

Finance Committee
May 16, 2022
7:00 PM

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I. Call to Order

The May 16, 2022 meeting of the Finance Committee was held via remote participation and was called to order at 7:02 pm by Aimee Sawyer, Chair of the Finance Committee. Finance Committee members present: Kevin Bugaj, Paula Daniels, Stephen Evans, Frank Joe Parker, William Rotondi, Aimee Sawyer, Cody Thompson, and Zack Tsilis.

Absent: Yelena Gordon, Jeffrey Moynihan, and Bonnie Yezukevich

New Business

Special Town Meeting Article 10

Mr. Matthew Wells, Business Administrator of Norton Public Schools presented this article required to close out the Norton Elementary Schools Window/Door project. It combines the funds previously appropriated under one article for the accounting purposes of the MSBA.

Motion was made by Mr. Rotondi to recommend the Special Town Meeting Article 10. Seconded by Mr. Parker. Vote: Yes -8 Unanimous. Motion Carries.

Annual Town Meeting Article 9

Mr. Yunits shared the Select Board is considering using ARPA funds for this article, which is for the engineering, design, and construction of a sewer line connection for the Henri A Yelle Elementary School and Norton High School. He recommended the Finance Committee take no action on the article at this time.

Dr. Baeta explained the sewer line issues at the Yelle School and the plan to request the Select Board approve \$800,000 from ARPA funds. If ARPA funds are not approved, correcting the issue will become more involved and include the DEP, similar to the Middle School project.

Mr. Thompson asked if the \$800,000 is inclusive of all the work required to correct the issue.

Dr. Baeta confirmed that is the current estimate.

Mr. Thompson asked if there could potentially be a need to come back for more money in the fall, if they run into any issues.

Dr. Baeta confirmed this and stated they will not know until they get in and really look at the pipes. He explained this must be fixed in order to proceed with the athletic complex project.

Ms. Daniels asked for clarification if there are DEP funds available to help fund this.

Dr. Baeta stated there are no DEP funds available. If the ARPA funds are not approved, DEP would have to get involved in correcting the issue.

Ms. Daniels asked for the estimated yearly cost to the School Department for not tying into the sewer lines.

Dr. Baeta replied he can email that information to the Finance Committee tomorrow.

Mr. Tsilis commented on the importance of being transparent to the tax payers and how the Athletic Fields project was funded through the override. He stated if there is a cost overrun due to the rising costs, it should be presented as such and commented the original proposal included funds for the sewer connection.

There was discussion back and forth on the cuts that were made from the original project plan, the issues that have come up affecting costs, and the status of the budgeted contingency funds. Since additional funds are required to continue with the project, the School Department is requesting ARPA funds; if those are not approved, they will present the request through an article.

Ms. Sawyer pointed out the Town has been talking about sewer problem at the High School, Middle School, and the Yelle School for five years and pushing out correcting it. She questioned why it would not be funded now, given the impact it's having on the new field project.

Mr. Thompson asked if the project will remain on budget if the Select Board allocates \$280,000 in ARPA funds for the INI remediation.

Dr. Baeta explained using the contingency funds to correct the sewer issue will significantly change the project. The finished product will not include many of the items in the original plan.

Mr. Wells stated the contingency fund balance is currently \$262,000 and the recommended amount for the project is \$570,000.

The Finance Committee decided to wait to vote on this article until after the next Select Board meeting.

Special Town Meeting Article 3

Mr. Yunits presented the Preliminary Draft of FY22 Operating Budget Supplements.

Dr. Baeta spoke on the status of School Department's operating budget. At the present time, there are 13 staff out on FMLA, which impacts the budget due to the need to pay licensed substitutes. In total there have been over 20 FMLA leaves, some of which are more significant than the typical 60 day paid leave. This has affected the budget significantly and has been compounded by sick days due to COVID and substitute shortages, causing overruns in the budget and the need for additional funds. Since there is still over a month of school left, he will wait to provide the Finance Committee the amount requested prior to the meeting on May 31st or (if necessary) just prior to Town Meeting.

Mr. Yunits asked if the item for \$30,000 (Weston & Sampson) is supposed to be out the ARPA funds.

Dr. Baeta confirmed this and said this will be removed from the document.

Mr. Bugaj asked if FEMA funds are available to help offset the snow removal item.

Mr. Yunits explained Emergency Management is looking at that now. He is unsure if any FEMA funds will be provided at this time. If they are, the funds probably won't be available in the budget for two years due to timing.

FY2023 School Budget Discussion

Dr. Baeta shared his concern the Norton Public Schools will not meet level services for general education or fully fund the mandated special education budget. To address this, the schools will be utilizing all grants and federal assistance funds and have cut just under \$450,000 to become balanced. Several areas will be affected by these cuts that directly impact the students and staff, such as increased fees and class sizes. He explained he will have to take from the general education budget to fully fund the special education budget. This is the first year the budget does not even take care of the mandated requirements.

Ms. Daniels asked if the increase in class sizes is due to teacher cuts.

Dr. Baeta replied he will try to limit classroom teacher cuts, but between 10-8 FTEs could be affected. He commented the Town needs to have a discussion about the school budget. He referred to the Student Opportunities Act, the minimal state funding Norton receives, and how the rate of mandated costs far exceeds the 2% rate of the Town's increase and is only continuing to increase each year. He also commented on the job market for certified teachers and how the salaries Norton offers makes it even more difficult to fill positions.

Special Town Meeting Article 9

Mr. Yunits presented Article 9 on the Special Town Meeting warrant to amend two sections the Town Charter pertaining to the Select Board's appointment of the Town Manager position. He shared the Select Board did not recommend this by a vote of 2:2.

Mr. Evans commented he does not see how this article will help the Town.

Mr. Thompson asked if a supermajority terminates a Town Manager, is the Town required to complete paying off the contract and if that situation is specific to each individual contract negotiation. He pointed out if the Select Board votes to remove a Town Manager, having a lesser term is beneficial to the Town.

Mr. Michael Toole, member of Select Board, explained the reasoning behind the article, the issues the Select Board had with it as it is currently written, and stated they would like to make some changes to it before it is presented to the Town.

Mr. Parker asked if the article can be amended and voted on again before Town Meeting.

Mr. Toole stated since the Select Board voted to not recommend the article, due to the timing of the upcoming Town Meeting, he would support it for a later Town Meeting. He added there is time to revise the article for the Fall Town Meeting and have it ready for the next election.

Mr. Tsilis asked if there is currently any probationary period for a newly hired Town Manager before becoming tenured and when the current Town Manager's contract expires.

Mr. Toole replied contracts are typically in force from day one and the Town Manager's current contract ends in December. The renewal contract is due in June.

Mr. Rotondi asked for clarification on the term of the Town Manager's June contract renewal, since these changes will not be in effect at that time and how long the terms have been historically.

Mr. Toole replied the term period will be up to the Select Board to determine and the Town Manager's previous contract was a five-year term.

Mr. Yunits and Ms. Sawyer pointed out the change would not take effect until it is voted on next April since it requires a ballot vote.

Motion was made by Mr. Parker to recommend no action on the Special Town Meeting Article 9. Seconded by Mr. Bugaj. Vote: Yes – 6. No – 2. Motion carries.

II. Old Business

There was no old business discussed.

III. Review/Approve Minutes

There were no minutes reviewed at this meeting.

IV. Open session for topics not reasonably anticipated 48 hours in advance

V. Adjournment

Motion was made by Mr. Rotondi to adjourn the meeting at 8:23 pm. Seconded by Mr. Parker. Vote: Yes – 8 Unanimous. Motion carries.

The meeting is adjourned at 8:23 pm.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bAPYTgbJvuE>

Respectfully submitted by:

Anne Simpson

Minutes Approved by Committee on:

9/25/2023

Signature:

Paula Sawyer