

Merrimack School District Budget Committee
Minutes

February 11, 2025

Present: K. 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 called the meeting to order at 6:30 PM and led those present in the Pledge of Allegiance. She explained the Committee would have a brief work session and she would convene the Public Hearing at 7 PM. She stated the purpose of the Public Hearing was to take comments about the warrant articles only.

Work Session

J. McCormack said that last week some members had expressed concerns that they had not had an opportunity to share their findings and proposals before a budget figure had been approved. She said she wanted the Committee to hear what those members had to say and she also wanted to give all members a chance to speak. She said there would not be any discussion on what members had to say and she would not be taking any motions from committee members.

M. Berry said she had what she thought were some efficiencies that she wanted to propose and she felt these adjustments would not hurt the students' education. They included:

- Removing 5% (\$57,300) from the 8610 student supply lines. She said 15% had been added to these lines for this year and an additional 5% was proposed – which she felt could comfortably be removed.
- Removing \$8,000 for the proposed boys and girls lacrosse teams at the MMS. She did not feel enough data had been provided to support adding these teams this year.
- Removing a proposed guidance counselor from RFS. (\$100,000 + benefits) She felt, due to declining enrollments, the second counselor at TFS could be split between TFS and RFS instead.
- Removing 3 proposed Student Services Administrative Assistants. (\$90,000 + benefits). She said she didn't think the District should be adding staff in the face of declining enrollment. She thought the District could solve the temporary paperwork backlog by assigning other staff or paying overtime.
- Removing lines for professional development substitutes. (\$128,712) She suggested that professional development programs could be scheduled in the summer or held during the paid preparation days before school starts when subs are not needed.
- Removing \$495,607 for SEL programming. She said NH Administrative Rule Ed 306.04 does not require that SEL programming has to be a separate curriculum. She said maybe the program could be looked at and possibly removed.

J. McCormack asked M. Berry to give others a chance to speak and told her that, if there was time before the Public Hearing, she could speak again.

S. Rand shared some budget numbers she wanted the Committee to think about. She said the current approved operating budget which included warrant articles was \$95,808,066. She said that she thought next year's proposed default budget would be \$94,953,402. She indicated that the default budget keeps going up and she wondered when enough is enough. She said the proposed operating budget should be lowered.

G. Groff asked M. Berry for the SEL budget line numbers that she had referenced in her comments. M. Berry gave her the line numbers.

K. Bernier said she wanted to respond to some of the issues that had been brought up.

J. McCormack said discussion on member proposals would happen after the Public Hearing.

M. Berry finished her comments on SEL by saying that SEL is taking up instructional time and that many students don't really need this training because of services are already being provided by IEPs, 504s, teachers, parents and school discipline codes. She said she is really concerned about test scores, noting high school proficiency scores in Math: 33%, Reading: 66% and Science: 59%. The other adjustments she wanted to propose were the removal of \$237,500 from the budget. She said last year the District used reserved funds for the initial purchase of Wit & Wisdom and she felt this was a one-time expense which appears to have been carried over in next year's proposed budget. She also had a similar concern about the \$888,000 that was added to the proposed budget for the MESSA contract in addition to the funds that were already added to this year's budget.

M. Berry also wanted to thank the Administration and the Staff for the gains that have been made at the elementary school test scores and said she looked forward to seeing similar gains at the secondary schools.

There were no more Committee comments.

J. McCormack recessed the meeting at 6:45 PM.

The meeting resumed at 8:32 PM. J. McCormack said the Committee needs to vote recommendations on each monied warrant article.

Recommendations on Monied Warrant Articles

Article 3: Establish Administrative Building Capital Reserve Fund.

J. McCormack said the first article the Committee would be voting on was Article 3 and called for discussion.

Discussion included:

- It is prudent to start saving for whatever the District eventually does.
- Money can only be added to this fund by warrant article.

- An article asking for funds for this CRF may or may not be on the warrant in future years.
- Maybe some of the issues mentioned in the Fire Department's inspection report could be addressed using this fund.
- Saving is good financial management and shows intent to work toward a solution.
- A building should be built but should be carefully designed for the future, not the past.
- Every year the District's unassigned fund balance (surplus) is used to reduce the District's portion of the tax rate. It does not accumulate.
- The Town of Merrimack has over two dozen CRFs which it uses to save for and purchase future capital items.
- It is completely unacceptable that the Administration works in a facility that does not comply with ADA requirements.

C. Mower called the question. J. McCormack called on M. Berry.

M. Berry made a MOTION to recommend Article 3. Second: D. Coakley.

A roll call vote was held. MOTION PASSED: 13 – 0 – 0.

Article 3 is Recommended by the Budget Committee: 13 – 0 – 0.

Article 4: Masticola Roof Replacement

J. McCormack said the next article the Committee would be voting on was Article 4 and called for discussion.

C. Mower made a MOTION to recommend Article 4. Second: D. Coakley.

Discussion included:

- An article to replace some portion of a school roof has been a regular maintenance item for several years.
- The roof Maintenance has proposed to replacement this year is leaking. There are actually buckets in the gyms to collect water from the roof leaks.
- In about 5 years, the District will have replaced the old roofs at all schools with multi-tiered, 45 year warranty, roofs.
- Once all the old roofs are all replaced, M. Shevenell hopes that the District regularly adds money to the roof CRF to save for future roof replacements.

G. Groff called the Question. Second: L. French.

A roll call vote was held. MOTION PASSED: 13 – 0 – 0.

Article 4 is Recommended by the Budget Committee: 13 – 0 – 0.

D. Coakley asked the Chair to check with Legal Counsel to see if there is a conflict of interest since two members of the Committee have signed the petition for Article 5. J. McCormack said

she would. L. French said he sponsored a petitioned warrant article a few years ago and there was no issue.

Final Actions and Recommendation on Operating Budget

J. McCormack read the Operating Budget Article and called for discussion.

G. Groff stated that members have been referring to Special Education as if it was a department by itself. She said the Department is called Student Services and provides services such as the YESS program, suicide prevention, etc. for all students in the District, not just those with I.E.P.s. She said SEL is part of the academic day and there is a lot of paperwork that is required by Federal Law for I.E.P.s.

J. McCormack reminded the Committee that its job was to put forth a bottom line budget number and it does not have any power or say in how those funds get moved around or spent.

Discussion included

- The budget number proposed by the Administration and School Board is the amount of money that they feel is needed to improve both the curriculum and student scores.
- Parents and teachers have praised and want to keep the SEL programming.
- The proposed lacrosse teams are new and the request is parent and student driven.
- MMS Administrators did not provide data to support the proposed lacrosse teams.
- Could some professional development be done before school begins so instructional time is not lost and subs are not needed?
- Having 2 guidance counselors at RFS would be “best practices” but it is not required.
- The district’s student population is declining and Pre-K is being moved to MES.
- MYA offers Boys and Girls Lacrosse.
- The extra Administrative Assistants for Student Services are to fill a temporary need.
- The District does not do training where an entire building is being trained and filled with subs.
- The Wit and Wisdom program was not purchased with funds from last year’s operating budget.
- Merrimack’s cost per pupil matches the state average cost per pupil and has done so for five years. Costs have gone up and the state average cost per pupil has gone up as well.
- The Administration did a presentation about all that the District has accomplished over the last few years. One of the accomplishments is that student scores are starting to go up.
- M. Shevenell said he would work to clarify the substitute lines and noted that subs are needed for sick days as well as professional development days for both teachers and para-professionals.
- The total amount that has been suggested to be removed is about \$1 million dollars which would bring the proposed bottom line to about the same as the default budget.
- Fixed costs are fixed costs. They have to be paid no matter what.

D. Coakley made a MOTION to Recommend the Operating Budget proposed by the School Board and Administration. Second: L. French

A Roll Call vote was held. MOTION PASSED: 8 – 4 – 1 (S. Rand, M. Berry, A. Santoriello, J. McCormack opposed. B. Trant abstained.)

Operating Budget (Article 7) is Recommended by the Budget Committee 8 – 4 – 1.

Other

Approval of Prior Minutes

L. French made a MOTION to approve the amended minutes of January 28, 2025. Second: M. Berry.

MOTION PASSED: 12 – 0 – 1. (D. Coakley abstained.)

RTK Update

J. McCormack told the Committee she has collated the data requested and will be reviewing it with counsel to determine what, if any, material needed to be redacted per RSA. She said she had USBs to return to the members. However, she said there has also been a follow-up RTK request from the original requestor for the same material from the end date of the original request to now. She asked members to give her this new material as soon as possible or at the Deliberative Session.

J. McCormack also told the members that there had been several emails sent to the Committee's general email address over the last few weeks that were regarding member comments about Student Services. She said she had responded to and forwarded all of them to the Committee.

Signing the M-S 27

M. Shevenell told the Committee that a majority of the Committee must sign the MS-27 before the budget can be posted. He said he would prepare the document and members would be notified by email to go to the Central Office and sign the document. He hoped to have 7 signatures by February 20th.

Filing Period

J. McCormack said this year's filing period runs from February 19th to February 28th at 5 PM. She said the members whose terms were expiring were hers, L. French, R. Paepke and G. Groff.

Next Meeting

J. McCormack said the next meeting of the Committee will be held immediately after the Deliberative Session on March 4th in the JMUES APR.

Committee Comments

K. Bernier reminded the public and the Committee about various bills dealing with education and finance that are being heard in the NH House and Senate which will have an impact on schools and everyone's budget. She suggested everyone should get involved, on-line or in-person.

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L. French said this has been a tough couple of years on the Committee. He wanted to thank the public for coming out and voicing their opinions. He also wanted to thank the freshman members of the Committee because this was not an easy year to join this Committee. He thanked everyone for their hard work.

D. Coakley made a MOTION to adjourn after J. McCormack made a final statement.

J. McCormack thanked the public for their interest in the budget process. She said everyone on the Committee has been elected by some portion of the community and stated that the budget is a complex process which is compressed in a very short time. She felt the Committee may not always agree but it had put a lot of effort into it this year's budget.

D. Coakley repeated his MOTION to adjourn. Second: K. Bernier.

J. McCormack declared the meeting adjourned at 9:55 PM