

NORTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS  
Norton, Massachusetts

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NORTON SCHOOL COMMITTEE  
JOINT MEETING WITH SELECT BOARD AND FINANCE COMMITTEE  
MINUTES OF MEETING

***Date of School Committee Meeting:*** Monday, November 13, 2023

***Location:*** Norton Middle School Library

***Present:***

Select Board Members: Chairperson Mr. Kevin Snyder, Mr. Alec Rich, III, and Ms. Denise Luciano. ***Not present:*** Vice Chairperson Mr. Steven Hornsby and Ms. Megan Artz ***Also present:*** Town Manager, Mr. Michael D. Yunits

Finance Committee Members: Chairperson Ms. Paula Daniels, Ms. Bonnie Yezukevich, Ms. Tracy Mahan, Ms. Sandra Ollerhead, Mr. Zack Tsilis, and Mr. Paul J. Schleicher. ***Not present:*** Vice Chairperson Mr. Frank Joe Parker, III, Mr. William Rotondi, Mr. Stephen Evans, Mr. Cody Thompson, and Mr. Kevin Bugaj

School Committee Members: Chairperson Mrs. Sheri Cohen, Mr. Nick Schleicher, Mrs. Justine Callanan, and Mr. Dan Sheedy ***Not present:*** Vice Chairperson Mr. Deniz Savas ***Also present:*** Superintendent of Schools Dr. Jennifer O'Neill and School Business Administrator Mrs. Kristine Hadfield

***Call to Order:*** Chairperson Snyder, Chairperson Daniels, and Chairperson Cohen called their respective meetings to order at 7:00 p.m.

***Pledge of Allegiance***

Chairperson Cohen announced that the meeting was being recorded by Norton Media and asked if anyone was recording to let the Committees know.

Chairperson Snyder recognized the passing of Mr. Bradford Bramwell on November 8, 2023. Mr. Bramwell was a lifelong Norton resident, a graduate of Norton High School, and served as the Chair of the School Committee and as a longstanding member of the Select Board. The Committees observed a moment of silence in his honor.

***Trane Project Update:***

Dr. O'Neill informed the Committees that the big remaining outstanding item for this project is the hookup of the solar panels at the high school as the other schools have been connected and are up and running. Mrs. Hadfield stated that the test witness documents need to be returned. The NHS panels should be connected once that is resolved. The only payment remaining is to release the retainage of approximately \$472,000. She advised the Committees that so far, the School Department has received a total of \$220,058 in rebates and has also returned approximately \$350,000 to the Town since the end of FY22. In just over the past three months more than

\$153,408 has been returned, including around \$60,000 last week. The retainage will not be sent back until all punch list items are completed.

The Finance Committee inquired about financial recourse for the time the panels have been offline. Mr. Wade Lizotte, Director of Facilities, responded that there is no recourse. Mrs. Hadfield clarified for the Finance Committee that the panels at JCS and NMS were complete in May; that the LGN panel was complete in April, and that the HAY panels were completed this fall. Dr. O'Neill advised the Finance Committee that the utility bills for the schools are paid by the School Department. Mrs. Hadfield told the Finance Committee that there have been some savings, but it is too early to tell the full benefits of this project. The schools do benefit from other solar projects in town. TRANE does not guarantee savings until the project is substantially completed, which would be after NHS is done. It was also noted that the improvements made to infrastructure such as the boilers and HVAC systems should also generate savings.

***Athletic Complex and Building Projects Updates:***

Dr. O'Neill informed the Committees that the athletic complex is just about substantially completed. One of the remaining items had been lighting at the flagpoles. This has recently been completed, and otherwise just a small list of items remains to be resolved. Mr. Lizotte reported that the contractor was out recently to walk the property. Some of the remaining items to be addressed are fixing loose gates, cracks in the tennis courts, a couple rips in the turf (warranty item that will be repaired), and the incorrectly installed home plate on the baseball field. The pit field was not in the scope of the project and is in better condition now since it has not been in use. The School Department will address the area where the dirt pile was in the spring.

The Town Manager asked if there was an update on the sewer tie-in, and Mr. Lizotte advised that he is still waiting for a cost estimate from the engineers. Currently liquids from the HAY and NHS are handled by the sewer system, and the solids are staying at both schools to be pumped. The intent of the study was to hopefully have both schools fully tied into the sewer system.

Dr. O'Neill shared financial information regarding the athletic complex. From the beginning the intent was to prioritize access to the fields for high school and middle school teams as well as community leagues. Mr. Lizotte and the Athletic Director, Mr. Sumner, have maintained that priority, and this spring and summer Mr. Tim LaConte handled much of the booking and scheduling for the fields at a stipend rate. Local sports organizations are not charged a rental fee unless custodial support or ground supervision is required. From March through June 2023, the athletic complex generated \$41,451 in rental fees. Approximately \$10,000 of those funds were spent on things such as signage, trash barrels, and stipends to coordinate scheduling. From July 1st to the present \$51,062 has been collected. After expenses, the profit to date is \$63,000. She clarified for the Finance Committee that these funds go into the Athletic Revolving Account on a line for the athletic complex.

The Finance Committee asked if the School Department was generating enough revenue to cover the costs of maintaining the fields. Mr. Lizotte replied that the fields are still under warranty and much of the expense so far has been to get things up and running such as the machine to groom the fields and trash barrels. Mrs. Hadfield further explained that rental income can only be used for maintenance of the athletic complex and cannot be used to reduce athletic fees. The School Committee noted that both athletic fees and bus fees were reduced a couple years ago. The Finance Committee acknowledged that maintenance costs will increase as the facility ages. Dr.

O'Neill stated that ideally field rental income will grow and be available in the future to offset maintenance costs.

The Finance Committee asked if there have been any discussions about turning the lights on in the afternoon/evening for residents to be able to walk the track or use the fields. Mr. Lizotte noted that there is a cost involved to turn the lights on and that the football team is still practicing on that field in the afternoon, so residents would not really be able to use the track. The lights were not kept on at the old track or fields, and turning the lights on has not been discussed.

~~Mr. Lizotte confirmed for the Town Manager that there have been savings in time and materials~~ in respect to previous maintenance of the grass fields. Mr. Lizotte has been able to redirect the grounds workers to take care of things at other schools.

The Town Manager provided an update on the two town building projects. The Senior Center is completely enclosed now with work ongoing inside. Last week they were doing the duct work for the HVAC and installing the sprinkler system. The project has been going smoothly and hopefully is still on target for the Certificate of Occupancy in June. The Town Hall now has walls starting to go up and hopefully by Thanksgiving should have the rear parking lot back. Many of the utilities have had to be relocated, and they are currently working on the septic. Once that is installed, the parking lots can be paved. He stated the company has been great to work with, and things are moving along on both projects. The anticipated completion for the Town Hall is July of this year.

The School Committee remarked on how good the Senior Center looks and inquired about the budget for the town projects. The Town Manager informed the Committees that both projects are currently under their estimated budgets, with the Senior Center coming in under \$1 million and the Town Hall under by \$2 million. He confirmed that new furniture is included for both projects and clarified for the Committees that items which had previously been cut from the projects will be added back in such as kitchen items and audio-visual equipment for the Senior Center. There will be panic buttons at the office windows at Town Hall and a large Select Board meeting room which can be used by different groups. The food pantry, Cupboard of Kindness, will be over at the Senior Center as well. The Finance Committee asked about the procedure for using available funds if the projects come in under budget. The Town Manager informed the Committees that while they have the authority to spend all the allocated funds, they are being frugal and looking to just add back in items that had previously been cut. He also clarified for the Finance Committee that the estimated savings on the Senior Center project does not include the funds that were gifted to the town. The intent of that gift was to reduce the debt for the project, and the attorney will cut the check once final borrowing has been arranged. The Town Manager received two reports from the architect to help estimate utility costs for budgeting purposes.

The Finance Committee asked if there were any updates or decisions regarding the current Town Hall. The Town Manager reported that currently the plan is to only take down the garage portion of the building where the food pantry is housed. The Fire Department plans to take over the brick portion of the building and do renovations. The Finance Committee noted that part of the gymnasium wall of the current Town Hall is structural, impacting renovations or removal of parts of the building. The Town Manager clarified that \$750,000 was cut from the project for demolition expenses and refacing of the exterior wall, a large part of the \$2 million savings. Renovations for the Fire Department were not part of the original project. The Permanent Building Committee will make final determinations as to how funds will be spent. The Finance Committee stated that there is cost involved in maintaining the old structure to ensure there is not

humidity that would encourage mold growth. This expense will have to be weighed against the cost of building a new exterior wall and demolishing the existing Town Hall. The Town Manager confirmed that there is no plan to make up for the additional parking that would have been where the current Town hall stands.

***School Traffic Congestion Update:***

Dr. O'Neill updated the Committees on efforts to address traffic issues on Plain Street near the LGN specifically during drop-off and pick-up times. She explained that parents were lining up very early which combined with the narrow road and a slight hill to create an unsafe situation. Dr. O'Neill, Mrs. Hadfield, Mr. Lizotte, and Mr. Higgins, LGN Principal, and Officer Marc Robichaud, School Resource Officer, observed traffic patterns and came up with options to change the traffic flow. The single line for drop-off and pick-up has been modified to a double car line. This allows more traffic to be off the street and has reduced the arrival and dismissal process from 18-20 minutes to 6-7 minutes.

Dr. O'Neill mentioned the house on the edge of the LGN property which was bought by the solar company when they began the project. The School Department would like to have conversations with the other boards about taking over that property to possibly create additional parking and/or access to the back of the school which would allow the traffic to flow to the back of the building as at JCS. She confirmed there is no longer septic behind the school. When the solar company took over the property, the School Department was supposed to receive \$25,000 for the LGN playground, but those funds were never received. The Town Manager will follow up with the School Department to further discuss this plan. It was discussed that families walk to school and on weekends there are baseball games at the Burchill Baseball Fields across the street with cars parked along the road. Extra parking at the LGN would help with that, and the Committees discussed the need for sidewalks in that area.

The Select Board shared that safety at the shared drive for the HAY and NHS had been brought up at their meeting and asked whether this had been reviewed recently. The concern was for young drivers having to turn left onto Route 123 and the potential for accidents. Dr. O'Neill responded that the second entrance to the high school, near the dental office, was opened about two years ago for the school buses and is closed to students and staff. There was a crossing guard just for the buses, but that person has retired and was not replaced in the budget. The traffic flow at the HAY has also been adjusted with the buses now flowing through the front lot and parent drop off and pick up taking place behind the school. This reduces some of the congestion caused by having two schools so close together with very similar start and end times.

The Committees discussed the number of families driving their students and not using the buses and whether families are doing so to avoid bus fees. Mrs. Hadfield confirmed for the Finance Committee that the School Department collects between \$135,000 and \$140,000 in transportation fees. Dr. O'Neill pointed out that this represents a fraction of the cost of the bus contract, which is well over a million dollars. The School Committee will explore this as part of the project to research school start times.

The Finance Committee requested an update on the traffic changes at NMS. Mr. Lizotte stated that there is a second access at the middle school. A one-way entrance and one-way exit for right turns onto Route 123 were created with traffic going past the Community Playground area. It was planned to pave the space but due to cost concerns, that project will be revisited in the

spring. This has really helped with traffic. The emergency route by the bank and access to Oak Street are not suitable for traffic. The middle school has a paraprofessional who has a role as the crossing guard for students walking as well as to help keep the buses flowing. Mrs. Hadfield has applied for a grant to obtain flashing traffic lights at the crosswalk. There have been no safety concerns or complaints regarding the new traffic flow at NMS.

***Election Planning Discussion:***

The Town Manager opened the discussion noting that consideration should be made for notifying Norton Youth Soccer not to schedule games during the town elections at the end of April, offering that this would help with traffic concerns. The Finance Committee asked whether future elections could be held in the new Town Hall and Senior Center. The Town Manager indicated that this option could be explored but noted that most towns use school buildings to hold elections. He stated that both buildings would likely need to be used as neither building could accommodate all the voting. Parking would be a concern at the Senior Center.

The presidential primary election in March will be held at NMS. Dr. O'Neill stated that the school cannot give additional space for the election, and the School Committee had previously discussed concerns about student safety and the impact of elections on the school calendar. A plan is in place for the March primary. The School Committee reiterated their concern for safety when holding elections in school while in session, stating that this needed to be looked at collectively to generate a solution.

The Committees discussed the typical voter turnout and debated the impact on traffic and voter turnout at town elections if soccer does schedule games on the same date. For presidential elections the practice has been and will continue to be to either hold professional development or close school, either way eliminating concerns about student safety. These elections are scheduled far enough in advance to be proactively considered when planning the academic calendar. The School Committee suggested tabling this discussion until the Town Clerk could be present at a future joint meeting.

***FY2025 Budget Planning Timeline Overview:***

The Town Manager explained that he will be asking the Select Board at their November 30<sup>th</sup> meeting to schedule the Spring Annual Town Meeting for May 13, 2024. He advised that on December 1<sup>st</sup> a notice will go out to all departments that the warrant is open with the deadline for submission for FY25 capital budget requests on December 20<sup>th</sup>. The process will start on January 25<sup>th</sup> for the budget with all town departments with a hearing near the end of January. The School Department will provide preliminary numbers by February 26<sup>th</sup> with the final School Department budget due on March 18<sup>th</sup>, eight weeks prior to the Town Meeting. The Finance Committee will hold their public budget hearing on April 8<sup>th</sup>. Capital recommendations will be done by April 12<sup>th</sup>.

Dr. O'Neill explained that the School Department's budget season is underway having been kicked on November 1<sup>st</sup>. All the principals and department heads will need to return their budget requests by December 4<sup>th</sup> which is earlier than in previous years. This will allow plenty of time for conversations about each request but will also allow for the administrative team to discuss what the priorities are as a school system. This timeline has already been shared with families as

well as information about a level-services budget and the priority of maintaining a high level of instruction and services for all students.

Dr. O'Neill and Mrs. Hadfield have been reviewing their obligations, specifically contracts, and noted for the Committees that the teachers' contract has a 2.75% increase. She outlined concerns facing the FY24 budget, beginning with the challenge of finding substitute coverage. Recently, Permanent Building Substitutes have been hired to be at each school every day to provide coverage. This is a guaranteed person for coverage and is a benefit to the individual as they have a guaranteed job daily. The initial pay rate is the same \$100 per day as daily substitutes but increases to \$130 per day after 90 days. The Finance Committee asked whether this challenge is likely due to a lack of available people or is possibly a reflection on the wage compared to other districts. Dr. O'Neill stated that it is likely due to a lack of available people. The Assistant Superintendent and Coordinator of HR recently hosted a substitute information session with an encouraging turnout. Additionally, there has been a return of Wheaton students who are interested in substituting as their schedules allow. Another creative option has been to allow substitutes to work at the hourly rate rather than the daily rate. Individuals who would be unable to commit to a full day of work can fill in coverage gaps at the hourly rate.

Another concern for the FY24 budget is the increase in out of district tuition and transportation costs. Currently, \$5.117 million is committed to out of district Special Education costs. This represents an increase from the information provided to the Finance Committee in September with four additional placements. Dr. O'Neill stated that the School Department would have to be creative to offset the \$400,000 increase in costs since September. Director of Pupil Personnel Services, Mr. Vincent Cerce, and Coordinator of Special Education, Ms. Cassandra Russo, addressed the Committees regarding the significant changes they are seeing. Mr. Cerce generalized that there is a significant spike in mental health needs at the secondary level. At the elementary level, students are coming in with very significant behavioral, academic, social, and communication needs. While the priority is always to keep students in their neighborhood schools, sometimes the level of need is higher than can be supported in a public school setting. This is a statewide issue. Mr. Cerce also pointed out that the State has approved a 20% increase for the private schools' tuition rates in the past two years. This does not include transportation costs, which have also risen dramatically.

The Finance Committee asked whether a level-services budget would represent a double digit increase and indicated that there is not funding to support such an increase. The School Department was asked whether they have a "Plan B." Dr. O'Neill responded that last year, they were fortunate enough to get those additional funds from the Finance Committee and town meeting to cover those expenses and not have to cut positions to cover mandated costs. The most important thing for the upcoming year will be prioritizing.

The Finance Committee mentioned contacting the State Representatives regarding the rules for funding in to cover the mandated expenses. Dr. O'Neill noted that the Student Opportunity Act is the State's answer to funding education in a more equitable way. Fifty percent of that formula comes from low-income percentages in a community. She pointed out that Norton doesn't have a high number of low-income families and therefore receives the minimum state aid.

Dr. O'Neill pointed out that the COVID funds, specifically the ESSER Grants, must be spent by September 30, 2024. Currently \$500,000 of ESSER funds are being used, and those funds will not be available next year. Norton is fortunate to have many families who have chosen to have

their students educated in our schools through the School Choice program. Those funds originally were used for initiatives such as curriculum and technology but are now being used to pay for staff.

The Committees engaged in discussion regarding the implications to the FY25 budget of losing federal grant funding, the funding added to the school budget from the Stabilization Fund this year, increases in special education costs, and contractual obligations. The discussion included how budget forecasts are shared with families. Dr. O'Neill noted that the budget process is fluid, and families will be notified regularly as to the projections while also focusing on all the positive things happening in the district. Staffing positions funded through ESSER will be evaluated first. The School Committee commented that it is essential to keep having joint conversations throughout the process so that all boards are sharing the same information. This has been an ongoing conversation for the community through the years.

The Town Manager stated that he will request department heads to start with level-services budgets. The town also faces several challenges in the budget process. The Safety Grant ends in March and currently covers \$250,000 for four firefighters. The payment for the regional dispatch center increases by \$150,000 in FY25. The town has voted to form a Public Works Department which has cost implications. The town really needs a Director, Assistant Director, and additional staff to support the Senior Center as that population continues to grow. The Committees discussed previous override attempts and the possibility of an override attempt supported by multiple town departments as well as financial concerns in the community. The need for transparency in the process was emphasized, and the Committees will plan to meet again jointly in January.

***Other Business:***

None presented.

***Adjourn:***

MOTION: by Mr. Schleicher to adjourn the School Committee meeting

SECOND: by Mr. Sheedy

VOTE: 4 - 0 Motion Carries

MOTION: by Ms. Yezukevich to adjourn the Finance Committee meeting

SECOND: by Ms. Mahan

VOTE: 6 - 0 Motion Carries

MOTION: by Mr. Rich to adjourn Select Board meeting

SECOND: by Ms. Luciano

VOTE: 3 - 0 Motion Carries

The meeting adjourned at 8:49 p.m.

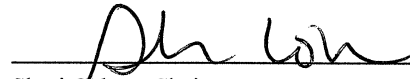
***Next School Committee Meeting Date:***

- Thursday, November 16, 2023, at 6:00 p.m., in the NMS Library

***Documents and Other Exhibits Used at Meeting:***

- FY24 - Out of District Tuitions and Transportation Expenses
- Fiscal Year to Date Financials – November 2023
- Norton Public Schools FY25 Budget Process Timeline

Respectfully Submitted,  
Jennifer O'Neill, Ed.D.  
Secretary Pro Tem

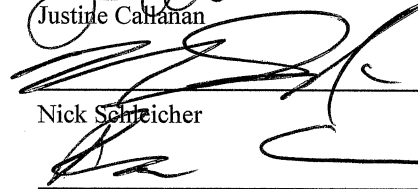


Sheri Cohen, Chairperson

Deniz Savas, Vice-Chairman



Justine Callahan



Nick Schleicher



Dan Sheedy

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