Ron indicated that some of the differences are because of audited number. Peter added that some of the numbers are minus capital expenditures. Most of the difference is restricted State and Federal funds that are passed through the budget as revenue and expense.

Geoff asked about class size. Mike indicated that depending on enrollment it might be 20 to 22 students per class. Buzz said that, unlike many other districts, class size is not dictated in teacher contracts. Mike indicated that state aid is on target. Joel stated that

the 1st grade enrollment numbers is the best empirical data but is skeptical that they will hold because some kids will be held out of public school because parents don't think that they are ready for a full day of school. Buzz disagreed. Joel agreed with Ron's earlier comments about the danger of structural deficits. He indicated, however, that with five ongoing years of surplus it appears that the school budget has a "structural surplus." He cited examples and went on to say that while that money has been used by the school department for good things he would like to see the school committee to follow the same format as the town – presenting to the CIP (Capital Improvement Planning).

Joel would like to see a discussion "here's the programs we want to add – here's what we can eliminate – "Strategic Elimination." Mike described it as Program Assessment" and indicated that this is, in fact, done.

Geoff has concerns that this is a zero based budget yet it comes in more than 3% higher.

Tim agreed saying that if you're doing a real zero-based budget then something should have been eliminated. Buzz said the future cost savings is the foundation for where they could make room for full day K and other additions. Ron said that two full FTE have been eliminated. He said a good example would be HMS where a position was eliminated based on enrollment.

Ed McKinley: Questioned staff costs and indicated that in lean times, companies make do with less – fewer staff doing more. Mr. McKinley indicated that as a senior citizen he is concerned about rising taxes and if he will be able to afford to remain in town. Tim agreed and said that Mr. McKinley and senior citizens like him are assets to the community and the School Committee should keep that in mind when budgeting.

Buzz and Mike made closing remarks for the School budget portion of the meeting. .

Agenda for Next Meeting

List the items to be discussed at the next meeting.

Adjournment

Meeting was adjourned at 8:46 pm by Tim Sweetser.

Minutes submitted by: Ann Strong, Town Council Liaison

Approved by: Geoffrey Grove