

Merrimack School District Budget Committee  
Minutes

February 4, 2025

Present: K. Bernier, M. Berry, D. Coakley, L. French, G. Groff, J. McCormack, C. Mower, M. Murphy (arrived late), 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 6:02 PM and led those present in the Pledge of Allegiance.

**Public Participation**

J. McCormack thanked the audience for coming to the meeting. She asked that everyone remember to be respectful and keep their comments brief (1 – 2 minutes) so that everyone who wants to speak, can speak. She said anyone who needed more time to speak after speaking for two minutes could go to the end of the line and speak again.

Barbara McCormick (Island Drive) thanked the Committee for its efforts. She said the School Budget is almost \$100 million dollars and that does not seem realistic to her. She said the student population is declining and the School District is still asking for more money. She said she heard the student:teacher ratio is 12:1 and that the per pupil cost is \$20,000 per student with the national per pupil average cost is \$14,295 per student. She said that any tax increase is devastating to senior citizens and asked the Committee to also consider the impact of budget increases on the seniors.

Kathy Komar (Belmont Drive) said she was reading a letter on behalf of someone who wanted to remain anonymous. The writer wanted to suggest that some behaviors by adults on the Committee or in the audience were disgraceful. The writer also wanted to know why the District was replacing curriculums when those in place were working. The writer suggested the District should be focusing on getting more staff rather than replacing curriculums.

Susan Dupuis (Highland Green) asked a question about funds for or from the Federal Government that are listed in the budget. J. McCormack explained the funds are listed on both sides of the budget ledger and are anticipated revenue which the District expends which have a zero impact on the budget. Ms. Dupuis asked the Committee to look for ways to cut some things from the budget.

Joanne Grobecker (Craig Drive) said she was shocked at the last meeting to hear an elected Committee member suggest that Merrimack put out a “No Vacancy” sign for Special Education and cap the number of students with disabilities we educate in Merrimack. She said this was

illegal and immoral to deny an education to students with disabilities. She also 21.84% of Merrimack students have I.E.P.s and in Londonderry, 21.32% of students have an I.E.P. and the state average is 19.4%. She said a majority of I.E.P.s in New Hampshire list reading as a specific disability. She said this is the first year that Merrimack has general intervention in reading. She feels that the School Board and Administration are actively reducing costs by improving and aligning the curriculum. She thanked the teachers for what they were doing.

Sarah Leland (Naticook Road) said that the accusation that public schools are teaching radical and exclusionary ideology is false and comes from a group that is exclusionary. She also said that she thought public funds should be spent on public schools. She said we need schools funded properly so we can have an educated populace. She said members, who ran for the Committee to cut the budget without regard for the impact on the system and the students it serves, should resign.

Samantha Collyer (Souhegan Drive) said every student has a right to an equitable education including access to the services they need to succeed. She said residents need to ask how the state of New Hampshire can properly fund its schools

Veronica Pelletier (Indian Rock) said in the past, Merrimack schools had a reputation for having good staff but large class sizes. She said she was glad that Merrimack had moved to smaller class sizes.

Molly Mear (Collins Avenue) said she felt spending money on education and public safety should be the highest priority for all communities. She said money spent on schools was an investment in the community property values.

Virginia Heald (Pondview) said that the people who are present are interested in everyone's well-being. She asked the School Board and the Administration to take a look at the budget and look for places where the budget can be reduced.

Angelica Houlihan (Blanchard Lane) said she wanted the School Board to use more frugal spending practices. She stated that the School Board has run a surplus every year and has asked for a bigger budget the following year. She said the voters want a choice and she wants a proposed budget of \$90 million dollars.

Karen Mortimer (Everest Drive) said she wanted to clarify that the suggestion a Committee member made last week was not to cut funds, but rather to put a cap on the number of students with disabilities the District serves. She said that this is discrimination. She said spending needs to be looked at but not at the expense of students who need help.

Heather Robitaille (Springfield Road) said that Merrimack taxpayers are in pain but we cannot put our students on hold. She said this was a state issue and the NH Legislature needs to do something to equitably fund public education. She said in 2000, Merrimack received \$10.1 million dollars in state aid and in 2023, Merrimack received \$9.9 million dollars in state aid. NH state funding is not even keeping up with inflation. She said the proposed budget and the default are so close because the Administration and School Board are trying to provide a quality

education at the lowest cost. She wanted to remind the Committee that blind cuts have a consequence.

Kathy Komar said she was reading page 2 of the letter from the anonymous writer. The writer said that she had problems with the Special Education process and procedures which did not provide her child with a one-on-one aid as recommended by testing. She said Merrimack needs to use its funds to hire staff rather introduce new curriculum.

Virgina Heald said voters are asking for a choice. She said throwing more money at education will not solve the problem. She said the budget is simply too much.

Karen Mortimer said she wanted to clarify that she was being respectful but that she was just stating the facts. She wanted to be sure that the Committee did not let members discriminate against the people it is supposed to serve.

Robert Reisman (Iris Drive) thanked the Committee for all its hard work. He said he had watched the last meeting and was disturbed by the comments made by a Committee member about capping the number of students with disabilities which we know is illegal and by the comments of another Committee member that we should fund the schools by donations. He said most parents pay taxes and already make donations to the schools. He said everyone is struggling financially but he wanted to advocate for the proposed budget. He said the proposed budget would allow the District to continue to maintain growth of the outcomes the District is seeing to hire teachers and move in a positive direction.

Rita Despres (Berkley Road) said the purpose of the School Budget Committee is to review and recommend a School budget as assure that budget aligns with School goals as well as aligns with the law. She said she had a child with severe disabilities and suggested that it might be helpful if members of the Committee had information about the laws and needs to students with disabilities. She offered to provide the Committee with training in those topics.

Shelly Uscinski (Forest Drive) said there seems to be a little confusion about what the Budget Committee does. She said the taxpayers elect the Committee and it represents the taxpayers of the town. She said she hoped the Committee remembers that. She asked for, and received, confirmation that Special Education services are provided to students until the child's 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday.

Derrick Muse (Vanden Road) said he wondered if some salaries were in line with other Districts. He thought the Superintendent, some Principals and the Director of Maintenance salaries might be a lot higher than they needed to be.

Allison Fee (Rocky Ledge Road) said this is a critical time to vote and participate in the process. She said she was in favor of the budget as proposed. She felt that any reductions would harm the schools.

Rosemarie Rung (Ministerial Drive) said she wanted to correct a previous speaker's comment about taxpayers voting on the budget. She said voters vote on the budget and voters may not be taxpayers. She said she wanted to thank everyone who spoke tonight. She said the state is not doing its job and she is sponsoring a bill to help pay for the state's portion of the retirement fund. She said she is also working to get more state revenue for Merrimack to offset the taxes Merrimack residents pay.

Molly Mear said we need to invest in the schools because the students are our future. She asked people to look at the bigger picture.

Kathy Komar said she was speaking for herself. She asked when is it ok for Committee members to yell at audience members and when is it ok for Committee members to get up in the middle of a meeting and leave. She said this was disrespectful.

Jay Bielecki (Peaslee Road) said he thought the School Board should look at a different direction to find money and streamline its budget. He said he thought the District should use AI learning systems. He also thought any surplus should be invested in bitcoin and crypto to pay for future budget increases

Jenna Hardy said she came to speak at a parent and she wanted to address some issues that have been raised during Public Comment because she was also the Vice Chair of the School Board. She said people want test scores raised and the only way to raise test scores is to make changes but the only way to make changes is to have an operating budget greater than the default.

J. McCormack suggested that Ms. Hardy ask to be put on the agenda to address budget issues.

Jay Bielecki asked to finish what his earlier comments. He said AI is the future direction of the country and AI works.

Rebecca Statz (Bradford Drive) asked why the School Board liaison got to vote as a member of the Budget Committee. She wondered if that was double-dipping.

Jenna Hardy said she was speaking as Vice Chair of the School Board to answer some of the questions that had been raised. She said the District is replacing curriculum because the current curriculum is severely outdated. She stated the District has a surplus because it is contractually obligated to budget for all of the positions listed in the union contracts even if the District can't fill them. Further she said no principal makes over \$200,000. In addition, she said that test scores have started going up. She noted that someone said don't cut sports and someone else said they wanted a budget of \$90 million dollars. Ms. Hardy told the audience that the School Board had an obligation to educate the students, not provide sports and she asked the Committee not to cut the proposed budget to \$90 million dollars because the School Board won't have a choice except to cut sports.

Barry Kendall (Sundale Drive) said everybody cares about the kids but it's about the taxes. He asked why the surplus didn't go back to the taxpayer. He said the Committee has a responsibility to the taxpayers. He wanted to know why the budgets keep going up and where the waste goes.

M. Murphy arrived at this time.

LeeAnn Vigeant (Ivy Drive) said she is a resident of town as well as a para. She said she loves her job and does not make a living, but she does make a difference.

Derrick Muse said he reviewed the District website and found a principal salary listed at \$234,000. He was told that was salary + benefits. He also said he didn't think it was right that students needed to fund raise to play sports.

There were no additional comments.

J. McCormack thanked everyone for coming and sharing their thoughts, opinions, frustrations and joys. She said everyone on the Committee is working toward the goal of providing a quality education that is prudently financed and affordable to our community.

### **Warrant Article Initial Review**

J. McCormack said the list of warrant articles was in the meeting packet and had just been approved by the School Board.

S. Rand made a MOTION to defer discussion and voting on warrant articles until the next meeting. Second: M. Berry.

Discussion included the following:

- A. Santoriello said he had a question about one of the warrant articles. J. McCormack asked that he wait until the Committee discussion to ask his question.
- R. Paepke asked if Administration will be presenting the warrant articles to the Committee as they had done for the School Board. J. McCormack said that could happen.
- R. Paepke clarified for the Committee that it would only be reviewing and voting on warrant articles containing a financial impact.

J. McCormack called for a vote on the motion.

MOTION PASSED. 11 – 2 – 0. (C. Mower and D. Coakley opposed.)

### **Work Session**

J. McCormack explained the goal of the work session is to review each department and have committee members suggest areas in those budgets for further discussion by the committee. She said the task at hand was to come up with a proposed bottom line budget number and stated the voters will have a decision between the Committee's recommended budget number and the default budget number. J. McCormack explained her plan for the discussion and said the first department for discussion would be Food Service.

N. Halter said she didn't have a comment about Food Service but had a few general comments for the Committee to consider as well as answers to questions raised during the Public Comments. She said Merrimack's cost per pupil is currently right about the state average cost per

pupil. She said the District's costs are not out of control; they are being raised in line with many other communities in the state.

J. McCormack said that N. Halter's comments were not about the Food Service budget and asked her to wait and share her comments later in the meeting.

N. Halter said she felt her comments could affect what the Committee was doing during the work session and made a MOTION that she be allowed to continue speaking for 3 or 4 minutes more. Second: R. Paepke.

D. Coakley called the question.

J. McCormack called for the vote. During the voting A. Santoriello asked to amend the motion and was told voting had started.

MOTION PASSED: 10 – 2 – 1. (B. Trant and J. McCormack opposed. M. Berry abstained.)

N. Halter continued her comments to say that, while student test scores in Math are average, test scores in Science and Reading are going up. She said the surplus absolutely goes to reduce the school portion of taxes. In response to the question about a principal salary line, she said the line the speaker was questioning might contain multiple principal's salaries. She indicated that the improved test scores were a return on the District's investment in new curriculums. She mentioned that the graduation rate is going up as well. She said she appreciated the comment about the tension between the tax rate and the budget. She said we are going to have to find a compromise which will be challenging because she said health insurance, which represents 25% of the budget, has gone up 250% but the school budget increases are below the average inflation rate.

A. Santoriello asked if he could make a comment and stated he had a slide he could share.

D. Coakley called for a Point of Order and said that the Committee had voted to allow Naomi to speak and suggested a motion to allow Anthony to speak was appropriate.

A. Santoriello made a MOTION that not just Naomi is allowed to speak. Second: B. Trant.

A. Santoriello called the vote.

MOTION PASSED 12 – 1 – 0. (D. Coakley opposed.)

J. McCormack told A. Santoriello to continue.

A. Santoriello said he would like to show a slide of a report from a Georgetown University report.

R. Paepke called for a Point of Order and said the motion passed was to allow members to speak, not to show other material.

A. Santoriello said a motion passed last week allows him to show slides. The slide he shared was a Georgetown University report on changes in reading and math scores compared to per-pupil spending in NH from 2013–2024. He said the slide shows per-pupil spending is well over inflation. He also presented a spreadsheet showing District healthcare line item costs from FY18–19 to FY23-24. He said the healthcare request this year is up more than \$3 million dollars.

L. French asked if the Georgetown University graph was about the state of NH. A. Santoriello said it was. L. French asked how the graph relates to the town of Merrimack. A. Santoriello replied that Merrimack spending is about average when compared to state spending and he had an inflation spending graph specific to Merrimack.

K. Bernier asked if the reading scores in the graph represented the entire state of NH and J. McCormack said they did. K. Bernier noted that Merrimack reading scores are now above the state averages.

R. Paepke called for a Point of Order and said that L. French asked about the graph displayed and asked that discussion return to that.

A. Santoriello put up a graph showing Merrimack actual spending as compared to inflation FY20-21 to FY23-24.

R. Paepke asked him to define inflation and enrollment. A. Santoriello said the inflation information came from Google and the enrollment data was in materials provided by the Administration.

L. French said he was looking for data about the state and wanted to match that data to Merrimack data for the same specific areas in order to understand the point that A. Santoriello was trying to make.

A. Santoriello said that Merrimack was looking good as far as state-wide testing scores and that NH is looking not good as far as cost of education on the national level.

R. Paepke said that the Georgetown graph was recently published and said the source of the inflation information was based on C.P.I. which is not representative on how a school district or a business would calculate inflation rates. She said the inflation number shown is not representative of a true price change.

N. Halter said the cost of health care lines did not include how many employees were insured and some of the years included Covid years when the District was understaffed. She said the reason she brought up cost per pupil is that per-pupil cost is also affected by new state mandates for services and training. She stated the Committee is looking at Merrimack and it is not looking to solve state or national level problems. She feels the Committee needs to deal with budget tensions so that the District continues to deliver a quality education and doesn't lose the phenomenal progress it has made in the last three years.

M. Berry said that the priority here is to make sure we have everything we need for our students to be successful and to be learning. She said the state of NH requires that students take the NEAP test and the latest test results for the high school (August 2024) show 33% of the students are proficient in math, 66% are proficient in reading and 59% are proficient in science. She said she did not want Committee decisions to adversely impact the students but she did see some things that could be trimmed back and not impact students and their proficiency.

R. Paepke made a MOTION to exclude any of the past historical numbers from the spreadsheet the Committee was just shown for the past 5 – 6 years on basis that they are not normalized. She said those numbers served in a point of time as a data point but are not something that the Committee should be looking at to build a basis around our numbers. She said without normalizing those numbers she believes it would be hard for the Committee to use those numbers in a realistic fashion tonight. Second: L French.

Discussion included the following:

A. Santoriello asked if the inflation number for this year presented by School Board Chair Lori Peters was an acceptable number. R. Paepke said she was not talking about inflation; she was talking about normalizing the numbers to account for things such as the MTA contracts and the MESSA contract that have been put in place so the Committee is comparing “apples to apples”.

A. Santoriello asked if she was suggesting that the Committee not look at historical numbers. R. Paepke said you can use historical numbers as long as you normalize them.

A. Santoriello asked if the numbers in the budget books are normalized. R. Paepke said she was concerned past historical expenditures on his spreadsheet that are not normalized to include the various contracts that are now in place. She said using numbers from several years ago that have not been normalized for inflation differences and fact of life changes skews the numbers and does not result in an “apples to apples” comparison.

L. French said the Committee needs an “apples to apples” comparison.

N. Halter asked that R. Paepke share her experience with building large budgets.

R. Paepke said her professional experience includes building budgets for projects ranging from several million dollars to billions of dollars and normalizing numbers in the budgets she presents for an “apples to apples” comparison.

J. McCormack said that many of the members of the Committee have been on the Committee for a long time and should be able to call out fact of life changes which explain the differences in the numbers. She said she thinks there is value in looking at numbers year over year.

C. Mower called the question.

J. McCormack asked R. Paepke to restate her motion.



R. Paepke said the motion was to exclude any of the past historical expenditures on the basis that they are not normalized for being an “apples to apples” comparison.

A. Santoriello asked for a clarification about the start date of any historical date exclusion.

C. Mower called for a point of order and said the question had been called.

A. Santoriello said he was asking for a clarification so it was a point of order plus one.

R. Paepke said she said 5 – 6 years originally.

J. McCormack said the motion is to exclude any numbers from prior years expenditures beyond 5 – 6 years.

R. Paepke said the spreadsheet that was originally shown is not representative of all the fact of life changes that the Committee needs to consider when drafting the budget.

J. McCormack said the motion is to exclude the numbers from the past 5 years’ expenditures for review and she didn’t understand the reason for the motion.

D. Coakley reminded the Chair that the question had been called.

MOTION PASSED: 8 – 5 – 0. (S. Rand, M. Berry, B. Trant, A. Santoriello, and J. McCormack opposed.)

G. Groff asked that the Committee return to discussing Food Service.

A. Santoriello made a MOTION to throw the budget books on the floor. Second: B. Trant.

D. Coakley called the question.

MOTION FAILED: 2 – 8 – 3. (A. Santoriello and B. Trant in favor; M. Berry, S. Rand, J. McCormack abstained.)

R. Paepke made a MOTION to remove column G from the spreadsheet as the percent of prior year expenditure is not known for this year and you can’t calculate that percentage without knowing the expenditure. Second: K. Bernier

D. Coakley called the question.

A. Santoriello said the percentage of prior year expenditures shown is for the last year for which he had full data. The current year total expenditures are unknown since the year is not over. He said the number shown has nothing to do with this year’s spending which isn’t done.

R. Paepke said that means the number shown is misrepresentative of the actual percent increase or decrease of what is happening in this school year. He said the budget request was made based on the last year's known spending, not what happened this year.

M. Berry said the Committee has to have some data points to compare. She gave Food Service as an example and noted this year's request is up 27% from 2023 expenditures.

D. Coakley said Food Service is the only self-supporting department in the District and noted the federal administration is looking to eliminate all federal reimbursement as well as the Department of Education and moving costs back to the state level. He said that, in NH, there is no state level of funding.

M. Berry said she really doesn't have any questions about the Food Service budget. However, she thinks the Committee cannot operate on hypotheticals and needs to look at things it has control over and make the best possible choice.

R. Paepke reminded members her motion was either to hide column G or remove it from the spreadsheet.

R. Paepke asked to call the question. D. Coakley also called the question.

M. Berry asked if she could ask a question and was told the question had been called.

J. McCormack asked R. Paepke to restate her motion.

R. Paepke said her motion was to hide or exclude Column G from the spreadsheet and our analysis.

MOTION PASSED: 8 – 5 – 0. (S. Rand, M. Berry, B. Trant, A. Santoriello, and J. McCormack opposed.)

N. Halter made a MOTION to add a column to the spreadsheet that includes the adopted budget amount for the year FY24–25. Second: R. Paepke.

J. McCormack said the budget books don't give a department by department tally and asked N. Halter to restate her motion.

N. Halter said she moved to add a column to the spreadsheet to reflect the 2024-2025 adopted budget. She also requested that an incorrect fiscal year heading be corrected.

MOTION PASSED. 10 – 0 – 3 (B. Trant, A. Santoriello, J. McCormack abstained)

### **Food Service**

J. McCormack asked if anyone had anything in the Food Service budget to discuss.

A. Santoriello said he thought the request was reasonable and he recommended the Committee proceed with no change. M. Berry seconded his recommendation.

J. McCormack asked if the members wanted to adopt the amount for Food Service as recommended by the School Board and called for a vote.

D. Coakley called the question.

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

M. Berry asked how to suggest a change that covers all the departments, specifically in 8610/Supplies.

J. McCormack suggested that District-wide might be a good department to suggest such a change.

### **Maintenance**

N. Halter asked where the recommended budget number in the spreadsheet came from. She said she had a different number. She said she was struggling with the fact that she did not know the origin of the spreadsheet.

A. Santoriello said the spreadsheet was made based on data given to the Committee by the Administration.

J. McCormack said that the Committee has the current bottom line number recommended by the School Board but needs a way to look at the data and make some decisions.

A. Santoriello made a MOTION to look at the data that was provided by the District again so the Committee can stop with the weird page flipping game and the Committee can actually get through the exercise of the evening. Second: B. Trant.

J. McCormack asked him to restate his motion.

A. Santoriello said he made a MOTION to undo the previous motion that prevented the Committee from looking at the data that we were provided by the District so that the Committee can go through its exercise this evening and actually put together a budget proposal because the books “no worky” for the amount of exercise the Committee has to get through tonight.

N. Halter called for a Point of Order and said she thought only someone who had voted in favor of a motion could move to revote something that had already been litigated.

J. McCormack told her that this was a new motion.

A. Santoriello said the Committee does not know how to look at the data since the budget book does not summarize by department.

G. Groff asked if the Committee could look at the same numbers that the School Board members were looking at when they voted their recommendation.

A. Santoriello said the Committee had a spreadsheet last year.

J. McCormack said the spreadsheet last year was very effective.

G. Groff said she just wants to be sure the numbers in this spreadsheet match up to what the School Board was looking at when they made their recommendations

M. Berry asked for someone to tell her where in the book she could find the page which listed what the total Maintenance budget was.

J. McCormack said there was a motion on the table. She said the motion was to incorporate the spreadsheets that allow the Committee to filter by departments and get full cost analysis and total of the department budget. She asked if anyone wanted to call the question.

N. Halter said that parliamentary procedure does not allow one to make a motion that undo a prior motion.

J. McCormack asked if anyone wanted to call the question.

N. Halter said J. McCormack had not yet ruled on her Point of Order. She said she questioned that this was a valid motion.

J. McCormack said it was and asked if S. Rand had called the question.

S. Rand said she called the question.

J. McCormack called for a vote.

MOTION FAILED: 5 – 8 – 1. (S. Rand, M. Berry, B. Trant, A. Santoriello, J. McCormack in favor. G. Groff abstained.)

M. Berry asked where she could find the total Maintenance budget amount again. K. Bernier told her to look on page 8 of the Budget Unit section.

M. Berry asked why there were utilities amounts which appear to be maintenance costs listed in school budgets.

J. McCormack reminded the Committee that it had a spreadsheet with proposed department expenditures throughout the District bundled together.

R. Paepke suggested that the Committee either discuss the budget department by department or make changes to the bottom line in general.

J. McCormack suggested that members raise questions in each department and that any changes be made in the bundled department budget lines.

A. Santoriello asked to talk about Maintenance costs. He said next year's proposed budget is about 250% over what Maintenance actually expended last year. He felt that this was an excessive request and recommended that the Committee back \$1 million dollars out of the proposed. He said that the amount left is still more than what was spent last year.

M. Berry said there are many unfilled positions in the Maintenance Department.

N. Halter said that last year a new MESSA contract passed which included salary increases and contains language that, if there are unfilled positions, the District has to keep those positions open and funded and the District cannot legally budget for contractors.

B. Olson asked if it would be easier to compare the default budget and the proposed budget to see what the major differences are. He said the Administration and School Board have kept the budget requested beyond the default budget to a minimum.

J. McCormack said that people want to know where the money is going.

A. Santoriello made a MOTION to remove \$1,000,000 from the Maintenance budget which would make the proposed department budget \$4,908,756.66. Second: B. Trant.

A. Santoriello said that the last couple of years Maintenance budget total expended has been increased due to the inclusion of warrant articles.

K. Bernier asked where the warrant articles show up as part of total expended in the budget book.

A. Santoriello said, during liaison meetings, questions and were asked and answers were given.

L. French asked A. Santoriello what his larger picture was and what other budget cuts he would be proposing.

R. Paepke asked for a Point of Order and said there was a motion on the floor.

L. French said he was trying to understand where the discussion was going before he could decide how to vote on the current motion.

J. McCormack said the question had not been called and members were still discussing the motion on the floor.

A. Santoriello said he thought some department proposed budgets were good, but he felt others had areas that could be trimmed. He suggested the following:

- RFS – cut \$100,000 for a new counselor.

- MMS – cut \$200,000 to reduce the budget increase to 8% which is in line with many other departments.
- District-Wide – cut \$4 million dollars
- Student Services – propose \$19.7 million dollars which is more than FY24 expended.
- Technology Services – cut \$722,000 for technology infrastructure
- Propose a bottom line budget of \$89.695 million which is less aggressive spending

N. Halter said she wanted to discuss A. Santoriello's proposed cuts. A. Santoriello said it was unfair to use the term "cuts." J. McCormack said there was already a motion on the floor.

C. Mower called the question.

J. McCormack asked A. Santoriello to restate his motion which was to reduce the proposed Maintenance budget by \$1 million dollars.

MOTION FAILED: 4 – 8 – 1. (S. Rand, B. Trant, A. Santoriello, J. McCormack opposed. M. Berry abstained.)

N. Halter stated that last year the School Board felt the originally proposed Administration budget was too high and asked the Administration to cut \$1 million dollars. She said the cuts proposed by the Administration were not enough and the default budget passed which resulted in the School Board cutting 5 positions, ending 3 programs and also prevented the initiation of some new programs and staff requests. In addition, she said that, instead of retaining some of the surplus, the School Board used all the surplus to reduce the School District's portion of the tax rate.

R. Paepke said the District has to have a surplus; it cannot default.

A. Santoriello said that in FY24 the District spent \$85.8 million dollars and he was proposing \$89.7 million dollars.

R. Paepke said that the FY 25 (default) approved budget is \$91 million dollars.

A. Santoriello said education spending in New Hampshire is 40% higher than the rest of the country.

J. McCormack said the community is asking the School District to tighten its belt.

N. Halter said the Administration recently gave a presentation to show all the things that have been changed and improved over the last few years while keeping the per pupil costs in line with state average per pupil cost.

C. Mower made a MOTION to adopt the full budget recommendations of the Administration and the School Board as presented to the Budget Committee. Second: L. French

Discussion included the following:

- It is important to weigh all the pros and cons.
- Both student needs and senior citizen needs are a priority.
- Passage of the default budget meant a \$3 million dollar cut which resulted in the School Board cutting 8 teachers and 2 programs and has impacted the students.
- The Budget Committee should offer a budget number that is significantly different than the default to give the voters a choice.
- We have to pay special education costs, contracts and the unfunded mandates. We need to find a way to meet all the District's obligations and give our children a quality education.
- Voters want the budget number down.
- The Committee is working to fund the education of the children and a \$7 million dollar cut will really deeply hurt our students.
- The Administration and School Board are trying to carefully and cautiously move forward. Any reduction in the budget is a move backwards.

G. Groff called the question and suggested the Committee could continue its work.

C. Mower called for a Point of Order and said the motion is to adopt a budget number, not to continue budget discussion.

R. Paepke called the question.

C. Mower restated his motion that the Committee adopt the full Administrative and School Board proposed budget. He said we have a community which we need to support.

MOTION PASSED: 8 – 5 – 0. (S. Rand, M. Berry, B. Trant, A. Santoriello, and J. McCormack opposed.)

M. Berry asked if this means no further discussion. J. McCormack told her that it does.

### **Updates**

J. McCormack told the Committee that on January 14<sup>th</sup>, she had forgotten to announce for the record that G. Groff was participating by telephone at that meeting and that she was at home in Merrimack with no one in the room with her.

J. McCormack told the Committee that one of the things she had on her to-do list was to have the Committee vote to adopt the School budget change recommended by the School Board and she said the motion just passed did that.

J. McCormack said that the Comments had received several emails but the senders did not come to the meeting so she will not read them for the minutes. She said the emails were objections to comments made by a Committee member regarding the student services budget.

### **Approval of Prior Minutes**

J. McCormack asked if anyone had any corrections to the January 28<sup>th</sup> minutes.

M. Berry noted some typos on page 4 and asked that three comments be clarified in the discussion points under Student Services comments on page 5. In addition, she asked that “before making decisions” be added to the end of her last statement in Committee Comments.

A. Santoriello noted a correction to who voted on the Power Point motion. He also requested a change to his comments during Committee Comments.

D. Coakley said what is in the minutes should be what he said.

J. McCormack suggested that the issue be reviewed and tabled Approval of the Minutes until the next meeting.

### **Next Meeting**

J. McCormack said the next meeting was February 11, 2025. She said the Committee will meet at 6:30 PM and recess to hold the required Public Hearing at 7:00 PM.

It was explained that after the Public Hearing, the Committee would reconvene to vote a final bottom line budget number to propose at Deliberative Session and finish voting recommendations on monied warrant articles.

### **Public Participation**

Heather Robitaille thanked the Committee and the public who came to the meeting for their time. She said NH has to pay for education more equitably and she suggested that everyone needs to contact our State Senator and State Representatives to ask for them to help solve this problem.

Richard Barry (Kyle Road) said he was a long time resident and prior member of the Budget Committee. He said the children aren’t getting the education they need to succeed. He said he wanted to hear what this budget was going to do for the children.

Karen Mortimer (Everest Drive) urged everyone to pay attention to future meetings. She said it was clear that 10 members listen to the public comments and the comments made by other members as well as to the experts about things the students need and how budget cuts will impact the students. She said it was also clear that two members are only concerned about taxes and don’t care about the students.

Justine Madde (Woodward Road) thanked the Committee for allowing the teachers in the District to continue doing what is best for the students.

### **Committee Comments**

M. Berry said she was not happy that the budget discussion was cut short because she had a list of budget modifications that she had planned to present. She said she wanted the very best possible education for the most reasonable price. She also suggested that the Committee should get rid of the budget books and work digitally.



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K. Bernier said the Budget Committee does not have the ability to increase the elderly exemption; she said that is a Town Council issue. She also said there are a lot of bills related to education and education funding currently being considered by the state legislature and suggested that people could consider contacting their state representatives and senator about them.

N. Halter told the Committee that M. Berry has valid complaint. She stated that both last year and this year have been confusing and people didn't feel heard. She said this year one member of the Committee presented something as if it was the will of the Committee rather than his opinion.

R. Paepke said she thought that member spreadsheets and power points should have been vetted by the Administration and then discussed and voted on by the Committee. She said she felt cutting \$7 million dollars from the budget was not a choice for the students or a way to move things forward.

J. McCormack said she was disappointed that the Committee could not find a way to work with the numbers and find a middle ground.

G. Groff said she would have liked to have seen a more thoughtful discussion.

J. McCormack declared the meeting adjourned at 10:15 PM.