

Barrington Committee on Appropriations

Meeting Minutes

March 22, 2016

Opening

The regular meeting of the Barrington Committee on Appropriations was called to order at 7:04 p.m. on March 22, 2016 in the Barrington Senior Center by Geoff Grove.

Present

Geoff Grove, Peter Dennehy, Melissa Horne, Chad Mollica

Also attending: Ann Strong (Council Liason); Michael Messoro (Superintendent, Barrington Public Schools); Ronald Tarro (Director of Administration & Finance, Barrington Public Schools); Kate Brody (Chair, Barrington School Committee); Edwin McKinley; Cynthia Rosengard; Scott Douglas; Tony Arico; Joel Hellman; Sam Read; Lisa Daft

Approval of Agenda

The agenda was unanimously approved as distributed.

Approval of Minutes

Geoff Grove proposed an amendment to the minutes of the previous meeting to provide that the number of police cars in the Town's fleet is ten (10). The minutes were unanimously approved as amended.

Open Issues

Mike Messoro opened the discussion of the FY17 School Budget by acknowledging various successes of the schools and the assistance of the community. Addressing matters for which funds were appropriated in the previous budget, he noted that the appropriation permitting 1:1 Chromebook implementation in the high school has been an overall success which included better collaboration between student and teachers and that the funding for a school resource officer represents one of the best investments district-wide. Mr. Messoro stated that the FY17 Budget seeks an increase in funding which includes an additional \$275,000 in the capital budget to continue Chromebook distributions, first in the middle school and then in the elementary schools, and to add an academic coach position at Hampton Meadows School in order to assist teachers through embedded professional development.

Ron Tarro discussed the budget in more detail. He stated that the school administration currently is in negotiations with two union groups and he expects to be able to announce within the next two weeks a fair settlement regarding new contracts that will result in savings to the budget. He advised that the working rate for medical insurance is down by 2% over the last five (5) years due to plan changes. This change also has been beneficial to the OPEB in that it almost wiped out the unfunded liability. The salaries line item of the budget is up by \$767,000 as a result of step increases and an assumed percentage increase for all salaries. Mr. Tarro acknowledged that the on-going negotiations may result in some modification, but stated that he believes the modelling upon which the budget is based was accurate. The benefits line item reflects a reduction of \$116,632; there was a slight increase in life insurance but a savings on medical

insurance and a slight decline in pension rates resulted in an overall decrease. Mr. Tarro explained that pension rates have been reduced even though there is a huge unfunded liability, noting that this is a decision made at the State level rather than at the local level. There is a significant increase of \$123,000 in the budget request for Professional and Technical Services, which Mr. Tarro stated is largely due to increases in special education costs and fees for legal services. There has been a slight increase in web-based services but a decrease in the cost of the school physician's services. The Other Purchased Services line item reflects a large increase that Mr. Tarro stated largely consists of a \$315,000 increase in transportation costs and \$129,000 for out-of-district services. Mr. Tarro concluded by addressing increases in the budget for Supplies, which he attributed to the purchase of next generation science materials, and for Building, Equipment and Vehicles, which he said includes additional technology-related equipment.

Geoff Grove opened the discussion of the School Budget by stating that he was surprised by how large an increase had been requested and disappointed that the Appropriations Committee's request that it be permitted to collaborate on the contract negotiations was disregarded. He questioned whether there was any data to support a need for increases over and above step increases. He explained that his macro view was that taxpayers are under a lot of pressure because there has been low inflation and that real wages have been flat or decreasing, so he wonders whether it is possible that Barrington teachers are not compensated appropriately in comparison to their peers.

Mr. Grove inquired whether there had been any consideration of opening the schools to outsiders in return for tuition payments, as was considered in Barrington several years ago and as other communities are considering, as a potential method of addressing declining enrollments and budgetary issues. Mike Messore suggested that we need to be very cautious about open enrollment because we don't want to give the State the impression that Barrington has open seats. Kate Brody noted, however, that the new Commissioner of Education is considering many changes that may include open enrollment options.

Peter Dennehy stated that he questions the requested increase for transportation charges in light of the School Committee's decision to postpone the previously announced change in school start times. Kate Brody advised that the School Committee had not discussed this issue yet but that she expected there could be budgetary changes depending upon the options it adopts.

Ms. Brody stated that she wanted to make the Committee aware of the school funding formula. She explained that over the last seven (7) years there had been an increase in state funds which resulted in a reduction in local school funding that translated to a 5% decrease in the tax burden. Fiscal year 2018 is the final year of that funding formula, but the School Committee is supporting a request for renewal of the same formula through Barrington's legislative delegation.

Ms. Brody also advised that there is a commission studying the potential for a state-wide teacher's contract. Patrick Guida is Barrington's representative on that commission. Ms. Brody observed that the problem with that concept is that it decreases local control over teacher compensation.

Ms. Brody also noted that the School Committee is aware of decreasing local enrollments and that FTEs have decreased over time. She stated that the administration does a good job of anticipating needs and filling them with existing personnel, using the volunteer coordinator position as an example.

Chad Mollica noted that while state aid increased from \$2.1 million to \$5.2 million, the portion of the budget funded through local property taxes increased from \$40 million to \$42 million and observed that even though Barrington received a \$3 million “rebate”, the budget still increased. He also inquired as to the amount of unfunded pension liability. Ron Tarro stated that Barrington’s share is \$33 million. Mr. Mollica asserted that this liability will continue to grow and questioned whether it is fiscally responsible to compound the issue by increasing salaries without having a plan to address the unfunded liability. Ron Tarro stated that he doesn’t know how Barrington can make a difference when decisions are made at the State level, but noted that the compounding factor was addressed in part by changes in the pension structure.

Mr. Mollica repeated Mr. Grove’s inquiry regarding the justification for salary increases. Ms. Brody stated that the quality of instruction was the most important factor. The administration wants to recruit and retain excellent teachers and increased salaries are directly related to that goal.

Ms. Brody noted that OPEB has been significantly improved, as it was reduced from \$21 million to \$4 million.

Mr. Mollica inquired whether there was anything in the new contract negotiations that will address unfunded pension liability. There ensued an extended discussion of potential methods of addressing the unfunded liability, including the possibility of posting a bond, issues associated with state control of the pension plan and the need to work together to address the problem in a manner transparent to the taxpayers, especially in light of the potential bond for the middle school.

Mr. Grove turned the discussion toward the previous discussion with the Capital Improvements Planning subcommittee and its recommendation that the capital request for School Technology be reduced from \$275,000 to \$245,000. Mr. Grove stated that the Appropriations Committee views playgrounds as more of a community asset than Chromebooks, so it would rather include in the capital budget \$100,000 for playground improvements and \$145,000 for technology, with the remaining \$130,000 for technology being funded from the school department’s capital reserve. Mr. Mollica observed that the capital reserve account appeared to have a balance of \$570,000 available to complete health and safety updates like the playground project; Mr. Tarro noted that those funds had to be spent in FY16 to receive the 30% reimbursement from the State.

Peter Dennehy inquired when the new collective bargaining agreement would be ready for public announcement. Ms. Brody responded that it would be announced prior to the Financial Town Meeting.

Agenda for Next Meeting

The next meeting will address the Municipal Budget.

Adjournment

Meeting was adjourned at 8:20 p.m. by Geoff Grove. The next general meeting will be at 7:00 p.m. on March 29, 2016 in the Barrington Senior Center Activity Room.

Minutes submitted by: Melissa Horne