

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: Thursday, March 21, 2024

Location: Norton Public Library Community Room

Present:

Select Board Members: Chairperson Mr. Kevin Snyder, Vice Chairperson Mr. Steven Hornsby, Ms. Denise Luciano, Ms. Megan Artz, and Mr. Alec Rich, III. ***Also present:*** Town Manager, Mr. Michael D. Yunits and Town Accountant Mr. James Puello

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

School Committee Members: Chairperson Mrs. Sheri Cohen, Vice Chairperson Mr. Deniz Savas, Mr. Nick Schleicher, Mrs. Justine Callanan, and Mr. Dan Sheedy ***Also present:*** Superintendent of Schools Dr. Jennifer O'Neill and School Business Administrator Mrs. Kristine Hadfield

Pledge of Allegiance

Call to Order: Chairperson Snyder, Chairperson Daniels, and Chairperson Cohen called their respective meetings to order at 7:01 p.m.

Mr. Snyder advised that the three boards had agreed that he would serve as the Chairperson for the Joint Meeting. He outlined meeting protocols, noting that all speakers would be limited to three minutes and would address the Committees only after being recognized by the Chairperson.

Appointment of Robert Kimball to Permanent Building Committee:

Mr. Kimball was present to review his background and qualifications as well as to express his interest in serving on the Permanent Building Committee to fill the vacancy after the passing of Mr. Robert Medeiros. As this item was not on the School Committee agenda, they advised that they would need to vote at a future meeting.

MOTION: by Mr. Hornsby to appoint Robert Kimball to the Permanent Building Committee

SECOND: by Mr. Rich

VOTE: 5 – 0 Motion Carries

FY2025 Budget Discussion:

Mr. Yunits informed the Committees that the original level services budget requests submitted by all departments resulted in a deficit of \$5,583,029. Significant time was put into these

proposals which represented realistic needs for each department. One of the challenges facing the town is that the Assessor's Department cannot provide any money out of the overlay surplus which represented \$100,000 in the budget last year. Additionally, last year the Town used \$707,500 out of Stabilization and used \$1,935,536 out of Free Cash. For FY2025, they were looking at only using \$700,000 of Free Cash.

The Town Manager advised that they have been working on trying to get to 3% budgets, noting that to get to that \$144,000 still must be cut out of the General Government budget. The proposal is to use \$1,000,000 in Free Cash and increase the Ambulance Receipts from \$850,000 to \$1,000,000. He informed the Committees that the Town would have a \$1,375,697 deficit at 3% budgets even with those proposals and noted that the Town has been fortunate where the health insurance previously increased 1-2% but this year will go up 5.7%. Each percentage increase is \$80,000 in health insurance costs. He stated that going below 3% budgets would be difficult for all departments and that discussions were needed on whether to use Stabilization funds or pursue an override.

Dr. O'Neill stated that the School Committee has put forward a level-services budget, which represents a 12.01% increase. She reiterated that there are no additional positions or programs included in the budget. Dr. O'Neill explained that a 3% increase would be a \$3,125,794 deficit over level-services resulting in significant cuts for the School Department. She noted the increases in mandated services including special education tuition and transportation as well as transportation for homeless students. Additionally, Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Grants have been used to cover expenses such as staffing and programming including \$550,000 in the FY2024 budget. Those funds will no longer be available.

The Town Manager clarified for the School Committee what the potential personnel impacts would be on the Town side stating that one position that may not be filled is the Public Health Nurse.

Dr. O'Neill clarified for the Select Board that \$1 million was used in FY23 for salaries from the ESSER Grants. The School Committee further commented that while they oppose using temporary funds for recurring expenses, the intent was to keep services in place. The ESSER funds were targeted for safety measures or to support students both academically and through SEL as they were coming back to school full-time from the closures that happened. This is a longer-term problem as it relates to students being academically ready for school, having had access to early intervention services or exposure to preschool. Academic gaps have grown exponentially as have concerns for the mental health component and students' emotional wellness. The positions originally funded through ESSER were designed more as a temporary fix when schools reopened, but they have become very valuable given the significant change in the needs of the students.

The Finance Committee sought clarification on positions that would be cut with a 3% budget on the Town side. The initial draft of cuts includes reductions to overtime for the Police and Fire Departments, reductions in expenses, and the elimination of the Public Health Nurse position. An additional \$144,000 would need to be cut to get to 3%. The 3% budget would only include one position for the Council on Aging.

The Finance Committee asked if \$1 million was used in Free Cash for the budget now would there be Free Cash in the Fall available to supplement anything. The Town Manager indicated that they are unsure about what Free Cash would be available in the Fall and cautioned that budget reductions could mean there would not be any tum-backs, which would reduce Free Cash.

The School Committee noted that the projected budget increases have fluctuated over the last couple of months. The Town Manager commented that the process is fluid citing the example of the projected health insurance increase just received a few weeks ago. He confirmed that if Free Cash or Stabilization funds are not used, then both the General Government and School Department are facing a negative increase. Mr. Yunits informed the audience that the Town holds money in a Stabilization account which requires a 2/3 majority vote at town meeting to allocate. He advised that generally, the Town should retain 5% of its budget in Stabilization.

The Committees were provided with various budget scenarios. The Town Manager confirmed for the School Committee that the budget numbers now are pretty accurate at this point. The Stabilization account balance currently is \$3,170,114 which is less than the recommended 5% of overall budget, and the Free cash balance is \$1.7 million.

The School Committee asked what the impact would be on Capital Improvements. Mr. Yunits advised that currently there is \$500,000 in Capital. He emphasized the need for caution in May and recommended retaining \$200,000 in the account unless they can put some more money in. He stated that they are looking to fund any articles on the warrant that require funding with Free Cash and then possibly use some Free Cash for Capital. New growth is less than the prior year and the Assessor and Building Commissioner are looking to project what revenue may be generated. The Town Manager clarified that spending Free Cash and Stabilization to zero leaves no emergency funds but also will negatively affect the Town's bond rating, impacting future borrowing.

The final bond was for the building projects (Athletic Complex/Community Center/Town Hall) will not be available until the fall when the projects close out. About 80% of the Town Hall and Community Center projects has been borrowed, so there is a potential for about 20% additional. Next year will be the peak on tax bills for the debt exclusion. The Finance Committee emphasized the concern about using temporary funds for recurring expenses and advised against the use of Free Cash and Stabilization.

The Select Board asked about state funds and potential increases. Dr. O'Neill stated that the initiatives around transportation really benefit regional districts and unless there is a change to the minimum funding through the Student Opportunity Act, Norton will not see an increase. The demographics of the town are such that we do not qualify for increased funding at this time.

The Committees discussed the annual increase in the cost of salaries relative to the levy limit. With a 3% budget increase, the School Department is projecting 25-28 position cuts. The Finance Committee questioned the impact on public safety if overtime is cut for the Police and Fire Departments.

Police Chief Brian Clark addressed the Committees regarding the 4.9% increase level-services budget he put forward. The department has an additional \$400,000 in unfunded requests that would be considered "wish-list" items. He gave an overview of their overtime budget and explained how overtime is used by the department. The projected cut to overtime is \$108,000

which would impact the ability to keep 3 officers on the road. To maintain this minimum standard, they would have to shift officers from administrative assignments and detectives. He explained that the School Resource Officers (SROs) are not funded by the School Department, so regular salaries and overtime come out of the Police Department's budget, and so this program would possibly need to be reevaluated.

Deputy Fire Chief Michael Wilson clarified that the \$1 million in Ambulance Receipts would be directed to keep the Chartley Fire Station open. He noted that the overtime is to keep Station 1 staffed. Shifts at the Chartley station would be more sporadic if cuts to overtime were implemented.

The Chair opened the floor to comments and questions from the audience.

Ms. Amy Martin asked whether School Choice funds are historically depleted each year or if they can be used for salaries. Dr. O'Neill explained that typically those funds are allocated throughout the year, but if they are not used, the funds can go back into the revolving account to be used later. She clarified the outgoing cost of School Choice at \$133,000 versus the incoming receipts of roughly \$1.6 million and stated that the School Committee has not yet voted on School Choice seats for the upcoming school year. Ms. Martin then asked if a Library Media Specialist is necessary for school accreditation. Dr. O'Neill responded that it is recommended but not required. Ms. Martin then asked about the rationale for eliminating the Public Health Nurse position. The Town Manager answered that a consultant would be utilized for necessary functions such as flu clinics.

Ms. Calista Thompson asked about the projected loss of School Choice students due to potentially increased class sizes and reductions in programming. Dr. O'Neill stated that families would have to make those decisions based on their own circumstances. A reduction in School Choice enrollment would impact the budget which currently is projected to utilize \$2 million in School Choice funds.

Mr. Brian Stalters spoke on behalf of the library, stating that most of the library's expenses are covered through fundraising. The funding from the town only covers salaries, and the budget request put forth would allow an extension of hours from 45 to 50 per week. This would allow the library to be certified and then receive additional funding from the state. Norton is one of four libraries in the state that aren't certified.

Discussion and/or Vote, re. Proposition 2½ Override Ballot Question:

Mr. William Gouveia spoke in favor of an override but cautioned against moving too quickly without a well thought out plan and override figure.

Ms. Alexia Hozella commented on the need to focus not on what cuts must be made but rather on what needs to be kept. Mr. Peter Wiggins expressed similar sentiments.

Ms. Laura Gustafson spoke in favor of an override discussing the actual cost to the average homeowner.

Mr. Mark Sweeney pointed out that in 2022, inflation was 8-9% and noted all the projects taxpayers have already funded. He spoke in favor of balance.

The School Committee reminded the audience that the agenda item is to decide whether to put an override question on the town election ballot. The Select Board clarified that the decision needs to be made tonight in order to meet the deadline for the ballot.

Ms. Debbie Winston commented that overrides do not pass because of a lack of trust.

Mr. Rob Welsh requested clarification of the options and process for an override. The Select Board explained that the override question can go on the ballot and then go to town meeting or town meeting can vote for dual budgets presented and then have the override question on a later ballot. He commented favorably on the information presented at the meeting and available online.

Mrs. Amy Weber spoke on behalf of teachers and students, stating that students will feel the cuts most and will experience lasting impacts. Properly funding the schools is an investment in Norton's future.

The Finance Committee commented that this is a political campaign and that not enough groundwork has been done to successfully pass an override. They additionally thanked Mr. Sweeny for pointing out the great success Norton has had, particularly in the schools, and cautioned that budget cuts could negatively impact that record. The public needs to have the time to be informed properly.

Ms. Val Cabral spoke in favor of an override and advised that being part of a community is supporting things that don't just interest or benefit you.

Ms. Amy Martin emphasized that those who need help, with or without the override, can reach out to the Senior Center for services such as fuel assistance. Ms. Cohen clarified that these services are not just for seniors.

Mr. Matt Drane asked if the override number is known and suggested waiting if the number is not set, until town meeting, putting forward two budgets, and going that approach with a defensible budget to present to the Town with an actual override number.

The Committees discussed the process of voting to put an override on the ballot versus the process of presenting two budgets forward at Town Meeting. To put an override on the ballot for the town election an override amount would have to be determined at the current meeting.

Ms. Donna Dolak spoke on behalf of putting an override on the ballot, noting the changes she has seen in the opportunities and resources available to children.

Mr. Oren Sigal stated that this should not be referred to as a political campaign. Rather it should be an informational or educational campaign.

A Norton Middle School student shared her experience with the previous budget cycle and cuts. She questioned if proposed cuts are implemented, what is the incentive for students to stay in Norton.

Ms. Kim Arena posed the idea of approaching this as how do we fix the problem to generate ideas or support rather than focusing on what is wrong or right.

The Finance Committee expressed concern that they aren't ready for an override because they don't have firm numbers yet. Discussion ensued regarding potential override amounts and the need to have a clear understanding of what potential override amounts would impact. Transparency for taxpayers was emphasized as well as the need to consider future budget cycles. The School Department presented numbers looking at level services, unfunded requests, fee reduction, and future budget planning which totaled \$5 to \$5.2 million.

Mr. Curtis Buck stated that a budget with necessary expenses should be presented to the taxpayers.

The Committees again expressed concern about rushing to put an override on the ballot for the April election without proper calculations and projections or the time to educate taxpayers and disseminate information, so they are able to make the right decision for themselves.

Mr. William Gouveia remarked again on the sensitive issue of attempting an override.

Ms. Debbie Winston addressed the Committees about fiscal responsibility and the need for a plan.

Ms. Kate Boylan asked what the Select Board would like to see from its constituency to help spread accurate information so that progress and movement can happen. The Select Board responded that they would love to see more people attending the meetings, such as the Finance Committee meetings, and in general people need to be more engaged and approach topics with an open mind. They would like to see all this information centralized and available and suggested having a "Frequently Asked Questions" available as well as forums that help dissect the information.

Mr. Jack Conway spoke in favor of compromise rather than putting the override on the April ballot. With a 3% budget there would be cuts but it would allow time for an educational campaign in support of an override.

MOTION: by Ms. Luciano vote to put a proposition 2 ½ override question on the town election ballot for April 27th

SECOND: by Mr. Hornsby

ROLL CALL: Denise Luciano – no; Megan Artz – no; Alec Rich – no, Steven Hornsby – no; Kevin Snyder - no 0 – 5 Motion Fails

Other Business:

None presented.

Adjourn:

MOTION: by Ms. Callanan to adjourn the School Committee meeting

SECOND: by Mr. Nicholas Schleicher

VOTE: 5 - 0 Motion Carries

MOTION: by Mr. Paul Schleicher to adjourn the Finance Committee meeting

SECOND: by Mr. Tsilis

VOTE: 9 - 0 Motion Carries

MOTION: by Mr. Hornsby to adjourn Select Board meeting

SECOND: by Ms. Artz

VOTE: 5 - 0 Motion Carries

The meeting adjourned at 9:39 p.m.

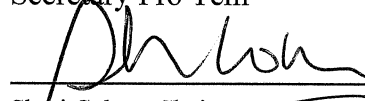
Next School Committee Meeting Date:

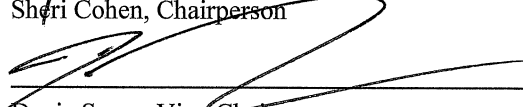
- Thursday, April 11, 2024, at 6:00 p.m., in the HAY Gymnasium

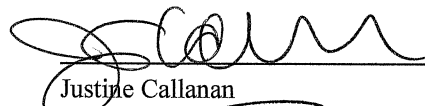
Documents and Other Exhibits Used at Meeting:


- NPS FY2025 Budget Book

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



Sheri Cohen, Chairperson

Deniz Savas, Vice Chairman

Justine Callanan

Nick Schleicher

Dan Sheedy

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