

**Finance Oversight Committee Meeting May 6,2021**  
**Minutes**

Present: James Broderick, Chair, Christine Saulnier, Kathleen Hill, Thomas O'Connor, Richard Freccero, Town Manager Mary McNally, Director of Finances Stephen Lonergan, Schools Superintendent Gordon Smith, Pamela Blair, Assistant Superintendant, Gregory Thompson School Committee Chair, Sarah Truoiolo.

The meeting was held by virtual participation (Zoom) and was called to order by Jim Broderick at 1:31pm Jim stated that the purpose of today's meeting was to review the School Department budget with members of the school administration and the School Committee.

The first item of business was the approval of minutes. Chris moved to approve the April 22, 2021 minutes, seconded by Tom. Voting YES were Broderick, Saulnier, Freccero, and O'Connor. Voting to ABSTAIN was Hill. The minutes of the April 29, 2021 meeting were not available and were tabled until a future meeting.

Jim asked Gordon to give a brief overview of the FY 22 School Department Budget. Gordon indicated that currently funds received through the various federally funded COVID grants, especially ESSER II were used to improve the learning experience and environment for students and to keep all students and school employees safe. He indicated that the list of employees provided as back up information included 3.6 teachers, 5.7 paraprofessionals that were grant funded. Overall, the school department request for FY22 is a level services budget.

Jim acknowledged the challenges facing the school department in trying to develop a budget in the face of so many unknown COVID related factors. Gordon acknowledged the fact that the current school year has been three kinds of school experiences: a cohort for high needs students in person, a hybrid learning experience, and a fully remote experience, each with their positives and obstacles. At the present, approximately 91% of enrolled students have returned to in person learning.

Jim suggested using the questions posed by the finance committee as a way to review and understand the school's budget. He noted that the April 26 public hearing for the FY22 school budget had been received by the finance committee. The salient points of each question follow.

1. *What are costs associated with permanent building substitutes, custodial OT, IT OT, PPE supplies....*
  - Currently \$300,000 budgeted. Principals note the advantages in having the same individual available each day, especially familiarity with school environment and curriculum
  - Custodians responsible for daily sanitizing of entire facility with inordinate amounts of cleaning and sanitizing agents, paper products etc.
  - IT responsible for increased numbers of laptops, and related technology. Hotspots have been purchased to lend out.
  - Necessary social emotional services have increased. In addition to guidance counselors and school adjustment counselors, the school department uses River Valley Services to augment the district's needs. 2.0 F.T.E school adjustment counselors have been budgeted for MS and MV through the ESSER III funding.
  
2. *Is it possible to receive a report through March 31, 2021 showing remaining balances?*
  - Yes, this report is forthcoming.
  
3. *What are the types of allowable purchases under these federal grants.....*
  - A list of allowable items was provided to the finance committee
  - Emphasis will be on enhancing computer hardware and software to deliver high quality teaching (evidence based, research-based instruction)
  - Preference from School Committee to retain ESSER II and III funds solely for prescribed uses and rely on potential turn backs in FY21 budget to help offset town budget.

- Difficult to plan for the 'unknown' and preference from school department is to use ESSER III funds to position the district for the future.
- IT emphasis will be on computer replenishment, creating a more robust Wi-Fi capability in all schools (\$219,000).

4. *Are parameters known yet for the estimated \$2.1 million ESSER III grant.....*

- Grant can be used over the next two years.
- Specific parameters are still pending
- Gordon will review Capital Plan request with Ryan Quimby to determine if some school related expenses from this list can be moved over to ESSER III.

5. *Student enrollment numbers.....*

- Appearance is that student enrollment is trending slowly downward, NESDEC projects a flattening in enrollment for coming years.
- Demographics of district are changing: free/reduced lunch eligible enrollment is 26%. Diversity is improving with increased % of student ethnicity. SPED enrollment approximately 18%.
- Enrollment numbers include School Choice students. Reimbursement from State is \$5,000.00 per student and in cases of higher costs associated with special needs, DESE will compensate for some of those expenses. If over \$47,000.00 district can apply for relief through the Circuit Breaker Funding each year.
- Still uncertain about September 2021 enrollment as some families may opt for enrollment in virtual school or return their children to ELPS from parochial or private schools this past year.

6. *Any pending contract negotiations?*

- Negotiations with Unit A (teachers) close to settlement for upcoming school year. The assumptions for this expense have been factored into the school department budget.

7. *Status of School Committee stipends.....*

- FY20 stipends line item increased to \$8500. No increase in FY21.
- FY22 stipends line item request is \$10,700; Chair \$2700, 4 members at \$2000.
- Easier to recruit future school committee candidates.

Jim asked if there were any final questions for the school administrations and Committee members as follows,

- Can unspent grant balances be carried into the next fiscal year, *Yes*
- Are encumbrance practices the same as have been used in prior years, *Yes*
- What happens to the \$2.4 million at the end of the school year, *IF funds remain, they will be carried forward. Figures will indicate higher expenses in Q3 as students have returned in person. Previous year reflects higher expenses in Q2 as students started in person and went remote in March 2020.*
- Where are summer school expenses reflected? *Always in the new fiscal year. Approximately \$100,000.00 for summer 2021*
- What is time frame for MV modular build and where will students be housed during construction, *approximately 4-6 months for construction. Room assignments for students and staff will be adjusted in order to house the population displaced during construction*
- How does School Choice 'add up', *Improves enrollment, adds to diversity of student population, funds received go to Revolving Account*
- Why the noticeable increase in the Paraprofessional Contract, *annual adjustments to pay scales to reflect Minimum Wage increases, salaries need to be competitive to attract/retain qualified individuals.*

Jim asked the School Committee to identify major concerns going forward. Gordon cited the ongoing need to assess and accommodate learning gaps in students. Planning for the 'unknown' will continue to be a daily issue. Greg cited the need to be mindful of aging school buildings and the necessity of future Capital requests.

Finally, Jim reviewed the next steps for the finance committee. May 12 and May 13 will be devoted to a department-by-department review and vote on budget recommendation. The final report of the committee will be prepared and forwarded to the Council President. The full Council will receive the final report in advance of the May 25 Council meeting where the finance committee recommendations will be presented during the annual budget public hearing. The finance committee discussed the prospect of holding the remainder of its meeting in person in the School Committee Conference Room but for logistical reasons decided to maintain the remote/Zoom format.

Chris made a motion to adjourn seconded by Kathy. Voting YES to adjourn were Hill, O'Connor, Broderick, Saulnier, and Freccero. The meeting adjourned at 3:07 pm

Respectfully submitted,  
Kathleen Hill,