

Merrimack School District Budget Committee

Public Hearing Minutes February 13, 2024

Present: S. Albuquerque, D. Coakley, L. French, G. Groff, M. Mackey, J. McCormack, M. Murphy, R. Paepke, H. Robitaille, C. Mower, N. Schoenfeld, E. Wilson and School Board Liaison N. Halter

Also Present: Chief Educational Officer Bill Olsen, Assistant Superintendent Amy Doyle, Business Administrator Matt Shevenell and School Board Vice Chair Laurie Rothhaus

N. Schoenfeld opened the Public Hearing at 7:30 PM. She said the purpose of the Hearing was to give the public a chance to speak about the proposed budget and the monied warrant articles.

N. Schoenfeld reminded the audience that the Budget Committee did not have the authority to change the wording of the warrant articles and asked if anyone had any general comments.

Rosemary Rung (Ministerial Dr.) said the School Board is elected to develop programs and policies for the schools as well as hire staff. She said the Budget Committee should look at the financial requirements to support those programs and policies to determine a budget that supports those requirements and is affordable to the taxpayer. She asked that the Committee not add money that the School Board did not request.

Scott Adler (Deerwood Drive) stated the lion's share of the budget is staff. He said the School Board has line item control and is not obligated to spend funds that the Budget Committee might add to the budget. He asked if the District really needed the number of administrative staff it wanted the new building to house and requested an impartial bottom up budget review. He said he wanted accountability and persistent fiscal integrity.

Shelley Uscinski (Forrest Drive) asked that the Committee consider that inflation is at 17%, the cost of energy, electricity, food and shelter have gone up and that earnings are down when it puts together the budget.

James Wood (Wilson Hill Road) said he didn't believe a new building was needed and that the District needed to fix whatever needed to be repaired. It said it's never going to be a good time to build but this may be the worst time to build.

Melissa Bollisk-Knight (Twin Bridge Rd.) said the Gifted and Talented (G & T) program has no academic benefit and the primary mission of the schools is education.

Joanne Grobecker (Craig Dr.) said the District needs a budget as close to the Default as possible but she supported G & T and reading interventionists.

N. Schoenfeld said that Sarah Locke (1 Pan American Dr.) had submitted an email which she wanted read at the public hearing: Ms. Locke wrote there isn't an alignment between the proposed budget cuts and the established priorities. Specifically, the emphasis on improving literacy at lower grade levels contradicts proposed cuts to a reading interventionist position at JMUES and the elimination of G & T programs at the middle and high schools. She took issue with the YEES program and the need for an additional Student Services administrator without clear supporting data. She requested that the Committee consider allocating funds for line items with a direct educational impact and scrutinize expenditures that may not align with educational priorities.

N. Schoenfeld said she was going to review monied articles on the warrant and open the hearing for ask for public comments on each.

Warrant Article 2: Bond for New Central Office

N. Schoenfeld said that Warrant Article 2 was a bond for a new Central Office and asked L. Rothhaus and N. Halter to present specifics of the project.

L Rothhaus shared a slide show explaining the health and safety issues at the current offices and how the cost of the project has risen since 2013.

N. Halter said the District is looking for a permanent solution, rather than a temporary solution.

Both indicated the District is waiting for the Fire Inspector's Report to help determine the next steps but the District doesn't want to be forced into an emergency situation. They reminded the audience that the bond interest would be 3.5%.

There were no comments from the public.

Warrant Article 4: MESSA Contract

N. Schoenfeld said Warrant Article 4 was a three year collective bargaining agreement with the support staff.

N. Halter told the Committee that the School Board had met earlier in the evening to approve this contract. She said it was a 3 year contract and covered support staff including paraprofessionals, custodians, administrative assistants, and food service workers.

B. Olsen explained that the first year of the contract will cost \$1,200,624, the second year will cost \$1,101,059 and the third year will cost \$821,954. He said that this contract will bring the salaries that the District offers more competitive with other districts, but Merrimack is still behind.

N. Schoenfeld called for comments from the Public.

Mrs. Uscinski asked what the percentage of wage increase and questioned whether the article as written raised \$1.2 million dollars twice.

M. Shevenell said the first year of the contract gives the staff an average 12.3% raise. The second year provides an average 10.05% raise and the third year provides an average raise of 6.8%. He said an employee now making \$13 an hour will now make \$15 an hour. He also explained the language and format of the article is standard language provided by the Department of Revenue Administration for contracted warrant articles so that there is an appropriation for first year and the other two years of the contract become part of the default budget.

Karen Korga (Cobblestone Place) asked if the District applies for grant funding. M. Shevenell said that the District does apply for grant funding and recently received \$300,000 in grant funding for updating school security.

L. Rothhaus said that once teachers get to the middle of our salary scale, they are staying but the District has difficulty hiring and retaining staff in starting positions because the salary scale is too low.

There was no further discussion.

Warrant 6 - Roofs at Mastricola Elementary and Mastricola Upper Elementary Schools

N. Schoenfeld said Warrant Article 6 was to replace sections of the roof in the Mastricola complex and called for comments from the Public.

Mrs. Uscinski asked how much money was in the Roof Capital Reserve Fund. M. Shevenell told her there was \$3,000 in the fund.

There was no further discussion.

Article 8 – Operating Budget: \$93,611,317

N. Schoenfeld said Warrant Article 8 was the operating budget. Before calling for public comment, she asked 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, special warrant articles, and the middle school bond which is now paid off; and 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.

N. Schoenfeld said the Default Budget represents the amount to fund basic level functional needs and to meet contractual obligations.

N. Schoenfeld asked if anyone had any comments on the proposed budget.

Mrs. Uscinski asked about increased benefit costs. M. Shevenell said these are contracted obligations and are included in the Default Budget.

Stephanie Rouess (McQuestion Road) asked when the District would know how much the health insurance increase would actually be. M. Shevenell explained the Health Insurance Trust gives the District a guaranteed maximum increase amount for budgeting purposes and he doesn't expect to learn what the actual increase will be until after voting in April but if the increase is announced before the Deliberative Session, the School Board will adjust the budgeted amounts in this warrant article at Deliberative Session. The final amount could be less than what is in the budget but it will not be more.

Mrs. Rung stated that there is a bill at the NH Senate which she is tracking which appropriates funds for school building aid. She also said that there is another bill that restores the state's obligation to fund the state retirement program.

Mr. Wood asked what the impact on the tax rate was if everything passed on the warrant passed. S. Albuquerque told him that a million dollars added to the appropriation would add 20¢ to the tax rate.

There was no further discussion.

N. Schoenfeld declared the Public Hearing closed at 8:45 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Pat Heinrich