

Merrimack School District Budget Committee

Public Hearing
Minutes

February 11, 2025

Present: S. Bernier, M. Berry, D. Coakley, L. French, G. Groff, J. McCormack, C. Mower, M. Murphy, R. Paepke, S. Rand, A. Santoriello, B. Trant and School Board Liaison N. Halter

Also Present: Chief Educational Officer Bill Olsen, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum Amy Doyle, Assistant Superintendent for Business Matt Shevenell

J. McCormack opened the Public Hearing at 7:00 PM. She said the purpose of the Hearing was to give the public a chance to speak about the warrant articles. She said she would work down the warrant, reading each warrant article and then asking for public comment that the warrant article only. She said she would not entertain any comments not relating to the specific warrant article.

J. McCormack explained **Article 1: Election of Officers by ballot** would be voted on in April and called for comments.

There were none.

J. McCormack read **Article 2: Ability to Accept Gifts of Property** and said there was no public comment.

J. McCormack read **Article 3: Establish Administrative Building Capital Reserve Fund** and called for public comment.

Rosemary Rung (Ministerial Drive) said she supported this fund because it was a great way to start saving for this building. She suggested that some instructional space be incorporated into this building. She said that state building aid may be coming back which could be utilized for a portion of the building if it had some instructional space.

There were no additional comments.

J. McCormack read **Article 4: Mastricola Roof Replacement** and called for public comments.

There were none.

J. McCormack read **Article 5: Default Budget Determined by Budget Committee** and called for public comment.

Heather Robitaille (Springfield Circle) stated that two members of the Budget Committee had signed the petition. She said that calculating the budget is a complex process and she was not sure that all members of the Committee understood the process. She felt having the Budget Committee determine the default budget rather than leaving it in the hands of the Administration could expose the District to legal risk and liability.

Robert Reisman (Iris Drive) stated the District currently has experts who calculate the default budget and he felt it was best to leave the default determination in professional hands.

Finn Haddad (MHS Student) said he was concerned that turning over the calculation of the default budget to people who need to focus on getting re-elected might result in a budget which would not meet all the District's contractual obligations.

Rebekah Woodman (Dwyer Street) said she she thought it was insulting that people did not think the Committee was able to determine the default budget. She also said it was a good idea to have another Committee look at the budget figures to determine the default budget. She indicated that she wanted to see more transparency, more accountability and more oversight to the groups in town. She thought the Committee represented the whole town and the whole town would benefit if the Budget Committee determined the default budget.

Joanne Grobecker (Craig Drive) said she did not like having both the default and the operating budget and she was concerned about the lack of knowledge about Special Education shown by some members of the Budget Committee. She thought having School Board responsible for one budget and the Budget Committee responsible for the other was a good idea.

Jennifer Motyl (Ellie Drive) said she thought it was important to have financial experts developing the default budget and ensuring that all student needs are budgeted for. She also said that SEL is a wonderful program and is helping the students.

Rosemarie Rung said that the current procedure of having non-partisan experts develop the default budget following statutory guidelines should continue as is.

There were no additional comments.

J. McCormack read **Article 6: Dissolution of the Budget Committee** and asked for comments.

There were none.

J. McCormack said Article 7 was listed in the handout as a place holder but there is no Article 7 so **Article 8, becomes Article 7: Operating Budget**. She read the article and asked for comments.

Mary-Elizabeth Hauver (Bean Road) said she could see the growth in her two children as the result of the new curriculums implemented in the schools. She felt that cutting the budget will hurt the students as well as the entire community of Merrimack. She said in order to keep our

students thriving, we need to keep the money where it matters and the students of Merrimack matter.

Matthew Brown (MHS Student) spoke in favor of the budget as currently proposed. He said that last year's budget cuts resulted in the loss of teachers and programs. He said he is concerned about the impact any additional cuts to the proposed budget would have on the quality of the staffing, programs and curriculums offered by the School District.

Tim Bevis (MHS Student) asked that information about the on-going budget process be made more readily available to the residents of Merrimack.

Maeve Larock (MHS Student) told the Committee about an extra-curricular high school program funded by the District that provides an opportunity for students to engage with elementary school students and which she was particularly thankful for.

Nate Gagne (Maidstone Drive) said a lot of people are thinking about property taxes and reminded everyone that the state is ignoring court rulings about funding public schools. He asked those present not to defund the educational programs of Merrimack students.

Cathy Goodman (Courtland Drive) said the proposed budget cuts could result in larger class sizes and staff reductions as well as reduction in many extra-curricular activities that are offered to students. She said that smaller class sizes and SEL programs have shown positive impacts on student learning.

Sarah Leland (Naticook Road) thanked the Committee members who were supporting the Merrimack School educational process.

Joanne Grobecker urged the Committee to keep the budget as currently proposed and above the default budget. She said the voters do have a choice.

Heather Davis (Joppa Road) said Merrimack has a wonderful educational community and provides many opportunities beyond the curriculums being taught.

Heather Robitaille said last year's budget cut had an impact on the students. She felt, if the proposed operating budget is cut, there will be bigger impacts. She stated cuts are being proposed by a few who have personal and political agendas against the public schools and don't care about the impacts budget cuts will have on the students.

Ashley dePreaux (Westminister Lane) asked everyone to do right by the students. She said the SEL programs have been essential to the educational development of her children. She suggested that people who are upset with the budget increase should put their energies into demanding more from the state.

Molly Azotea (Chestnut Circle) said the budget in place for the past year has caused hardship on the students. She said this town needs to stand behind its schools.

Robert Reisman said he was in favor of the proposed budget. He said that the co-curricular activities help motivate the students. He thanked the teachers and staff for all the work that they do.

Stefan Fritz (12 Surry Lane) said he was in support with the proposed budget and felt the budget was an investment in the students. He suggested that charts that are shared at meetings be presented ahead of time to the whole committee so they could be vetted for accuracy and not be misleading.

J. McCormack read a letter from Pat McGrath (Peter Road) in support of the proposed budget.

Ashley dePreaux (Westminister Lane) said that passing any proposed budget cut to remove diversity education would be a bad direction to take.

Max Abramson (Josten Drive) asked what the total cost per student would be if the budget as currently proposed passed. He was told that the hearing was just for comments from the public. He then asked for a Point of Order to explain that voters need to know that if a budget line is zeroed out, no funds from other budget lines in the budget can be moved into that zero line or used for the line's purpose.

Finn Haddad said he the default budget that passed last year has impacted the students and he felt that passing a well-rounded budget that was proposed by the Administration and School Board is important.

There were no further comments.

J. McCormack asked Assistant Superintendent for Business M. Shevenell to explain the Default Budget.

M. Shevenell said there is a statutory formula to determine the Default Budget. He said he starts with the last year's approved budget; removes one time expenditures and special warrant articles; and then adds the maximum guaranteed health insurance increase and other approved contracted increases like teacher salaries, transportation, food service, and Special Education services. He said the School Board approves the Default Budget.

J. McCormack asked if there were any comments.

There were none.

J. McCormack said some members of the Committee had proposed some budget adjustments at the pre-Public Hearing meeting that might be discussed and voted on during the Committee's post-hearing meeting. She said they included:

- Cutting 5% (\$57,300) from the student 8610 supply lines.
- Cutting \$8,000 for the proposed boys and girls lacrosse teams at the MMS.
- Cutting a proposed guidance counselor from RFS (\$100,000 + benefits)
- Cutting 3 proposed Administrative Assistants for Student Services (\$90,000 + benefits).

- Removing lines for professional development substitutes (\$128,712)
- Cutting \$495,607 for SEL programming
- Removing the initial amount used to purchase Wit & Wisdom materials (\$237,500)

People in the audience asked to be able to make comments on the list of proposed cuts.

J. McCormack said the Committee she had closed discussion on that article and closed the Public Hearing at 8:09 PM. She said the Committee was going to move on with its agenda and stated that the Committee would not be taking further public comments during this meeting.

M. Murphy asked for a Point of Order and made a MOTION to reopen the Public Hearing. Second: K. Bernier.

J. McCormack said she had closed the Public Hearing. Members noted that there was a motion on the floor which had been seconded and needed to be voted on.

J. McCormack said she would re-open the Public Hearing for 15 minutes and she would limit each speaker to one minute.

L. French made a MOTION to AMEND the motion to state that there would be no time limits on public participation. Second: R. Paepke.

M. Berry said that last week and tonight the Committee's comments had been restricted.

MOTION PASSED: 8 – 2 – 3. (A. Santoriello and B. Trant opposed. J. McCormack, M. Berry and S. Rand abstained.)

J. McCormack reopened the Public Hearing at 8:12 PM and said she would limit each speaker to one time at the microphone.

Alison Fee (Rocky Ledge Road) said she was shocked to hear the proposed budget adjustments. She felt that the majority of those present would be against these adjustments.

Molly Azotea said para-educators don't make a living, but they do make a difference.

Heather Robitaille told the Committee that reducing the budget to less than the default is not giving the voters a choice and is not acceptable.

Robert Reisman said we know that SEL programs and Wit and Wisdom work, so let's keep them. He asked the Committee to carefully consider the impact of budget cuts on the students.

Samantha Sperry (Remmin Court) told the Committee that her child has benefited academically, socially, and emotionally from the SEL programs and is now able to confidently get on the bus to go to school. She said please do not cut these programs.

Lori Peters (School Board Chair) thanked all the people who had come to the Budget Committee and School Board meetings to speak. She wanted to provide information about 3 specific cuts that were being proposed:

1. The student supply lines had been level funded for three years but were increased by 5% for the current year and 5% in the proposed budget because of actual increased costs.
2. The SEL lines include suicide awareness prevention training as well as the YES program.
3. The Wit and Wisdom cost in the proposed budget included the start-up materials for a new teacher as well as on-going consumables for all classes.

Ashley dePreaux said she didn't understand how the Committee could consider the proposed cuts after listening to what all the people who had spoken during the Public Hearing had to say.

Rosemarie Rung thanked everyone for coming. She said one of the problems that Merrimack is facing is that the state is not fulfilling its state constitutional obligation to fairly fund education. She said she was working on it but people need to speak up about the situation.

Cathy Provencher (Ingham Road) said she can't believe that people think that SEL is not worthwhile and that we should get rid of it. The people here are here because they care. She asked the Board to listen to what people are saying before it picks the budget. She said the proposed budget cuts will affect the students.

Evan Fulmer (Woodbury Street) said it is so important that we stay positive and stay on track to keep things moving forward. He said, sadly, money is the driving force to supply the schools with what the students need but we need to give the schools what they need.

Jeannie Wagner (Cowin Road) asked the Committee when the last time was that any of them had been in the schools to observe the benefits of the programs they doubted the veracity of.

Max Abramson said he was still adding the numbers but he thought the cost per pupil was \$28,000 per year. He said, full disclosure, he had been a state representative and worked hard to reduce the state and local tax impact on homeowners. He commended the Committee for doing a deep-dive investigation into the budget and he didn't think it was right for members of the community to berate the members for voicing their opinion of what they think the budget should be.

J. McCormack closed the Public Hearing at 8:32 PM